

The novel *Each Distant Light*
and
“By the way you dance”: an essay on
disco and identity
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Abstract

This thesis is presented in two related sections; the first (primary) section is the novel *Each Distant Light*, and the second, “‘By the way you dance’: an essay on disco and identity’, is an investigation into the role of disco in the creation of a gay identity.

Each Distant Light, set in 1981, follows Col, a young gay man who leaves his Northern Irish home in search of a more accepting community in New York. Over the course of one night in a dance club, memories from Col’s past overwhelm his present, increasing his sense of dislocation. Longing to belong, he’s homesick for a home he can never return to, yet is unable to find comfort in the sexual liberation of the gay scene.

“‘By the way you dance’: an essay on disco and identity’ is an exploration of the transformative effects of dance music and club culture, particularly with regards to gay men. Focusing on the disco scene of 1970s New York and Andrew Holleran’s 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance*, the piece investigates the disruptive attributes of music and club spaces, their role in the development of gay liberation, and the possibilities they offer dancers in contemplation of the self.

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Dedicated, with love, to my dad, Frank Morwood (1941-2018).

Section One

The novel *Each Distant Light*

It's Just Begun – The Jimmy Castor Bunch

I rush the stairs at 103rd Street Station, relieved to have completed this journey without complication, and vow to take cabs for the remainder. As I exit, a goading, icy whip of wind almost sends me toppling back to the platform but, in spite of its cold, I open my jacket and check the bulk of goodies. Running my fingers around the sharp edges of the ziplock, I reassure myself there's still no breach, then do the same for the pocket lining, scraping away fluff to test the integrity of the seam. Satisfied, I button up and walk on. This is the furthest north I'll have to travel. My other deliveries will take me downtown.

I ring the doorbell, retreat the four stone steps to the pavement and wait, measuring time by the sequence of traffic lights at the end of the block. Last time I counted five, but tonight, after just two full cycles, a shadow darkens the opaque glass of the door and a gap appears large enough for the fat, moustachioed head.

'Irish, it's you. Well, come on in. Get yourself out of the cold.'

Jack's nickname for me is as original as it is accurate, but now's not the time for a lesson on the Troubles and besides, I'll gouge him on the price. Up two flights then we pause by the door as he slips off his loafers.

'Bobby's trying this kind of Japanese thing at the moment, so if you wouldn't mind.'

He points to my shoes. I bend to untie them but my frozen fingers can't untangle the double knots, so I peel off the backs with my toes. Underfoot the

hallway carpet feels expensive and mossy. In the living-room large tapestries and wall-hangings have replaced the paintings. Bobby is sitting cross-legged at a low table and his kimono parts to reveal more white thigh than is necessary. I sit opposite, and as he bows his head ceremoniously his fringe drops teasingly close to the candles floating in the large glass bowl.

‘Namaste,’ he says, pinning the rogue strand of hair behind his left ear.

I don’t bother to correct him. ‘Hi.’

‘Get you anything...beer, sake?’ Jack calls from the fridge.

‘I’m fine thanks.’ I don’t want to stay longer than necessary. ‘So where are you guys going tonight?’ I pull the bag from my coat. It’s not a social call.

‘Oh, we’re not sure.’ Jack hands an eggcup of sake to Bobby and joins us.

‘We thought we might try somewhere a bit leathery tonight. Bobby has this waistcoat he’s dying to wear out.’

‘It’s very elaborate...very detailed stitching. It must have taken days. But’ – Bobby’s speech is slow, his attempt at sounding thoughtful – ‘maybe I’ll just wear it to The Saint. It might...stand out more there. Really...you know...’ His hands blink open for emphasis.

‘Well, what do you need? I’ve a bit of everything.’ I pat the bag.

‘Did you manage the coke?’

‘I did and it’s great, but it’s not getting cheaper. I can split it if you want.’

Derision crosses Bobby’s face. ‘Please.’

I pass over the whole baggie I knew they’d buy. ‘How about some downers? After all that blow you’re going to need them.’

‘We’ll take six,’ Jack counters without hesitation.

‘I have some California sunshine, too. Jimi’s friend flew it in from the West Coast just this week.’

‘Blotters or caps?’

‘Neither, it’s drops.’ I hold up a small amber glass bottle. ‘I’ll lay it for you right here. While you wait.’

‘Oooh, fresh. I like the sound of that,’ Jack replies, as if I’m a waiter listing specials. ‘Can we get, like, ten hits?’

Bobby nods. ‘We may bring a few...friends home later.’

There’s an insinuation that I find repulsive, and combined with the spidery hairs I can see just above his knee and the thin probing fingers that he waves through the air, he’s really starting to sicken me. I quickly unwrap some sugar cubes, pilfered from work, and, using the dropper from the bottle, squeeze two tears of liquid on each, like I’d been shown.

‘Let them dry for a minute. Once the wet patch goes, they’re ready. Don’t eat them all at once, you might never come back.’ It feels good to play the scientist.

Bobby’s tapping at the table; the bag of coke is open and he’s chopping it with a pocketknife.

‘Jack, get the money. Col and I will seal the deal with a little toot.’

He sculpts the pearly white mound into three thin lines and passes me a metal straw. Politely, I make for the smallest and Hoover it with one swift motion, another sniff to get it down.

‘Let’s call it four hundred,’ I tell Jack. ‘Is that OK?’

He’s already counting out the notes.

‘Coke’s certainly not getting any cheaper,’ Bobby says, as if he’s ever paid for it, or anything else, since he snared Jack. His chosen line disappears in an instant, then he holds one nostril and snorts three short blasts with his eyes shut – it’s a ritual I’ve had to endure since Jimi let me take over these transactions. Perhaps the monotony of the exchange is the reason he wanted to stop. As I wait for Bobby’s choreographed grunt and shake of his head, I imagine supplying something nasty and corrosive, something that could burn a hole straight through the back of his skull.

My coat goes on before the coke really takes hold and they become that unmanageable combination of needy and chatty. It’s happened before, last month I was trapped in the corridor, talked at for hours about people I don’t know or only half remember.

Jack hands me the cash at the door. ‘If you’re looking for a place to hang later, let us know. Like we said, we might bring some friends back. An intimate party.’ He squeezes my shoulder.

‘I’ll keep it in mind,’ I tell him, but I’ve already erased the very idea. Bobby breaks his post-snort meditation to offer a wave, but his eyes remain closed.

Instead of sobering me up the cold air outside accentuates my jitters. I didn’t want to start this early but it’s an issue of trust, proof that what you’ve sold them won’t kill them or, worse, won’t work, ruining their weekend. A cab turns the corner and I flag it, too bitter and too foolhardy to negotiate the park on foot. I hurry in and slam the door; the warmth needles my cheeks and my hands sting. It takes a moment for my mouth to articulate the destination but soon we’re gliding under the bridge and round a series of bends. This is the only fun road in New

York, navigating the rocks and dips of the island as it used to be; with the soft suspension, I imagine I'm on a boat.

Too soon, we're spat out and I'm waiting, once again, at the foot of some steps. It doesn't take long for Gerard to open the door. Only on entering does his Hawaiian shirt make sense – the apartment is decked out in grass fringing and garlands, half-coconut shells stacked by the punch bowl.

'It's been so fucking cold we decided to bring some sunshine.' With a throaty laugh he places a lei around my neck. There's no party yet, just a young Latino I've never seen before, blowing balloons on the sofa.

'So did you bring the magic?' Gerard rubs his hands together.

'Of course. Custom order, just for you.' I reach deep in my pocket, fiddle in the bag until I find the sealed bottle – his greedy eyes won't see what else I'm carrying. 'There's a hundred drops in there, strong doses, so be careful.' But he empties the lot into the punch, dumping the bottle in after with a splash.

'Warn everyone,' I plead but know that he won't. Two hours from now the place will be filled with young men like the balloon boy, tolerating Gerard's wandering hands for a few free hits and a bit of warmth before they disappear to wherever it is they really want to be. He may get lucky if any are wasted enough, picking off the casualties, but by Monday he'll be alone again, mourning the loss of another young love.

Two potential victims show at the door, smooth-skinned boys with arms full of groceries.

'I'd better go,' I tell him, seizing my opportunity.

'Of course,' he says and I sense the relief in his voice. He won't face any competition from me. 'One hundred, right?'

He counts out five twenties and I'm gone. I drape my lei on the rail by the steps.

It's snowing, not quite falling, but swirls of flakes fill the air, blown this way and that before being laid gently to rest. I hail another cab; my goods can't get wet, and the cash in my pocket feels conspicuous.

The heating in the car is turned high enough to defrost the entire city and the cabbie accelerates and brakes with such force that I might as well be on a roller coaster. I should tell him I'm in no rush, but I'd need to shout to be heard over the dire music, an Eagles song made worse by the driver's attempts at harmony.

'Stop here.' I can't bear it. There's a few blocks to go but I need some fresh air. Besides, very little snow now spots the windscreen. I throw him a few dollars and slide out. My stomach lurches, ripples from the journey, but there's little in there, no solids – I skipped dinner and lunch. On a corner, one block ahead, as if anticipating my needs, a red *Diner* sign flickers. With a long night ahead, I check my watch and see there's time.

It's not busy so I take a booth. The seats are tacky to the touch. I jam my jacket and its cargo safely between my thigh and the wall.

'Can I get you something to drink? A coffee?' A waitress arrives at my table. Her pencil hovers over the pad as if she's been waiting all night for my order.

'No coffee.' My heart slows in gratitude. 'How about a milkshake? Vanilla?' I don't bother with the menu. 'Can I have a grilled cheese sandwich too?'

‘American, Swiss or Cheddar?’ She’s impatient before she reaches the end of the question.

‘Cheddar.’

‘Fries, tots or slaw?’

‘It’s fine. On it’s own is fine.’

‘I’ll bring you some slaw,’ she replies dully, but it’s not out of kindness. She needs to keep the order simple, to what is expected.

She tears off the docket and stashes the pad in her apron. Within a minute she’s back from the kitchen and slides a beaker of water in front of me; ice tinkles against the hard plastic.

‘In case you’re not cold enough already.’ Her voice has the same downbeat delivery but there’s a thaw in her face that takes off years.

‘Thanks.’ I can’t blame her crabbiness – the smell of grease in here is one she’ll take to her grave.

On the opposite pavement two figures are bent double against the wind. One trails a plastic tarpaulin cape like a dishevelled superhero. They stop by each pile of rubbish in the gutter, turning the contents over with their feet. The caped one stoops to remove something, then holds it to the streetlight. It looks like a half-empty bottle but I can’t be sure; the other snatches it and hurries off. Chasing him, the caped one manages only two quick strides before he’s limping again, part hobble, part shuffle, the tarpaulin dragging behind him.

Sooner than expected my order’s plonked in front of me and my belly reels – the coke’s exacerbating my shrunken stomach and I feel like I’m consuming myself from within. On first bite my mouth is coated in oil; it’ll take a strong detergent to cut through. The milkshake goes down better, but gives me a sharp

head-freeze, made worse by the stuttering light overhead. I force myself to eat more, unsure when I'll get another opportunity, and nibble on the centre of the sandwich, away from the three-day-old grease that soaks its edges.

Before long I'm defeated and as I gesture for the bill a man appears in the doorway. His clothes are rags stitched together by dirt; he waves two blackened fingers in front of his mouth, sign language for cigarette. I shake my head without guilt, I've never smoked, but offer up my unfinished plate of fat.

'Fuck you,' he shouts hoarsely then gives me the finger.

'Get out,' screams the waitress, 'and take your filth with you.'

The door slams behind him. Suddenly I wonder if her words were meant for me, so I leave a large tip and move on, a quick tap to check my package is secure. The temperature's plummeted even further but it's only a couple of blocks to Walt's. My legs tense as I navigate the slippery pavement, my steps becoming shorter and shorter, and I place a steadying hand on the rough brick of a warehouse. In the lee of a delivery door a body has taken shelter, chin tucked to the chest and the cape wrapped around like a blanket. I almost stop, think of reaching for a few dollars, but realise his friend could be waiting by the corner, ready to exploit any weakness. I walk on. The thought of an ambush spooks me; glancing over my shoulder, I lengthen my stride as much as the icy concrete will allow.

Just ahead, the new apartment block emits the only light on the street. Walt's not been here long. He got it for a steal after a well-publicised shooting in the lobby. As I move closer I dread to think what theme might meet me – if it's shamrocks and shillelaghs I won't even darken the door. Despite the cold, the

entrance is wide open and a rumbling, walking bass spills from the floor above to the pavement. Either his party's started early or it's gone on very, very late.

Inside the furniture has been pushed to the edges of the room, opening up space for a dancefloor, but it's not quite that time – it's only just begun. On the far side a crowd gathers around a flickering screen, whistling and jeering. I poke my head above a bony shoulder to catch sight of the grainy, brutal fuck scene playing on Walt's new toy, a VCR. Each slap and thrust at the young man on all fours is echoed by the onlookers.

I leave them to cheer on the inevitable climax and set off to find Walt – he's in the kitchen, waving a joint like a conductor's baton, teasing out the nuances of one of his long, involved stories. I leave him to finish, or get as close to the end as he ever does, and instead try the loo. It's already locked and from inside someone shouts, 'One second.' After a few moments a tall skinny kid appears, and, despite the arctic conditions, waves a fan in front of his face. 'All yours.'

After I pee, I wash my hands thoroughly and without haste, squeezing soap through interlaced fingers and allowing the warmth to return. The milkshake and sandwich sit uneasily in my stomach, but there's a tin of Bisodol in Walt's cabinet, next to a shot glass of wrapped toothpicks. I suck on two of the chalky mints and drop a toothpick in my back pocket. A dozen different bottles of aftershave vie for space on the vanity top; I pick the least fancy and spray my jacket twice, each lapel.

Walt's still holding court in the kitchen but I can't wait any longer; also, that joint might settle my guts. His arms open wide when he spots me and he pulls

me in without interrupting his tale, but the reluctant audience see their chance, smile and move on.

‘How you doing, kiddo?’ He sweeps his greying hair back, uncovering bloodshot eyes.

‘Not bad, but I’d feel better after a tug on that.’

The smoke is fruity and heavy, envelops my head with an immediate, tight warmth.

‘Very nice.’ I take another toke, pass it back. ‘Can you spare a bit, I’ll do a swap?’

‘Anything for you, Col. It’s Maui Wowie. A little number on the JFK – Honolulu route brings it in for me. They smoke it in *9 to 5*. You seen that movie yet?’

I shake ‘no’, a delay between thought and movement.

‘It’s a riot. We laughed our asses off. I thought they were going to throw us out. Victor almost pissed his pants...’

Victor. My face betrays me with a momentary wince. It’s enough to make Walt stop.

‘It’s OK,’ I say, when the silence has gone on too long. ‘How is he?’

Walt concentrates on measuring out the grass, not meeting my eyes.

‘He’s good.’ He passes me the baggie. ‘Definitely better. He still needs his stick, although the forgetful fucker leaves it everywhere.’

That’s enough; I can’t hear any more. ‘You sure you can spare this, I won’t leave you dry?’ I force an upbeat tone. ‘How’s a couple of ludes sound?’ The bag feels heavy. ‘Actually, make it three?’

‘Yeah, that’s perfect. I mean, you don’t have to. Hey, what about some of that acid?’ A grin spreads across his face. ‘I want to buy some of that sweet stuff Jimi’s been banging on about.’

Walt’s adept at making anyone feel welcome and I’d happily enjoy his hospitality all night but this space is too small and the gathering too intimate for me to lose myself. As soon as the acid is prepared and exchanged, I leave. On the stairwell I stop and twist up a joint – I know it’s careless to smoke on the street when I still have deliveries to make but I need its bubble of protection.

By the time I’m halfway to the roach, the buildings have become like a set, an unfamiliar stage I must walk through. Every shred of recognition has been ripped from me and I have no idea what I’m doing here or what part I must play.

March 1979

‘It’s your granny. She’s passed. Your mother got the call in the early hours.’

We were in the kitchen and I switched off the kettle so that its boiling wouldn’t intrude on our grief. Dad didn’t stand to hug me or hold me, but remained where he was, newspaper open, and cigarette in hand.

‘Have you a suit? What about your old blazer, will it fit?’

I shook my head. Two years had passed since I’d left school; even the jeans I’d bought just six months ago scarcely buttoned up.

‘Where’s Mum? How is she?’

‘She’s taken to her bed. She just needs a rest. You’ll have to organise something to wear. We’ll be leaving tomorrow. The funeral’s the day after.’

Although certain there would be nothing suitable, I was grateful to be dismissed and grateful, too, that my early reappearance from College wouldn't be questioned. At the landing, I peeked through the gap in my parents' door. Daylight illuminated the paisley swirls on the drawn curtains and brought a purple tinge to the lump that was Mum, swaddled by duvet. It was an unnerving sight – my mother was always the last to bed and first up and I couldn't remember a time when she had been sick. I crept to my room and shut the door with care.

A quick inspection confirmed that there was nothing in my wardrobe that would fit yet also strike the right sombre note, but I rummaged the depths anyway, exploring amongst the forgotten and unwanted. At the very back, buried beneath old and worn shoes that had tangled in a ball, I found the pair of jeans Granny had bought me many Christmases before. I had ridiculed them at the time for their cheapness and unfashionable cut, for the bright stitching and the shiny dye; I'd refused even to try them on. *She does her best*, Mum had said after I swore never to wear them, *she's not up to date on all the fashions*. I held them against me now but they were much too small. It was too late.

Folding them neatly, I smoothed the years of creases and hung them carefully. As I lay on my bed, the room settled with creaks and ticks. I wondered if anyone was with Granny when she died and whether she knew she was about to go. Dad's parents had died before I was born and Granny's husband, Granda, died when I was still too young to remember him – if I thought of him at all it was always in the blue tie and cream shirt he wore in the photo on her shelf. Death happened to people I didn't know, the people pictured in newspapers or on the evening news. Now, it had struck someone solid, someone real, and its inevitability disturbed me, the inescapable outcome of becoming older. Previously

I'd thought you could cheat it; by being careful, death could be avoided. But this new certainty left me sad and disheartened, not for Granny or anyone else, just for myself.

There was a swish as Mum's door swept over the carpet then the tread of her footsteps across the landing. I didn't rouse, afraid she'd look to me for comfort.

When I finally joined them in the kitchen, Mum was standing with her arms around Rose.

'Why didn't you tell me before I went to school?' Rose cried. 'I've been in classes all day as if nothing has happened. I even did PE.' My sister burrowed into Mum's chest.

'We didn't want you to miss too much,' Mum replied, voice tight. 'You'll have to take the next couple of days off as it is.' Finally, as if she'd just spotted me, she said, 'Hello love.'

'I'm sorry Mum,' I mumbled and moved closer, but she held my sister firm and I could see no easy way to join their embrace.

'Your father says you've nothing to wear. Give me five minutes. We'll call next door and see if Robbie has something that might fit.'

Mum phoned Margaret who told us to come straight over, although Robbie was still at work.

'Terrible thing for you,' she said to Mum as she showed us to the living room. 'Still, perhaps it's better that she didn't get to see the way this country's going. Held to ransom by murderers.' Her head gestured towards the folded Belfast Telegraph on the arm of the settee.

‘What about this suit of Robbie’s? Can we give it a try?’ Mum said, impatience creeping in.

‘Of course, yes. I’ve laid it on the bed in the spare room. Colin, go up and get it on you. Let us have a look.’

The house was the mirror image of ours, but seemed larger without our clutter. Robbie and Margaret had no kids of their own but had been baby-sitters for us when we were younger. The first room at the top had always been spare, saved for ‘guests’, who seemed to consist solely of Margaret’s elderly, deaf cousin from Ahoghill. Every time she visited we would hear raised voices through the wall as Margaret and Robbie struggled to make themselves understood.

A dark suit lay on the bed which was carefully made; a matching valance skirted the green carpet. I closed the door and undressed. My legs prickled as I pulled on the wool trousers. Old and musty, their smell intensified with the heat of my body. The thought of Robbie wearing them, skin rubbing against the fabric and leaving traces of himself among the fibres, made me itch more. They were a little short in the leg, the hem sat above my ankle, and I had to adjust the buttons on the side to gather in the waist. The jacket was broad and flapped around my chest, but it would have to do. I returned the suit to its hanger and dressed, unwilling to parade it downstairs.

Mum and Margaret cradled cups of tea in their hands. A plate of precisely arranged biscuits sat between them.

‘No good?’ Mum asked as I paused in the doorway.

‘It fits fine,’ I said, swinging the suit into the room. ‘I’ll take it on home if that’s alright? Tell Robbie thanks, I’ll make sure it’s looked after.’

‘Don’t mind that, it’s never on him. You won’t stay for a cuppa? Your mum and I were just chatting. It’s been ages since we’ve seen you. Robbie will be sad he missed you.’

‘I’d better go, make sure I have a clean shirt to go with it.’

‘Take a biscuit for the journey.’ She held up the plate. ‘A boy like you might like two.’

I chose only one, a coconut cream. ‘I’ll see myself out.’

Early next morning we loaded the car and set off. I didn’t ask to sit up front despite having longer legs than Mum. The radio started with the engine and no-one thought to silence it. Dad and Rose sang along, harmonising where they could and at times I caught him looking to her in the rear-view mirror, his eyes lit with encouragement. With each road sign for Enniskillen my impatience grew at the number of miles still to travel. As a boy I’d been able to stretch out and sleep the distance, only waking when the thrum of the engine rattled to a stop and the doors opened with a rush of cool air. My knees pressed the seat in front and I rested my head on the window, hoping the vibrations might bring sleep. None came and, instead, I contented myself with the rise and fall of the hedges lining our route.

It was my first trip to Granny’s in a couple of years – I’d avoided recent visits, excused by summer jobs or college work, and had only seen her the previous Easter when she made the infrequent journey to us. She’d had to miss Christmas because of a flu. With my eyes closed, I tried to remember the house, to trace through each room, and I wondered if it might be haunted, if a piece of her remained. Haunting was the type of thing Granny would do, always fond of a practical joke. For as long as I could remember she had booby-trapped her

cupboards with fake jars that sprung snakes when opened, or squeezy ketchup and mustard bottles that squirted coloured string, and when I was younger these were the things I looked forward to most, rifling through to find any new additions.

The car slowed, the indicator blinked, and we turned onto her street, a small row of terrace houses. Each had a fenced garden to the front with a wrought-iron gate. Granny's house sat in the middle, the sills and door painted a glossy weathered blue.

'Well, here we are,' said Mum, the first words she'd spoken since we left home.

'Do you have a key?' was all Dad could reply.

We didn't need one. As we organised ourselves on the pavement, retrieving bags from the boot, Granny's front-door opened and Mrs. Sturgess, her neighbour, waved from the step.

'I just can't believe it, Maureen,' she said, head shaking. 'I was sure she'd outlast us all. But what about these two? The size of them, they're quare grown up now.'

My sister beamed and even stretched on her tiptoes to emphasise her height but I said nothing and lowered my head, hiding the involuntary smile sparked by Mrs. Sturgess' sing-song accent.

We followed her inside and she met each of us with an awkward hug as we struggled with bags and clothes on hangers in the confined space of hallway. Warmer than I expected, the house smelled of cooking, but not Granny's – it was more delicate. There was no sign of the hearty fog of lamb stew that had greeted us on past visits, when a large pot would bubble away for the duration. I used to

imagine it simmering on the range whether we were there or not, never completely cooked, never fully eaten.

To make space I shifted into the good room, bringing my bag and suit with me. The heavy curtains were drawn but a flick of the light revealed the figurines and statuettes that covered the mantelpiece, the vases and bowls on the side tables I'd always been warned against touching and, on the wall, the plates edged with gold that, as a child, I'd presumed were priceless. These objects I knew so well seemed suddenly meaningless; without Granny their connections had been lost.

Next door, in the shabbier living room, I opened the dresser, hoping to find the jokes and jars she'd hidden, searching for a piece of her, but they were gone, as if finally she'd grown up. In the drawer, among opened letters, loose elastic bands and broken pencils, I found a brooch, the one she'd pin to her left lapel, especially at Easter. It was a leaping hare in dull silver, ears swept back and limbs at full stretch. I dropped it into my pocket and it thudded softly against my thigh.

'When you get settled you can see her laid out,' Mum said, poking her head through the doorway. 'You and Rose can share the wee room at the front, as usual.'

My sister and I filed upstairs as if Granny were sleeping and we were under orders not to wake her, but by her door our pace quickened and I fixed my eyes forward. I tried to picture her in a nightie, teeth soaking in a glass, a hairnet and a welcoming gummy smile, but instead a scene of death and decomposition came to mind that I did not want to envisage. Once inside our room, we shut the door and kept our voices hushed as we unpacked.

Rose stood frozen by the wardrobe door, one hand short of the handle, the other clutching her good dress.

‘I can’t open it.’ Her face portrayed a fear that made me feel needed.

‘It’s OK. It’s OK,’ I said.

The wardrobe was long and thin with only a single door, like a casket propped against the wall. Rose’s reticence was somehow contagious, the association now planted in my mind. Cautiously, I reached for the handle then slowly opened the door. There was nothing more sinister than a couple of dark woollen overcoats and, at the bottom, a bedspread wrapped in brown paper. I pushed the coats aside.

‘See, clothes. That’s all.’

Her shoulders dropped, the dress hung at her side.

‘I’m sorry.’ She gave a sniff. ‘I’m just a bit frightened.’

‘Don’t worry. There’s nothing in there.’ I pulled her to me. ‘Even if Granny did come back, do you think she’d do anything to scare you?’ Her head shook on my chest. ‘Actually, she probably would.’

Rose pulled away with a snotty laugh. ‘Thanks,’ she said and rubbed her eyes with a cuff. She straightened the dress on its hanger then placed it confidently inside.

‘If I go for a walk, will you be OK?’

‘I’m fine,’ she answered and gave a tight smile.

Mum was with Mrs. Sturgess in the kitchen and I could hear Dad sweeping in the back yard. I left the house without explanation.

Outside the wind had strengthened and I had to lean into it as I fought my way past the Fire Station and on to the war memorial that marked the start of the town centre. When I was younger I’d always been keen to visit the row of shops that made up the town, novel yet familiar. Even then they’d been rundown and

dated and I saw that little had changed. One building had been boarded up, but the majority of shop-fronts remained the same; the grocers showed off its wares on fake grass matting, and beside it, the men's outfitters protected its display with crinkled yellow cellophane.

The newspaper shop at the end was always my favourite, a place to stock up on sweets and comics. I pushed open its stiff door, glad to be out of the wind. A flattened cardboard box on the floor acted as a mat and the smell of gas heaters, ink and sugar saturated the warm air. My eyes scanned the shelves behind the counter where plastic jars held a bounty of brightly coloured sweets, their wrappers glistening. Granny had brought us here each visit, just before we returned home, to buy us a quarter each for the journey.

'What is it you're after?' The woman stood from the stool behind the counter, a cardigan buttoned over her apron.

'Can I have a quarter of sweet peanuts, please?'

She kicked the stool across the uneven floor and climbed to retrieve the jar. The sweets rattled as she held her hand across the top and shook them to the scales, one by one.

'And a quarter of cola cubes? Thank you.'

They were Rose's favourite and we would swap one for one even though they would always stick to my teeth. A dog-eared copy of the NME lay on the low rack for papers and I wondered who in this town would possibly buy it, then saw it was already two months old.

Sweets bought, I made for the large park opposite – a fenced-off grassy hill crested with swings, a roundabout and a slide. A steep path snaked to the playground summit and I recalled that childish fear that one misstep, a simple

stumble, would send me toppling from the earth. There was a bench opposite the swings and I sat and watched as a dog nosed through the leaves. The noise of traffic was overcome by the gusting wind in the trees. At the top of the slide, a young boy teetered anxiously as his father shouted encouragement from the base. After several minutes of cajoling, the boy let go and screamed all the way to his father's embrace. I watched as again and again he made the trip, his confidence growing on each circuit. Soon my quarter of sweets was finished; I opened Rose's and ate those too.

Mum was in the hallway when I returned, dusting the bannister.

'Do you want some help?' I asked, guilty that I'd taken time alone.

'First, you should go and see your granny before there's a house-full this evening. Your sister's already been.'

'Rose? Was she OK?' There was no avoiding it, I had no excuse.

'She said she was glad that she did. Go on up. I'll have a sandwich ready for you when you're done, then we can make a start on that living room.'

I took the stairs slowly, dampening each crack of the boards. A small patch of light fell on the carpet just outside her room, the door open a few inches. I gave it a nudge and paused on the threshold so as not to surprise Granny or myself. The empty bed shocked me, its tasselled maroon blanket taut across its width; I'd expected to see her laid in the middle with the covers pulled to her chin. Beyond the bed, parallel to the close-curtained window, stood a metal trolley with a casket on top made from a shiny pale yellow wood. Granny's profile peaked just above its side.

Her face flickered as my shadow fell over her. There was little space between the coffin and the bed so I remained at its foot. Despite the warm yellow

glow of light through the curtains, her skin was pale; there was a slight pout in her mouth that made it seem her teeth didn't quite fit. It was an unflattering view, up towards her nostrils. The skin around her chin and neck was set in wrinkles so deep that they could never be smoothed. This was not Granny. The empty bed said more about her being gone. I stroked my pocket, feeling for the outline of the brooch beneath, then backed out and slid the door closed. In the kitchen my mum had left out a doorstep sandwich, a duster and some polish.

Word had spread in the town that there was to be a gathering at the house. From an early hour people traipsed in to offer their condolences and by six o'clock the place was full. They disappeared up the stairs in twos or threes to pay their respects. Few in the crowd were recognisable to me – Mum's cousin and his wife and the Sturgesses from next door – the rest were a combination of Granny's neighbours and church friends. Her good room was open to all as plate upon plate of sandwiches were fetched to us by a short-haired, big-hipped woman who moved with a lumbering grace, yet neither Mum nor Dad could say for certain who she actually was. It seemed that the house belonged to no-one and everyone as strangers made tea, sliced bread and took over.

On the sideboard sat several bottles of spirits and some tumblers for people to help themselves, but I didn't want to touch a drop; I never drank in front of the family. Dad made straight for the whiskey and after the fourth or fifth large pour he needed entertaining. 'Sing us a song,' he pestered Rose.

She crossed the room. Although tall, she had not yet filled out and was all knees and elbows. Her awkwardness, however, was purely physical and she never shied away from these public performances. Standing beside Dad's chair, she rested her hand on his shoulder. Before the first note my cheeks had flushed with

an embarrassment and pride that I couldn't bear, so I left the room, clutching my empty plate as cover. In the time it took me to walk to the kitchen and back, she was in full flow. I lingered in the hall, listening with jealous awe as she sang *The Green Glens of Antrim*, Granny's favourite.

When she brought the final note to an end, there was silence, not even an uncomfortable shuffle. I palmed the wetness from my cheek. Dad patted her hand gently and said in a soft, high voice, 'You're some girl,' then tilted his head backwards as if to try and tip the tears back in. Mum joined them, side-saddling the arm of the chair.

'Your eyes are too close to your bladder.' She ruffled his hair. There was a smattering of applause and my mum's cousin, Dessie, gave a whoop, but we all felt intruders on their moment.

From outside, as if to add to the praise, the loud, slow wail of the Fire Station siren pierced the night. I slipped to the garden, wanting to relive the excitement I'd felt years ago when, at the first inkling of noise, we'd rush to the front lawn and watch as cars were abandoned and feet thumped the pavement. There would be a lull as the men changed their civvies for uniforms, then finally the doors would open, Dad would hoist me on his shoulders and I'd scream as the engines swept past.

But this night only a few men barrelled through the side door and the siren trailed off like bagpipes squeezed of their last. It was not the frenzy I remembered. A trail of orange light brushed across the lawn and I turned to find my sister barefoot on the path, my dad on the step behind, arms draped over her shoulders.

'Do you think it's a bomb?' She lifted her head to his.

‘No.’ He pulled her closer. ‘It’ll just be some chimney that’s caught fire.
Come in before you catch your death.’

The glow vanished as the door shut and I waited in the dark for the flashes
of blue.

You Stepped Into My Life – Melba Moore

The cab pulls tight against the curb, the wheels whispering over the slushy remnants of snow. My warmed hands squeak against the mock leather upholstery as I slide them from under my thighs. Although the Maui Wowie fog no longer muddles my thinking, it takes all my effort to push forward and squint at the meter. The space expands around me, the seat wide as a bed. I should stretch out, bury my nose in the seam where lost quarters gather, and command the driver to take me where he will. But it's after midnight, there's nowhere else I can go, so I feed notes through the space in the glass, rounding up to the nearest dollar, then adding a quarter for luck.

I push open the cab door and it's wrenched from me by a sudden gust. A raw wind blasts my knuckles and I shove my hands in my pockets and shoulder the door closed. The package, though depleted, is squeezed between my arm and chest and I'm thankful it's still there. On the pavement huddling figures huff and stamp against the cold as if their dance has already started. I take my place behind them; there's no one I recognise but it's early yet.

Two black kids in front pass a cigarette back and forth with pinched fingers as if it were a joint. When they sense me watching, one cups a hand to his friend's ear, whispers, then giggles. His thumbs rise to either side of his hood and with a flick his face, grubby with downy hair, is hidden. Blood rises to my cheeks;

maybe I look strung out. I force a yawn to reset my expression but it just makes me dizzy.

The queue shifts forward; the two boys bounce on their toes, arms circling, hips bumping, and launch into the chorus of McFadden and Whitehead. Heads almost touch as they sing at each other *We're on the move*. The peach-fuzzed boy flips back his hood, whips his body forward and flashes his eyes at mine. *We've got the groove*.

I laugh, a half snort, and the noise surprises me. The queue falters and brings an end to the boys' routine. They conspire for a moment, then the clean-faced one shoots a glance my way.

'My friend wants to know if you got a spare cigarette, mister?'

'He could try asking me.'

He steps towards me. His bottom lip smoothes the hair on his upper lip before he speaks. 'Well, do you? Have a cigarette going spare?'

'I don't smoke.' I shrug. 'Besides, you just finished one. Give your lungs a break.'

'You talk funny. Where you from?' The clean-faced one jostles closer.

'I'm Irish, from Northern Ireland.'

'Are you a cop?' They double-team me with questions. 'Cops are always Irish.'

'No. Why would I queue if I was a cop? I'd just walk straight in.'

'But maybe you're an undercover.'

'He can't be. He'd have to tell us if we asked him. It's called entrapment.'

The fuzzy-lipped one bangs his friend on his arm.

'I'm queuing to get in, just like you.'

‘You a member then?’

I hesitate, I don’t want to have to sign them in.

‘It’s OK, Darryl’s cousin said he’d get us in. He just told us not to talk to him.’ He motions to a tall, thin man a few feet ahead.

‘So he’s Darryl. Who are you?’

‘Ricardo.’ This time his forefinger and thumb smoothes the light moustache.

‘It’s Richard,’ Darryl complains.

‘Same thing, I’m just translating.’

‘He’s Irish, not Spanish, you doofus.’

A space opens up and we stumble a few steps closer to the door, this time without accompaniment. Cold air creeps through the canvas of my shoes. It could be twenty minutes or more until we’re inside and already I’m flagging so I reach for the weed and roll another. Soon, I’ll be relieved of the other goodies and the night can take over, but for now a joint will do. The match catches with a hiss.

‘Thought you said you don’t smoke?’ Ricardo’s eyes narrow.

‘It’s not a cigarette. I only meant cigarettes.’ I almost stick out my tongue.

‘Darryl’s cousin,’ I shout ahead. ‘Do you mind if I share with these two?’ I show him the joint.

‘As long as I can tax it I don’t care. Just watch your wallet.’

The boys pull on it in quick succession and their cheeks puff as they hold the smoke. First to cough is Darryl, releasing three quick clouds. Ricardo forces a steady plume from his puckered lips then sends the final wisp into Darryl’s face. They bicker like brothers, arguing who produced the most smoke, but soon they’re gripping each other in peals of laughter, the rest of us excluded.

Darryl's cousin takes a few swift hits and, closer now, I remember him – his slim fingers, the thick knot of knuckles.

'You haven't been here in a while?' I take the joint.

'I'm not out much anywhere. I met a boy, we play house. I only came tonight because this child's been harassing me for months. Says he'll die if I don't take him. I told the little faggot, if you can't get in on your own, you got no place being here. But I guess I'm getting soft. There's always got to be a first time.'

'He's lucky he's got someone to look out for him. Both of them are.' I offer the joint again but he declines. The boys are collapsing on one another; they've had enough so I take the few final tokes and crush the roach between my forefinger and thumb.

'Your man trusts you out alone?' I remember him now and the fond greetings he reserved for Victor, that thin hand that lingered. Rarely did he even acknowledge me.

'He doesn't dance. Besides, I'm only here to escort these boys in then it's au revoir. Too old for this mayhem now.'

'I'll take them in, if you want to go on. I'll see that they're good.'

'No, I'll stay. Just to sign them in.' He pauses. 'Look, I know you're running errands for Jimi. Don't give them anything. They're not ready for that yet.'

'I wouldn't. I won't.' But I can't be sure. The package weighs heavy in my pocket and I look to see if the boys witnessed his disapproval but they're oblivious. I blow into my hands for warmth, and for purpose. The spent stench of ash rises from my fingertips so I spit-wash then wipe them on my jeans.

‘That shit is strong. You trying to take advantage of us?’ Ricardo asks. Darryl tries to hush him but dissolves to giggles. His head burrows into Ricardo’s chest and he kicks lazily at his toes.

‘Who says I need weed for that.’ Though the cousin is still in earshot, his warning won’t stop the dangers. They’re everywhere. They’re what we’re searching for.

Ahead, a gap opens and the boys bounce along the wall; we’re almost there. I stretch to glimpse who’s working and catch sight of John’s ribbed woollen hat. At least I’ll have no trouble.

The boys tussle and pull at each other until the cousin snarls, ‘Stand up straight. You mess about, they’re not going let you in.’

He’s right but I say nothing, reluctant to give him the satisfaction. With only the boys and their cousin for cover I feel the strength of the wind as it’s forced through the channel of buildings. I yawn and the cold drills to the roots of my teeth.

As the uncle offers his membership card and signs for the boys, Darryl and Ricardo remain silent and still, careful to behave, but then John frisks them and they relent and shriek at every prod and pat. For the first time tonight I catch John’s eye and he throws me a wink. Finally, he smacks their bottoms as if chasing off ponies and they clasp hands and skip together up the ramp. Their bodies shrink towards the neon.

September 1979

Work over, I needed a breeze on my face. For twelve hours I'd been sweating among hot suds and steamy dishwashers with only the looming weekend of solitude to spur me on. Outside was not much better; the September air was sticky and thick as the city drummed out a summer's worth of heat, heat that even after four months still prickled and itched.

Although I had nothing planned, I was not ready to return to the sparsely furnished oven of a room, only the muffled transistor radio for company. Instead I crossed from Eighth Avenue to Seventh then headed south. At Christopher Street my pace slowed. Young heat-drunk men walked arm in arm, their tanned legs revealed beneath cut-off shorts. I moved among them, invisible, hoping their ease and confidence would rub off on me. This was the fourth or fifth journey I'd made here, always too afraid to be more than just a spectator to their rituals. Before long, the street widened and, across the highway, the Hudson came into view. Beyond, too, were the piers I'd heard about but never entered. Even in those places of abandon, I could only imagine myself alone in the corner, undesired.

I watched those braver shadows from the intersection then checked my watch as if late for an appointment and returned on the opposite pavement. Songs wafted from each open window, changing like a radio tuner from rock to soul to folk and back again as I passed. An explosion of laughter from above caused me to stop and squint through a ripened tree but I could only glimpse a shadow as it fell across the window-frame. Suddenly a rush of hot air shook the branches and pops of fat rain splashed its leaves.

What began as intermittent splodges increased in intensity, bouncing as they landed and soaking me from above and below. The street teemed with people

criss-crossing for shelter or signalling for cabs. Summer shirts that had been laid open against the stagnant night were hoisted to shield blow-dried hair and people rose on tiptoes to avoid the floods. Every awning and overhang had been commandeered and, too timid to share, I was left with no cover. I rushed to the blue door with the square window and tried to peer in but could see little past the stuck-on mirrored strips. On previous evenings, from a safe distance, I'd watched men enter and leave and imagined which one I'd like to meet.

The door opened easily and there were no checks in place to make sure I belonged. Despite the weather it wasn't crowded, only a few groups of two or three chatting quietly, their conversations dampened by taped piano music. I walked to the bar determined not to look at anyone – there were rules and codes that I couldn't yet interpret and was afraid I'd send the wrong signal – but I sensed their scrutiny.

I ordered a beer and supped it slowly, half-embarrassed, half-aroused to be here. Rainwater dropped from my hair and tickled as it ran down my face so I used the square napkin from under my glass to pat myself dry; my fingertips wore two holes in the tissue. The back wall of the bar was clad in mirrored panels and I spied on the other patrons amongst the rows of reflected liquor bottles. Most of the men were older than those prowling outside, but had taken no less care in their appearance. Between the vodka and rum I caught a set of eyes on mine. His mouth was hidden, but there was a brightness to his gaze that told me he was smiling.

He was black and didn't resemble the man I summoned to mind late at night, the one that would lead me to unchallenged sleep. But none of the men did, in this bar, or on this street. The man I wanted would be so familiar that he was

almost part of me. He'd look at me and understand without my having to utter a word.

With his reflected glance he made me feel desired and that made me desire him, but I looked to my drink, worried that any gesture would constitute tacit consent. Curiosity led me to lift my eyes again. He was gone, just a space now between the two long glass necks.

'Let me see your hands.' Suddenly he was beside me. The command was delicate and belied his physique.

I held them out, too afraid not to, and he turned them over, tutting as his thumbs gently circled my palms and caused a wash of excitement that reached as far as my toes. My fingertips were like walnut husks, still wrinkled from work. He flipped them and examined the frayed skin around my nails that I tidied with small nibbles as I rode the subway each day.

'Poor boy,' he said softly.

And I think that was it, no coercion required. He stood without talking as I finished my drink and pressed his leg firmly against mine, his warmth radiating through my rain-damp trousers. When my glass was empty he took it from me and placed it on the bar, then turned for the door. The heat vanished from my leg and left me wanting.

I followed him to the street where the rain had stopped, although water still dripped from the trees and awnings. Any freshness the deluge had brought was short-lived and there was a smell of damp concrete in the air. On the pavement gathered the same men as before, or at least the same type. Neither of us spoke as I shadowed him and I was uncertain where this trail would end but at each turn he offered a smile that was bait enough. Soon we had escaped the

droves; he relaxed his stride and, when I caught up, placed a guiding hand on my back.

At the corner of the narrow street he stopped by an Italian sandwich store, the window darkened by shadows of hanging meats. All around, iron fire escapes zig-zagged the buildings and reminded me of those cop shows on TV. He wrestled with the metal lattice door as it snagged on the food wrappers that littered the floor, and the muscles of his back swelled beneath the thin fabric of his t-shirt. Light from the sign above picked out tiny flecks of silver in his neat hair.

I hesitated, my foot resting on the cracked red linoleum of the first step. This threatened an intimacy I hadn't allowed before. Previously, my encounters had been limited to anonymous fumbblings in those dim adult theatres that lined Times Square and, even then, I'd had to be drunk, a succession of beers in a bar close to work aiding my explorations.

'I'm Col,' I called after him.

He stepped back towards me.

'Victor,' he said and once again took my hand. I followed him up the uneven stairs.

A door opened on what I thought was a kitchen, then realised was the whole of his flat. A toaster, hotplate and kettle cluttered the small countertop. In the corner, a dusty blue curtain was pulled back to reveal a squat bath, sink and toilet. A short length of dark brown carpet led to the bed, squeezed under a tall narrow window. At its foot was a record player.

'Take a seat.'

There was only the bed. The mattress squashed to nothing as I sat, the cool metal frame pressed against the backs of my knees.

Victor lit candles, as if there was a power-cut, and turned off the light overhead. Although home, he appeared less certain than before; the fear I'd fought to ignore was now becoming a dry-mouthed anticipation.

'Do you like to get high?'

'I'm not sure...I've never really tried it. Not properly.'

'Not properly?' he repeated, attempting my accent. 'Where you from?'

'Ireland,' I said, then corrected myself: 'Northern Ireland.'

'I didn't know they had boys like us there too.' He stretched to reach a wooden box from a shelf.

'They don't. Not really.'

'Well, Ireland is missing out,' he said and sat beside me.

The bed dipped further; I worried it would give way. With the box resting on one knee, he opened it slowly, eyebrows raised like a magician revealing a dove. Inside were small golden green buds with long dried leaves like ribbons. A muskiness escaped.

'This is some good shit. Be warned, it makes me really horny.' His leg pressed against mine once more and he looked up, lips parted.

My desires could not be spoken aloud, but my cock stiffened against my damp trousers.

He tore up the pot, filled a small metal pipe then tamped it down with a finger.

'I'll be your teacher. Watch how I do it.' He brought the pipe to his lips and teased the bowl with a flame from his lighter until the leaves glowed orange. His cheeks collapsed as he sucked in the smoke, then held it. His exhale came in one steady stream that hung in the air between us.

‘You try.’ Our fingers touched as he passed me the pipe. ‘I’ll work the lighter.’

My first attempt was no use – I coughed immediately and made the candles flicker.

‘Gently,’ he said, his voice mirroring the word.

This time I felt the heat reach my lungs and held it as long as I could. The smoke expanded, filling me, until I spluttered. Its earthy spiciness made my mouth tingle.

We passed the pipe from lips to lips, blasting it with flame, until there was no light from the embers. Victor filled it again. After another two hits my body was so loose that I lay back on the bed; I thought I might sink forever, descending slowly to the deli below. When his mouth brushed mine, I didn’t open my eyes, happy to surrender. He undressed me with efficiency and I felt goose-pimples rise as the air hit my legs, still clammy from rain. As he peeled off his own shirt I caught the strong tang of him.

His fingers lightly touched the exposed skin on my stomach and I gave an involuntary twitch but still could not look. He tugged the waistband of my underpants and I raised my hips as he inched them off. When his hand crept upwards, parting my thighs, I complied; I knew what would happen but did nothing to resist. This was what I’d ached for.

At first there was a fluttering tickle as his fingers circled and searched, then, as they found their way, his touch became more focused and forceful.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked and I think I nodded. ‘Then relax.’

And I tried my best. My eyes remained shut and I barely moved, except to yield when he nudged me to alter my position.

There was pain but it didn't frighten me; Victor coached with soft instructions that allowed me to relinquish control. In its absence, my fears and anxieties disappeared too. If I had no control, I could not be blamed; neither guilt nor shame could exist. Victor pushed further until only the numbness of pleasure remained.

Next morning I woke under the weight of him, stirred by the crashing and slamming of a delivery truck. I traced a finger along the crease of his tummy where the skin was darker, almost a bruised blue, but when his eyes blinked open, I pulled away quickly.

'I'm not going to bite, unless you want me to.' He yawned and scratched the short hairs on his chest. 'I've got nowhere to be today, so feel free to hang here long as you want.'

Arm curled, he hooked me close to him. My head rested on his chest but I could not relax. I'd lost the comfort I'd found the previous night; my body refused to surrender and my limbs stiffened with a hot energy that would not dissipate. As if sensing my awkwardness, he sat up and reached to the windowsill for the pipe. A few puffs relaxed me and I stopped thinking of what I had done, what he had done to me, and concentrated instead on the smoke that swirled above us; caught by a draught, it folded in on itself like a breaking wave.

His lips met mine. We fucked, then dozed, then smoked. Each action prompted the next and the cycle was only broken when the smell of fresh airy bread wafted upstairs and our hunger could no longer be ignored.

Although Victor dressed quickly, he made no effort to hide himself from me. I tried not to stare, but as I watched I could not imagine his figure at home.

He was nothing like the men I'd grown up with, the boys I'd sat behind in lessons, and perhaps that's why I'd allowed this to happen.

'Don't be robbing my shit while I'm gone. I'll be counting the silverware when I get back.'

The door closed with a bang; I was left among the sheets, naked and alone. Reaching beneath the bed, I found my underpants, but even clothed I couldn't bring myself to trespass into the rest of the room and delve among his secrets. Instead I itched to be far from here, where the experience could be remembered rather than lived.

Although each passing minute intensified my anxiety I lay still, outstretched on the bed, until a current of hot air tickled my skin and Victor returned. His thick fingers were wrapped around the necks of a couple of Cokes and a pair of long, tightly wrapped parcels rested in the crook of his arm. The room filled with a sweet meaty smell.

'You're still here?'

'If I'd found the rest of my stuff I'd be long gone.'

'That's why I hid it all in the bathtub.'

He passed me one of the warm, heavy sandwiches and popped the lids off the Cokes. We picnicked in bed with the paper spread across our laps to catch crumbs and drips of sauce.

With full bellies we slept again, surrendering to the drowsy heat of midday. The revs and beeps of traffic infiltrated my dreams until I couldn't discern the real from the imagined. Each time I tried to grasp the scene something would shift and I'd be left confused. Our bodies would bump, then rest, skin on skin, until our combined heat forced us to opposite sides of the bed.

When I finally woke it was no longer light and it took a few moments to blink some recognition of where I was. Shadows in the middle of the room, Victor and a skinnier stranger, whispering with heads bowed. The heat of my sleep increased and, suddenly vulnerable, a sheen of sweat coated my body. I forced myself to be still, rigid, but this caused the sweat to rise more, tiny springs breaking the surface.

‘We wake you?’

The kindness to his voice relaxed me.

‘Did I sleep through the whole day?’

‘We both did. It’s good, save energy for tonight. This is my cousin, Jimi.’

‘As in Hendrix,’ the boy added.

‘Col,’ I mumbled. ‘Short for Colin.’

Victor switched on the light. As the tubes clunked to full brightness I scrunched my eyes, pulled the flimsy sheets tighter. My hands darted between my legs for modesty. Jimi was no older than me and showed no interest in my presence; already, he had turned to Victor and was counting some small pills into his palm.

‘You’re gonna come out tonight, right?’ Victor asked me, though it seemed more an order than a question. His eyes grew wide with the promise of the fun that lay ahead.

I had no work until Monday and no friends at all; my life in the city consisted of an unpacked case in a shitty room too hot to inhabit.

‘OK.’

Victor nodded to Jimi: ‘Two more.’

Welcome To Our World – Mass Production

John calls me forward. He reaches as if to frisk me but instead his hands grasp my shoulders.

‘You doing OK, Col?’ I can’t tell if it’s a pleasantry. His eyes bore into me, the lower lids sag with weariness.

‘I’m fine. Tonight’s going to be a good one. I can sense it.’

‘You’ll take care, though. I don’t want to have to deal with any shit.’

‘What? I’m fine,’ I stutter. ‘No problems here.’

‘You been going hard, lately. I found you, just before Christmas, head in a speaker. Remember? No one could wake you.’

I don’t remember, but for those nights after, Christmas Eve, Christmas, Boxing Day, as I lay in bed, grasping for sleep, a face would appear from the darkness, close and shouting. Fragments of the stumbling, confused walk home would come to mind also, but very little else. The only clarity was the sense of dread that reverberated through New Year, that sits with me still.

‘It was the festivities. It had been a long week.’ The words tighten with embarrassment in my throat.

‘Next time, make it home first, or at least to the Cinema. Dance floor is for dancing. Take care of yourself is all I’m saying.’

He continues to hold me still, allowing time for his words to sink in. I break eye contact and glance to see who's in earshot; thankfully the boys and their snotty cousin are gone. After what seems like an age, he releases me with a wink.

'I'll be careful,' I call back. And that is my intention. I'll forgo the downers until my bed is safely beneath me. That night was a freak occurrence. I think I was upset. Or maybe I wasn't and I simply overshot. It no longer matters. I shake off the residual guilt, the confusion, glad the reasons and circumstances have been forgotten or buried. This is a new night.

On the way up the ramp I peel two fives from the roll in my pocket. I stumble as two pulsing lights shoot either side of me, then steady myself with a hand to the wall.

Denise is in the kiosk, her face lit by a small desk lamp. I hold out the cash and flash a smile – I'm definitely more stoned than I thought – but she shakes her head.

'Col, you're on the list tonight, honey, courtesy of Greg. No cash needed. Save a dance for me.'

'Always.'

I pocket the money, a good omen, and pass the cloakroom. It'll be hot but I won't leave my jacket until I'm rid of its cargo. In the main room lights scan a near-empty floor, although already some groups are congregating on its edges, staking territorial claims and capturing those sweet spots where the music is not just heard, but felt.

Above, the booth appears unmanned, the lights and songs on automatic, but then a hand appears in silhouette, clutching a record. I return to the corridor and find the door that leads to that control deck. There's no answer when I knock

– it's either too loud or I'm not yet needed. I retreat to the back bar where the juice has already been ladled in to cups and grab one and take it through to the Cinema.

The screen flickers, illuminating a few faces but none I recognise. By the end of the night even the aisles will be deep with casualties but for now I can move easily to the farthest corner. I sit, resting my legs on the seat in front. The film is not one I've seen before – some guy is tending to a huge greenhouse of trees and plants, set adrift in space; there are robots to help him. In the warmth I stretch my toes to get the blood flowing and wedge my hands between my thighs, but even the increase in temperature doesn't bring relief. Suddenly, I've never felt so tired.

Perhaps I should go home after I've done what I need to – climb into bed, pull the blankets to my chin and fall asleep to the TV. But the sheets are damp and leave me clammy; the TV only receives two channels. And there's a smell I can never get rid of. At least in this concrete theatre there's no taint of mould, no wind rattling through.

With the roll of notes in my pocket, I could pay for a nice hotel, maybe stay a week – I'd run a bath without having to scrub it clean first and I wouldn't have to wear my socks to bed. A proper sleep might just fix everything. But the money isn't mine; it's already promised. My only profit is the few loose ludes, some acid, the bartered weed from Walt. This room is as much of a hotel as I can afford. I close my eyes and listen as the man teaches the robots how to pot a seedling.

There's a light kick to my thigh. I squint in the semi-darkness and find Greg leaning over me. Confused, I can't tell if I've been asleep – on screen the plants are dying. Greg holds out a hand and pulls me up.

‘You wanna come and show us what you got?’ he shouts in my ear.

I nod. My left leg has gone to sleep and I bang it against the right. Greg is already at the door and I hobble after him, my toes becoming less numb with each step.

Through the door, we climb the stairs to the booth. There are only a few people inside, but the view to the dance-floor shows it’s packed. The DJ doesn’t acknowledge me, we’ve never spoken, but concentrates on making small adjustments to the board of dials and knobs before him, his body twitching to the downbeat. After each correction he looks to the floor to measure its effect on the dancers. With a flourish he twists a dial all the way to the left and the bass drops out. The crowd claps and whoops and they fill the missing kick-drum with stamps of their feet. For minutes the song continues with just the high frequencies like a buzz between my eyes until, with a smile and a snap, the DJ throws the bass back. The dancers take to the air, there’s movement in every corner of the room, a strobe mapping the kinetic frenzy. I can’t help but grin and must fight the urge to dive among them.

September 1979

Jimi left and it was just Victor and me. Unsure what I had committed to, I was nervous of those small pills Jimi had given him.

‘We’re going to meet some friends,’ he said when I quizzed him. ‘Then we’ll go out. You’ll love it, I promise. First we got to eat. Put some fuel in the tank.’

He spoke with a soft authority that made me feel safe; I convinced myself I would be looked after.

Victor ran a bath and told me to soak first. It was a novelty not to have to cross a bare hallway and ascend a flight of stairs. The tub was deep but short and I had to sit with bent legs. I doubled over to cover myself and watched, curtain open, as Victor ransacked the cupboards for anything edible, emptying jars and cans to fill a casserole dish on the hotplate. After, I dried off on the bed, wrapped in a towel. When Victor had bathed, he joined me and we dug hot forkfuls of beans and sauce from the pan.

As we dressed I noticed grease spots and pocks of dried suds on my shirt. I dabbed the dots with my finger and some spit but Victor told me it wouldn't do. From a pile of neatly folded clothes, he threw me a green top. It was too long and too wide but I liked the colour and it smelled cleaner than anything I'd ever worn. Once outside the warm late-summer wind billowed through me.

We walked further downtown, where the streets grew wider, the buildings taller and the trees more scarce. The ease I felt in his studio evaporated and I was sure that anyone who saw us would know exactly what we had done. Buzzed into a high rise, we made for the lift and Victor pressed floor twelve. As we ascended I started to question my choices. It was late, after ten, I was miles from my bed and home was even further. Against all advice I was putting my trust in someone I didn't know. But then, as if sensing my anxiety, Victor lightly kneaded my neck and his forefinger and thumb squeezed the fear from me. I would have gone anywhere he asked.

The doors opened and, across the hall, a short, stocky man with a thick black moustache welcomed us. Holding Victor at arm's length, he stretched to plant an exaggerated kiss on each cheek.

'Who's this young thing?' He took a step back and appraised me with a half curtsy.

'Jack, this is my newest friend, Col. Col, this is my very old friend Jack.'

My arm stiffened as he pulled my hand close to his lips and kissed it.

'Nice to meet you,' was all I could mumble.

Inside, half a dozen men sat on a large corner sofa. I'd assumed Victor's friends would be like him. Instead, they were white or hispanic; one was much older, long grey hair covering his ears. None were as young as me. Opposite, the wall was entirely glass, the reflection of the room superimposed on the buildings beyond. It felt more like a plush office than a home. Victor introduced me to the men, each nodding as he rhymed off names I was in no state to remember. Their clothes were expensive and new, their faces wore healthy smiles. I felt sloppy and provincial in comparison, my jeans threadbare and in need of a wash, my top borrowed, but they squeezed to make space and I sat next to the tall skinny man in a peach open-neck shirt. Victor perched beside me and rested his arm on my shoulder.

'So, where did you two meet?'

I glanced to Victor for the answer.

'I rescued him from Larry's on Christopher Street. Poor boy almost jumped out of his skin.' Victor gave me a squeeze to let me know he was teasing.

'I thought that place had been condemned.' The skinny man turned to me.

'They say Larry waters down paint remover and calls it a Martini Special.'

‘I was sheltering from the rain. And I most certainly did not order his Martini Special,’ Victor replied.

‘I was sheltering from the rain too,’ I felt compelled to add.

‘Well, then it’s romantic. Brought together by a September storm.’

Their focus began to unsettle me and was glad when Jack kneeled before us.

‘I’m so sorry to interrupt. We should probably get going. Did you manage to score a little something?’

‘Course I did. Jimi says these are strong motherfuckers, so you best take it easy.’ Victor placed a small round pillbox on the table, a growling tiger emblazoned on the lid. ‘Especially you, Miss Speaking-in-tongues.’ Laughter broke over the sofa as the man at the far side, maybe Rodney or Ron or Rod, was slapped and bumped.

‘Come with me.’ Victor led me to the kitchen then held a small barrel-shaped pill to the light. ‘It’s acid,’ he explained. ‘Now, you don’t have to if you don’t want to and if you do there won’t be any going back. But you might like it.’

‘Is it fun?’

‘It can be. It can be the best fun in the world.’

‘Will you take care of me?’

‘You won’t need me to, but I will. I’ll take good care of you.’

I stuck out my tongue and it swelled with excitement. What that pill would do, I didn’t quite know, but I needed to be part of that room.

We returned to find the sofa cleared and everyone on their feet. On the street they were a gang, shouting over one another and slipping easily into horseplay. Victor and I followed behind and when he dared to pull me close a horn

stabbed angrily through the night. My new friends shook their fists and catcalled the car's disappearing lights. Then there was silence, no one else on foot, no restaurants or bars, just empty grey buildings abandoned until Monday. I couldn't imagine what there could be for us here, but then we turned a corner. A huge snaking queue covered a whole block, smoke rising along the entire length. It bustled and flexed as more people joined.

As we walked its stretch, Victor stopped at almost every bunch or clique to exchange excited greetings, hugs and air kisses. The majority were black and I stood by, jealous when he didn't introduce me, territorial when he did. Finally the queue thinned and we reached its end. I searched ahead for faces from the apartment but couldn't say for sure if they were there.

'What is this place?' I grasped his arm as my body suddenly tightened and a judder like an electric shock struck my legs.

'The Club,' he whispered. 'You'll be there soon enough. You doing good? Anything happening?'

I couldn't tell, at least not for certain; I didn't know what the effects would be. There was an excited nervousness in my tummy, although that could have been dinner. Voices and sounds passed through me and I struggled to catch their meaning, but I'd been alone so much lately that it could have been the crowd that was overwhelming.

'I'm OK.' I grabbed at my crotch; a spreading warmth convinced me I was pissing myself. My trousers were dry.

'You'll be just fine. I promise. Breathe. Enjoy.' Victor smoothed my hair.

Soon, the men in front had vanished and we'd reached the bottom of a huge concrete ramp. Hands prodded, tapping soft ripples that reached my fingers

and toes. Victor pushed gently at the small of my back, guided me towards the lights and noise. At a cashier window the lady got impatient when I couldn't make sense of my cash, the notes all the same, so I passed them to Victor and let him divvy them up.

Through a corridor, the next room was huge and dark, but filled with people and music. As we glided through the shifting crowds I had to concentrate on those solid things around me, the walls, the floor, to register exactly where I was. The lights swarmed in a corner, then paused before racing to another spot; tops of heads were illuminated as they passed. Colours span in all directions and from the ceiling a bright circle pulsed in perfect time to the music. Everything was in motion and I became unbalanced by the horns and crashing cymbals that grew faster and faster until they unravelled to a stuttering stop.

Suddenly there was darkness, every light gone. Reaching to steady myself, I grabbed Victor, or whatever body was beside me. I blinked repeatedly but the blackness remained. Unease began to surge in my head then tingled all over my body. Whoops and howls resounded through the room as if circled by a pack of dogs. The tinny static of percussion raised hairs on my neck and was joined by a low frequency throb that detonated in my chest. Scratchy guitar and clattering cowbells ripped through the speakers. *Knew it was you, by the way you dance.*

The lights burst and every other sound was swallowed by screams; the space erupted. Pushed and pulled, it was all I could do to stay upright. Victor's hands beat a steadying rhythm on my shoulders.

I spun to face him, fighting the current, and placed my hands on his cheeks. My tongue explored his warm, safe mouth, reaching deeper and deeper until I wanted to jump inside. But my limbs and feet could not contain the energy

that flowed through me and I had to pull away. Before I'd always approached dancing as a task requiring great concentration, but these movements came without thought, as instinctive as breathing.

Victor shouted something in my ear but all that registered was his hot breath. Then he was gone and I didn't think to follow. Time became immeasurable as one song bled into the next and, although most were new to me, I could anticipate their rise and fall. Bodies slid past, lubricated with sweat. My legs did not tire as the floor bounced beneath me, magnifying my efforts, lifting me higher.

A touch and he was there again. His smile flashed in the light. He took my hand and we slipped through the dancers who parted with only the slightest pressure. Passing beneath the booth where the DJ stood, Victor ushered me through a door to a bar beyond. Large bowls of punch sat alongside plates of fruit, as if displayed on a stall. I kept my eyes on them, convinced that if I looked away the bowls, bananas and oranges would simply vanish. He filled two glasses with a pale pink drink and I slurped greedily, enjoying the coolness as it washed through me. The sticky liquid spilled down my chin and dripped onto the borrowed oversized t-shirt. I attempted a look of apology, but he gave a conciliatory shake of his head.

'Just don't drink too much of it. You'll be flying.'

As if plunged underwater, all that remained of the music was the muffled thrum of the bass. I couldn't speak, was not even sure that I'd previously known how. Victor refilled our glasses, only half-way, and directed me to a thin staircase.

'I want to show you something.'

The easy, fluid movements I'd found on the dance-floor had been replaced by foal-like uncertainty. It took all my attention to tread these stairs that wound

higher and higher until I found myself on a narrow walkway. I stopped. The door ahead had no markings denoting what lay beyond and I couldn't bring myself to open it, already troubled by the distance I'd come, wondering if I could ever make it back.

Victor squeezed past and pushed the door open to reveal the huge expanse of the roof, criss-crossed by strings of tiny lights, twinkling as they swayed in the breeze. I stepped without fear into the night air. My neck hairs prickled as the sweat on my body cooled. The bright studs stretched on forever, past the confines of the roof and into the buildings beyond, an expanse of stars flickering to infinity. Each way I turned they surrounded me, without limit.

Clouds – Chaka Khan

Greg beckons me to the space by the door. I glance again at those heads beneath, bobbing like kelp at high tide. This is where I'd like to pass the night, to watch from this height. Even though it's the DJ who selects the music and programmes the lights, it's as if the view itself confers control.

Greg calls me again, impatient.

'Let's get this thing going,' he says.

I take the final two vials from my jacket and place them in his palm.

'It's been road tested already. You won't be disappointed.' My sales pitch isn't needed, he's paid Jimi in advance. 'It's all over the city, everyone'll be on the same trip.'

'Anything's better than New Year. A washout. Even the die-hards left before sun-up.'

I shrug. I'd survived on the coattails of my Christmas supply, but midnight passed without fanfare; all I could recall was the cold daylight walk home.

'Can you ask Jimi to get his hands on any more of these?' Greg holds two white pills out for inspection. They could be anything. 'It's MDA,' he says. 'I only managed to find a few, but have them, try them out. Source more and I'll make it worth your while. This place would be insane if everyone was on them.'

I've heard it described with reverence, but it's never crossed my path. I swallow one pill dry, pocket the other in case I need a boost.

‘There’s no shortage of energy tonight.’ I gesture to the floor.

‘I’m surprised. With the holidays over, and the snow coming in, I thought we’d be dead. Maybe too much family time has them racing back.’

I saw no family at Christmas; I saw no one. I’d swap one night here for just an evening at home. I wouldn’t even have to sit with them, my family, they’d remain downstairs and I’d stay in my room. Their voices would carry, Dad shouting at the news, Mum’s dry crack of a laugh as she and Rose watch a chat show or a quiz. I’d sleep through the night, no waking with panicking gasps for air. But I know that just one night is impossible and any more is too much.

Greg taps my shoulder and I lower my ear to his mouth.

‘Sorry to be a pain in the ass,’ he says, as softly as the music allows. ‘It’s Danny. He doesn’t want this place overrun. Later, maybe, when he’s more hospitable, you can come back.’

Danny’s at the console, expressionless concentration. My usefulness has expired.

‘What song are you dying for?’ Greg asks, an afterthought. ‘Maybe I’ll get him to play it – a thank you.’ He taps the vials.

I shrug at the consolation. ‘Maybe Sylvester. That slow one. He plays it most nights.’

Greg nods. ‘When you hear it, come stand under the booth. I’ll find you. We can turn it out.’

He holds the door open and I don’t prolong the embarrassment of my dismissal, ducking beneath his arm. A shadow passes the stairs as I’m closed out. In the quiet of the corridor I prepare, moving the remaining goodies from my

jacket to my jeans. I keep them separate from the money – left for cash, right for stash was Victor's mantra.

At the coat check, there's no queue and within minutes I'm stalking the edges of the dance floor. Nothing's happening, no change in body, no peculiarity of mind, but as *Can't Fake The Feeling* reaches its chorus my steps follow its rhythm. I squeeze sideways through a trio of smiling dancers and when one drops a double handclap I'm momentarily caught in his delight.

Then, in the corner, heads touching conspiratorially, I spy Darryl and Richard. Or Ricardo. His arm is locked in Darryl's. They don't see me, but I watch them. A little lost, they retreat to the wall. I want to tell them to go home and enjoy the company they've found. At their age all I dreamed about was a friend, someone who would visit at weekends. He'd stay over and we wouldn't be able to sleep. We'd steal food from the cupboards while my parents slept, perhaps eat custard from the tin, only one spoon between us. We'd lie awake, listing our favourite songs, our favourite actors, until the sun rose, then we'd try to hush each other, but collapse instead into fits of overtired giggles. And that's what these boys should be doing. They shouldn't be out all night dancing; they should not be here.

But the life I wish for them, that I wished for myself, does not exist. It doesn't exist for any of us and that's why we're here. At least these boys have found one another. Each has their friend.

July 1971

The bundle of wrapped sandwiches flopped against my leg.

‘You can put them in the boot when we stop,’ Dad said. ‘Your mother made enough for an army. She thinks we won’t cope on our own.’ He gave a derisive shake of his head.

I reached for the radio, then resisted, Dad would only sing along. Besides, we’d arrived at Paul’s street. It was narrow, only a few cars parked, so I could see him straight away, standing on the pavement with his mother. She waved enthusiastically as we drew alongside, her other hand held a dark brown overcoat across her nightie. At Paul’s feet lay a holdall and a rolled sleeping bag, tied in the middle with a belt.

‘This is awfully kind of you, Derek. Now, you be good for Mr. Price, won’t you.’ She pushed Paul gently towards us and he pulled a face. ‘Let’s hope the weather goes with you.’ She nodded to the small hole of blue in the clouds.

I helped Paul gather his belongings but the boot had been packed so tightly there was little space.

‘Put it in the front. You two can sit together in the back,’ Dad said.

Relegated already, I’d hoped to sit in Mum’s place, but made sure to take the seat behind hers, where I’d get a better view. Paul would be stuck with the sight of Dad’s head.

‘I’ll have him home in a few days,’ Dad said once we were settled. ‘And send Billy our best.’

‘I will. Thank you so much. You’re a godsend.’ She peered in at Paul. ‘Be sure and share those sweets with Colin and don’t be acting the lig.’

Paul screwed his face and hunched his shoulders; I couldn’t help but giggle. We bounced on the back seat to hurry the departure.

Our route began on the streets and roads we travelled every day, but their landmarks had somehow changed. The sign above Boyd's Butchers looked grubbier, in need of an update, and our old primary school appeared like a scaled-down model. I was happy to be leaving, if only for a few days.

It was the previous summer that Dad had first promised me this trip, when we'd visited Brian, his friend from work. He and his family were camped down near Newcastle and I'd fallen for the simplicity of their set-up, the idea that you could feel the wind through the canvas as you slept. It was Brian's tent in the boot and Dad said if this trip was a success he'd buy one of our own, in the sales.

With so many miles ahead, it didn't take long for the novelty of the journey to turn to boredom. Dad suggested I Spy, but we soon exhausted the meagre offerings of hedges, cars, lorries and fields. Within constant earshot of my father, Paul and I said little to one another, our conversation limited to the changing scenery, or models of cars. Each time Paul spotted anything resembling a maroon saloon he would pull himself forward and press his head against the window, checking to see if the driver was, in fact, his uncle.

'He has a new car, a Cortina,' he'd explained earlier and it became his mission to find him. But every car brought disappointment as Paul regretfully conceded that it wasn't him.

Dad was able to keep conversation flowing where we failed, quizzing Paul on his new school, his position at football, his exams. He discovered so much that I worried there'd be nothing left for Paul and me to discuss when we were finally alone. The summer before, when we'd just left primary school, we would spend hours together, never seeming to exhaust one another's company. But then we'd split for separate schools. Paul's parents had chosen a secondary close to his home

and, because I'd done well in the transfer tests, Mum and Dad had decided on a grammar in the city centre, one with only boys. At first, I'd protested; it seemed inconceivable that Paul and I would not start first year together, but our playground rituals were soon forgotten and I quickly got used to sitting alone. Since then we only met on a Sunday, at church, but it was different; lately his talk was all about football. Our rhythm, once lost, was hard to regain.

'Londonderry ten miles,' Paul said, reading the sign ahead.

Dad slowed the car. 'Passports at the ready, boys.'

Paul's face was stricken and he squirmed silently in his seat. A panic came upon me, too, until I caught Dad in the rearview mirror and he tossed me a wink.

'I don't even think I have a passport, Mr. Price,' Paul stammered, checking his pockets nonetheless. 'Maybe my mum packed it for me.' He lunged forward, grasping for the holdall.

'I'm only pulling your leg, Paul. Just a wee joke.' Dad winked at me again and I was happy to have shared it with him.

Within a few miles the sliver of blue sky we had been chasing disappeared. I opened the window and craned my head to see if the darkening clouds threatened rain.

'It'll not catch us, not until we get the tent organised,' Dad said with confidence.

'We're not stopping?' I scanned the small, dismal streets that stretched from both sides of the main road and marked the start of the city.

'Not a chance. The Fenians have it all blocked off, rioting amongst themselves. Unless you boys want to?'

'No way!' Paul shouted.

Even the car hushed as we passed those streets. I snatched quick glances left and right, but could see no trouble, their pavements and houses no different from the ones I passed each journey to school.

Soon the terraces yielded to fields, and the sky, though dark still, became less threatening in its enormity. A few miles later we came upon a queue of traffic and Dad wound his window to peer ahead.

‘RUC,’ he said. ‘Neither of you two are wanted, I hope?’

Paul and I shrugged at each other, but this time neither of us laughed.

Our progress was measured a car length at a time, as drivers and passengers were checked then released. On our turn, Dad sat taller in his seat and cleared his throat.

‘Good afternoon to you.’ His voice was loud.

The officer stooped to meet him. ‘Afternoon sir, can I ask your name, and where you’re headed?’

‘Certainly. Derek Price of Mountview Gardens. This is my son and his friend. We’re off to Fannad Head, camping. Hope the rain holds off.’

The officer leaned in towards us. A smile plastered itself on my face and I couldn’t stop my legs from jiggling.

‘Right you are. Safe journey,’ was all he said, then saw us off with a tap to the roof.

I waited several hundred yards, then asked in a whisper, ‘Who do you think they’re looking for?’

‘Not us,’ Dad replied.

The roads became narrower and more winding, the hedges taller, and I must have drifted off. A screech woke me.

‘Where are we?’ I blinked. The wiper screeched once more against the windscreen. ‘It’s raining?’

‘You’re some craic,’ Dad said and Paul let out a guffaw.

I wondered what other jokes they’d shared while I’d been asleep.

‘Almost there, son. Rain’s only just started. A skiff – it’ll pass.’

But it beat down on us for some time and, although sheltered, my shoulders hunched at its severity. In the downpour, Dad failed to spot the campsite’s entrance and had to reverse. It was easy to miss, nothing more than a rusted gate leading to a large open field. Just inside, hidden from the road by a hedge, was a single storey breezeblock building. It had no windows but two blue doors framed the large sink, almost a half bath, that protruded from its middle. There was a large orange and brown tent and an off-white caravan in the opposite corner, but no sign of the inhabitants.

We drove slowly, the car pitching and rolling with every divot and mound. Dad made for a patch farthest from both the other campers and the toilet block, then reversed tight to the hedge. When the engine cut, the rain rapped louder and gusts of wind gently rocked the car.

‘We’ll give it ten minutes or so. There’s a bit of blue over there.’

I struggled to see the break but chose to believe him.

‘Shall we have these?’ I passed Dad the parcel of sandwiches Mum had prepared.

He tore off the wax paper and handed Paul and me a doorstep each.

‘Well Paul, did you see your father before you came away?’

Paul chewed at the hunk he’d torn off. It was the first mention of his dad since we’d left and it embarrassed me to silence.

‘I was at the hospital last night. He looked better, a bit anyway. They still don’t know what it is, but if he can shift the fluid from his lungs they’ll let him home. My mum says he’d be on his feet already if he quit the fags, but Uncle Jonny keeps sneaking them in.’

‘There’s no use if you can’t enjoy yourself once in a while. I’m sure he’ll be on the mend in no time.’

Mum had said it didn’t bode well when the doctors couldn’t say what ailed you, but I didn’t contradict Dad.

Quick, bright sunlight swept across the field, chasing the rain as it went.

‘Right boys, out you get. Let’s get this tent up while it’s dry.’

The long grass was sodden and tickled my shins. I wished I’d worn long trousers; Paul was in jeans. Dad tugged the tent from the boot and upended the bag with a clatter of poles and canvas.

‘Brian says you need to match the dots on the end.’ Dad kicked at the different lengths of steel.

After a good half hour of fumbling and reorganisation, Dad shouting for different coloured dots, the frame began to take shape. When it came time to lift on the canvas, I couldn’t reach, but Paul, being taller, was able to hoist it in place. Ousted, I retreated to the car; half a sandwich remained and I tucked in as they lashed the structure together. Above them, I watched a gull struggle in the wind. Suspended in mid-air, its wings gave a few steady beats but it progressed no further until it ducked, turned, and allowed itself to be carried in the opposite direction.

I didn’t rejoin them until the tent had been pegged.

‘Paul’s been a great help,’ Dad said, pointedly. ‘Unpack the gear while I find the farmer.’

Paul and I laid out the groundsheet and hung the inner compartments, one for Dad and one for us. Inside, the canvas glowed as if the sun had been magnified, but the firm breeze fattened and stretched the walls. We lay on our sleeping bags, practicing for the night ahead.

‘Do you want a wine gum?’ Paul wrestled a paper bag from his jeans pocket.

I picked a black one and held it to the light. ‘I got brandy.’

‘Mine’s sherry,’ he said, biting it in half.

‘How many do you think it would take to get drunk?’ I asked. ‘There must be a bit of booze in them.’

He didn’t reply but rummaged in his bag, sending a few balled socks and a t-shirt tumbling. ‘Look.’ He slid a wooden pencil case across the groundsheet.

The lid was fastened by a nail at one end and I swung it open. Nestled between an HB pencil and a fat pen were two loose cigarettes, strings of tobacco leaking from the ends.

‘I stole them from my da. I have matches, too.’ He unrolled a sock to reveal a small book of them, held flat against his ankle.

Suddenly, Dad’s whistle was carried in by the wind. I shut the case quickly and slid it to Paul.

‘Hide them,’ I said.

‘We’ll try them tomorrow,’ he whispered and stuffed the case into the his holdall, covering it with clothes.

Dad said he was off to the village, the farmer had given him directions. I wanted to go but he maintained we’d be bored, stuck in the car again. Already, I

was at a loss with Paul; the jokes and silliness we'd once enjoyed felt strained and unimportant. Paul's preoccupation was with football, the teams and players, whereas at primary he'd been as happy as me to sit on the sidelines. Sometimes I did watch the results, before Dr. Who, but my interest went no further than guessing the scores based on the announcer's intonation.

'Shall we smoke them now?' he asked, cocking his head towards the contraband in the tent.

'No,' I argued. 'Dad could be back any minute. What if the farmer sees us?'

He shrugged, then suggested a race to the gate and back. When I refused that too, he let go a long sigh of irritation.

Luckily Mum had packed some playing cards and, using an upturned basin as a table, we played Jack Change It. Neither of us were certain of the rules, but we managed to muddle through a few hands and it seemed to placate him until Dad's car finally trundled through the gate. He'd brought fish and chips, steaming in a carrier bag, a bundle for each. I shovelled salty forkfuls into my mouth until the heat caused indigestion. Paul didn't like fish, so Dad and I shared his.

As we finished and Dad collected the empty papers, two cars arrived in convoy at the site in the far corner. One was a dark red and I asked Paul if it was his uncle, but he said nothing in reply. The drivers looked like brothers, with the same thinning baldness that left their hair wispy on top. There were kids too, two boys in one car, a girl and a boy in the other. All were a little older than Paul and me, but not by much.

Silently, we watched the activity at their camp; the fathers set up a table and some chairs that had been folded and stashed beneath the caravan, protected from the rain. The women retreated inside the caravan and it rocked as they walked its

length; the girl followed. A football shot from behind the tent and the boys took over the field, sending arcing lobbs to one another. With each thud of shoe on leather, Paul itched in his chair.

‘I’m sure they’ll give you a game,’ Dad said, opening one of the bottles of Guinness that had appeared with dinner.

Before I could disagree, a stray pass sent the ball tumbling in our direction and Paul was on his feet, deftly stopping, then returning it with a lofty kick. That was all it took to be included in their game; for Paul it was easy.

‘Go on and join them,’ Dad said after a long pull on his stout.

‘There’s four already, it will be uneven.’

‘They’ll let you on, it’s only a kick around. There’s a good lad.’

I could think of no reason he would understand and I didn’t want to disappoint him.

They put me on Paul’s team but he soon became frustrated when I couldn’t make the shots he demanded. If the ball came my way, their shouts confused me and I’d fumble it to empty space. Soon, they stopped passing to me and I was glad to be relieved of the responsibility. Instead, I skirted the imaginary boundary and only made the effort to chase when I felt Dad’s gaze.

Soon the boys were called for dinner and the game declared a draw. When Paul promised a rematch the next day, I hoped for rain.

We played cards again until the light faded and Dad hurried us off to bed.

‘Brush your teeth first,’ he reminded us.

The lower ground by the toilet block was still soft after the day’s rain. Dew clung to the grass.

‘How come you don’t like football?’ Paul asked as we stood by the large sink at the wash-block.

I shrugged.

‘Is it because you play rugby at that posh school?’

‘It’s not posh.’ I spat toothpaste into the sink.

‘Carnew at school says it is. He says you’re all poofs because there’s no girls.’

‘We’re not.’ I had no other reply.

I placed a rock by the toilet door so that I could pee without losing the light. Halfway through I heard the rock move then the door slammed to darkness.

‘Quit it,’ I said, quietly at first.

Paul didn’t reply but I could hear a snigger from outside. There was no light.

‘Open it,’ I shouted and forced the stream to stop, worried I might be pissing on my shoes.

Still he made no reply. I shuffled slowly to the door, my arms outstretched and braced for hidden obstacles. I found the rough wood of the door and banged it hard with my fist.

‘What’s the password?’ he sang from outside.

I said nothing, unwilling to show my fear, but it was too dark and I needed out. My fist pounded. I found the handle but it wouldn’t budge; Paul was holding it firm.

‘The password?’ he repeated.

‘I don’t know.’ My voice had pitched higher and I thumped the door with both hands. ‘Let me out,’ the last word almost a scream.

Slowly it opened, a little light at a time.

‘Crybaby,’ he said calmly. ‘That was the password. Crybaby.’

I pushed past him and rushed to the tent. Quickly I settled in bed and ignored his strained whispers that he was only messing. Slowing my breathing, I pretended to sleep but it was only when the tent shook and I heard the rustle of Dad’s undressing that I eventually managed to drift off.

Next morning I woke to movement outside and the soft putting of the gas burner. The canvas glowed with sunlight and the tent was filled with the smell of warm, damp earth. Paul’s sleeping bag was hoisted over his head and he seemed not to have stirred. I rose and dressed quickly in yesterday’s clothes.

‘Morning son.’ Dad was in his chair, peering into the pot by his knees. ‘We’ll have tea when this is boiled. Do you want a roll?’

He handed me a soft, white bap which had been roughly torn in two, a slab of butter nesting in the middle. I pulled a chair closer and sat. Small bubbles clung to the bottom of the pot and a light steam started to escape.

‘Paul still asleep?’ he asked.

‘Yeah.’ I glanced at the tent.

‘He’s a good lad.’

I shrugged.

‘I know it’s not what we planned. At least you won’t have to look at my ugly mug all day.’

‘It was supposed to be just us. Why did he have to come? We’re not even friends any more.’ I wanted to tell him more, about the toilet last night, but I saw the disappointment in his face.

‘That’s enough. Do you know how sick his father is? When your mother heard, we had to invite him. Give him a break from all that’s going on.’

‘None of that’s my fault.’ My voice cracked and I bit on the roll before I could say more.

‘Nor his,’ Dad snapped. ‘Now, dry up.’

There was a noise from the tent and we both turned quickly. The zip opened and I wondered if Paul had heard. Dad shot me an angry glance.

As we ate breakfast our neighbours disappeared in their cars; the boys waved as they passed and Paul shouted, ‘We’ll have a game later.’

As soon as the dishes had been cleared Dad suggested a walk. Opposite the campsite entrance lay an overgrown lane. Two grooves, worn to earth, ran either side of a large hump that sprouted weeds and grass more than a couple of feet in height.

‘Could you bring your car down here?’ Paul asked.

‘Only if you wanted to ruin it – a car could never clear that. No, this’ll be for tractors only, access to the fields,’ Dad said with certainty.

I slowed, skimmed my hand over the weeds, their bushy tops tickling my palm. Ahead, Dad placed his arm on Paul’s shoulder and brought him to a stop. He was pointing to a spot beyond, where the path rose to meet the sky; they could pass as father and son. I jogged to join them.

‘What is it?’

‘Shhhh. Listen,’ Dad silenced me.

‘What?’

‘The sea,’ Paul whispered.

The slow, rhythmic shuffle of waves rose in volume. Paul ran to the noise and I followed but couldn’t keep up. When I glanced back to Dad he shooed me

on. At the path's crest I was breathing hard. A rush of wind joined the rumble of the sea.

'Look at the waves,' Paul said.

A short slope of light sand ran from the path to the water and stretched for miles either side. Paul skipped downhill, gaining speed but I was slower, breathless, my heels sinking in the softness. Beyond the tidemark of dried seaweed, the wet sand tightened underfoot.

Paul had found a stick and was poking at something by the water's edge.

'What is it?' I ran to see.

He levered the stick into the sand and flicked. A dirty white mass flew into the air, landed with a slap then rolled awkwardly towards me. A wing splayed open on the final turn and stopped just short of my feet. I leapt from it, a mangled confusion of beak and legs and sodden feathers that gathered in strands.

Paul shoved the bird again and, as if life had returned, it flapped skittishly a couple of times before coming to rest.

'Quit it.' I cried.

'Let the poor thing be.' Dad had joined us.

Paul dropped his stick.

'He threw it at me.'

'It's only a dead bird, Colin. Catch yourself on.'

Paul sprinted by the shore, muttering crybaby as he passed. That Dad took his side angered me; I wanted to be the one protected, looked after. I stayed close to Dad, along the waterfront towards the headland. He stopped every few hundred yards to scan the horizon; there was nothing out there, no markers to give any clue to the expanse.

‘If you kept going, would you get to America?’ I asked him.

‘Maybe, but you’d be gone some time.’

Further on Paul let out a roar; he was teasing the tide, running back and forth to evade the waves.

‘Go play with him. Try to enjoy yourself.’

Dad nudged me gently and to please him I trotted after Paul.

‘Keep heading North, to the head. Aim for the lighthouse,’ he called after me.

Paul and I stayed by the sea; Dad walked behind us, but further from the shore where the sand was dry. Paul dribbled anything that lay in our path – stones, shells, smoothed glass. At first he kicked them to me and I’d attempt to return his pass, but the game soon changed. When I couldn’t match his skill he’d shoot, then run to block me, putting the object out of reach with a back-heel. When I stopped even trying he ran goading circles around me.

I wondered what change Paul had noticed in me, the difference he could perceive that made me more foe than friend. It was obviously there, the boys at my new school could see it too; I had made no true friends. If I could detect what trait betrayed me, I would hide it, but all I could uncover was the sense that I didn’t fit. If others had recognised it, soon my parents would too.

Progress was slow; it took more than an hour to reach the path that led to the lighthouse, perched atop the headland. I was hungry and Paul’s harrying had left me with a pain behind my eyes. Although I’d plagued Dad to make this trip, I longed to be home with Mum and Rose.

‘Race you!’ Paul steamed past, his soles throwing grit from the steep path.

Aware that Dad was watching, I made after him, faking enthusiasm. Each stride brought blood thumping to my head and my eyes pulsed in their sockets. The building pressure became unbearable and I had to stop then take soft, shallow steps until the throb subsided.

‘Loser, loser,’ Paul sang when I finally reached him, then administered a dead arm.

I didn’t retaliate, preferring to pretend he was no longer there; the rest of the trip would be for Dad and me, as I’d planned it. In the distance I spotted Dad, the strand stretching miles behind him until it disappeared into a haze of broken waves. Paul was off again, running towards the large white lighthouse that rose from the craggy black rock, but I waited.

‘Did you not run on?’ Dad asked when he finally reached me.

‘I wanted to walk to the end with you. This is it, isn’t it? The lighthouse from the photo?’

‘The one with my father? I suppose it is. We would have stayed just down there, a cottage at the end of this road.’ He pointed to where a car park now stood.

Normally behind the camera, the photo was the only picture of Dad in our house and had always sat on the mantelpiece in a small metal frame. When I was much younger I’d examine his face, imagining that would be how I’d look when I reached twelve or thirteen. Although Dad had easily taken on the features of his father, I fell short of his childhood image – fatter, smaller, softer. Now the same age, my resemblance was that of a sickly cousin.

‘We were supposed to take a photo here, one to match, weren’t we?’ Dad asked.

I shrugged; it no longer seemed important.

‘The camera’s back at the car. Perhaps we’ll do it on the way home.’

Beyond the lighthouse the wind strengthened. Waves surged beneath us, then shrank several feet, pulling tight the seaweed that gripped the rocks. We joined Paul who stood, arms splayed into the breeze, as if on the prow of a ship. There was no land to escape to, only water to be lost in.

‘We should be getting back,’ Dad said, but we stayed a few minutes longer, held in the hypnotic rush of the tide, the next wave that could bring change.

On our return, Paul continued to bait me, running forward, then back, like a puppy. Every few hundred yards he would try to instigate a race.

‘He’s full of beans,’ Dad chuckled. ‘Why don’t you try chasing him instead of moping? You might even enjoy yourself.’

I wanted to tell him about my headache, Paul’s teasing. He was stealing my holiday, the one I’d begged for, the one I’d been promised. Everywhere I was made to feel a stranger.

‘He has cigarettes,’ was all I said.

Dad did not reply.

‘He wants me to smoke them too.’

‘That won’t be happening,’ Dad said finally. ‘I’ll tell him to give them to me and we’ll say no more about it.’

There was no anger in his voice; the only disappointment seemed aimed at me.

‘He stole them from his dad. From the hospital. He wanted me to smoke one yesterday, when you were gone.’

‘Colin,’ he snapped. ‘Just go and play for Christ’s sake. I’ll deal with it later.’

He pushed me with a jab; the sting of his fingers remained on my shoulder. I fought hard to contain the tears, turned my face to the wind to dry them. From that moment, wherever Paul raced, I followed – from the dunes where spiky grass exploded in tufts, to the shore, littered with seaweed and frayed rope. I'd check Dad was watching, that he saw me playing like a boy, but often he'd be facing the sea, searching its horizon.

The pain behind my eyes did not recede, instead intensified with each exertion. By the time we reached the campsite, every heartbeat created a squeezing, throbbing hurt and I tried to absorb each step so that my head would not jolt. The boys were in the field, playing football, and Paul rushed to join them. I slipped into the toilet, shut the door on the sunlight and lay my forehead against the cold, rough walls. This time I welcomed the dark. From outside, I could hear shouts for passes, a yell of 'goal'. Saliva pooled in my mouth and the rising nausea could only be quelled by remaining still.

Some time later Dad's distant voice called for me, but I couldn't answer.

'You in there son?' He was outside.

'I don't feel well,' I said.

Tears tumbled at the admission.

'Open the door, let me see you.' He spoke softly.

I slid the bolt and the door swung open; a burst of light left me squinting and I raised my arm as a shield.

'Have you boked?' He pressed a hand to my forehead.

'No, it's my head. It's so sore.' I squeezed my eyes shut.

'Let's get you to the tent.'

He led me with gentle fingers on my back. With one arm around my shoulder, he guided me, my head jarred by each step.

‘Colin’s not feeling great,’ he shouted to Paul.

There was silence from the pitch, but I didn’t raise my head to see if they were watching. Dad laid me on his sleeping bag, lifted my head and gently placed a rolled jumper underneath. The smell of him rose from it, his cigarettes, the Guinness.

I cried out again, helpless and in need.

‘Shhhh,’ he pulled the sleeping bag over me then lay alongside.

His hand smoothed the hair from my forehead.

I sobbed, no longer worried that Paul, the others, might hear.

Dad shifted his body towards mine and I felt his gentle weight bearing down, protecting me.

‘You’ll be all right, I’m here. Try to sleep.’

Smack Dab In The Middle – Janice McClain

From the booth there appeared to be order, as if the dancers were following a routine; now at floor level it's a chaotic scene. Limbs and heads gyrate, threatening to collide. If I'm to give that small pill of Greg's a chance, I have to join them, but, like entering a hot bath, it must be done slowly, inching in so that the body becomes accustomed. I build my movements little by little to suppress embarrassment and fight hard not to analyse each step and turn. Even in a crowd of dancers I often feel I'm the only one, there to be judged. To move beyond that scrutiny, forget myself, forget the others, that's what brings the joy.

From the beginning I've been in awe of these men surrounding me who move with unrestrained energy, who dance without aggression, who are unashamed to touch. Despite Victor's tutelage, and my unwavering attendance, I've never become one of them. Still, in this room I can forget the past and delay the future; I can suspend myself in the present.

May 1979

A sideways lurch left me pressed to the window. Outside, beacons on the wing lit the clouds as if a fire had caught in the engines. A gap opened to reveal the earth below and I leaned forward to glimpse the city but it closed as quickly as

it came. This was my first flight and every sound – hydraulic realignments, shifts in throttle, the whoosh of air that appeared then vanished – brought a new anxiety.

I had no real sense of how far we'd travelled; there had been ships beneath us as we'd crossed the Atlantic, but the flat expanse had given no sense of distance. The bus journey to Shannon had seemed to take me further from home than this aircraft – there was no mistaking the border checks or the road signs that appeared in Irish. The fields we had passed were to a scale I understood.

In the previous weeks I'd imagined that take-off would be the moment of departure, when my decision to leave could not be undone, but it had come and gone with neither apprehension nor release. I realised my leaving had been a certainty; it had become impossible to stay.

The captain informed us that we'd be landing in forty minutes and that the time in New York was 7.43pm. I swept back the hands on my watch as if those hours in the air had merely been a rehearsal for the time yet to come. In readiness, I took my passport from my inside pocket and laid it on top of the book in my lap. It was a spy novel that Rose had given me but I'd struggled to concentrate on, each shift in our flightpath causing me to pause.

'Your first time in the States?' Encouraged by our imminent arrival, the man beside me broke our flight-long silence.

'Yes. First time.' I did not tell him it was also my first time leaving home.

'You here to see family, or on vacation?' He faced forward, watching the stewardess place a handbag in the bins overhead.

'Neither, I'm looking for work, spend some time here if I can.'

He shifted in his seat, turning to face me. In his forties, his sideburns were curled with grey and his side parting started high on his forehead. Beneath his white shirt was the outline of a vest.

‘You want my advice?’ It wasn’t a question. ‘Don’t get stuck in this city. There might be work, but it’s a dump. My wife and I used to visit a lot. We live upstate. She’s a theatre buff, loves the Broadway shows. Anyway, we’d come to catch plays, eat somewhere nice beforehand. Not any more. It’s not worth it. You’ll see for yourself. Nothing but junkies, muggers and queers. Somewhere else might suit you better, like Florida. The weather’s a hell of a lot better too.’

‘I’ll keep it in mind.’ It was easier to agree. I turned to the window. From this distance, the danger was hard to see; there was more water than land, islands scattered in the ocean. There were some roads too, ordered and regular. It looked welcoming.

To prevent further conversation, I pulled my holdall from under the seat and busied myself with the map inside. I’d ordered it specially from the Eason’s in town. At home, I’d spent hours with it unfolded on the bed, marking the sights and the districts I might want to visit, imagining the people I might meet. The Youth Hostel address was paper-clipped to the front, though I’d copied it into my notebook, too, along with the address of a distant cousin of Granny who lived in Boston. I’d also printed my own address, as if the distance would make me forget. For the first time I realised that address was no longer mine, it was the house where Mum and Dad lived with Rose.

At the bottom of the bag I searched for the envelope that held the remainder of Granny’s money, changed now to Traveller’s Cheques. After the air-fare, there hadn’t been much left, but what there was would have to do until I

found work. Alongside, was the fifty dollar note Dad had given me that morning under instructions that I didn't tell Mum. It was enough that I was spending Granny's money like this without wasting theirs as well.

When I learned of the money she'd left me, I'd wondered what Granny might have wanted me to do. I could have bought something big, like a car, or I could have saved it, in bonds, like Rose. In the end I'd decided it really didn't matter – Granny herself had put it out of reach but it had done her little good. If only she'd spent it on a new TV she could have watched the third channel; she could have put in central heating and made her last winter a warm one; she should have heeded her own warning that there were no pockets in shrouds. I'd decided to spend it for her. Unlike Rose, I couldn't save for a future; I had no idea what that would be.

Beneath, the city expanded, more land now than sea. As its scale became apparent, so too did its dark corners. Perhaps Mum had been right and this was a mad idea. Here, I knew no one. At least in Boston – *if you're so sure you've to go*, she'd said – there'd be family. Each Christmas we exchanged cards with Granny's cousin who would have been delighted to see me. She even had sons of her own, who'd help with finding work and somewhere to stay.

Suddenly, the plane dropped with a jolt and I gripped the arm rest, unsure how the approaching city had become my destination. I couldn't remember making the decision, but at some point it became the plan. New York was the place where people went, when they dreamed of a life outside the one they were given. All I'd left behind was a room in my parents' house and the certainty that nothing there would ever change. A change would have to be forced.

But as the plane plunged further, the anonymity I'd desired, the very thing that frightened Mum most, now began to unnerve me.

Who'll look after you if you're sick? had seemed her most worrisome scenario, or being involved in an accident. *Who's to know if you don't come home at night?*

And that, simply, was the reason I had to leave. No one would know if I didn't come home, no one except me.

We banked sharply and I was pinned again to the window. The pitch of the engines rose higher, struggling against some unseen force. I glanced at the man beside me, the woman next to him, then the couple across the aisle. While none of their faces showed the slightest signs of consternation or panic, it did little to comfort me. There was a spike of heat throughout my body and my fingertips tingled. As hard as I tried, I couldn't help but imagine the plane exploding, a blast that would rip the fuselage apart. Instead of terrifying me, the idea brought relief. I would not have to arrive anywhere, and neither would I have to return.

The plane straightened and the engines' whine grew fainter. Beneath us, shapes began to form. A string of brightening lights revealed a bridge. A tower appeared. People lived here.

Let's Get Together – Pam Todd & Love Exchange

Eyes closed, I listen and hope that this track will bring me distraction. I break it down to its constituent parts, firstly following the rhythm of the drum. My body locks into the beat with ease, and I focus on the bass and its syncopation. I copy the pause...the release, but energy eludes me. Perhaps that little pill from Greg doesn't contain the magic, or maybe I've used my quota up. My pocket has more than enough other gifts to offer the night, but I'll give him a second chance. I force my hand deep and find the extra pill, then swallow it dry.

As if one is the consequence of the other, Jimi appears. His stillness, not even a head nod, is all the more noticeable in the frenzy that surrounds us.

'Let's find some space,' he shouts, then turns without waiting for a reply.

I follow his wide back as he leaves the dance floor. His body is filling out and the gangliness of youth has been replaced by something more solid. From behind, he is Victor's double – a hairline that almost reaches his back, and small compact ears that protrude like buttons. I rest my palm on his shoulder and let him guide me through the corridor and back to the Cinema.

Inside, the same film is projected on the wall. The plants are growing again and either this is a happy ending, or we're back at the beginning, destined to repeat those same mistakes.

'Over there.' Jimi motions to the far corner. It's more crowded now, small groups and couplings scattered throughout, spilling into the aisles. I have to step

over one guy laid flat on the floor, his eyes rolling in his head. If it weren't for the ecstatic grin that's overwhelming his face, I'd be worried. Still, I offer a conciliatory pat on the shoulder and commiserate that his peak could not be enjoyed on the dance floor.

Our journey might be for nothing. It's no quieter in here; the speakers are pushed to their limit and the actors' distorted voices rebound off the concrete, stinging my ears like a slap. At the back of the room, Jimi pulls my sleeve and we sit on the floor between two of the rows. Thankfully, the upholstery muffles the sound and we can at last be heard.

'How you been?' His voice is slower, lower, and concern lurks in his eyes.

'I'm good. My balls are frozen from traipsing round earlier, but I'm good.'

The words sound plausible, even to me.

'You manage to shift it all?'

'Of course. I gave Greg the last of it, besides what I kept for myself. Here,'

I straighten my leg and dig for the roll in my left pocket. 'I've got your money.' I hand it over without counting.

'I wish it was mine,' Jimi says, counting the notes. 'I'm just a poor man in the middle, just like you.' He hands back a twenty dollar bill. 'You did better than you thought.'

'I must have overcharged Jack,' I shrug and Jimi laughs.

On screen, a fight erupts. Two astronauts grapple and we're both drawn to watch. All the while Jimi steals glances at me, picks at fluff on his shirt. It's the same nervous fidget that would possess Victor when something was troubling him.

‘You know,’ Jimi starts, ‘the holidays haven’t been great for Victor. He reckoned, we all did, that he’d be better by now.’

For a moment, I’m stunned; it’s as if my remembrance of Victor has brought him to Jimi’s mind too. Perhaps there is some strange sorcery in Greg’s pills.

‘He needs more visitors,’ Jimi continues, unaware.

I say nothing, hopeful he can’t mean me.

But his hand lands softly on my leg as he says, ‘Look, I think if you saw him, it might do some good. For both of you. You’ve been getting all kinds of fucked up lately. Maybe you need this too.’

I turn to the screen as if it might offer an answer. The man helps a fallen robot right himself. With a tug on my arm, Jimi swivels me back.

‘Col, did you hear me?’

‘Fuck off.’ The words drift from my mouth, are not forced out in anger. ‘That’s what he told me to do. Last time I saw him, he said *Fuck off and don’t come back. Don’t you dare come near me again.* Those were the words. That is precisely what he said.’

Anger rushes in as the memory of that hurt resurfaces.

‘He didn’t mean it. You know Victor. He was in hospital. He was pissed and going crazy.’ Jimi reaches for my shoulder but I shake him off.

‘Did he ask you to ask me?’

‘No...’

‘No, of course he didn’t. I told you. He doesn’t want to see me. He doesn’t want me.’ My chest is tight with frustration. ‘I’m sorry about what happened. I

really am. But it wasn't my fault. Until he asks to see me, I'm going nowhere near.'

Jimi shakes his head in disgust, or disappointment. Either way I want to slap him.

'I'm annoyed with him.' My voice quivers. 'More than annoyed, I'm fucking furious. Victor's at home, everyone feels sorry for Victor. What about me? He fucked me over. He hurt me. None of this is my fault. I wasn't even there, but everyone looks at me like I did it. Poor Victor. Fuck Victor, it's bullshit.'

Now it's my voice that stings my ears, my shout that rebounds off the concrete.

Jimi grips the back of my neck with gentle fingers and pulls me close.

'Just think about it, Col. Nobody blames you. Anyone that does, fuck them. They don't know.'

His lips move from my ear and press gently on my cheek. They are warm and soft and he lets them linger. I fight the urge to turn and find them with my own, to taste Victor by proxy.

September 1979

On the corner of Forty-ninth and Broadway, I waited. Waves of workers passed by, on late lunches or early finishes. I was one of the latter; my shift had started before the breakfast rush and I was done for the day. Although I'd arranged to meet several blocks from work, I nervously scanned the crossing for anyone who might spot me.

Each group brought a new possibility. Despite two whole nights and a day in his company, if I tried to recall his face, I couldn't. There was an outline, the hair, all features present and correct, but I'd lost any detail. Even with closed eyes I couldn't muster a sharper portrait. Still, I readied myself, flattened the front of my shirt and tucked the gathered material into my trousers.

Suddenly, opposite, I recognised his smile. He was waiting for the lights and I wondered how long he'd been watching me, my anxious preparations. I allowed a small wave and, despite trying to hide my excitement, my face tightened to a smile. He stood solid and dense, yet there was an inviting plumpness to his lips and warmth in his eyes.

Traffic halted. He strode towards me and my body froze, uncertain how we should greet each other on this public junction. As he reached my side I glanced around, convinced the world had stopped to gawk. Thankfully, he took charge and hugged me like a pal, our heads close but not touching. His scent brought the memory of his room, his bed, and I knew at once those hours had not been imagined.

'I have your t-shirt.' I raised the plastic bag in my hand. 'It's washed.'

'Aren't you the sweetest. Thank you, Col.' He took time over my name and made it sound like it belonged to someone else. 'And this is for you.'

He held out a small paper bag. I took it and looked inside. It was a single,

Bunny Sigler – By The Way You Dance.

'They played it, at the Club,' he said. 'You seemed to enjoy it.'

'I did? I think I remember it,' I said. 'I'll listen again. Thank you.'

I didn't tell him I had no record player and worried my acceptance had not been grateful enough. Gifts always brought their own anxiety and I could think of

nothing more to say. This meeting had been my preoccupation, whether he would recognise me, and if, on second viewing, I'd be a disappointment; I hadn't allowed myself to envisage what would happen after.

'You look like I'm going to eat you.' He gave my shoulder a squeeze.
'You're safe.'

'Sorry. I've just finished work. I'm a bit...' My words trailed and I screwed my face.

'You need a change of scene. We could take the ferry past the Statue of Liberty, unless you've done that already?'

I shook my head. 'I'm not a very good tourist.' At first I'd tried, exploring when I could, but once I'd found work it all seemed less urgent and I slipped happily into my routine.

'We can be not-very-good tourists together. Besides, the city is much prettier from the water. Maybe not so nice close up.'

I envied his easy use of 'prettier' – too soft, too feminine a word for me to utter so freely.

'Have you eaten? Do we need to get you something?'

'I had a sandwich at work. Sometimes we get them for free, if there's been a mistake with the order or a customer sends it back. It's a perk of the job.' My words embarrassed me, neither smart nor interesting. Each movement felt contrived and awkward but did little to scare Victor off.

When we reached the subway it was crowded, but we found two seats together. In its confines Victor spoke only to point out the obvious, his words inconsequential and benign. 'Only three more stops,' or 'this stop for Chinatown.' Out in the world, we could offer nothing of ourselves and the silence became

intolerable. If it hadn't been for the comfort of his leg pressed against mine, I would have jumped from the train. The promise of him, his body, kept me there.

'Let's go.' At our stop he allowed a covert pat on my knee.

The forced silence of the subway followed us above ground. Any question I thought of, any remark I constructed, I discounted immediately. Too afraid to create a bad impression, I attempted to make none at all.

'Well, there it is.' Victor spread his arms wide to present the Ferry Terminal, rundown and dirty with droppings; many of its windows were smashed too.

'It's not much, I know, but it's the best way to see the city from afar.'

The ferry had not yet arrived; we queued behind a young woman and her child, a boy of about four. He circled his mother, following the hem of her overcoat to complete lap after lap.

'Quit that! You're making me dizzy.'

The boy ducked under the coat, embarrassed at the public reprimand.

'Kids have always got to be up to something,' the mother joked.

Victor chuckled agreeably but I said nothing.

The woman was young – definitely younger than Victor and probably younger than me. I wondered if the child gave her the confidence to talk to strangers, or if she had always been that way, like Rose. The boy hugged his mother's leg.

With a fanfare of groaning metal, the ferry docked and brought the terminal to life. Passengers spilled from the ramp, the downwards slope speeding them on. The bustle relaxed me and I allowed myself to be lost in it. After the final few passengers had bounced down the ramp, we were allowed to board.

‘You wanna sit on deck? We have extra layers if you get cold.’ Victor held up the t-shirt I’d returned.

‘Let’s do it.’ It felt like an adventure.

‘If we sit at the back, on the right, we’ll see the city and get a prime view of Lady Liberty as we pass,’ Victor explained, leading me through a narrow doorway to a steep set of steps. A long, smooth wooden bench wrapped the side and back of the upper deck. The sky was bright and clear – autumn had blown in earlier in the week and replaced the stifling humidity. Finally, we were alone; there was no one within earshot as the other passengers sought warmth in the enclosed decks below.

‘I wanted to say...thanks for the weekend, for looking out for me. Sorry I ran off...’ I could think of no reason, only that it had been too much. The experience had left me overwhelmed. Once home, I’d been unable to sleep and had blinked my way through Sunday, twitching with tired, restless excitement. It felt like something had changed, that something had begun.

‘I did worry a little. A boy like you lost in the big, bad city. I’m glad I got your number before we went out and I’m glad you called me back.’ He glanced at me quickly, then kicked my shoe.

‘Me too.’ I stared at the riveted deck beneath my foot and tried to suppress the grin. Warmth flooded my body, my groin. ‘I’m new to this,’ I added, quietly. That would be my excuse.

‘How long have you been in the city? Did I ask you that, already?’

‘I can’t remember. If you asked me or not, I mean. I’ve been here since May, so almost five months.’ It seemed so long since I’d left home, but the time spent here felt short.

‘Why New York?’

It was a question I could never answer, even to myself. I shrugged.

‘You came here to get laid?’ he teased.

‘No!’

‘Don’t worry. It’s why boys like us end up here.’

‘I needed to get away. I needed to be somewhere else.’

‘Could you not do it at home? You know, be with guys?’ He lowered his voice, though there was no one close by.

‘Not really. Only once, but it was... I don’t know, it was strange. He was much older.’ My voice lowered too. I hadn’t expected to tell the truth.

‘You like a mature gentleman?’ Victor asked. ‘Is that why you went with me?’

‘No. I mean, he was old.’ I couldn’t tell if he was joking. ‘Much older than you too. I don’t know why I let him.’

‘I wasn’t your first in the city, though, right?’ He looked concerned.

‘No. Of course not,’ I added, to make him feel better. ‘It’s just. I never really spent that much time after. I never saw them again.’

‘You’ve been trawling the piers, you mean, or getting touched up in those dirty movie theatres.’

Caught out, I felt my cheeks smart.

‘It’s OK,’ Victor touched my leg. ‘Sometimes it’s just what we need. A quick something and then off. You shouldn’t feel guilty.’

A head at the top of the steps, a man, peeped along the deck, then disappeared. Victor straightened and moved a few inches from me.

We sailed further from the city; in the open water the air grew cooler, the wind stronger. Flashes of sunlight exploded on the skyscrapers we'd left behind. The buildings merged, creating one solid fortress to keep the island safe.

'Have you always lived here, or there, I should say?' I nodded towards Manhattan.

'We moved when I was seven. Before then, we lived in Detroit. But Dad passed and we came to be with my aunt and her husband.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Do you still see the others?'

'Not as much as they'd like.'

'And do they know?'

'What? Are you kidding? They'd hold a service, try to flush those demons out.' Victor strained a laugh. 'They think I'm a ladies' man. *Victor's too smart to get tied down to one woman.* I just play along. I'll be old, all alone with drool on my chin and, still, they'll believe it.' He reached deep into his pockets and his legs stiffened against the breeze.

'What about your cousin, Jimi? He knows?'

'Only because he's a dirty little faggot himself. When he was about fifteen I caught him fooling around with the kid next door, if you can call trading blow jobs fooling around. Anyway, he freaked out, thought I was going to tell my aunt. After a while, when I'd said nothing, he started to tell me things, talk to me, you know. It was good, for both of us.'

'I never told a soul. My parents know nothing. As a teenager, I was fat. They didn't expect me to have a girlfriend, they never even asked. I didn't have to lie, I just had to be quiet.'

‘You can’t be much older than a teenager now.’ Victor leaned away from me, shielded himself in mock defence.

I played along, nudged him lightly on his shoulder. ‘I’ll be twenty-one in the New Year, a grown-up.’

‘I’m thirty-three and I’m still not a grown-up. Maybe we never can be.’ He slouched back on the bench. ‘We don’t get married. We don’t have kids. We don’t have to be responsible. We can do as we please.’

‘I don’t think it’s those things that make you a grown-up, I think it’s the lack of fear. Grown-ups aren’t afraid. They don’t need to be looked after.’

‘Maybe grown-ups are just people who look after each other. Maybe it takes two.’

The ship adjusted its course and, no longer sheltered, the wind buffeted our ears. The afternoon sun shone directly onto our faces and I leaned my head back, closed my eyes. I imagined Victor doing the same. For the few months I’d been here, each new thing I’d seen – the buildings, the subway, the Park – none of it had seemed real. Without someone to share the experience, the memories had no anchor. At home, we told stories over and over, of childhood and family, so we could remember what we’d done, who we were. Now, Victor was beside me, enjoying the same warmth on his face, I could be sure this was happening. I would remember.

‘There she is.’ Victor sat up, shielded his eyes with one hand, and pointed to the Statue of Liberty.

It was impressive and disappointing at the same time. It was exactly as I’d seen in pictures, or films – the torch was there, the strange, green glow – it was

just smaller somehow. Even at this distance, it wasn't the towering giant I'd expected.

'She was my costume, last fourth of July. There was a big party at the Club. I held my torch so high all night, I lost feeling in my fingers.'

'Do you always go there – the Club?' I tried to say it the same way he had, the same intonation.

'Every week I can. It plays the best music, has the cutest boys.'

'Is that where you go to meet people? I mean, boys.'

'I go to dance. If I meet someone, all the better. But, this is New York. You can meet a boy anywhere, you don't need the Club, or any club. Or the piers. Or some dirty ass movie theatre. You just have to read the signs. We're on every corner, on every street. We're everywhere. I bet if you looked, you'd find someone on this boat to make it with. There's nowhere in this city you can't.'

I scanned the deck. We were still the only passengers braving the breeze.

'I said you could find someone, not you should.' He hooked my neck and pulled me to his lap. A hand roughed my hair. Although we were alone, his touch was public and brazen and excited me. I felt it excite him too, but he stopped, sat upright. The ferry was slowing.

There was a burst of noise, then the judder of engines reversing. The ship was sliding, fighting to grip the water as it manoeuvred into position.

'We've got to get off, then board again. It's dumb, I know. You got a quarter for the way back? I don't want to have to leave you here.'

I fished in my pocket, held the coin for him to see.

People were already queuing when we disembarked and we said little as we joined the line behind them. The terminal was no better kept than the one we

had left, but the turnaround was quick and we were soon back on board. Victor directed me to the front so that we'd be facing Manhattan on the return. The sun had dipped and already there was a faint glimmer of lights amidst the shadows of the buildings.

Now busier, we shared our bench with an Italian family, shifting to make room for the mother and father. The teenage boy and his younger sister remained by the railing, heads projecting into the wind. Their presence forced silence upon us.

As the buildings grew bigger and closer, I wondered what was expected of me. I didn't know if we'd go home together, or if we'd only met for the afternoon. I'd scarcely prepared, had not presumed to bring a change of clothes, but my toothbrush was in my pocket, its head protected by toilet paper. Even if we'd been alone, I could not have asked Victor. There was no one I could ask.

The Greatest Performance Of My Life – Loleatta Holloway

Tonight, I gave the greatest performance of my life. Loleatta Holloway saturates the air with pain.

I mouth along, *That not a single soul could tell that I was lying.* Behind me, a soaring falsetto joins her and has everyone searching for the source. A heavy man sings, as if alone, and his mouth stretches wide to let the hurt escape. Rocking back and forth, from heels to toes, I try to build the energy, to distribute whatever chemical taints my blood.

Ahead there's a boy I've seen before, although we've never spoken. He's the antithesis of Victor – rangy and with a glint of danger. I watch him with his friends, their shared looks of encouragement and empathy as the song modulates their dance. He must sense my gaze; his eyes meet mine and the corners of his mouth rise. Impossible to tell if the smile is encouragement or derision. I won't allow hope to overcome me.

But he breaks his circle and dances closer. Embarrassed, I shuffle backwards. He follows, mirroring my movements. His friends pass him a joint and the scent teases my nostrils. He takes a hit, then another, and with a French inhale, sucks the smoke deep into his lungs. His eyes lock on mine, even when his head tilts to release a slow plume into the air. He holds the joint towards me and our fingers touch as I take it; the soft contact leaves me wanting. I hit it twice, as

he did, and when I offer it to the air, he points to his friend in a navy t-shirt. I pass it on.

‘It’s primo,’ he says of the quality.

There’s a sour, breathy smell and I worry I’m the culprit, that my diner stop has left its mark. I nod, mouth closed.

Now closer, I see he’s probably my age, but his moustache is thicker than I could ever hope for and trimmed to a poker straight line. Perspiration coats his arms and, while he’s not musclebound, shows off an athleticism I can only envy. His hand scrapes to tame the dark, sweat-formed strands of hair that stick to his forehead. Beneath heavy eyebrows his pupils shine. When the joint makes its second lap, my new friend makes sure to pass it my way.

‘I’m Martin,’ he shouts in my ear.

I dance on, my mind rushing forward to the possible happiness, the probable disappointment. Only after several moments does it occur to me to reveal my own name. I place a hand on his upper arm.

‘I’m Col.’

His head ducks in time to the music and I can’t discern if it’s a nod or a move. He sidles near, then returns. It’s the call and response of romance on the dance floor.

I sweep the crowd for familiar eyes, feeling suddenly disloyal to Victor, although I owe him nothing. The future should be my focus, not the first touch, or the first kiss, but the security and ease that comes after. There’ll be no return to Victor. I catch Martin’s eye, let him know it’s time. I’m ready.

He steps to meet me, his lips curl to my ear and I feel their touch throughout my body.

‘I’ve heard you’ve got some really great acid. My friends and I would love to buy some.’

My feet stop. I shake my head.

‘You’re wrong. There is no acid. I have nothing for you.’

His hand leaves my shoulder and he shrugs, first to me, then to his friends. They’ve been witnesses to the entire ritual. This was no courtship – it was a transaction.

The excitement that had built is wrenched from me and my stomach collapses in its absence. I turn, and walk from the floor without glancing back. Fuck Martin. Fuck his friends. Fuck them all.

December 1972

A church service played on television, the volume turned low. I watched as the fire spat and cracked in the grate. Dad had struggled to get it lit, the day’s damp permeating the coal, but a rushing noise soon joined the pops as the kindling beneath erupted in flames that were sucked towards the chimney top.

‘I hope Santa’s not stuck up there. He’ll get his arse burnt.’ Granny turned to me, her mouth wide as she let out a guffaw.

Rose swung in through the door with a clang, a new roller-skate strapped to her left foot. For safety, she’d agreed with Dad not wear both in the house.

‘Is Top of the Pops on yet?’ she asked.

‘Not for a while.’

‘I don’t want to miss the Queen,’ Granny proclaimed.

‘It’s on the same side, right after,’ I said.

Careful not to rustle, I reached deep into my stocking, still propped where it had been left, by Granny's chair. I squeezed the selection box, feeling for the long, thin Curly Wurly, and, once found, fed it gently up my sleeve. My arm stiff, I walked from the lounge as casually as possible, quickening only when I reached the stairs. I locked the door to the small toilet, closed the lid and sat. Saliva rose as I tore at the wrapper. Although breakfast had been late and dinner would be soon, this was a day when treats should not be denied; it made it special. In the New Year I'd try harder.

At first I tried to make the bar last, sucking slowly at the chocolate coating, but soon I was chewing large mouthfuls of caramel, rushing to get to the next bite, until nothing but a few shards of chocolate at the bottom of the wrapper remained. I used my tongue to dab at the scraps, then scrunched the package into as tight a ball as I could manage. Buried in the pit of my pocket, no one would be any the wiser.

In the lounge, the fire roared orange. The multicoloured lights on the tree appeared brighter too, multiplied by the window's reflection. I moved past them, to glimpse the sky, darkened now as if night had come early. With my back to the room, I picked caramel from my teeth. The grey clouds had dropped so that a mist hung in the air, obscuring everything beyond the house opposite. Even that was partially veiled – the McCallisters were spending Christmas with their son and his family and had not bothered with decorations this year. The pavements were empty, no one braving the murk to try out new bikes, or show off new presents. Outside, it could have been any other dull day; the weather made no concession to Christmas.

I passed by Granny; her head had lolled to one side, overcome by a soft, shallow sleep. It was almost time for Top of the Pops. Turning the knob gently, I tried to raise the volume in increments that would not wake her, but regardless, Granny's head straightened and a slow smile fattened her cheeks.

'The heat of that fire's put me to sleep.'

'Are you sure it wasn't the sherry?'

She looked at her empty glass. 'Would you fetch me another? Maybe this one will waken me up.'

When I returned, Rose was sitting cross-legged, as close to the television as she could.

'Look at his glasses!' she cried without turning.

Elton John was singing at the piano. I gave Granny her sherry and sat by the fire, on the off-cut of carpet that caught the sparks. My back to her chair, I could smell the leather of her shoes and the slight whiff of foot sweat. Her hand absently picked through my hair, ruffling it up then smoothing it back in place.

None of my bands would be on so I gathered my stocking and examined its contents once more. I reached in and felt a soft bundle – socks, a pack of three, white with different bands of colour at the top. Another rummage brought forth underwear, another multipack of different coloured y-fronts sporting the same white trim. Next was a checked flannel shirt, still pinned to cardboard and with a plastic strip stiffening the collar. Mum had wanted me to wear it today, but the check was large, almost tartan, and I worried it might be too childish. Beneath the opened Selection Box was the diary with gold-edged pages and a short pencil housed in its spine. Finally, at the very bottom, I reached for the envelope and card inside with the unseasonal picture of a footballer, leg extended as he took a

shot at goal. The very stiff five pound note was still enclosed and I reread the message – *Happy Christmas Colin, Love Mum and Dad. xxx.*

In a pile it didn't seem much, certainly less than Rose's haul which had spilled from the top of her stocking. There was still one present left from Mum and Dad, a box beneath the tree. Rose had one too, although hers was larger. We hadn't made lists this year but Margaret had given Mum a thick *Kays* catalogue at Hallowe'en and each of us had folded over pages to mark the things we'd like; Rose had turned so many they'd lost all usefulness and the whole directory had become a tome of her wants. I hoped it was the radio alarm from page seventy-two that had been wrapped and placed at the foot of the tree.

The fire settled, a new flame erupting where virgin coal met burning embers. Rose shouted that it was time for the speech and Mum and Dad rushed to join us, bringing with them the smell of cooked meat and vegetables.

There was hush as the Queen started to speak and the sombre silence of her living room matched ours. I didn't listen, bored to indifference, and was content just watching the flickering coals. But then she mentioned us. She mentioned Northern Ireland. I felt Granny pull herself forward in the seat behind me. My parents, too, moved to the edge of the sofa and their necks stretched towards the television.

'Whisht,' my mum repeated even though no one was talking except her and the Queen. We listened as if she might list each of us by name. Dad interjected with a few agreements. Even though she was offering sympathy and commiserating with the trouble we were facing, it felt special to be talked about, as if this province was now somehow important.

‘Good on her,’ my dad said as the Queen wished us all a peaceful Christmas. ‘Let’s see what the Provos make of that.’

‘She looked beautiful,’ Mum added, ‘and she speaks very well.’

‘There’s not many like her,’ Granny said.

But the excitement was short-lived; nothing would change.

Mum announced it was time for dinner and we took our places at the dining room table. Dad was at the head flanked by Mum and Rose. Granny and I sat opposite each other, on the end. The earlier dank weather had turned stormy. Rain scattered against the window; silhouettes of trees and bushes danced in the garden behind us. It would soon be dark.

‘This is a lovely bird, Iris.’ Dad stood, ready to carve the meat.

‘I’m just glad it got here. I thought it wasn’t going to past the checkpoint. I could see one soldier licking his lips.’

Except for calls for more stuffing or requests to pass the cranberry sauce, there was not much talk at the table. Even the crackers, leftovers from last year, offered only a muted snap. Once everyone had finished, Rose and I cleared the plates.

Dad pulled a bottle of brandy from the cabinet and took care to drizzle it over the entirety of the Christmas pudding, letting it pool in the indented top.

‘Get the lights, will you son?’

I flicked them off. He handed me a box of matches.

‘Away you go. Carefully.’

This was our ritual, mine and Dad’s, although my role had changed over the years. I’d started out with the wish, then, as I got older, I was allowed to help pour the brandy. For the last few years I’d been chief lighter, but took care to still

make my wish. It took three strikes for my match to fizz alight. I lowered its flame to the pudding, almost black with richness, and there was pop as the brandy caught. A cheer erupted from the table, Granny giving a particularly high-pitched yo-ho. The blue glow vanished.

‘I don’t think I soaked it enough,’ Dad apologised. ‘Let’s try again.’

He let the bottle run freely and I worried the whole table would be engulfed. The second match would not light, its head disintegrating after numerous failed strikes. Dad took the box from me and, with a sure flick, his match lit. Suddenly blue flames appeared in the dip and rolled down the sides. The entire pudding was aglow; flames shot up and down and the fruit inside whistled and sang.

Once more there were coos from the table but I did not join in. Instead, I concentrated on the wish, the same one I had always made but could never utter aloud. I watched in silence until the last flicker.

‘Shall we get the presents from under the tree?’ Rose didn’t wait for a reply but returned with her arms full. These were her gifts to all of us and had been bought and wrapped for almost two weeks; they’d had to sit in her room for many days until the tree went up.

She handed me a small, flat square I knew was a single, so I waited for the others to unwrap theirs. There were small ornaments for Mum and Granny, handmade pots to keep their rings safe, and a set of golf tees for Dad. Everyone thanked her and Rose sat back with satisfied smile. I tore open the paper to find *The Chi-lites – Have You Seen Her*.

‘I hope it’s the right one. I heard you singing along with it on the radio.’

‘It’s brilliant, thanks.’ And it was, the first gift that day I’d truly wanted.

Granny was next to dole out. ‘What with the turkey, I couldn’t carry much else,’ she said as she handed envelopes to both Rose and I. Inside was a card and a book token for five pounds. There would be no need for receipts this year and I thanked her with a kiss on her cheek. Rose, although younger, had got the same.

When it came time to pass out my presents I watched nervously as they were unwrapped, hoping that I’d made good choices. Rose put on her scarf immediately, professing to love it. Mum unscrewed the lid of her bubble bath and inhaled deeply.

‘That smells wonderful,’ she told me.

‘This will come in very handy,’ Dad said as he set the golf ball cleaner alongside Rose’s tees.

Granny was last and tore at her wrapping with haste. When the paper split the matt brown dog turd landed on the table with a thud.

‘Oh, Jesus,’ she exclaimed, before breaking into a hearty laugh.

‘What is that?’ my mum asked.

Granny poked it with a fork, verifying that it was indeed fake, then held it up for all to see.

‘That is disgusting. Colin, why would you do that? It’s not even funny,’ Mum strained.

But Granny was laughing; her head was lowered and her shoulders shook.

‘Rose, away and fetch our presents to you pair from under the tree. Although I’m not sure Colin deserves his. Son, that really isn’t very nice.’ There was no anger in her voice, only disappointment.

I could feel my cheeks smarting, a surge of blood that reduced me to a child again. The snowman serviette twisted in my hand.

‘Well, I’ll certainly remember it. Maybe if I set it beside me on the bus home, I’ll get the seat to myself.’ Granny caught my eye and gave a wink.

‘I just don’t like that humour,’ Mum countered and the table fell silent.

Rose carried two presents. ‘This one’s yours.’

It was a heavy and rectangular. There was no rattle when I shook the parcel gently. I picked at the Sellotape first, prolonging the anticipation, but when the thin paper ripped with it, I just tore through. The writing on the box revealed a mistake and I hoped the clock radio would be nestled inside. I opened the lid to find there was no error; a pair of black leather rugby boots lay toe to heel, their dull metal studs to the outside.

‘Thank you. These are brilliant!’ Rose stood while she put on her helmet and pads.

‘When we heard Santa was bringing you skates, we thought we’d get you something to make sure you don’t hurt yourself.’ Mum helped Rose fix the strap under her chin.

Dad’s eyes were on me; I said nothing and glanced again at my lap.

‘If they’re not the right size, they’ll change them,’ Mum said. ‘Your father has the receipt.’

‘Those are proper studs,’ Dad added. ‘The key’s in there somewhere, for tightening.’

I dug into the box, through the crunched paper that kept the boots’ form, and found it at the bottom, like a large wing nut.

‘There’ll be no stopping you on the field now,’ Dad said and topped up his glass with wine.

‘Thanks.’

I hoped the crack in my voice had not been noticed. If they did hear, they ignored it, and talk turned to the speeds Rose would reach now that the pads and helmet could guarantee protection.

The fault must have been with me; Rose got what she had wanted. Perhaps my request for the clock radio had not been obvious enough and I needed to make my desires more clear. They weren't to know I hated rugby. It was a truth I'd never divulged for fear its discovery would bring forth others. At school we had to participate in a sport and being wider, stockier, it was assumed rugby would be my game; hockey was reserved for those faster and thinner, less manly. I did not feel suited to either.

Dad caught my eye and I squeezed a smile as best I could, raising the box slightly to show him I appreciated it; the problem did not lie with him.

After the table had been cleared, we took to the living room where the fire had settled to loose, glowing ashes. Dad got it started again with some kindling and a few large nuggets of coal. The TV sounded softly in the background, but no one paid it much attention. Mum and Dad sat on the sofa, Granny on her chair. Rose was on the floor, drawing with her new colouring pencils, and I sat next to her, my presents beside me. The record could not be played with the TV on, and I couldn't bring myself to try on the boots. I leafed through the diary, examining the back pages to work out what day my birthday would fall in the years to come. There was a hot discomfort I couldn't get rid of, the sense that something had been left undone, or that an opportunity had been squandered.

Afternoon passed quickly to evening. Television programmes celebrated the festive season so we no longer had to. In the middle of *Christmas Night with the Stars*, Mum left to fetch a plate of sandwiches and I followed her to help.

‘Butter some bread and I’ll cut more turkey,’ she said, then passed a sliced pan loaf.

Diligently, I scraped butter from the block and made sure it spread right to the crusts.

‘You’re very quiet,’ she said after some time.

As if to prove her right, I remained silent and hoped she’d probe further, that those questions I needed her to ask would appear. But with none forthcoming, my preparations became more slapdash. At intervals I released long exhales and the bread began to rip under the increasing pressure from my knife swipes.

Finally, when my body could tighten no more, I asked, ‘What about the clock radio?’

‘What?’ Mum asked with a sigh. ‘Is that why you’re in bad twist?’ She stopped carving to look at me. ‘You can’t have everything you ask for. There were a lot of things Rose wanted but didn’t get. You got your boots. Sometimes there just isn’t the money.’

‘I never asked for the boots. Those weren’t my idea.’ Although I tried to control it, my voice pitched higher.

‘Don’t be ungrateful.’ Her volume increased to match mine. ‘And don’t let your father hear you say that. He spent a long time getting the right pair, and they weren’t cheap. He was so happy to have found them.’

‘I don’t even like rugby.’ I turned from her, then crossed to the table. The admission didn’t bring the relief I’d hoped.

‘Maybe if you tried harder you’d enjoy it. You can’t just mope about in your room, Colin. It’s not healthy. Your Dad thought that maybe those boots would spur you on.’

That it had been discussed between them made me shrink. The present was an effort to shape me, to help me become the son they had wanted. If I thought it were that simple, that a pair of boots could be the answer, I'd have requested them myself; they'd have been at the top of my list.

'Don't be disappointed,' Mum said, softening. She arranged chunks of turkey flesh on the buttered bread. 'We've had the nicest day. Many would give their eye teeth to be so lucky.'

'Why don't you give them the boots.'

I regretted the words at once, even before Mum let out the staccato *Enough!* that rebounded from the walls. She was still for a moment, then attended to the sandwiches, stacking and cutting them with a long bread knife. Her movements were precise and without flourish, her anger transformed to speed and efficiency. I could not say sorry, although I was – sorry that they didn't know me enough to buy the right thing, sorry that I wouldn't let them.

As if the matter had been forgotten, Mum handed me a large, oblong plate filled with sandwiches cut in neat triangles, the one with the roses on the border she usually saved for visitors. She collected the Christmas cake, resting the silver base on the flat of her palm; the other hand gripped a thin, sharp knife.

'Let's just enjoy the rest of the evening,' she said. 'For Granny. Anyway, it's your birthday soon.'

While none of us could complain of hunger, the sandwiches were soon finished. Mum removed the tinselled cuff from the cake and cut thick, straight slices. I chose an end piece, with icing and marzipan covering both the side and top. Rose persuaded Granny to try the Happy Families game she'd got from a

school friend and Dad helped with the rules. Mum returned to the kitchen to finish the pans she'd left to soak.

I left in search of the catalogue to make sure my request hadn't been imagined, that its refusal had been deliberate. It was not where I'd left it, beneath the telephone table in the hall; only the directories remained. I searched through the papers and supplements on the kitchen table, the pile topped with the bumper Radio Times. When Mum asked what I was looking for I said nothing, for fear of upsetting her once more. I remembered Rose carrying it with her the day before, a final check.

I poked my head into the lounge where the air was heavy with sleep and heat. Dad, Granny and Rose were still holding their cards but the game had slowed as their eyes sought the television in between turns.

'Have you seen the *Kays*?' I asked Rose.

'Binned it,' Dad answered. 'Threw it out this morning when we had the clear up. No need for it now.'

The loss of the catalogue was as disappointing as the day. With only hours left in the evening, Christmas would soon be over. Those things I'd hoped for had not materialised; the days ahead would be as unfulfilled as the days before.

Rose was first to bed, only relenting when I promised to follow soon after. But I held on, believing that if I stayed up something might happen, that the day would not be lost. Finally, it was too late and I climbed the stairs behind Granny. When I reached the landing she called me back to her room, the bedroom Rose had given up for her stay. As she sat on the bed, the quilt patterned with pale red strawberries, it seemed as if she's been there all her life, the room unchanging as she grew from a girl to an old woman.

‘Don’t be disappointed,’ she said as I stood by her door. ‘Christmas is for children, the younger ones. One day you’ll have some of your own – that’s when it gets exciting again, when they believe in it all. Rose knows fine rightly there’s no Father Christmas, but she plays along, that’s why she does so well out of it. Your mother doesn’t question her. She was so upset when you stopped believing. She wants to keep it going as long as she can.’

‘She says she never got much at Christmas.’

‘Your mother? Only because she managed to sniff out anything I’d bought long before the decorations even went up. Anything I put aside – a bit of chocolate, some hankies – she always found them. I’d catch her, mid-November, half a chocolate bar eaten. *It was down the back of the chest of drawers*, she’d say. *You must have lost it*. Even so, I was never angry long. She’d always smile at me, her eyes half-closed. Just like you’re doing now. You’re the spit. You can’t be angry with that.’

Although pleased she’d remarked on it, I could never see any similarity, to Mum or Dad. Instead, I’d search for the ways we were different, confirmation that some mistake had been made, a mix-up that would explain the unease I felt, my inability to fit.

Granny’s arms called me to her and I lowered to her embrace. Her cheek pressed to mine, the soft sagging skin like velvet.

‘Off to bed with you. You’ll feel better in the morning. There’s more eating to be done.’

I crept to my room, careful not wake Rose, stretched on a makeshift bed by the door. Once undressed and beneath the covers, I was unable and unwilling to sleep. Rose snored softly on the cushions, changing position every now and then.

When I heard the footsteps of Mum and Dad and the closing of their bedroom door I waited, measuring the passing minutes by my watch. Although the hands had lost most of their luminescence, if I tilted my wrist, I could just make them out. After a slow hour I finally stepped around Rose and snuck from the room, anticipating each clunk of the door handle.

The landing was quiet and cold and I wished I'd snatched the dressing gown from the back of my door. Each creak on the stairs left me certain I'd be discovered and it was a relief when I stepped onto the frigid tiles of the hall floor.

I loosened the bolt on the back door in tiny increments, then slid my feet into the old shoes Dad kept for collecting the coal. The torch he used to find his way to the bunker was there too, and I clicked it on. The air was even colder outdoors and squeezed at my chest, although thankfully the rain had stopped. I stepped into the yard and was suddenly lost in its silence.

The bin lid clanged only once as I lifted it but no one stirred. Inside, the catalogue's thickness was easy to find, resting beneath a soft covering of vegetable peelings. I brushed them off then leaned the book's spine on the rim. Tucked the torch under my chin, I directed its beam so that it caught the pages. Quickly, I flicked to the section that had held my interest for so many weeks, more than the clock radios or the camping gear, and that once found, once I allowed myself to pay it close attention, I could not leave alone. It was only four pages, a double spread in the middle, but that section held everything I wanted. There were three different men, one blond, modelling swim trunks and shorts. Sometimes the whole bodies were pictured, other images showed only a cutaway of their groins. Carefully and quietly, I ripped out those pages and folded them several times over.

I pushed the rest of the catalogue deep into the bin and recovered the surface with thin peels of carrots, parsnips and potatoes.

With one last sweep of the torch I made certain my disturbance could not be noted, then returned inside. After bolting the door, I left the shoes exactly as I'd found them and set the torch in its place. I did not allow myself a peek at those pages again; that I'd rescued them was comfort enough.

The house ached with silence, but I still wasn't ready to sleep. In the living room I turned on the lights of the tree. All around there was evidence of Christmas – my presents were still stacked neatly by Granny's chair. Soon the socks, the pants, the shirt would be used, integrated into my other possessions. The rugby boots, despite my disappointment, would be worn and dirtied with mud. There'd be no reminder of this day.

I moved past the tree, cupped my hands on the window and stared into the night. The storm winds had cleared the air and the lights of the city now shone in the distance. Other people were out there, people I didn't know, their Christmases, too, coming to an end. I felt suddenly alone.

I (Who Have Nothing) – Sylvester

I escape to the far wall where I can't be surprised; with a view of the floor and the doors leading in, I have control. Crushed by dancers, I step to the riser. My rage has been soothed to a tingle; there's a throb in my extremities. Those little pills may have delivered after all, but my body's more unwilling than my mood and I can only muster a head nod, a bounce in my knees.

With the night advancing I wonder whether I'll find the impetus to stay. There's still a stretch to go. By the crowds on the floor, I'd guess it's two o'clock, though in this weather it could be closer to the peak hour of three.

At home, at my parents', it would be seven or eight, early Sunday morning. Rose might be awake, all those miles from here, perhaps downstairs, wrapped in the dressing gown with the teddy bear on the pocket. She might be in bed, reading, a book held inches from her nose. Or maybe she's finally taken over my room, the bigger one, sure now I won't return. She's cocooned in Granny's blankets, the few things of use when we cleared her house. There's probably rain putting against the window – that's how I remember it. It will gather on the tree, just outside, and cause Rose to jump every time a drop falls to the sill, a tiny explosion in the still dawn.

But the Rose I call to mind is the one I used to know, the one I left. The real Rose is almost two years older now; I'm not sure I know her at all. Regardless, I would give all to crawl in beside her and be calmed by the turning of her pages, to

have an hour of protected sleep. Here, my mattress prods and pokes with stray springs, and, even though every gap and crevice in my apartment has been stuffed with newspaper, draughts still blow through like malevolent whispers. I dream of sleep. I haven't slept in months.

Now, my legs feel stripped of muscles and bone, just two tubes of flesh. I flop to the platform and wait it out. The air is warmer and more dense. The music is deadened. There's a small group dancing next to me and I'm grateful not to recognise their faces.

My body fizzles, an incapacitating swarm of prickling heat and cold shivers. I must remind myself these sensations are desired and not some malfunction. Victor could banish this nervousness with a single calming touch, a look even, but now I must deal with it. All I need is focus, a distraction from the physical.

A bottle of amyl is being passed around the group that is shielding me. A boy raises his head and cradles his hands, holding the vial to his nose. Acne scars on his shoulders glow off-white. His hands fall from his face, bottle still gripped, and his eyes remain closed. His chin lifts to the lights and I envy his elation, that moment where all fear has been banished. The boy sways and I worry he'll keel over. My hands dart forwards but he remains upright. It's a dance, a gentle side to side movement that snakes from top to bottom. He lowers his head to reveal a grin so large it wrinkles his ears.

Perhaps mistaking my interest as a request, he slips me the bottle. It's warm from his touch. I pop the lid and inhale deeply, first the left nostril, then the right. I scarcely manage to hand it back before a surge of blood, like a warm swollen river, washes over me. Released, I sink into the platform, laughing with huge gasps I can't control. Overpowering, uncomfortable – I wish I could stop.

But they feel necessary; something must be ejected. I submit. Eyes shut, I find the wall with my shoulders. Muscles tense, then release. This is not laughter. Sobs squeeze through me. It must stop. I swallow and drive it down, my throat tightening, body bloating.

The heaving is gone as quickly as it came. I touch the soft skin beneath my eyes, expecting to wipe at salty tears, but there's no wetness. Perhaps the sobs were imagined, but I can't deny that I'm not quite right; I'm on the cusp of ecstasy or illness. Eyes shut, I roll my head to the lights. The silhouette of the aml boy remains like a projection against my lids. The shadow rotates and gains detail. It's not the boy. The shape is Victor. My eyes open with a start and he's erased.

Music whooshes back like my ears have been cleared of water; the beat throbs, a buzzing reverberation that tickles like the delicious moment just before a shiver. Although I hear the noise of others – claps, stamps and cheers that bubble beneath the music – they are no longer close by. I've removed myself.

October 1973

Wet seeped into my jersey. Through the hedges that acted as boundary to the playing fields I saw the flash of car headlamps. Light was fading. There were legs surrounding me, then a hand reached to haul me up.

'Let's take that scrum again. This time try and stay on your feet,' Mr. Wilson shouted.

I ducked under the hooker's arm and grabbed a handful of loose jersey at his flank. He pulled me close, his hand wedged in my armpit. The second row's head

forced its way between our hips and his hand grasped through my thighs for the tail of my jersey. Mr Wilson held us at arm's length from the opposing front row.

‘Last scrum,’ he said.

I braced as we lowered then engaged. Moore was my opposite and rubbed his cheek against mine; his grit of stubble stung. As the scrum-half let out a cry, I felt the press of flesh from all sides, as if trying to compact me. I gripped tighter and dug in my toes. Suddenly, a short shout announced that the ball had been won. The pack disintegrated.

Exposed, the cold struck me at once and with nothing to counter my weight, I hit the sodden ground again with a slap. By the time I'd risen to my feet the whistle had blown and practice was over. As we rushed towards the orange glow of the pavilion, Mr. Wilson bellowed out the details of our forthcoming fixtures.

‘That's the quickest you've moved all afternoon, Price,’ he called as I passed.

Sniggers rose from a few of the boys, but I ignored them, intent on changing quickly before the rooms became rowdy and crowded. A hand pulled my shoulder.

‘If you showed as much commitment on the pitch as you do leaving it, you'd be as good as your father.’

Wilson had caught me. He had always singled me out, having played on the same team as Dad in his twenties.

‘That's all it would take, Price, a little dedication.’ His voice had quietened, only addressing me as the other boys ran past. ‘Half the time you don't even look like you want to be here.’

I wanted to tell him that I didn't; if the choice had been mine, I would be nowhere near these playing fields. But I gave only a placatory, 'Yes, sir.'

Last inside, high-spirited shouts echoed amidst the sluice of water from the showers and some boys had already changed. I found the peg with my blazer and my schoolbag on the bench beneath. I removed it and sat to peel the wet socks from my feet, making sure I kept my belongings to the small space of bench that was mine; any encroachment would bring unwanted attention. After checking my shirt was close at hand, I attempted to remove my jersey. Damp with sweat, the material stuck to my body, and my nipples, hard from the cold, chaffed as I pulled it off. I didn't bother to dry, but quickly slipped on my school shirt and fastened its buttons as fast as my cold hands would allow. There was film of mud on my knees and I wiped them clean with my sodden jersey. Some dirt hid in the creases that I would have to scrub at home.

A pair of trousers sailed high across the room, grazing the strip lights, then landed in a crumpled heap on the slick, muddied floor. There was stifled laughter as a jumper, then some socks, followed. Johnston, biggest in the year, had returned from the showers to find errant clothes on his bench. McWilliams, dressed only in underpants and unbuttoned shirt, ran to retrieve his belongings.

'For someone so small, you take up a lot of space,' Johnston said, standing unashamed, a towel wrapped around his waist; a ladder of dark hair crept to his belly button.

McWilliams didn't respond and, clothes gathered, continued to dress. More boys filed from the showers next door, boys who, like Johnston, had matured and were proud to display the new hair that smattered their broadened bodies. I pulled my shirt tail low, slipped off my shorts and, without a pause,

tugged on my trousers. They would not fasten at first but, after a few attempts and held breath, I got the clasp to couple. Body covered, I sat. Beside me, McGrath raised his arm to pat dry the spread of hair in his armpit. His underwear was at eye level and the damp from his body thinned the material so that I could see the outline of him and the dark shadow of pubes.

As I dried my feet and pulled on my socks, I stole glances when I could, imagined my fingers slipping under the elastic to stroke the thick hair beneath. On the other side of the room Jones' towel dropped and I glimpsed the fuzz of his arse as he bent to pull on y-fronts. If I was more like them I could linger among them; I could shower and be brazen in my nakedness, in the hope that they would be too.

McWilliams was ready first; he had dressed hastily and was still fixing his tie as he made for the door. As soon as my laces were tied, I followed, afraid my stares would find me out. The afternoon had turned wintry with small specks of icy rain. It was properly dark and my eyes struggled to adjust. McWilliams stood at the bus stop and we acknowledged each other with quick nods. We had never been true friends but, in lieu of any other alliances, we tolerated one another's company.

'Have you done the thing for Geography?' His voice, like mine, had not yet broken and every word was spoken as an apology.

'No, we've the weekend still. Besides, I'm not taking it next year. That or Latin, so it doesn't matter.'

'It will if Bell gives you detention. He said it was D for anyone that got below fifty, double-D for anything below forty-five.'

'He's such a bollocks,' I said, my voice trailing as I ensured we were not overheard. 'And he has eyebrow dandruff.'

A red City-bus groaned to a halt and we boarded. I sat next to McWilliams; his feet dangled loosely above his bag. He was shortest in our class and the others never let him forget it, sometimes throwing him about like a doll. In the right light, however, his upper lip was graced with short golden stubble, a covering I would have been proud of, and I cursed the unfairness.

We both alighted at the City Hall and shrugged our goodbyes – his home was to the east and I was heading through the centre to catch a bus north. I crossed to the security hut at the mouth of Donegall Place and waited until a soldier with a tight beret that pinched his temples called me forward. A long counter separated us and I placed my bag on top.

‘Open it up for me, will you.’ His voice could only belong on TV or in uniform.

Using a stick with rubber end that looked like a xylophone beater, he poked through my school books. Pushing aside my dog-eared maths jotter and a hard-backed Latin dictionary, he uncovered the plastic bag that housed my sports kit. As he kneaded it gently, checking each lump, he sent up embarrassing whiffs of damp grass and earth.

‘All clear.’ He zipped my bag. The fastener appeared tiny in his sausage-like fingers, his thumb nail as big as a fifty pence piece. ‘Get home safely.’

I tried to thank him with a smile, but his eyes were already on the man behind, calling him forward with a single, sure wave.

Shop shutters rumbled closed on both sides of the street and workers hurried home. By six o’clock the centre would be empty, safely deserted. I turned onto High Street, past the boy with the dirty face who yodelled from on top of a pile of newspapers. The towering clock showed I still had five minutes, but I

hoisted my bag on my shoulder and jogged the last stretch. There were no bag checks at these barriers – no one cared what was taken out of the city.

Outside the newsagents, I checked my pockets for change – with rugby I'd earned the right to a treat. Enough for two, I rushed inside and grabbed a Macaroon bar, my favourite, then decided on Murray Mints as well, hopeful they would last the journey home.

'You're late the night.' The shopkeeper set a half-eaten sausage roll on the paper bag beside the till and he wiped flakes of pastry from his mouth.

'Rugby,' I said and dropped my coins into his palm.

'Jesus, Wednesday already? They make you wear shorts, even in this weather?'

I nodded.

He passed me my change. 'Away and get your goolies into a hot bath before they fall off.' The till closed with a bang.

'Will do.' I'd heard the bus round the corner and ran for the door

Slushy snow spotted in the hair and shoulders of those queuing. It was only a short wait before I climbed the steps. The driver scarcely looked as I flashed my pass, his mouth clamped around a cigarette. There was a free double seat in the middle; I stowed my bag and sat, then wiped the misted window with my sleeve.

After careful unwrapping, I bit a corner of my Macaroon; saliva rushed to dissolve its creamy sugary mass. A woman, Mum's age, squeezed beside me, pushing me to the window. Her numerous shopping bags fissled as she arranged them around her.

By the time we departed, the Macaroon was no more. I dabbed at the small, loose pieces of coconut at the bottom of the packet. The woman and her shopping shuffled closer as passengers lined the aisle and I struggled to release the Murray Mints from my pocket. The first one I unwrapped with my teeth. At floor level, vents huffed hot air and the atmosphere grew sticky. If I bowed my head I could smell the familiar nutty woodiness of my dirty kit, or perhaps my unwashed skin. It wasn't unpleasant, but I hoped no one nearby would smell it too.

To ration the mints I allowed myself just one per stop, and as the packet emptied, so too did the bus, the terraced streets swallowing passengers. I wiped the window once more – there was still a way to go, but the next stop was his and I hoped he'd be there. When the bus pulled up, I cupped a hand to the gloom and sought him amongst the flurry of blazers and bags that packed the kerb.

They boarded as one, with icy rain dotting their blazers and anoraks. Most hadn't bothered to change from their kits – their games were held on a Wednesday, too. Hockey skirts revealed raw knees; boys wore shorts with sagging striped socks that looked too fat for their black-leather school shoes. I searched for his face in the red-cheeked throng. As I saw him board I wanted to shout, to gesture to the empty seat in front. But I didn't know him. I'd never uttered a word he could hear.

I held my breath as he stepped closer. His blazer flapped to reveal the blue and gold hooped jersey; his shorts reached only a little further than its tail. Mud scuffed his legs and the cold had left them mottled with purple. He glanced left and right, shrugged the bag from his shoulder then plonked himself where I'd hoped he would. In the reflection I watched him pull at the sleeves of his jersey to cover his hands, then give a quick blow of hot air on each fist.

Our journeys did not coincide on any other day, but on the late bus after games he'd be there. He always sat alone, and even if I didn't know his name and had never heard him speak, his presence gladdened me.

He settled in his seat and I stretched to be closer. My fingers counted the ridges of sweets left: only two remaining. I popped one in my mouth, and sucked quietly so he wouldn't hear.

He turned to the window and revealed a ruddy cheek, peppered with a rash of stubble that reached past his ear. Each sporadic hair was dark and erect, not like the flaccid down that fluffed my cheek. I seldom got to examine his face, but his essence resided in the small patch of skin shadowed by his ear. More often than not I'd sat behind him, transfixed by that inviting piece of flesh. It was smooth, framed by his collar, his hair and a perfectly shaped ear that dropped to a plump lobe. I yearned to wet that soft spot with my lips.

The bus drove deeper into the outskirts and I watched his head loll as short bursts of sleep consumed him. A bump woke him with a start. He polished the glass then blinked his long lashes into the dark to discover where we were.

I knew but couldn't tell him; we were three stops from his. Instead, I wished our journey would last forever. I would memorise each follicle, I would trace each fold in his skin as his head turned. No part of him would be uncharted.

The bus was warm and I, too, could have dozed, but I wouldn't surrender the opportunity. I hoped that he'd chosen to be near me, that it pleased him, too, to know I was just behind. We'd sat in this order a few times already this term. Once or twice I'd had to move to be nearer, but we'd never sat together; our legs had never touched.

I crunched the last mint and used my tongue to poke at my teeth and the hollows where the sticky shards collected. We were approaching his stop. I lunged, pretending to check my bag. Our heads almost brushed. The proximity was agonising pleasure. I wanted to jump inside him and wear his body as if it were mine; I would lightly brush the bulge of his shorts, smooth the hairs on his legs. I wanted to have him and be him.

Suddenly, he collected the bag at his feet and stood with a stretch. Above his shorts, I glimpsed the tiniest ribbon of flesh – a parting gift. Then he was gone. I rubbed feverishly at the window, desperate to catch one last peep as he waited to cross the street but the bus pulled away too quickly and I was left with a deep ache.

The erection remained until we reached my stop and I had to gather my bag close to conceal it as I walked the aisle. Snow dappled one side of our garden, illuminated by light through the living room window. I hurried to the front door.

‘Just me,’ I called from the hallway. In the living room, Rose lay at the hearth, scribbling in her jotter.

‘Tea in twenty minutes,’ Mum called from the kitchen. ‘Away and get changed.’

My bag slapped the tiled floor and I took the stairs two at a time. The toilet door closed with a bang; I locked it, rattling it twice to make sure. I hung my blazer on the handle to cover the keyhole. My heart beat loudly in my ears. Swiftly, I unfastened my trousers and wrestled them and my pants to the floor. My cock was still hard and the head twitched as it touched the cold ceramic of the sink. I stroked the skin next to it, going against the grain of the short silky hairs that had appeared in the last months.

I imagined that the boy's house faced ours. He was in his room, dressed in shorts and gold hooped jersey. I was in mine. He would glance from his window and see me; that would be all it would take. At once, he would know and understand. Somehow, he would arrive at the foot of my bed. Now naked, he would move closer. I would feel his skin next to mine, his cock touching me, digging in. He would whisper, our cheeks meeting, and tell me that he understood.

I understand, I promise, I understand. We're the same. You're not alone.

My knees bucked and I pressed my thighs hard against the basin. I tried to slow my breathing, afraid someone would hear. There was only silence. I tore a square of loo roll and patted dry the milky white dots that had splashed the green sink.

How High – The Salsoul Orchestra

I raise my knee from the liquid puddling between the tiles. My stomach tightens but there's little to grip – the toilet has already collected most of its contents. Floating inside is the aborted diner meal. There's no denying that I do feel better although the purge has left me giddy.

I stand then stare at the bowl, my offering, hoping it might provide a clue as to how I came to be here. There's a blank, a lapse of memory that unnerves me. With no explanation apparent, I flush once, then again. Details are forgotten for a reason – a decision has been made to leave them hidden. The water rushes and as the bowl cleanses itself, I hope Greg's pills haven't been lost in there too, though they may be the catalyst for this agitation. There's always that risk. If I concentrate, however, I can detect something within, a gentle warmth, more soothing than hostile. I'm beginning to feel stronger. Hopefully there's time left.

Someone knocks and I open the door. They push past and I find myself on the other side. I still need to pee; it's not happened all night. There's space at the urinal, so I unzip and pull at my shrivelled cock. My neighbours are in full flow and the pressure of an audience gets to me. Even with a squeeze, I can't summon a drop. I stare ahead, face reddening. Only when they both leave, the one on the right with an exaggerated tuck, am I able to let go the pungent, amber stream that looks as healthy as I feel. Bit by bit, I'm relieved of the toxins.

Ignoring the old wives' tales about reflections, I face the mirror. There's a tired pastiness to my skin that I'd rather not see and although my birthday's not until Monday, I have to admit I look a year older. I rub a blemish on my cheek until I discover it's the glass that's marked. My lips curl, a smile spreads and I find myself laughing. Already a better look. Pleasure swamps me. A joke shared with my reflection, the complicity – this is when I know I am truly high.

Not yet ready for the floor, I hit the Lounge. Inside are fewer sprawling bodies than I expected, though perhaps it's still early. My grip on time is definitely skewed. Conversation burbles above the slow jazz, respite from the snapping rhythms of the main floor. In the corner a kid wearing sunglasses taps out a beat on his knees. I take the seat beside him and ask about his night. My confidence surprises me but he doesn't flinch, keeps drumming. I slip further along the bench; it's not for me to ruin his flow.

At the doorway I spot Ricardo and Darryl. Stuck on the threshold, they scan the room, wide-eyed and sheepish. I wave for them to join me, point to the empty bench beside. Darryl spies me first, shunts Ricardo and uses him as cover to cross the room.

'How's your evening?' I shift to the middle and force them either side.

'The music is fucking un-real,' Ricardo declares.

'Yeah, it's great.' Darryl sounds less sure and picks at his hands.

At their age I couldn't have imagined a place like this existed, a space in the world that would embrace us. On the best nights, it still feels like fantasy.

'You seen any boys you like?' I tease.

'Ricardo likes them older. He likes men.'

'Shut up!' He reaches back, delivers a light thump to Darryl's shoulder.

I wonder if I'm the one being teased. I've never thought of myself as a man. Maybe to these two, I am, although I can't imagine I'm the one they think of when they close their eyes and dream of being looked after.

Now that Darryl's posited the idea, I can't let it go. Ricardo has got kind, sad eyes, like Victor, eyes that reveal mistreatment somewhere along the way. He's not filled out yet; in bed he'd be all legs and arms, long and hairless, and his bony arse would offer up a shallow, wide trench. He'd allow himself to be thrown about, enjoy that direction. I don't think I'm man enough to do it.

As if reading my thoughts, Ricardo's soft lips rise to a shy smile and I think, maybe I could be, just this once.

'If we want to come back next week, can you get us in?' Darryl taps me. 'You have membership, right?'

'I don't know if I'll be here next week.' As I speak, I realise this is not a lie.

'But if you are,' he continues, 'and if you see us, you'll help us, right?'

'Sure.' It may be all I'm good for.

We sit, awkward in our unfamiliarity. Darryl leans forward, his eyes pleading with Ricardo to leave. His whole body rocks as if to precipitate departure. And although it's uncomfortable, for all of us, I don't want them to go. I sense Ricardo's reticence, too. Something is keeping him here.

'Where do your folks think you are?' I ask to curb their fidgeting unease.

Each points to the other, then they collapse in high-pitched giggles. I laugh too, but there's a history between them I can't possibly infiltrate.

'What about you? Is anyone wondering where you are?' Ricardo is doing his best.

‘No, just me.’

‘You got a place of your own? You’re lucky. You don’t have to please anyone.’

‘Yup, I’m free.’ But it’s a draughty, grimy, lonely freedom I can’t bare to inhabit.

‘Hey, you got any more of that weed we smoked outside?’

Suddenly Ricardo’s determination makes sense, although it doesn’t anger me; his request is innocent and truthful and exhibits none of the flirtatious subterfuge of Martin’s ploy. I pat my pockets and although I know there’s weed in there, now is not the time. These boys need their eyes opened; it might even help us get along.

‘You ever done acid?’ I ask. ‘It’s all I’ve got.’

Ricardo raises a smile that signals he won’t need persuading.

‘We’ve got to go home at some point,’ Darryl says. ‘What if we’re all strung out. My parents would go apeshit.’ But this is more for Ricardo’s benefit than mine.

‘They won’t notice a thing. It will wear off. I’ll give you half each. You’ll be back to normal in no time.’ Although that’s no strictly true, it’s for the greater good. Ricardo can thank me later; Darryl may be a lost cause.

I take a pre-dosed cube from my pocket and unwrap the foil. It’s crumbled only slightly and I finger it in two. I contemplate half for myself but the warm pulse within me is growing and I don’t want to overshoot again.

‘On the house.’ I offer it up. ‘I’ll even guide you through.’

But he doesn’t need this encouragement, his choice made before he got here. I flick half onto his palm, shooing granules off the foil.

‘Tip everything into your mouth. Let it melt on your tongue.’

His lips purse and he holds the sugar inside. After a minute he opens wide for inspection; Darryl jerks his head away and folds his arms across his chest. The silent squabble hangs over us all.

Then, through the doorway, I’m sure I glimpse a tangle of grey hair, a passing nest on wide shoulders. Walt? A memory of him, a need for him, chills me. I’m on my feet.

‘I have to go.’

‘What about us?’ Darryl is panicked. ‘What if he freaks out? What should I do?’

‘Don’t leave us,’ Ricardo says, his time bomb swallowed. ‘I can feel it already.’

‘You won’t. Not yet. I’ll be back before you do.’ Sometimes a lie is the only reassurance I can give.

Darryl stares at me, his eyes bursting with disappointment as if tears are on their way. There’s nothing I can do to make this any better and staying might just make it worse.

‘Be a friend,’ I tell Darryl. ‘Take him next door.’ I squeeze Ricardo’s shoulder. ‘Dance – it’s the best thing.’

They’ll need to work this out on their own.

In the corridor, Walt’s nowhere to be seen but at the far end the toilet door swings to a close. Inside, all cubicle locks have been swept to ‘ENGAGED’. Unsure he’s here, I don’t call his name, but wait by the sinks.

The mirror greets me with a different face – the elation has vanished. I shouldn’t have abandoned those boys, but I can’t look after them. I can’t look

after myself. My forehead rests on the cool glass. My eyes widen and my pupils swell. I search for something I recognise, some shred of me hidden deep within. I can't connect these features to the person I am, or even then person I've been. Nothing is familiar. I only recognise the fear.

September 1979

A female voice, a cappella, cut through the cheers for more. Victor clapped and stamped, brought his fingers to his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. I crouched below him, stretching my calves. Abrupt yellow light flickered and illuminated the dance floor detritus: discarded cigarette packets and crushed stubs, flattened paper cups, dunes of grubby talc carved by pirouetting soles. It was a wonder we could dance amid the debris.

A young man picked his way through the thinning crowd. At each group of hangers-on he paused, then flashed a hand-written sign that read *WE ARE CLOSED*.

I was surprised I'd lasted; I almost hadn't come. The disorientation of that first night had followed me into the week and I'd been nervous to revisit, but Victor had convinced me – he wanted me to come, his friends did too. Earlier, when I'd walked into the apartment and they'd welcomed me as one of their own, any doubt I'd harboured had disappeared. Now, in the light, I saw they'd all disappeared too – only Victor and I remained. By the speakers, slumped in a crumpled shirt, I thought I spotted Walt, but the boy with the sign kicked at the outstretched legs and the face that emerged was beardless.

Above me, Victor was flagging. His feet barely lifted, but still he matched the rhythm. Eyes closed, he swayed and wrung his hands in gentle circles, forever at ease on this floor. The music slowed. Heads nodded in anticipation of the next beat, the space between stretched and stretched, the pitch sank lower until there was silence. Applause and shouts echoed through the near empty room and, with knowing nods and backslaps, the survivors congratulated one another.

Victor offered his hand and pulled me from my squat with little effort. I rose too quickly; my legs wobbled and my vision shrank, the periphery growing dark and indistinct. He caught me. His arms hooked beneath my armpits as I fell onto him, supported by damp, warm flesh. It took a few moments to blink the dizziness from my eyes. All the while he held me.

There was a soft nudge at my heel. The same boy, his sign swapped for a broom, swept at a cellophane wrapper by my shoe.

‘I think they want us to leave,’ Victor joked in my ear, then unfolded his arms from around me.

With our jackets collected, we were soon flung squinting into a shower of sunlight.

‘What’s the time?’ Traffic suggested it was not that early.

‘Sunday.’ A voice boomed behind us.

‘Walt! Thought we’d lost you.’ Victor pulled him under his free arm.

‘I’ve been taking the morning air.’ Walt breathed deeply.

He suggested a trip to the park, to enjoy the last throes of summer. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be thrust into the world, but, when Victor agreed, there was no other option. And so we marched towards Sixth Avenue. Buildings stretched upwards and the streets widened; the city had grown while I’d been sheltering in

the Club. All around I could sense movement, snatched glimpses of bounding shapes that suddenly disappeared. The roar of a muffled engine gunned towards me. The world was attacking. I stopped dead.

‘What’s up?’ Victor stopped too.

‘It sounded like it was coming for us,’ I explained. ‘A car, right behind.’

‘Kid’s got spooked,’ Walt said.

Victor shifted me close to the buildings, he and Walt walked nearest the kerb.

‘Don’t sweat it. You’re still tripping. You’re inside so long, you forget. Then you get outside, and bam – it takes a while for your brain to work that shit out.’

‘And Walt knows. He’s been at this longer than any of us. Original sixties child.’ Victor gripped me tight. ‘We got you, baby.’

Walking calmed me. Still, each car horn or slammed door made me flinch.

Victor sang the same words, over and over – *Happiness. Keep it coming* – the chorus of the final song. Our steps fell in time. The opposite pavement had darkened under the shadows of the buildings above while ours remained bright. Glints of sun in the windows ahead beckoned us like landing lights.

At the crossing we waited an age for *WALK* to appear. Even then, I froze until the approaching traffic had come to a standstill. My legs, thick with tension, rubbed as we hurried to the far side.

‘Got any ludes you can feed this poor boy?’ Walt slapped my back and winked. ‘Almost there. No more traffic. Promise.’

The end of the street was clear of buildings, trees with rusted leaves stood in their place. A large white arch rose on the far side. Our entrance was less grand,

just a gap in the perimeter wall. People were splayed across the grass, its area no bigger than a rugby pitch, soaking up what heat they could from the autumn morning sun.

‘You guys want a soda?’ Walt pointed to a food cart at the intersection of two rough paths.

‘Sure. Maybe a pretzel too.’ Victor thrust a scrunch of notes at him. ‘We’ll find a spot.’

I kept watch of my feet, wary not to clip knuckles or tramp on fingers as we navigated through the sprawling crowds. Many looked as if they’d yet to sleep and I was delighted to be among them.

‘You doing OK?’ Victor pinched the nape of my neck.

‘Yeah. Of course. Tonight was just...I could live there. Thank you!’ It was only once outside, amid the ugliness of the world, that I realised the beauty of that place.

We stumbled upon a suitable spot, the patchy grass drained of colour by the long and hot summer. I kicked away what cigarette butts I could see, patted the earth to test for wet, then sat. Close to the ground the breeze dropped and I shed my sweatshirt. The summer had left its mark on my arms, too. My skin was now lightly bronzed, the few hairs I possessed were bleached golden. My hands, though, were still pale and ragged, the flesh around my nails puffed and broken by the days under soap suds.

Walt reappeared with bottles of Coke gripped under his arm.

‘No pretzels, but I got us these.’ He opened his fist. ‘Loose joints.’ There were two, stubby and misshapen.

Using a lighter, he prised off the lids and I slurped thirstily at the sugary drink. Bubbles caught in my throat, tightened my chest and I hit it with a bunched fist to dislodge them. The journey's ordeal now over, I could enjoy the club magic that remained – the pulses of objects when they moved, the sparkle of light on far-off buildings. If I stilled my breath I could hear the sweep of distant strings. Grinning, I looked at Victor, then Walt; the joy on our faces could outshine anyone's in this park, in this city.

Victor extended his legs then reached to grasp his toes. 'You should try stretching...feels amazing. Everything glides back into place.'

I straightened my knees; my toes were too far away. It had been years since I'd tried, more since I'd been able.

'This works just the same.' Walt passed me the joint, long ash balanced at its tip.

I hit it. Once, twice, then again, deep into my lungs like Victor had taught me. Suddenly dizzy, I lay back on my elbows and watched the beat of the breeze on straggly grass. I felt it on my body, too; goosebumps rose then fell. In the distance a siren swelled, and underneath, closer, there was the strum of an out-of-tune guitar. The murmur of conversations hung like a mist.

Overhead, a shadow passed, then a light tap; something hit my forearm. A bright red drop of liquid, a perfect circle no bigger than a penny, collected above my wrist. When I twisted my arm the spot did not move or run; already, it had begun to clot. I rubbed, searching for the cut beneath, but there was no break in my skin.

'I'm bleeding.' I ducked and swivelled my head for Victor, so he could examine every inch. 'Am I cut?'

Without waiting, I scrambled from the ground, in readiness for what, I wasn't sure, but I needed to be on my feet. Victor followed. With arms outstretched, I turned full circle so that every inch of me could be checked. I needed to find its source.

‘Am I injured?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Victor pinched my chin softly and tilted it skywards, then checked each nostril. ‘I can’t see a thing.’

‘There was blood on my arm.’ I presented my stained finger as evidence. ‘It fell on me. It fell from me. I felt it.’ I blinked to the sky.

‘Maybe it was a bird. Maybe it was injured.’ Victor pressed my shoulder and I returned to the ground, though I rested on my knees, ready.

‘Maybe it’d been stabbed. This city is a shithole. Not even the pigeons are safe.’ Walt laughed a stream of smoke from his mouth.

I spat on my fingers, to loosen the smudge, then scoured them on a tuft of grass. ‘It’s definitely not me?’ I bowed my head for a final appraisal.

‘It could be from below.’ Walt widened his eyes to the ground. ‘There’s twenty thousand people buried beneath us. The soil could be leaching.’

‘You’re full of shit. Stop teasing the boy.’ Victor patted my thigh.

‘I’m not bullshitting. It’s a burial ground. They buried people here, right up until... Well, I don’t know when it stopped. There were hangings too. The tree’s still there...’

I snatched my hands from the earth. ‘I think I might go.’

‘Hey, Walt’s just kidding. Tell him, Walt.’

‘Kid, I’m yanking your chain. It was hundreds of years ago, there’s nothing left of them now. You’re OK too. No injury. Just some freaky thing.’

But I stood so only the soles of my shoes would be in contact with the land. 'I'm not feeling well.' An itchy energy bubbled within. My mouth was dry and when I swallowed there was a metallic tang I was sure was blood. I scratched again where the spot had landed.

'What was in that joint? Was it laced?' My pulse quickened, my skin surged with static. I felt strangled. 'I really should go.'

'It's just weed, trust me,' Walt said. 'We're your friends.'

Victor stood. 'He's right, that's all it is. That and the acid. It gave it a kick, brought it back. It can do that.' He leaned closer. 'Stay. Don't be alone. We could get breakfast.'

I wanted to believe him. Although I felt dreadful, being alone might make it worse.

Walt grasped my arm. 'Breakfast's on me.'

I knew no one else – I had to trust them.

Again, it helped to walk; movement dispersed the sickening alarm. We passed under the arch and the vague chatter of the park was replaced by the drone of traffic. Victor reached for my shoulder and at first I wanted to shrug him off, but his firm guiding pressure was soothing. Each step eased me until I longed to walk forever, my only preoccupation to put one foot in front of the other.

Finally, we reached the diner and endured another wait for the lights to change. An unsullied stripe of aluminium skirted the top of its glinting windows. The increasing heat sent wafts from decaying rubbish piled high by the road. Some bags had been slashed and their contents scavenged, entrails tumbling in the gutter.

Once inside, slanted sunlight poured through the blinds and carved wedges of smoke in the air. Victor motioned to a booth on the shadier side.

‘Have what you want. Walt’s treat, remember?’ He handed me a menu. ‘Just go slow. I can never eat properly after a night. You’d think with all the dancing, it would be easy, but my stomach can’t take it. I swear it shrinks.’

‘Eating’s good, though,’ Walt said. ‘Makes the descent less bumpy. Let’s start off simple. Can we get three fries and three vanilla milkshakes.’ He called the order to the nearby waitress.

‘Be right up.’

The menu made no sense anyhow, the letters familiar, the words somehow not. I set it down and breathed slowly, then kneaded my arm where the drop had been. I wanted to determine how I was feeling. There was an oddness still, but, if pressed, I couldn’t have described it. It made sense that the drugs were still working, I reasoned; I’d had more than last week, topping up halfway through the night with everyone else. There seemed to be no shortage.

‘Where does it all come from?’ I asked. ‘The acid, loose joints. Who sells it? Is it that easy to find?’

‘This is New York City. It’s everywhere. Throw a rock and you’ll hit a dealer. Even the pretzel guys are at it,’ Walt chuckled.

‘It’s not like that at home. Not that I saw.’

‘Ireland, right?’ Walt asked.

‘Belfast,’ I corrected.

‘No bars to meet either,’ Victor said. ‘Isn’t that crazy?’

‘Jesus, no wonder you guys are fighting.’ Walt tidied the menus as the waitress appeared with our fries and shakes. ‘I’ve only visited London. Once – it

was five or six years ago. They have bars. Serious, though. I tried a leather one, on the West side. The whole time I was there, not one of those queens cracked a smile. Strange scene.'

'I've never been. To London.'

'But you fly half way across the world to be here instead?' Walt dipped a chip into his shake.

I didn't have an answer. At home, every time this city was in the news, or on films, wherever it was shown, it was dirty, dangerous and overrun by gangs. But that could have been Belfast, too. At least here, I'd thought, there'd be people like Victor, and Walt, people like me.

'I'm glad he did.' Victor's foot playfully tapped mine.

I kept my eyes lowered, worried I'd reveal too much. With his touch, my fear subsided; I wanted to leave with him, right away. I wanted him to lay me on the bed, then wrap his arms around me so that I could listen to the noise of this city, protected, until sleep overwhelmed me. But I blinked the daydream away, unwilling to jinx it. All week I'd dreamt of the Club, its happiness and delight; if the radio played a song from that first night, my body would shiver at the memory. And yet, when Victor suggested returning, it was the thought of being with him that had thrilled me most.

Behind us, applause erupted followed by a chorus of coos. We craned to see the waitress carry a cake to a table in the far corner. She shielded burning candles with one hand. The kids in the booth, eager for a better look, jockeyed and climbed over one another like kittens.

'Let me see. It's mine.' One boy pushed the others aside.

Pausing to make sure everyone saw, he took a huge breath then blew out every last candle. The table sang *Happy Birthday* and Walt joined in with gusto, only silent on the boy's name.

'Fuck.' Remembrance shot through me, stealing blood as it went. My head slumped. 'I can't believe I forgot.'

'What's up?' Victor asked.

'Rose's birthday. My sister. Sixteen today. I didn't think.'

I almost cried at the admission. Rose did not deserve to be forgotten. I'd wanted to send a card, waiting to get the timing just right, but that date had come and gone and I hadn't posted a thing. Then, I'd vowed to call her, when they'd be at Sunday lunch, but that deadline, too, had been missed. Besides, the money I'd put aside was now spent. It was expensive to call and I'd only managed it once, after my first weekend to let them know I was safe. When mum had found out how much it was costing, she'd told me not to ring again but to stick to letters – it was a waste of money I could ill afford. I had only written one letter since.

The celebrations continued at the far table; the greedy boy called for more cake.

'You could still call her?' Walt suggested.

Even back at my room there were only a few bucks, enough for some bread and milk; for the next week I'd be on leftovers from work as it was.

'I can't afford it.'

'It's a long way. She'll understand,' Victor reassured me.

I couldn't face him, to see my shame reflected.

'I have a phone,' Walt said. 'Just a couple of blocks from here.'

‘It’s too expensive. I can’t pay you, not yet.’ I wanted to punish myself further.

‘It’s OK. You’re good for it. Make it quick and it won’t cost that much. Besides, I won’t be billed for another month. You got time.’

I imagined the excitement on Rose’s face. Calling, all that way, just to wish her Happy Birthday. She would tell them at school tomorrow – a phone call from America.

Walt paid for breakfast, too, leaving a few notes on the table. As we walked, he and Victor spoke of the music we had heard, listing names of artists and songs I had yet to discover. I stumbled behind them, the sunlight drilling into me and causing my stomach to lurch; I hadn’t been able to touch my fries. Every few steps I shut my eyes for a second’s respite, but it was never enough.

At home, it would be late afternoon, maybe even tea time. Rose would be listening to the Top Forty, cheering when a favourite climbed higher and booing if it sank. I hoped one of her songs was number one today.

We soon reached Walt’s. My seizing legs struggled to climb to the fourth floor; Victor helped, his hands at my buttocks.

‘You should’ve tried those stretches.’

Inside, the apartment was tidy, tidier than Walt’s straggly hair and patchy beard would have suggested. It was bright too; the windows were three times the size of mine and had not been made opaque by decades of grime.

‘Soda?’ Walt opened the large box refrigerator, a luxury. One shelf was crammed with Coca Cola, the shelf below held only take-away cartons.

‘Sure you don’t mind?’ I asked, hoping to move things along.

‘Of course. The phone’s over there. The wire reaches the bedroom. Have some privacy.’

‘Good luck.’ Victor called after me.

The bedroom was just as clean. A mattress with crisp sheets lay on a scuffed wooden floor. Above it, a pencil sketch of a nude man was thumbtacked to the wall. I wondered if it was someone Walt knew, an old lover. It could have been Walt himself, younger and less hairy.

I sat on the mattress, tried to ready myself. The number I knew by heart, but struggled with the code. It was in my address book, zipped inside my suitcase for safe-keeping. I’d found the first of Rose’s notes in that address book, nestling between the Ms and Ns. She’d hidden ten in total, all numbered, throughout my belongings – stuffed in the toes of socks, crammed deep in trouser pockets. The final one had taken forever to find, slipped in behind our address on the luggage tag. *Ten of ten*, it said at the top, then – *Ha ha! I thought you’d never look here. Miss you. xxx*. The others were simple messages of good luck or declarations of how much I’d be missed – things that could never be said aloud. For the first few weeks after finding them, I’d clung to those messages; they were the smell of potatoes on the boil and onions frying, the sound of the news at six and Dad’s paper rustling; they were the click of Mum’s shoes in the hall that signalled her return. The notes were everything I missed.

Without thinking, the code was summoned to mind and I hurried to dial before it was forgotten again. As the line filled with static, I held my breath. Ten seconds, then a whirr. The first ring, although distant, came like a shock; my eyes and nose flooded with tingly discomfort, a precursor for tears. Suddenly, I wasn’t sure this was a good idea – could they hear the drugs in my voice? But, stunned to

inaction, I held on. For minutes, I listened to the repetitive ring I hoped would be broken. For them, it was Sunday evening. There was nowhere to go; everywhere would be shut. As the purr continued, I became convinced that the empty house could not be due to a celebration, but rather, some catastrophe had to have occurred. The call was no longer to surprise Rose; I needed to know they were safe.

After several more minutes I knew I must hang up. But each time I moved the handset close to the cradle, the ring would disappear and I'd snatch it back to my ear, sure it had been answered. It never was.

'They weren't there. I don't know where they are.' As I rejoined Walt and Victor my face crumpled. I felt foolish.

Victor enveloped me, forced my face into his chest.

'You're coming home with me. You shouldn't be alone.'

You Can't Hide From Yourself – Teddy Pendergrass

I run the tap and splash water on my face like a grizzled detective. Only one cubicle remains closed; if Walt's inside, he's setting up home. I mount the next door bowl and hoist my head over the partition. No sign of Walt, no sign of anyone. The cistern is cracked; dirty, saturated toilet paper clumps on the tiles.

I release my grip and drop, cursing the time I've wasted staking out a busted bog. Those first quivers of energy, of ecstasy, have morphed now to a stronger sensation that's decidedly anxious. If Walt is here something serious has brought him; it's been months since he's come to dance. Without Victor, he said, it would be like cheating. I was less faithful and only missed that first weekend. I couldn't think what else to do.

As I rush to the dance floor, figuring that might be Walt's next stop, I wonder what emergency has brought him here. His party would not have migrated – it wasn't that kind of do. Perhaps he's searching for Jimi, or me, or both of us. Something sinister has occurred.

On tip-toes, I skim the crowd for a sign, but the music works against me, expanding and suffocating, driving reason from my mind. Its rhythm tumbles like a train crash and confuses my limbs. I slump against the wall and follow the shower of lights, first green, then red. This kaleidoscope will hide Walt's grey.

Among the dancers I see a pattern emerge; two semi-circles pulse with light, side-by-side, and join with a taper at the bottom. It's a heart. Another flash

and it beats to wings. The stitching is luminescent in the black light and there's a glint of leather underneath – a waistcoat. A head jolts and its long fringe flicks sideways. It looks like Bobby. The thought causes me to shudder. Arms lift and bony fingers spread to the ceiling. Now, there's no mistaking him. Beyond, a full head shorter, I spot Jack and his moustache. I should slip away before I'm spotted but maybe they've seen Walt. Perhaps they came together. Jack appears above Bobby's shoulder on an upbeat and, when his eyes catch mine, I wave with enthusiasm, as if trying to signal him all along.

Jack hooks a hand to Bobby's neck and shouts in his ear. Bobby's bulging eyes search through his plastered fringe; every muscle in his face strains. By my guess he's done most of that coke already. His conversation starts before he even arrives; his lips pull and stretch but I can't decipher the words. Jack, at least, will talk sense.

'You guys seen Walt?' I shout.

'He's here? He actually got off his ass and came?' Jack replies.

'I thought I saw him, earlier,' I say, uncertainty creeping.

Bobby opens his mouth then shakes his head, the thread lost.

'I thought it was The Saint tonight?' I ask.

'Tell me about it. Some asshole dropped from the balcony. A mess.'

'Almost ruined our buzzzzzzzzzz,' Bobby adds.

'You cunts,' I utter softly so my words go unheard.

Jack cocks a hand to his ear.

'That's awful,' I repeat.

'It's OK. We jumped the line and got straight in. We didn't have to freeze our asses off.' Jack replies, smiling.

Bobby's left the conversation, his eyes widen and contract as he worries his upper lip with tiny nibbles. With a tug, his hand finds Jack's and their fingers intertwine. His legs keep nervous time and he reminds me of a child desperate to pee.

'If you do see Walt, tell him I'm here.'

'Course,' Jack replies. 'Come find us later. We'll be on the floor.'

Bobby's already dragging him, hands clasped above the crowd. I watch them with envy; dancing is always better with two, when you can lose yourself but know someone will find you. Victor was the best partner. He could carve out a space, just for us, without knocking or bumping, even in the thickest crowd. He would spy a gap in the amorphous flesh and take it in an instant with an outstretched arm or a duck and sweep of his head. Beside him, I was leaden but he never let me know it.

I jump for one last peek; there's no sign of Walt. As I head for the exit, I begin to doubt he was ever here but this search is what's holding me together. Somehow I know it's what I must do. Suddenly, I stumble close to Martin. Luckily his eyes are shut; his arms stretch upwards, fingers rippling like grass in a breeze. From elsewhere he's found what I refused to give him. Little by little my usefulness is being eroded.

The corridor air is cooler and calmer and it's possible to think. The Cinema – I should have tried it before – was a favourite of Walt. Often, we'd find him in the early hours, his feet resting on the seat in front and a long-extinguished joint clasped in his cragged teeth.

Once inside it's hard to pick out faces. The man on screen is crying over a broken robot and I wonder if robots can ever truly die, or whether the batteries can

be replaced and the circuit boards fixed. There's an explosion, a blast on the spaceship, and I use its light to search for Walt, his mop of grey.

I climb the aisle calling for Walt. Some people hush me, but mostly my cries are met with silence. From the back wall, I see the door slowly open. The silhouette is unmistakable; I rush to greet him. Half way, my foot catches. My shoulder hits the ground first and the wind is knocked clean from me. I lie like a busted droid, unsure what injury I've caused. I need to be fixed.

January 1976

I shifted in my seat and raised my hips so my erection pressed the underside of the desk; a flutter flushed through me. I tensed again and squeezed, hoping the exertion would rid me of the hard-on. In five minutes the bell would ring and we'd have to stand. If it had been a double period I could have enjoyed the friction of the wood above and would have spent time crafting one of those scenarios that involved a classmate, often a teacher, many times both. But the lesson was practically over, we'd been left to finish the passage by ourselves. Even the teacher, briefcase on his desk, stared out the window, his journey home already begun.

All period a draught had blown from the metal window frame, across the dusty sill and wrapped itself around my neck. I hadn't been able to get warm and my nose and throat thickened with the chill. Outside, I scanned the squat terraces; their roofs had been left glossy by the low heavy clouds that had brought rain. The weather had swallowed the afternoon and, with the Christmas lights packed away for another year, the nights were at their darkest.

No-one had wished me Happy Birthday, not since I'd left home that morning. At breakfast, Rose had presented me with a card and a carefully wrapped copy of the Highway Code, although I wouldn't drive until the weekend, when Dad could take me out in daylight hours. If I'd brought the Highway Code to school, opened it at my desk as I'd seen others do, people would have known it was my birthday, or they would have guessed.

But not even McWilliams remembered despite coming home with me last year for birthday tea. I'd only seen him in Divinity, second period; at lunch I'd been busy with choir. Maybe it was for the best. The previous evening I'd lain awake, wondering if the others would find out, the lads. Debagging and wedgies were still the preferred form of celebration; trousers were forced down and underpants ripped upwards to commemorate every occasion. Although I wasn't part of their group and the easy physicality they shared, on the periphery you could still be fair game.

The new term had fired them up enough as it was. All day their talk had been about Christmas and who'd got what. Every detail of Johnston's New Year party had been picked over several times. Nearly everyone had gone. Although the invite was open, and I'd considered going, it was easier not to. Johnston scared me – he had a temper and could turn on the weakest.

The bell rang. My erection had subsided. Mr. Wright stood, both hands on his briefcase, and reminded us of our homework. Chairs and tables screeched as we rushed for the door.

'Jesus, that was so boring. Even auld Wright near put himself to sleep. Did you see his eyes and his head go?'

Campbell was speaking to me. I laughed, then tried to muster a reply, but he was soon lost in the procession of boys streaming through the quad.

At each corner black blazers galloped from the staircases and converged at the main door like an army on the march. Some parents waited in cars by the gates, but most boys travelled by bus, departing from the nearside of the City Hall to the south of the city and bigger, detached houses on the tree-lined streets. My stop was through the city centre and I'd already decided to catch a later bus. Granny's card had come a day early, and when Mum had let me open it that morning I'd found two stiff pound notes, enough for an album; I'd buy one on the way home, something to mark the day.

Outside the school walls, traffic stalled as boys crowded the road and crossed bunched together, rendering the lights impotent. I kept left, past the suit shop and its dusty mannequins then around the corner to the security gates. More police than usual were gathered. That morning the news had reported shootings, the first of the year. Dad had said it was just the start and that killings never marked the end, only the beginning. Usually these incidents didn't scare me; I wasn't involved, so couldn't be a target. Adults would protect us. But as my bag was searched and I passed through the gate, I saw the RUC officers confer in low voices, nervously alert; the violence felt closer.

Rain spluttered and I ran from one canopy to the next, pausing by each shop window, their lights glowing in the gloom. Each time I swallowed there was a scratch in my throat. Cells multiplied in my nose, like those diagrams in my biology textbook – germs split, then split again, occupying more space in my head and making it stuffy.

As the rain fell harder, I dashed to the Arcade. Shoppers had already soaked the tiles and with my shoe soles worn smooth, I had to be careful not to slip. I wondered perhaps if this detour was a mistake, if it would not be better to head straight home. The next bus wouldn't be for another half hour and there was a longer walk the other side, but this was my birthday and I needed somehow to make it special.

Rolla Records was at the far end of the Arcade, opposite a bakery. The window display for Van Morrison's live album hadn't been changed in a year or more; they only kept it because he was local, as if that meant something. Inside it was warm but strangely silent. A radio played news at low volume. The usual guy with the beard who wore his hair long was nowhere to be seen; a ginger haired man with pocked cheeks stood scrawling something behind the till. He didn't even raise an eye as I passed him and headed to the racks at the back.

I knew those racks by heart. Any lunchtime I wasn't at choir, I'd scour through them, picking out albums I couldn't afford but had read about or heard on the radio. The covers intrigued me as much as the music and I'd pore over them, examining the photos or illustrations for some hidden message. That morning, as soon as I'd opened Granny's card, I knew what album I'd buy. In fact, I'd wanted it for weeks. But still, I pulled a damp clipping from my inside pocket – *NME's Top Twenty Albums of 1975*. I scanned it one last time. *Young Americans* was only number seven, but it was the one I wanted most. I hadn't always liked Bowie, but the album had a song I loved and I hoped the rest would be similar. Besides, no one else at school owned it.

I plucked it from the rack and gripped it beneath my arm while I flicked through the others, checking for new arrivals. It was the same stock as before Christmas, when I came with Dad to buy Rose the ABBA record she wanted.

At the counter, the man ignored me when I set the record in front of him, continuing instead to draw *SALE* signs on florescent orange stars. I stepped back from the cloying stench of the thick black marker. Finally he capped the pen, then turned the record over in his hands.

‘Not as good as the early stuff,’ he said, tapping the register. ‘It’s no Ziggy.’

I didn’t answer. The long-haired guy would have congratulated me on my choice, even if he didn’t agree. That was the job.

‘One ninety-nine.’ He bagged up the record.

I passed over the notes, thick with newness, and held out my palm for the penny change. In future, I’d only buy from the other guy; the excitement wouldn’t be stolen from me before I’d had a chance to listen. I snatched the record, pocketed the coin and let the door swing behind me with a bang.

From the shelter of the Arcade, I watched rain splash the street. Opposite, a grey Land Rover closed the entrance to Corn Market and police were turning shoppers and workers away, directing them further along the street. My route was blocked; perhaps the buses would be disrupted too. There was an ache in my knuckles, a weak bruised feeling that always marked the onset of a cold or flu. I longed to be at home, for Mum to raise a hand to my forehead, though she never diagnosed flu, it was always a cold. With the flu, she determined, you wouldn’t get out of bed, even if there was a five pound note on the floor, ready for the

taking; while you could still walk, it was a cold. Whatever I was sickening for, I didn't need these complications to my journey.

I followed the others as instructed by the police. There was no sense of panic, only tightened lips and sighs and murmurs. Each street I came upon that could take me closer to my stop had been cordoned, sometimes by a single RUC man, arms outstretched like a uniformed scarecrow. A woman Mum's age asked a young officer, 'What is it now?'

'An abandoned car just outside the gates. The Army are taking a look.'

She tutted off with a shake of her head.

The closures were pushing me further from the centre to streets I'd never walked before. My feet were sodden and my woollen blazer was heavy with rain. The other refugees from the disruption had been swallowed by the city and I found myself alone at the mouth of a clear passage. It swept left and although I couldn't see where it ended, I imagined it would lead to the buses, or at least to the Cathedral where the buses passed.

The further I walked, the darker and more narrow the street became, the buildings on either side bowing to one another. A twist in the alley revealed several boys, crowding the kerb beneath a dim street lamp and sharing a single cigarette. They were slightly younger, maybe fourth form, but they weren't from my school. Their blazer badge was green, a Catholic school; we'd never played them at rugby. They inspected me with disdain; my movements faltered under their gaze. As I passed, a throat cleared, then I heard the hoick of spit. I did not turn.

There were no following footsteps, but I hurried nonetheless. Within fifty yards, the street closed to a dead end. Where the road should have opened, instead

stood a pub. Its opaque windows threw a pale light and the only way to continue was through the shuttered bar door which lay half open. I didn't dare enter; even out of my uniform I didn't look old enough. There would be men inside, less hospitable perhaps than the boys I had passed. I'd have to return the way I came.

Against the wall, I stood out of sight, allowing time for the boys to finish their cigarette and leave. The rain strengthened and I folded the bag over so the record would remain dry. Water beaded my blazer like dew and fat drops ran from my hair; my limbs ached and all I wanted was to find the bus home. I gave it several minutes then lowered my head and carried on.

I heard their voices before I saw them, but hoped they wouldn't bother me. There was a shout, something I didn't catch. The others snickered. My strides quickened and I dared not look up.

'Fat proddy fuck.'

That time the words were clear. Their laughter grew louder, surrounding me, and there was more hoicking of phlegm. I ran.

I felt a kick to my backside; it didn't fully connect but still drove me faster than I thought possible. Ahead, the main road was just visible. High-pitched squeals and laughs echoed in the alley behind. There was a thump on my arm and then hands struck my back, jarring me forward. I lost my footing, rushed face-first at the pavement. Thankfully my elbows broke the fall.

Now grounded, I balled myself in apprehension of the kicks and punches I was sure would follow. But the gang didn't stop. I felt the disturbance of air as they jumped and leapt around me. Then the catcalls and shrieks disappeared with them – the sound of a distant playground.

'Everything alright, fella?'

Through a blur of tears I spied a police uniform. When I wiped my eyes, his face didn't appear old enough, but I still felt safe in his company.

'I tripped.'

He held out a hand and helped me to my feet, then picked up the record bag from the pavement.

'Here you go. Your friends not wait on you?'

I didn't explain, just shook my head. The bag's outside was soaked and peppered with grit. I cleaned it against my leg.

'How can I get to Bridge Street, to the buses?'

'It's all closed down, everything beyond the gates. You could try further along, by the Telegraph building, but you'd be lucky.'

The boys had taken off in that direction and I wanted to stick to the streets I knew, so I followed the policeman back to the city centre.

Sheltering under the porch of an office, I checked the album inside. It was still in one piece, no cracks, but at the top of the sleeve, where it had been drenched, the cardboard had ruffled and split. It would still play but its newness had been destroyed. The damage would be a goading reminder.

In the light of the entrance I inspected myself for injury, too. Just above my ankle, on the back of my right trouser leg, was a pearl-like gob whose discovery made me retch. A snail trail marked its journey downwards. I attempted to knock it off with the my shoe but only succeeded in spreading its glistening mass as far as the hem. The clean-up would have to wait until home.

Across that way, the cordon had unwound and the police were allowing people to pass. Most probably it had been a hoax but no one stopped to ask. The streets were reclaimed once more – pedestrians bustled in both directions,

umbrellas raised. A few cars motored by. Only the packs of RUC, their Land Rovers parked curiously on the pavement, denoted anything out of the ordinary having taken place.

As I reached the bus stop, however, it was clear there were still delays. No vehicles sat idling at the stand and a long snaking queue of passengers stretched as far as the crossing. An inspector scratched his pen over a worn timetable.

‘We not getting home the night?’ asked a woman, her arms stretched by heavy bags, her hair shielded by a plastic headscarf.

I stepped closer to catch his reply.

‘It’s not just here. There’s scares all over, all the way out to Rathcoole. I’ve been on to the depot and they’re sending some buses, but it’ll be forty minutes, at least.’

‘What’s this country coming to?’ the old woman asked of no-one in particular.

My blazer was swollen with rain; the school bag and tainted record were heavy in my hands. The dull pain in my knuckles had spread to my legs and my head buzzed with congestion. Forty minutes was too long.

Behind me, a metal shutter rose with a clatter and I glanced to find Keith unlocking the door to the newsagent. Although I’d resolved to save treats only for Friday, this was my birthday.

‘Are you open?’ I called after him.

‘I came back to cash up. Best get this money safe? But if you want something, you might as well come in. Close that door behind you.’

The only lights were those by the till, the rest of the shop melted to darkness.

‘You look soaked. Not a good day for the buses to be up the left. Take what you want and away into the store room. The Super Ser’s lit and you can dry off while I get this sorted. There’s nothing moving out there.’

I wondered if I should just choose something and leave. Although Keith and I had chatted before, I’d never lingered to talk the way some customers did, perched by the till as if it were a bar. Still, the shop was warm and the bus would be some time yet. I selected a Macaroon from the display beneath the till; Keith looked up from bagging coins and gave an encouraging wink.

The storeroom was small and dark, just space for a desk with a lamp amidst the boxes piled as high as the ceiling. I imagined those boxes stacked in the utility at home and wondered how long it would take Rose and me to get through them; the most Mum ever bought was a variety pack of twelve, and even then, only if we were expecting callers.

The gas heater in the corner threw out a warmth that made my wet trousers itch. I kicked my bag beneath the desk and propped the record gently against the wall. I hung my blazer on the back of the chair, near the heat. Rain had soaked through, leaving dark patches on the shoulders and front of my jumper.

I was just about to open the Macaroon when Keith appeared in the doorway. In silhouette, his slightly balding head and large frame made him look like an overgrown baby. He said nothing but stepped forward and closed the door. There was a seriousness to his manner that I had not seen before. My mouth dried and I dropped the chocolate on the desk.

As he stepped into the light of the lamp, I saw that his flies had been opened and pulled back so that his cock and balls hung freely in a thick knot of flesh. I had to stifle a laugh of embarrassment; I feigned indifference. His cock

twitched but he remained silent. Something close to anger emanated from him, a threat of strength, and I couldn't move, rendered immobile by both fear and excitement. My heart beat loudly in my ears and I was sure my legs would give way at any moment.

But he was close enough to catch me if needed. His hands attacked my belt and fastenings. Instead of pushing him off, I pulled him closer, then rose on tiptoes to press my lips against his. They remained there for a few seconds and I tasted his dry, chapped skin, but he soon turned his head and my mouth caught on his stubble.

‘No,’ he grunted. ‘Not that.’

I tilted my head back. My trousers were open and he groped at my cock, so hard and eager it almost hurt. Now, he was erect, too, and there was something almost horrifying about his form. His size shamed mine. I grabbed his cock in return, tugging it, wanting to take it as my own.

‘Gently,’ he whispered close to my ear.

He breathed quickly, shallow inhalations. I held my breath, hoping to control the spasms in my legs. My hips jerked backwards but he wrestled me closer until I could feel his cock against my own, his chin now pressing down on my head. The friction, his force, was too much and I came quickly, but he would not release me, binding me tight to him until I felt hot jism hit my hand.

Even after he was done, he held me, his hand squeezing the back of my skull, fingers burrowing beneath my hair, until the room was still and our breath came low and even. At this proximity our eyes could not meet.

Suddenly shy, he turned from me, fastened himself, then snatched a dirty cloth from the shelf and wiped his hands. Without looking, he threw me the cloth

but I wasn't ready; it hit my chest and fell. I tucked in my shirt and fixed my trousers. Their front was a mess. His come, or mine, probably both, had soaked in and wet stains spread from their pearlescent strings. I reached for the cloth and patted them dry as best I could, but did not want to appear too fussy.

'I should get the bus.' I dropped the rag on a crate of lemonade.

He didn't reply; he kept his back to me as he gathered and stacked the few things that lay on the desk.

My blazer, though warmed, was still saturated as I slipped it on. With a kick he slid my bag from under the desk to the door. I reached for it and hurried into the dim shop beyond.

'I'll let you out.' He pushed past me, not roughly, just with a lack of interest, as though we were strangers shoving by on the street. With one hand on the snib, he paused, eyes to the ground. 'Tell anyone about this and I'll be after you.'

It didn't come as a threat, more a statement of fact. Anyway, there was no one I could tell, no one I would want to. I nodded, then stepped to the pavement. The door closed behind me. Rain dripped from the awning. Although I'd forgotten the record, and the Macaroon bar, I couldn't bear to return.

There was a bus at the stop, the 165, and the queue had disintegrated into a scrum by its doors. By my guess, there would be enough space for us all, but still people pushed to get seated and out of the rain. I stayed at the back, keeping an eye for any movement at the shop door. When I finally boarded, wet collar chaffing my neck, there were no free seats and I had to stand in the aisle, my feet planted either side of my bag. My legs twitched and ached, yet I had to tense them at each bump and turn to avoid tumbling to the floor. I tried to close my eyes and

shut out the world but it would just bring me back to that store room and what I had done. If Keith, somebody I barely knew, understood what I was and what I had wanted, then the truth must be obvious to everyone. I focused on the lights through the window, each a home to someone, the city sparkling in the rain.

At my stop I could scarcely summon the energy to push to the front; the aisle had been thick with passengers the whole way. My head pounded as I dropped down the steps and there was an unwelcome drip at the back of my throat. Rain hit sideways with the force of the wind and I had to duck to keep its sting from my face. When I finally reached our driveway, a shadow passed the window, perhaps Rose, or Mum; Dad's car was still absent.

I stopped short of where the light from the living room fell on the paving stones. A lorry rolled by, its headlamps lighting up the corner of the front garden and the hollow in the hedge where it met our neighbour's fence. Summers, as a child, I had hidden there, creating race-tracks in the dirt for my cars. It was shaded and cool, away from my parents and the bigger children opposite. I had spent hours there each day amongst the dusty roots, imagining I was somewhere far away, somewhere better. I yearned to disappear there once more but the dark winter night was too wet and too cold and I had grown too big for that nook to offer any protection.

Another shadow flickered in the window; Rose cupped her hands to the glass and peered out. I couldn't delay any longer. I opened the door and wiped my feet on the mat.

'I thought I heard something. Happy Birthday, love.'

Mum moved to kiss my cheek but my head recoiled – I couldn't let her touch me, not where his breath had been.

‘I’m sick. You don’t want to catch it.’

‘Don’t be an eejit, come here. You’re not getting too old, are you?’

She pulled me close but I twisted so that her lips found the other cheek, the one he hadn’t tarnished.

‘You’re soaked through. No wonder you’ve got a chill. They said on the news town was bad – everything at a standstill. Your dad’ll be late too.’

Behind her, the kitchen table was set; blue paper serviettes peaked from the glasses.

Rose came skipping to our side. ‘We made you a cake. Mrs. Basher was ill, so I didn’t have my piano lesson. Mum let me ice it.’

‘Give him peace. He’ll see it in a minute.’ Mum released me. ‘Away and get out of those wet clothes or you’ll catch your death.’

My sinuses throbbed as I bent to collect my bag.

‘What happened those trousers?’ she called out. ‘They were clean on this morning?’ Mum pointed to the stain at my thigh.

‘It wasn’t my fault.’ My voice became angry. ‘Some boys chased me. They spat.’

‘At school? Who were they?’ she asked, angry herself, but on my behalf.

‘No, it was in town. When I was trying to get the bus. The whole place was shut down. I didn’t know them. They’re not at our school.’ My throat closed and my voice strained higher. Tears dropped from my eyes.

‘Dirty brutes. As if we don’t have enough to worry about. Away and take them off you. I’ll have to get them washed. They’ll dry in the hot-press overnight. Forget about it,’ she said softly. ‘We’ll have your birthday tea when your father gets in.’

I sloped upstairs and undressed, then held the trousers to my face and dabbed my tongue at the damp spot where Keith's come had spilt, to see if I could taste him.

Why D'ya Do It? – Marianne Faithfull

‘Hold steady, man. It’s iodine. It’s going to sting.’

John squeezes a small plastic bottle; rusty liquid dribbles from the bent nozzle to coat my arm, smarting where the fall has gouged a length of skin. Tiny beads of blood dot the surface.

‘This will kill any bugs or nasties. I hate to imagine what shit’s on that floor.’ He gives another squirt.

‘Good job it wasn’t your head,’ Walt adds.

I hadn’t wanted the fuss but in the corridor’s light Walt had seen the gash and insisted we find help. I still don’t know what he’s doing here; John’s ministrations have brought a halt to my questioning.

There’s a burnt smell coming from the saucepan on the hot-plate. Beside it, the tap from the heater drips water into the sink. It’s a staff-room at the weekend but they say the DJ camps out here in the week. I search the shelves but can spot no sleeping bag. Victor brought me here once; I remember the plastic chairs. He’d swapped a joint for the key from some kid who got fired soon after. It was a thrill to trespass. Beneath the glaring lights, he pushed me onto one of those chairs, tugged my trousers and pants to my knees and sucked me. Afraid of discovery, I wasn’t able to relax. When it was over, I stood and was embarrassed by the stripe of sweat that had collected on the chair, marking the cleft of my buttocks. Victor saw it too but said nothing.

‘No need for stitches. Just a band-aid and you’ll be good.’ John slaps a plaster in place and the surrounding skin tightens. ‘Every week with those stairs is the same – someone ends up on their ass. It’s OK when they play cartoons, everyone can see. But with these space movies, that shit is dark.’

John grips my upper arm as if to inspect his handiwork but his eyes fix on me.

‘Reckon that should do. You being cool tonight, Col?’ he asks firmly.

I nod, as much to convince myself.

‘Nice work,’ Walt says, moving closer. ‘John, you mind if we just hang here for five minutes?’

‘Sure, just lock it up. I don’t want to come back to some orgy, least not while I have to work.’

‘Thanks,’ I call after him.

Walt takes a deep breath and his thick eyebrows angle towards his nose with worry or disappointment, I can’t tell.

‘So what’s happening?’ he asks.

‘Not much. I’m just...having fun. Greg gave me some new pills to try – MDA I think.’

‘Looks like they work,’ he says.

I breathe, try to still the vibrations in my body. ‘And you’re sure Victor’s OK. When I saw you here, I was sure something was wrong. I thought...’ I don’t give voice to my fears.

‘It’s not Victor, I told you. I haven’t talked to him since this morning, but he was fine. Look, Col,’ he moves closer, ‘it’s you. I came to see you. You called me. Remember? An hour ago, two at most.’

I can't. There was a handset, earlier, but the memory is like an overheard story, fleeting and imprecise. I recall a string of words but know their meaning was lost as soon as I uttered them.

'I'm sorry Walt, if I did. I mean, I think I did, but I can't...Greg's shit is strong. It hit me hard.' I appeal to the hedonist in him.

'Well, it was noisy and, to be honest, I didn't catch most of what you said, but you were upset. Buddy, you sounded scared.'

I shut my eyes tightly, hoping to squeeze out the night's details. I remember Martin, the disappointment, the DJ booth, both inside and out. There were sobs that struck from nowhere as I sat on that riser, but they abated quickly. I danced. I watched robots in space. Darryl and Ricardo feature too. The order might not be correct but the memories are there, within my reach. The phone call is different, like it happened elsewhere, on another night altogether.

'Walt, I'm sorry. I didn't mean drag you out here. Just, you know. Too much. I must have lost my mind for a bit. I've found it again. I've turned it around.'

I smile to let him see that it's true, I am better. There is no sadness here.

'What kind of fucked-up person makes a call, then can't remember?' he asks, but his voice is playful and I'm grateful he's not angry. 'Take more care of yourself,' he continues. 'Sleep sometimes. And eat. Eating's good too.'

I hold my fingers to his face. 'I had a grilled cheese sandwich earlier. You can still smell it.'

'OK, OK,' he recoils. 'I believe you.'

'What about your party? You didn't kick everyone out just to check on me?' I ask.

‘No, there were only a couple of freeloaders left and this girl who would not stop talking about her fucking art.’

I miss Walt; he could always crack me up. Now we only meet to trade drugs. We don’t hang out like we used to, those nights that would break into day. I lost him along with Victor.

‘So, who are you with tonight?’ His concern is back.

‘Jack and Bobby are here,’ I offer.

‘You came with them?’

He knows that’s not true; I’d always found them insufferable. I want to tell him that I came with no one, that I came to recapture the joy that I can’t quite believe existed. I came because I’m not quite sure what else to do.

‘We had fun here, didn’t we? It was worth it. They were good times?’ I ask.

‘They were the best,’ Walt whispers in reverence. ‘But you know what? They’re over. Time to find something new, something that’s yours. Victor’s never coming back, at least not any time soon and we both know there’s no one can dance like him.’

Under our feet, as if summoned by his name, I feel a rhythmic thump. Walt feels it too; his head cocks to one side and I know he’s trying to figure out which song is thundering through the building. At this remove listening takes concentration and we attempt to fill the mids and highs that have been stripped by the walls.

Walt’s smile tells me he’s guessed it. As a clue, he hums along softly and his eyebrows rise and fall to match the rhythm of the lyrics. I’m so close to

solving it that my mouth waters. To help me further, I follow his lead, my voice floating up and down the register a split second after his.

As the chorus begins, I get it

Happy Music! we both blast out.

Somehow, through the laughter, we keep singing.

Makes you feel good...All the time.

Walt is blinking back tears. The song reaches its break and we sit noiseless. The beat keeps on.

‘Shall we?’ I nod to the door and the dance floor beyond.

Walt shakes his head; there’ll be no convincing him.

‘Why don’t we both get out of here?’ he asks. ‘Come back with me. We’ll get a cab, enjoy some more of that Maui and I can bore you with all of my stories. My couch makes a great bed, it’s been tested. I won’t disturb you. Sleep ’til you’re ready. You can sleep for a week.’

The company, the security of having someone near – it’s appealing. And I know there’s no condition on acceptance. He’s offering his place like he passes a joint – a thoughtless act of sharing. Victor would often poke fun at his hippie ways, but Walt’s more generous and selfless than any hippy I’ve ever met.

‘I’m going to stay here,’ I tell him, desperately hoping not to disappoint.

He’s right, I need to find something new. His offer belongs to the past, along with Victor and maybe even the Club.

‘You’re sure?’ he asks, but there’s no sense of cajoling. As always, Walt gets it. ‘The offer stands. The couch is there should you choose to use it.’

He doesn’t say ‘need’ but ‘choose’ and I’m thankful.

When he stands I rise with him. My thoughts are as clear as they've been all evening. Facing one another, it feels like a strange goodbye, but Walt reaches to take my head in his hands then pulls me down and closer. His lips touch my forehead with a soft wetness that feels pure and unsullied. I'm swallowed by a grin that won't stop, as if the secret of his happiness has been passed on to me.

'Remember to lock the door,' he says as he leaves.

I may be alone, but there's mileage left in this night.

April 1980

Their bill was on the table where I'd left it. The men had requested it twenty minutes ago; neither had moved to pay. My shift was over but I'd danced attendance on them all afternoon and I wanted to make sure the tip made it to my pocket. Other tips had vanished, perhaps mistakenly, but I wouldn't have put it past the other staff to pilfer what was rightfully mine. It was the owner's fault; he'd heard my accent in the first week and had told me how he pined for the old country, although he'd yet to visit. His favouritism meant that in ten months I'd gone from washing dishes to bussing tables and then to serving them. It was a progression that brought cold stares and ambivalence from my colleagues. Most days I would have been happier back amongst the suds and the crockery with little to do but think.

'Can I get you anything else?' I asked, hoping to hurry them along.

The blond one, in the blue shirt and tie, peered at me with condescension.

‘Still finishing up,’ he said defiantly, although no plates or glasses remained. His friend, with dark hair and a podgier face, shrugged at me apologetically.

‘Take your time,’ I lied.

Any gratuity would have to be a write-off; if I lingered any longer the other staff would dislike me even more for distrusting them. Besides, with the subway strike, I’d worked the last seven days straight, taking extra shifts from the no-shows. For once, there was a little extra in my pocket.

I took off my apron and cashed out, though it seemed the longer I worked, the fewer tips I made. With no call for goodbyes, I stepped into the teeming street. The sun had slipped beneath the skyline and glowed softly behind the buildings to the west. Traffic was gridlocked and the pavements as busy as I’d ever seen them; the inert subway meant all journeys were conducted above ground. With no demands other than to keep pace, I allowed the crowds to swallow me.

I set off for Victor’s, a shorter walk than to my room on the northeastern edges of the park. When the strike was announced he’d offered his place without condition and I’d accepted gratefully, glad to have some respite from my own stuffy room – the gaps and holes that had welcomed the bitter winds of winter seemed to seal themselves in the warm swell of spring. Also, the past days I found pleasure in returning to him, content that he was there and waiting.

Although my feet ached from the long shift, I travelled beyond Victor’s and on to the Village, in search of a present to thank him. The warmer evening, as well as the strike, had brought many boys to the pavement. Here, they walked with an unhurried tread that paused with each possibility; glances lingered longer than they should and everyone was caught in a constant state of appraisal. I, too,

played my part. Each new face, every fresh glimpse, I measured against Victor. It was a habit I'd developed in those first weeks after meeting him when I had no idea what our evenings together or our Saturdays in bed constituted. When insecurity gripped me, the faces would form a gallery of lost opportunities and possibilities squandered. The city threw up endless choice that not only brought excitement, but overwhelming confusion too. With Victor, however, I don't remember exercising a choice; he'd wanted me and had made it clear. My only choice had been to offer no resistance.

Half a block ahead, I spied a bounce of black hair so soft and full that it must taken an age to blow-dry. As he came closer, I saw he was my age, possibly younger, with a skin tone that Victor had taught me was Puerto Rican, or Dominican. His t-shirt glowed in the dusk and the blue trim that circled his arm and neck was almost electric. There had to be a mother at home, diligently scrubbing to achieve this pristine look.

I crossed to where I hoped he'd pass. Further along, I saw other men do the same, changing their course to get closer, but he cut through them, head high and unwavering, and they were left bobbing in his wake. As he reached me, there was little room to pass but he shimmied sideways and pushed by. I leaned to catch the scent of him. It was as clean and fresh as his t-shirt and I had to hold myself from jumping after him, from jumping inside him. I needn't have worried. I could have been as brazen and unashamed as I wanted to be and still he would not have noticed, his sights fixed elsewhere.

Pausing by a shop window, I wondered if these yearnings would ever disappear. I'd hoped being with Victor would have quashed my desires but found they could still be sparked by the smallest thing – the golden hair on a forearm,

the clean, plump skin on the back of a neck, the unmistakable heft of a cock in sports shorts. If anything, being with Victor had only increased my need. Sometimes, I'd race after men on the subway, watching the trouser fabric stretch over their arses as they took the steps two at a time, imagining what lay beneath. Victor was not one of the men I had followed, but since he had followed me, that was enough.

I reminded myself that these men were not the reason I'd come this distance tonight; the idea was to treat Victor. I pushed through the door of Liquor King. A single ping sounded as I stepped inside. In the far corner a hand-drawn sign declared *WINE*, but the sheer volume of bottles blinded me, one label indistinguishable from the next. Drinking wasn't our thing, except perhaps a shot or two before going out as a soft buffer to the night ahead. Wine was for people like my parents, to be enjoyed at home with the curtains drawn; it was for people who would be asleep before the sun came up. For once, however, I wanted it to be for us, Victor and me, to share with dinner as those other couples did.

'Help you?' asked the short, thick-set man by the counter. His hair was thinning but he'd slicked it back nonetheless. The flimsy striped shirt he wore was laid open and displayed the vest beneath.

'I'm looking for some wine, under four bucks.'

It was an arbitrary amount and I had no idea if it would allow for something special or if I was just being cheap.

'You want a red,' he told me, dropped his cigarette in the ashtray then kicked a stool the length of the wall. Hopping up, more nimble than I would have given him credit, he grabbed a bottle from the uppermost shelf.

'This one is very nice. Four forty-nine.'

He pressed it to my gut and I didn't feel as if I had a choice. The bottle weighed heavy and the label was French, so at least it looked the part. I placed four scrunched dollars on the counter and dropped two quarters from a fistful of change. He didn't bother to count it, but picked his cigarette from the ashtray and resumed smoking.

The door pinged as I left and, once more, I found myself amongst those searching eyes. This time I strode with purpose, resolving to ignore and not instigate any gaze. I needn't have worried; as ever on these streets, I was invisible.

The Deli next-door to Victor's was closed but the sliding metal door to his stairs had been left open. I bounced up a flight, hid the wine behind my back and pushed his door. It, too, was unlocked and swung free. A draught pulled at the curtain and it billowed over the bed; the sheets looked clean and freshly made. There was no smell of his one-pot cooking, just the faint taste of marijuana in the air.

'Hey baby.'

Victor was wearing only a towel, fastened at his waist, and rivulets of water sprang from the hair on his chest. A gurgle escaped from the drain in the bath. As he stepped forward to kiss me I could see his eyes were smoked red.

'You're wet,' I cried when he strapped his arms around me. 'And you're stoned.'

'Boss let us go early today. Our last job was past Harlem and he didn't want us caught in traffic. Cheap bastard won't pay overtime.'

I shook free and presented the wine like a waiter, the bottle cradled in my arm with the label showing.

'Baby, that's too much. We celebrating something?'

‘I just thought it would be nice, a thank you.’ I passed it over.

He examined it for a moment, then set it on the counter so he could embrace me fully. I placed my lips on his shoulder and tasted him, clean and neutral. We began to sway – a slow, soft dance that would have left me awkward if it wasn’t so reassuring. My hands dropped to his waist and I tugged the towel free.

‘I just ordered food. Chinese,’ he said, re-tucking the towel in place. ‘We don’t want the poor guy walking in on us. He’ll never come back. Open the wine. There’s a corkscrew there somewhere. I’ll throw on some clothes.’

Although I knew my way around the flat, the kitchen was still Victor’s domain and it took a couple of drawers before I found the corkscrew, a knotted branch for a handle. As I dug its point into the metallic wrapper on top, there was a knock and I pulled the door open.

A young man, brown hair and thick moustache, stood on the landing.

‘Food guy?’ I asked hopefully.

‘Ahh, no. I’m just... Victor,’ he called past me.

There was no paper carrier in his hand.

‘Shit. One second. Just wait.’ Victor struggled into his t-shirt.

‘Victor, it’s my keys. I think I dropped them,’ the young man said, then gave me an impatient smile. ‘This fucking strike. I walked all the way home. Twenty blocks. Then I couldn’t get in.’

‘Victor?’ I demanded, but he would not look at me.

‘Let me find them,’ he mumbled, then fell to search the floor.

‘They must have fallen out of my pocket,’ the boy shrugged.

I stood between them, immobile and unwilling to question further, fearing what I might discover. The boy's clothes were baggy, but the material draped to show the sculpted body beneath.

'They say the strike could go for months,' he said.

Since I'd made no effort to welcome him in, the boy toed at the hallway carpet and picked at a flake of paint on the doorframe. My unease polluted the whole space, but I did nothing to banish it; I needed him to suffer too. Studying him, I tried to find a flaw in that clear complexion, one thick hair out of place. Although he was a good half foot taller, he probably weighed less than I did. On the street I would have followed him, but here, I could not wait for him to disappear.

'Got them.' Victor pushed himself from the under the bed and rose to his feet. 'They must have...' He stopped, unwilling to speculate. None of us needed to know.

Victor passed the keys over my shoulder.

'Here you go...ah...'

'Jonathan,' the boy completed.

I couldn't help but think this was for my benefit; if he had no name, their encounter had no meaning. An oppressive silence descended until, finally, Jonathan let go an uncertain 'Goodbye'.

I shut the door firmly, but was careful not to slam it, unwilling to play the wronged party.

Victor flopped to the bed with a sigh. I wondered how many hours that afternoon he'd spent there already, how many times the pipe on the sill had been reloaded and passed from his lips to Jonathan's. It was his bed, and he should use

it as he pleased, but I couldn't abide the thought of him sharing it with someone who wasn't me. With my back to the door, I slid its length until my bottom touched the floor. I turned my ear to the hallway but there was no sign of Jonathan, only silence. From this position all I could see of Victor was his feet, overhanging the bed. His big toes flicked the ones next to them again and again, a twitch he normally reserved for those sleepless mornings after our nights out. Even after the afternoon's discoveries, their clicking soothed me too.

I had no idea what to say, how to act. My face flushed as I imagined Jonathan's impression of me, forever labelled the possessive and spiteful lover. Victor had explained how this might work, right from the start, or rather, he'd waited until I'd known him a few weeks. By then it had been too late; I was too excited to have found someone and would have accepted any condition. But this had been his only one. Late one night, with his weight on top of me, he had whispered in my ear. *Sometimes I need to be with other people but I won't do it to hurt you. It won't be like with you. It will be sex, and it won't be this.* He had squeezed me tighter, nuzzled my neck as if to demonstrate. *And, of course,* he added, *you can find others too.*

He'd never referred to it again and I hadn't asked. With no features to attribute, no bodies to size-up and compare, I'd remained purposefully unaware. But then came Jonathan, with his hair and his perfect moustache and a toned form that could stir only jealousy or desire.

Finally, Victor rose on the bed to face me. 'Do you want to talk about this?'

I couldn't answer. Not thinking about it, or mentioning it, had worked up to that point. And that had been my stipulation – we would never discuss what

happened. But perhaps I needed to hear each and every detail. The truth couldn't compete with the images that cluttered my mind.

'Or you could just come and lie with me?'

His voice was soft and coercive; I yearned to be placated, to have him lie on me and shield me with his bulk. But I needed him to feel my hurt, too.

'We discussed this. You agreed,' he said.

'I didn't realise you'd fit them in at every opportunity.' My voice trembled. I was angry because he'd slept with Jonathan and I was angry because I hadn't.

'I don't use every opportunity,' he said. 'I don't plan it. Sometimes, it just happens. Like today. Bad timing, I know, but we met on the corner. I was coming home from work and...Look, are you sure you need to know this? It doesn't concern us...what we have.'

Silent again, anxious that if I released my words, I would be unable to stem the flow. Victor had advocated sex without consequence. For me, the consequence was the important thing; sex, I hoped, would always lead to something more. In the darkened theatre, I'd wanted those anonymous lips on my cock to talk to me for the rest of my life; I'd hoped that the arms pulling me closer would go on to hold me forever. Every one of my encounters had brought the spark of excitement that it could be the last and my search would be over. Victor was still searching.

'Come on, come up here,' he said, his voice edged with frustration.

I moved closer, but stopped short of joining him on the bed, crouching instead by the low table and the record player. Whatever had happened with Jonathan had lasted to the third side of *Songs in the Key of Life*.

'Lots of people have this arrangement,' he said. 'It's what people do.'

‘People you know, maybe. Your friends.’

But it was all over the city. The carefree air I had sensed when I arrived, that had made me hard as I first walked the streets, I viewed now as thoughtless self-interest. Each man was there for his own gratification. No one took care of anyone else.

‘It’s called honesty,’ he said. ‘Would you rather everyone lied? You’ve never just fucked someone?’

‘Not since I met you,’ I cried.

If only I had, I could let slip some detail that would sting.

‘Come on, join me,’ he pleaded.

On the bed, he shifted to clear a space then smoothed the sheets. I stood, caught between him and the door. Victor and his friends were the only people I knew in the city and I had no desire to start over. To have found him, to have been found by him, was so improbable that I could never manage it a second time. His arm reached for me across the mattress but I pushed it away.

Carefully, I lay at the edge with my back to him, making sure a gap between was maintained. When his hand touched me lightly I tensed my shoulders and arched my back until his fingers retreated. I burrowed further into the pillow, breathing in the clinical smell of a service wash; at least he’d had the good manners to change the sheets. But, as I relaxed, the mattress gave out a warmth I was sure was an echo of Jonathan’s presence. I reached beneath the covers to check for his imprint, a telltale divot from those solid limbs. This bed was no longer marked with my pleasure, my time with Victor – it belonged to Jonathan, and to the others, whoever they had been.

‘I need to go.’ I rolled and stood before his arms could grasp me.

‘Don’t.’ Victor sat up. ‘This is stupid. You’re freaked out, but it will fade. I know.’

Impatient anger gushed through me.

‘I’m going back to mine.’

It would be a hike but I needed the movement and space.

‘Go, if you’re sure. I won’t stop you. And that’s what this is about, the freedom to make choices for ourselves, to not be constrained.’

I nodded; I’d heard this speech before. I wasn’t interested in choice – choice brought only remorse.

‘Kiss me before you go.’ Victor stood and slipped his hand in mine.

He leaned in and kissed me just once, on the cheek; I pulled my hand from his.

Suddenly I was outside and I feared that was it; inadvertently, I’d given those signals that meant we were over. If he’d forced his hands on me I would have stayed, but he allowed me to go. Perhaps this was what he wanted but was too afraid to say. With my absence he could do as he pleased; he was free to keep searching.

The night had cooled and I cursed that my jacket still hung behind his door. Not quite ready to face the long walk, I found myself drawn back to the Village. The pavements were less frantic as the cool April air drove the search indoors, to the bars. My reflection stuttered as I passed Larry’s striped mirror. I hadn’t been through the door since Victor and I had met, but at least it was familiar.

Inside was no busier than that first night and, without rain to drive them in, no one was under forty. I sat at the bar and when I found my seat faced the

vodkas, I hopped two along, to the darker spirits, the whiskeys and brandies, where Victor had first spied me. The barman dropped a coaster and asked what I was having. When he brought the beer, I drained almost half on my first sup. I wanted to get drunk, something we didn't do. We smoked weed, we dropped acid, we sometimes snorted coke, but drinking wasn't part of our weekend ammunition. It was a relic of my old life, the time before Victor, when I needed to be bolder. I would sit in one of the Irish taverns close to my digs, at once both homely and foreign, and I'd drink until I had courage enough to face the night.

There was movement behind me and I checked the door. An older man humped in to join another on the long banquette. They occupied the space where Victor had sat, and when they caught my staring reflection, one raised his glass with a smile.

I cleared my dregs and ordered another; the first had blunted my anger and softened my disappointment, a second would do better. I began to wonder if Victor might come here to find me. He might look to apologise, even promise to be with only me. We joked about this place, each time we passed, and how we had met. Victor called it the Last Chance Saloon. It seemed obvious that he would come here to find me. It was at least worth a hope.

As I made inroads on my second glass, the door swung open with greater frequency and, tired of turning, I checked each new entrant in the mirror. Every face that wasn't Victor's disappointed me further. Small groups grew larger as friends gathered; the barman turned up the music so that it would be heard in the increasing din. He played songs from shows, from musicals, that proclaimed love or loss. They were the kind of thing Rose and Dad loved to sing along to on the radio.

A short man, probably in his fifties, hauled himself on the next stool but one and flashed me a quick grin. He pushed his empty glass closer to the barman and gestured for a refill. The song had reached its chorus and the man, head raised and eyes closed, sang along loudly as if none of us were there.

*We'll build a little home, just meant for two, from which I'll never roam,
who would? Would you?*

The barman poured him a large measure of whiskey. The golden liquid clung to the glass and I thought of Dad once more. With a yearning for home, I signalled for the same. The first sip made me shiver. When that song finished and another began, the man remained, eyes to the ceiling, mouth shut, and I wondered what memory was keeping him from the world. Finally, his trance came to an end; he dropped his head and lifted the replenished glass to his lips – a long slow sip as if it were communion.

‘Liquor always brings out the sadness. Sometimes that’s needed.’

I didn’t know who he was addressing; his eyes searched the mirror behind the bar.

‘You drinking alone tonight? You have the sadness?’ he turned and asked.

I shrugged.

‘It’s a thankless task,’ he added.

‘I don’t see your friends,’ I said, the words were more reproachful than I’d intended.

‘There they are.’ He pointed to a large group in the corner. ‘I’m just taking my time.’

My disbelief must have been visible.

‘There’s Jack, and Tom, then Chris, Patrick, Neil...I don’t know that one in the cap, but it’s only a matter of time and alcohol.’

His confidence, no matter how misplaced, made me smile.

‘I tell you what,’ he moved to the closer stool, ‘tell me your name, I’ll tell you mine, then you’re not drinking alone. You’ll know people. You can get as tipsy as you want.’

Two beers in and his logic made sense.

‘I’m Col.’

‘Well, Col,’ he repeated, ‘I’m Henry.’

He reached out his hand, fingers pointed to the floor as if to be kissed. I gave them a solid tug.

‘Now you can drink,’ he said and gave the counter a slap. ‘It’s the one thing we Irish are good at.’

He’d noticed my accent and to please him I took a long, exaggerated gulp. The whiskey burned on the way, then detonated in my stomach like a warm bomb.

‘And, since we’re friends, how about another?’

He pointed to my glass. Only a dribble remained. Without waiting for an answer, he called to the barman for the same again.

‘Just so you’re comfortable, you should know that I’m taken. Tom over there. I’m just making him jealous.’

‘Which one’s he?’ I asked, peering once again to the group in the corner.

‘The handsome one, of course. Looks like an older Michael Landon. In the paisley shirt.’

His back was to me but I spotted a maroon paisley shirt and a thick head of hair whose colour was too dark to be real.

‘He doesn’t like you buying other men drinks?’ I asked.

‘Not if he’d like them for himself. He goes for the younger ones, like you. I prefer a more mature gentleman, which, as we grow older, is good for me, shitty for him.’

The barman topped us up and Henry raised his with a smile. I wanted to ask him how it worked, if it could work, how he and Tom could be with other people and still be together. But Henry’s eyes were already on the far corner, searching for Tom’s. As if he’d sensed it, Tom had turned too and they glanced at one another briefly. Everything around them stopped – the lights, the music, the chattering gossip. They were alone, together.

I recognised the look, my parents would do the same. With sneaked glances they could conduct subtle conversations across the room. I wondered if they’d had arrangements too, things they accepted but never discussed.

The rest of my whiskey slipped down quickly and spread its protective warmth.

‘I’m going to go.’ I tapped Henry on the knee. ‘I’ll owe you a drink.’

‘That’s OK. You stay here any longer and I’ll probably hit on you anyway.’

The booze made my legs unsteady; I’d yet to eat. Outside, even though there was a chill, men loitered by the stoops, hoping. I heard a murmured request for a light that might constitute something more, but it was late and my desire had gone. I started on the long walk back to my room, where the only rules were my own.

Weekend – Phreek

Walt's kindness lingers after he's gone; I must find Ricardo and Darryl. I dosed Ricardo and left, like a cheap dealer out to score a buck, although I didn't make him pay. But I don't do it for money – with the deliveries for Jimi, I get to keep a piece of whatever's around. My nights come for free and that's my profit. That people expect me and seek me out is a bonus; I'm wanted.

As I skirt the floor there are a few faces I recognise, people Victor knew, whose greetings lessen with each passing week. Now, it's no more than a nod; we're not even close to being friends.

It's Darryl I spot first, his neck extended as he scours the room, half dancer, half sentry. There's a glimmer of fear in his eyes that he's trying to dispel, a sense of unease at his environment that I recognise well. Only when I'm feet away, do I make out Ricardo. Although his face is buried in another's, he hasn't given himself over completely; his arms lie limp by his side.

'Ricardo's made a new friend,' I shout in Darryl's ear.

'He didn't even stop to ask his name.'

Darryl avoids my eyes as he speaks, his gaze fixed at some point beyond.

'He's enjoying himself,' I reason.

'Tonight was supposed to be our night. Because of you, he's off doing his own thing. And what? I'm supposed babysit him?'

'You could find someone else,' I offer. 'Have your own fun.'

‘I don’t want someone else,’ he shouts.

He’s stopped even attempting to dance, his body resists.

‘Wait here, one second.’ I need to fix this. I reassure him with a pinch.

Ricardo’s still making out with the tall boy. They’re a good match but I pull them apart.

‘OK?’ I ask.

Although Ricardo’s smile tells me all I need to know, his eyes wide with glee, he nods an affirmation. Next, I check his suitor. Thankfully, he’s not much older and has a sympathetic face. There’ll be no trouble tonight.

‘This is his friend,’ I tell Ricardo’s boy and point to Darryl. ‘We’re going to leave for just ten minutes, then we’ll be back. To this exact spot. Don’t let him wander off. Stay with him. Make sure he finds his friend. Make sure he only leaves with his friend. Understand?’

The boy nods, but perhaps only to shut me up. I pat his arm to say good job, then give the top of Ricardo’s head a rub. All the while, his grin has not diminished and I envy the newness of his experience.

‘Come,’ I say to Darryl and, before he can protest, I drag him to the clear air of the corridor.

‘I shouldn’t leave him.’

‘He’ll be fine. You’ve got time. There’s something you’ve got to see.’

I take his hand and he holds mine. There’s nothing about this intimacy that promises more; it’s a soft, playground touch that brings only companionship.

The door at the end of the corridor is marked *DO NOT ENTER* and as I push it open Darryl gives an opposing tug, but I draw him through.

‘Where do these stairs lead?’ he asks.

I don't reply but keep our momentum as we climb one flight, then the next. The final one ends with a short walkway.

'Is it safe?' he asks, but I answer only with movement, dragging him to the exit at the far end.

We pause.

'We'll only stay a minute, it's cold and I don't want you to catch your death. Ready?'

He nods, the most certain I've seen him all night. Outside the wind must be strong and I force the door with my shoulder. A rush of frosty air hits as it pops.

'Should we be here?' he asks, but I step out.

The temperature has dropped further; the promised thaw hasn't materialised and we've been left with a refreeze.

Bolder now, he follows me to the middle of the roof.

'It's so...'

'Pretty.' I finish the thought for him.

It's the only word that can describe this scene. Light catches on snowflakes as they spin slowly by. The snow that's already fallen deadens the city noise; apart from the odd muted horn, we could be the only people left. All around, the buildings stretch high above us, yielding a soft yellow glow. It's almost Epiphany, not quite my birthday, but it's the most festive I've felt this Christmas so far.

I want to point to those far off glimmers in the night, to explain that each distant light is a person, that each one offers an opportunity to not be alone. But I can't; it's corny and my words can't do justice to this view.

‘Do you think he’ll be Ricardo’s boyfriend? After tonight?’ Darryl asks, his body beginning to shudder.

‘Maybe, for a while,’ I reply.

The cold is starting to work on me too, but I can’t leave. Not yet.

‘Let’s have one last look,’ I say. ‘Over here.’

The snow has crisped underfoot and I stop a yard or so from the edge; the rail is shallow and allows no room for error. I gather Darryl in, his back to my chest, and cage him with my arms.

‘Let me warm you.’

My chin rests on his head then I bow, place my lips on his crown. I pass on Walt’s kiss, the one that lets you know you are loved. His hands reach behind and grasp me tighter. As we watch, some lights blink off, others flicker on. Collectively, they stretch without limit into the night.

October 1978

There was a scream, then a metallic galloping bass that signalled the episode was over. I poked my head into the living room. Rose was on the floor, her back resting against Mum’s legs. Dad was in the armchair, reading.

‘Did the Doctor live to fight another day?’ I asked.

‘He’s been captured, but I think it’s OK. I think he planned it,’ Rose said cheerfully.

‘So, where are you for tonight?’ Dad asked, folding his paper.

‘Just a friend from the Tech, having a few people over. I said I’d drop in.’

‘And where is it?’ he asked.

‘This side of town, Skegoneill Avenue. The bus goes straight there.’

‘Watch out for any trouble. Does he have a phone? So you can ring if there’s problems.’

‘And will there be any lassies there?’ Mum asked, her hands absently tying a plait in Rose’s hair.

When I didn’t reply, Rose let out a long, drawn ‘whooooooooo’.

‘Well, like your father says, you be careful,’ she added.

‘It’s only round the corner.’

‘And these boys, have they lined up anything for next year? Apprenticeships or what have you? They say there’s lots of places taking on now.’

I shook my head. ‘There’s not as much out there as you think.’

‘And you’ve looked?’ Dad asked, joining the interrogation.

It was Saturday night and I didn’t want to be reminded of college, of work, or anything in the future. None of it seemed to belong to me.

‘There’s a careers fair next week,’ I said to shut down any further discussion. ‘I’ll check then.’

I left them to get ready, though it was still too early to leave. In the brighter light of the bathroom, I combed my hair, taming any stray ones and checking my reflection that the middle parting was true. I hadn’t shaved in three days and a pleasing smattering had risen between my ears and cheeks; a shadow ran from the edges of my upper lip to my chin. The areas had yet to connect, but from the right angle there was no denying the stubble.

In the bedroom I changed into my good jeans and the thick navy shirt I’d got last Christmas. My mirror was inadequate for a full-length view, comprising just the middle section of a tall cabinet that had been a hand-me-down from

Margaret next-door. Only my stomach and chest were reflected back at me, the parts that pleased me least, the only areas that were growing in size. I glanced at myself hurriedly, unwilling to take it in, then ducked to check my parting was still straight.

I rummaged in the small jam jar on the shelf above my bed but found nothing greater than a couple of ten pence pieces – enough for the bus. Next to it, I reached down the shoe box that held my singles. The rugby boots it once housed had been left to rot in the garage but the box remained. Inside, there weren't that many records, I bought more albums than singles as they were better value, but I flicked through nonetheless to see if there was anything good for to the party. Thomas said he had a record player but I wasn't sure what music he liked. In fact, I didn't know much about him. We shared the same the terminal for practicals and swapped tests when it came to marking, offering leniency where we could, but I wouldn't call him a friend. The invitation had been thrown open to the whole class. Afraid I'd make the wrong choice, I left the records where they were.

Downstairs, a quiz blared from the television and Rose shouted answers or directions to whatever task confronted the contestants. I could have happily lain back on my bed and allowed the evening to glide by, as I did most Saturdays. To stay in would allow for no expectation and therefore no disappointment. Any restlessness would soon evaporate and once an equilibrium was reached I could spend hours listening to the radio, or even in silence, dreaming of those places I'd rather be.

Purposely, I'd mentioned the party earlier in the week, so that I couldn't back out. In exasperated moments, Mum and Dad had both remarked that I didn't do anything, didn't go anywhere except my room. I was as disappointed as them;

I'd expected College to be different from school and I'd hoped I'd be different too. The world would open up, I'd thought, and my choices would increase, but as each week passed they only diminished, my trajectory becoming more and more fixed. I had no idea what I wanted, only that it wasn't this.

'If you want to go soon I'll run you to the bus,' Dad said, appearing at my door.

'I'll walk, thanks. The rain's stopped.'

I wanted to buy a carry-out on the way; you couldn't arrive without a drink. Besides, a trip with Dad might mean more questions about College, about jobs, about all the things I couldn't bear to answer.

'If you're sure,' he said, then held out two pound notes. 'Your mother said to give you these.'

I folded them into my back pocket.

'Thanks.'

'And look after yourself, will you lad?'

He left me but the words remained. Lad was a name he hadn't used in years and made me homesick for a simpler past, that time when I'd hoped to please them, when I still believed I could.

Downstairs, on the settee, Rose now lay with her feet in Mum's lap. Both were laughing at the contestants on TV, trying to ice a spinning cake.

'Bye then,' I said.

'Take care love, don't be out too late, and watch yourself. We won't lock the door,' Mum said.

Rose waved then returned to the screen.

Careful not to disturb the others, I pulled my coat from the pile that had gathered on the bannister. Next, I turned the front door handle inch by inch, bracing against each creak. Once outside, I closed it with just as much care, pretending I was making an escape. My family would turn to each other and wonder when they'd last seen me – at breakfast, at dinner the night before? I'd disappear and, unable to recall details or to summon a picture of me, they'd wonder if I'd ever really existed.

A car left the driveway opposite and its lights blinded me. I heard, 'Hello there.' When my eyes readjusted I saw Mrs. Tandy, from a few doors up, shuffling on the pavement towards me. One hand held the newspaper to her breast, the other gripped a lead. Bruce, her dirty white poodle, lurched beside her, rooting amongst the fallen leaves. Once, he'd been fast enough to give Rose a scare, chasing her the length of the street. Now he was too blind to see beyond his nose. I returned her greeting but hoped not to be dragged into a conversation. Thankfully, she kept her head down and lumbered past me, as slow as her dog.

It was downhill to the shops and, with the wind behind me, I had to lean backwards to temper my speed. The street lights wobbled at every gust and scattered raindrops to the pavement. At the off-licence, the wire shutters had been raised but the door was still open. I grabbed four tins of lager from a crate in the middle and paid with the money Dad had given me. Outside, I hesitated, wondering if I shouldn't bring more, but the bus had arrived at the stop and I had to jog to catch it.

I sat near the driver and far from the cigarette smoke that cloaked the rear. Amidst the fog, two boys sat, in opposite corners, smoking and shouting to one another but I could hear little over the engine's rumble. I considered opening a tin

for courage but it would be poor form to arrive with only three, the empty ring advertising an absence. Anyway, Mum had always frowned on public drinking.

Many stops were empty and we halted only a few times; the windy autumn night had confined most to their houses. Although Thomas had said to turn up any time after seven and it was now closer to eight, as I stepped from the bus, I still worried I might be too early. These things never start on time but I didn't know the streets well enough to delay. Hopefully people would be there already and my entrance could be less conspicuous.

Rising from the Shore Road, I crossed to the long stretch of terraces that made Thomas's street. There was no need to check numbers, even from this distance I could see the party, a noticeably busy house half way up. Light spilled from every window and, closer, I saw that the upstairs curtains had not been drawn; people could be seen from the street. From the path, I heard the din of conversation and, above it, a song I couldn't quite place. There was no answer to the bell so I pushed open the door and slunk in.

Two boys were talking football by a rack of coats in the hall; I recognised neither so made for the kitchen at the back. Gripping my bag of tins tightly, I wasn't sure if I should surrender them to the party or keep them for myself. There was a table at the far end where several more boys stood, their carry-outs piled before them like a challenge. No one was from Tech but I nodded a brief hello all the same and freed a beer from my bag. With a long gulp, I retreated to the doorway and, in the absence of company, examined the tin. It was Tennents and had a woman pictured on the side. Deirdre was her name, scrawled beneath like a signature. She wore a pale coral dress that was almost see-through and her hair had been flicked at the sides. I took another long gulp. The group by the table

were too far away to hear and, afraid to hover closer, I hooked the bag on my wrist and went in search of the people I knew.

In the hallway a crowd had just arrived, and they bustled in with flurry of coats and plastic bags. I peered into the living room and, darker, it took a while before the shadows gained focus. Thomas was on the settee by the bay window and was shouting to be heard over the music. I didn't recognise the girl and two boys who were with him, so I waited on the threshold until it seemed his story had finished.

'Colin, glad you could make it,' he said as I wandered in. 'This is Debbie, her brother Terry and my old mate from school, Neil.'

I acknowledged each as he introduced them. Debbie was his girlfriend, he'd mentioned her before. With her neat blouse and large earrings, she seemed older than the rest. Neil could have passed for Thomas's brother, the same shaggy hair and sideburns. Terry, on the end, was younger and smaller; he gave a quick wave.

'Did you get yourself a drink?' Thomas shouted.

I held aloft my can as evidence.

'Who did you get? On your tin?'

I inspected it arms length, as if for the first time.

'Deirdre,' I said, holding the picture for him to see.

'Not bad,' he replied, displaying his tin. 'I got Angela, still, I'd be happy with either.'

'You should be happy with whatever you get,' shouted Neil.

Debbie rolled her eyes.

'Sure, I didn't mean it darlin',' Thomas said, patting her leg.

Pleased to be included, I wanted to join them but there was little space on the settee and I didn't want to squash. Neither could I sit on the floor, in the way of the others who were standing, so I remained, looming above them, only catching snippets of what they said. If they laughed, I laughed too, but could contribute little else. With nervous speed, my beer was soon finished and, despite several full tins at my wrist, I used the empty as an excuse to leave. I'd come back later when there might be more room.

I crossed to the kitchen in search of a bin. It was in the far corner and already full so I had to balance my tin on top. Amongst the swelling crowds I could see no others from Tech; the rest of the party were strangers, at least to me. They all seemed to know one another, gathering in tight groups that would erupt in raucous laughter and name calling.

The house was getting warmer but I kept my coat, preferring not to lose it in the precarious heap that had developed in the hallway. I took the stairs, hoping for some familiar faces amongst the shapes I'd seen at the window. Midway up, on the corner where the treads were wider, a couple sat, her legs hitched over his. Clearing my throat, I tried to excuse myself past, but they kissed, eyes closed, unaware of anyone but each other. She pulled gently at his hair while he traced circles on her back, following the outline of her bra strap beneath the blouse.

'Is it a cheap thrill you're after?'

A heavy guy with an unlit cigarette in his mouth called to me from the landing. I tried to stutter a reply.

'Only messing you,' he said. 'C'mon Roy. Quit your carry on and let your man past.' He winked at me in collusion.

'Sorry about that,' Roy said, breaking his embrace. 'On you go.'

As I passed, I caught him tug his jeans, rearranging the material at his crotch. The girl moved the other way, her embarrassed eyes on the bannister.

I trod carefully through. The guy with the cigarette offered his hand and dragged me the last step.

‘Next time, just hit him a dig. Or try a bucket of water. Like cats. Now, mind out.’

He bounded past me and over them, a couple of stairs at a time. At the bottom he used the wall as a bumper to guide him to the hall.

Along the landing, shouts came from one of the bedrooms.

‘Number six. Attempt number six,’ someone called out.

‘Let me see,’ said another.

Inside, there was a scrum at the window as people competed for the view.

‘Gary’s gone out,’ someone exclaimed.

Close to the commotion, beer in hand, was Brian. I opened a beer for myself, sipped the froth from the rim, then reached to tap him on the shoulder.

‘Colin,’ he shouted, more enthusiastically than I’d expected, but was pleased to have found him.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked.

‘Some old eejit is trying to park his car. Granted, it’s a tight squeeze, but he’s been at it for donkeys. Seven goes, now. We all think he’s half cut. Gary’s gone out...you know Gary? There he is now. Go on Gary,’ he called.

I pushed closer. In the street, the guy from the stairs, unlit cigarette still clamped in his mouth, gave exaggerated hand signals to a reversing car. Even through the glass you could hear him yell ‘Left hand down, left hand down,’ so that the boys in the room repeated it like a mantra. Slowly the car manoeuvred

into the space and when it came close to the vehicle behind Gary banged the rear window twice. The room let out a congratulatory roar and I shouted too, happy to join them.

‘You just got here?’ Brian asked when the cheers had died.

‘Yeah, just about. Nice place you have,’ I said gesturing round the room.

Football posters covered the nearest wall, but the biggest picture, in the middle, was of a woman in an orange bikini. There was little furniture, just a bed, a desk and a chest of drawers. A pile of crumpled clothes lay under the desk where they’d been kicked.

‘What? Are you mad. This is Thomas’s. I wouldn’t let Liverpool scum on my walls, although I wouldn’t say not to a bit of Raquel. No, mine’s next door, but my bird, Carolyn, is in there with her mate, Kirsty. Crying over some fella again.’

I nodded eagerly, to show I understood.

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I could probably set you up. She’s a bit of a moany cow, but I’m sure you could think of a way to shut her up.’

The thought terrified me, to have to do those things any other boy here would be more than happy to perform. I took a gulp and wished to escape. From downstairs, a Blondie song started again, louder this time.

‘Fuck me,’ Brian said. ‘If I have to hear *Denis, Denis* one more time I’m going to go buck mad. I need to change it. C’mon.’

He paused by the next room, popped his head through the door.

‘Carolyn, are you not coming down?’

Then his hand grabbed me and pulled me into the gap. ‘Kirsty, this here’s Colin. Nice fella he is too.’

Two women sat on the bed. One, with shorter hair and wearing a knit jumper, gave an embarrassed smile.

‘Stop teasing,’ the other, Carolyn, said. ‘We’ll be there in a minute.’

The couple had relinquished the stairs, perhaps in search of a quiet room or corner.

‘Jesus, your face,’ Brian said. ‘She’s not that bad. You’ll give her a complex.’

I couldn’t think of the expression I’d pulled, the unintentional look that had betrayed me.

Once in the living room, I lost Brian to the another group that had just arrived. Mostly boys, they stood in the middle, clutching carry-out bags. When they saw Brian, they let out a cheer. With everyone crammed together, sweat began to gather at my nape, so I removed my jacket and stowed it behind an armchair. The second beer was close to empty and my bladder full.

I left as Brian acted out some goal, or some save, I couldn’t tell which. I remembered passing a small toilet beneath the stairs. Knocking twice to check it was free, I ducked inside then barred the door.

Already, piss had been dribbled over the seat so I took care to wipe it, unwilling to shoulder the blame. There was no towel and I had to dry my hands on my jeans. Through its walls, I could hear the party, the thump of people up and down the stairs, but from inside there was no pressure to join them; I did not feel the burden of contribution.

Leaving would be easy. If I reclaimed my coat I could be home in half an hour and I’d tell Mum and Dad that a neighbour had stopped it. Brian and Thomas wouldn’t care; I doubt I’d even be missed.

Outside, there was an impatient rap and a shout of 'I'm bustin' here.'

I opened the door to the younger boy from the settee, Terry.

'Sorry mate, gotta go.'

He pushed past me and without even pausing to shut the door, lifted the seat and stationed himself in front of the bowl. The sound of his stream was accompanied by a long sigh. Unsure where to go, I remained by the door, but made sure to direct my eyes to the hallway beyond.

If I left, the night and the next day would pass into nothing; everything would remain as it was. At least other people were here, people to meet, if I could only stop lurching on the sidelines. I pulled open another beer, this time Joyce, and forced down a large gulp, hoping to find the looseness that came so easily to everyone else.

'Cheers mate, you're a lifesaver.'

Terry had finished and flushed. Both hands rested on my shoulders as he pushed past. It was a light touch, full of friendship. I followed his compact body to the living room where Thomas and some others had gathered by the record player.

'Something we can all dance to,' said Debbie, peering over Thomas's shoulder. 'How about the Grease soundtrack?'

'I'm not playing that shite. It's bad enough you made me sit through the film,' Thomas replied.

'I didn't hear you complain when Sandra Dee was on screen.'

Thomas grabbed Debbie's face and licked it. 'I'm more of a Frenchie guy.'

'Get off, you hallion!' She pushed him away with a smile.

Someone dropped the needle on a record. Fleetwood Mac fed through the speakers to no objections.

Debbie must have sensed me close. She turned and asked, 'So how do you know Thomas?'

It took a second for my tongue to work, to move from being a spectator.

'College. The Tech.'

'So you know Brian too?'

'Yeah.'

And that was all I could think to say. With no questions of my own to ask we were left in silence, nodding without commitment to the music. My awkwardness was contagious. Debbie fiddled with her glass and, when her eyes looked past mine to the corner where her brother and the others were, I willed her to leave.

'I must check on Terry,' she said, finally. 'He's only seventeen. I don't want those ones feeding him hard drink. But come over if you like. If you're on your own.'

Gary pushed past and there was a rasp as the record needle was lifted; a collective moan replaced the music and a couple of people booed.

'Hold your horses,' Gary shouted. 'This is a fucking party. None of this hippy shit.'

He picked a single from the pile on the table and dropped it on the platter. A rush of defiant guitar pummelled the room; he'd cued it halfway through. It was The Buzzcocks; I recognised it from the radio.

'Sorry, sorry,' he shouted, then returned it to the beginning and dialled the volume higher.

When the guitars screeched the intro Gary pogoed to Thomas, grabbed him by the lapels and dragged him to the centre. They jumped at each other like stags and Gary, taller than Thomas, looked in danger of bashing his head on the plaster above.

Their arms gathered more dancers, but they chose only boys. Once seized there was no alternative but to jump along; resistance would have been damaging in itself. I stepped to the window and sheltered behind an armchair. Thomas leapt to Debbie and her brother. She warned him off with a wagging finger but Terry was bundled into the fray.

The floor pounded with each leap and, when the needle bounced back to the first verse, the stomping became even more frenzied. At times the ruck threatened to disintegrate; boys were thrown off course, or stumbled over one another's feet. Gary jumped faster and faster so that even the rhythm of the song was lost. He peeled off, grappling Thomas and Terry with him. They lurched towards the settee but were met with raised hands and feet to keep them at bay. Terry's dancing was protective rather than effusive, but still he was thrown about. An elbow hit the side of his head and, eyes squeezed in pain, he loosened himself from the tussle.

The song ended; its energy could only be sustained for so long. Gary fell to the ground as the last chord reverberated. With whoops and shouts, the boys congratulated themselves. Terry rubbed his head where it had been hit.

'No more punk or I'm leaving,' Debbie shouted.

Thomas pulled Terry close and said something in his ear that made him beam. I felt a sudden ache at their ease, the way in which Terry, though younger, could be welcomed so readily.

As it got later even those who had spent the evening on the sidelines migrated to the middle of the floor, dancing and laughing. I'd commandeered a spot by the doorway, on the arm of a chair where I wasn't in the way. If someone caught me watching I'd flash a grin, pretending to be drunker than I was.

When each record ended, there'd be a rush to choose the next. I didn't venture a choice, but was happy to sit supping my final beer. Over time, Debbie's brother's dancing had become more elastic and his hands searched for props, people or furniture, to keep him upright. Debbie had disappeared with Thomas, leaving Terry at the mercy of Gary and his whiskey.

Gary poured the last of his Bells into a glass and passed it to Terry. He raised it to his lips and let the contents slip into his mouth. Holding it for a few moments, he then forced it down with a gulp. His eyes watered and he choked for breath. Soon, he stumbled past me, grasping the frame for support, a hand on my thigh; his face had grown pale and his lips were puffy. Victoriously Gary set the empty bottle on a speaker and chose another record.

'Ready for the erection section,' he shouted, then grabbed a girl, Kirsty from upstairs, who hooked her arms around his neck.

A song by The Commodores played and those who had paired off began to sway gently. Alone, I felt conspicuous on the chair-arm, not quite sure where to look. I left the room.

The kitchen was littered with empty bottles and tins. Here and there a ballooned bag promised the bounty of a spare tin or two, but each I checked had already been ransacked. A cool breeze caught my cheek and I spotted the open door at the back. There was retching, then the slap of liquid on concrete. In the darkness I could make out a person, bent double against the far wall. I moved

closer. It wasn't a garden, but a bricked-in yard with a large wooden gate at the end. Beside it stood Terry, a puddle of vomit glistening at his feet.

'You all right?' I called.

'I've been sick,' he replied weakly.

I stepped back inside and found a dirty wine glass, gave it a rinse then filled it with water.

'Drink this,' I said, taking it out to him. 'To get rid of the taste.'

He slurped it down, wetting the front of his t-shirt. A belch erupted that threatened more, but he contained himself.

'Do you want Debbie?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'She'd be raging. She told me not to get in a state. Anyway, she's off with Thomas.'

He passed me the glass and I refilled it. I enjoyed being useful, my night suddenly given purpose. When I returned, he'd moved to sit on the step, but shifted to make room for me. Wet seeped from the concrete through my jeans but I ignored it.

'Better?' I asked when he had drained the glass again.

He nodded and flashed me a grin.

It was cold. I looked at the goosebumps on his arms. His leg fell casually against mine and I could feel heat radiating from his jeans.

'You're at the Tech?' he asked, his voice reedy.

'Yeah, and you?'

'School,' he said. 'One more year and then I'll be out of here.'

'From Belfast? Where would you go?' I asked.

‘London, Liverpool, Manchester. Anywhere that’s not here, where they don’t care if you’re a prod or a taig or whatever, where it doesn’t matter who are.’

He moaned at the effort.

‘Right,’ I said in agreement, though I’d never considered an alternative.

I looked at his face, forlorn and sorry for himself. There was a gentleness I liked and wondered if we could be friends.

Suddenly he stood, then rushed to the gate. His hands rested flat against the wood. I heard a burp then he was sick again.

I went to him, traced slow circles on his back with my palm. Vomit came once more, but I didn’t flinch, kept my hand on him. He let out a low groan and I hushed him. Beneath the t-shirt I could feel the shape of him, each muscle, every bone. He remained doubled. With long strokes, I ran both hands the length of his back, then moved to massage his flanks and the soft puppy fat that was deposited there. His groan became one of contentment and I’m sure his back arched with pleasure.

There was the sound of a throat clearing. I turned quickly. Debbie stood, arms folded, by the door.

‘That’s enough,’ she said.

My hands dashed to my pockets, as if to hide the evidence.

‘I’ll take care of him,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t need your help.’

She took quick steps, then shoved me aside. Retreating to the kitchen, I watched as she took care of Terry, his wellbeing her only motive.

I found my jacket quietly. Couples swayed to the record without shame. Although my bladder was full, the pain accentuated by desire, I did not stop. The door closed quietly behind me, as if I’d never been there.

Is It All Over My Face? – Loose Joints

Piano chords tumble over what remains of the previous song, a brief cacophony that resolves with the chant of *Love Sensation*. If tonight is to succeed I must throw everything at this moment. Below the booth, to the right, I find them – the group whose mayhem can bring energy to even the most jaded legs. Victor never strayed too close to these evangelists, their singing, handclaps and whistles too much for him. *I wanna hear the damn song*, he'd complain, *not these bare chested queens*. But it was always said with a smirk, an admission that he was only one snort, one swallow, one puff away from joining them. Tonight I edge close in hope of catching the fever that drives them to jerk and holler in ecstasy. A joint comes my way and I hit it, pass it on. I scan the circle for the next Victor but know it doesn't work like that. I don't get to choose; I must wait. It could be another twenty years before I'm picked again.

I close my eyes to still the flashing. The lights continue in bursts of green and red that spiral and shimmer against my eyelids, each pattern overlaying the next. Wheeling limbs remind me I am not alone. I bat them away and sink deeper, through the branches and twigs of the hedge that borders our garden. I scramble to that nest at the back where I can sit for hours in the dirt, tracing a figure of eight with my Matchbox cars. It's dark in here but I'm not afraid. A radio travels like a whisper from the sill in the kitchen, escaping through the window, open a crack to cool the cake Mum's baked for Rose's birthday. I will stay here and listen for the

sound of tyres on gravel that will announce Dad's return. He'll arrive with crisps and biscuits for the party tomorrow, for just the four of us. Our family. That's all we'll need. He'll bring Guinness, too, and let me draw a face in the foam and then we'll watch as it slips further down the glass with each sip until it reaches the bottom and the detail is lost. I'm not frightened in these shadows because I know they're still within reach, Mum and Dad; I just need to shout and they'll come.

I'm knocked, pummelled backwards and forwards. A name escapes, a cry, and my eyes blink open. Something pulls me by the shoulders.

Victor.

No, it's Jimi. He stands above me.

'You need to get up,' he demands and helps me to my feet. 'Did you just call me *Mum*?'

Even though he says it like that, like I do, without substituting the *u* for an *o*, I'm sure that I didn't.

'C'mon,' he continues. 'Let me help.'

August 1980

We stepped from the Metro Theatre into darkness. Neither of us spoke; it was a habit we'd developed, allowing the film to settle before offering an appraisal, so one opinion could not influence the other. I searched the skyline for those landmarks that would orientate me. Victor's north-south bearings came with ease, an intuitive compass, but I still relied on buildings, the Chrysler, the Empire State, and their position, left or right, to determine what direction I was facing. We were in the Upper West, the opposite side of the park to mine. Victor liked to

introduce me to new neighbourhoods, so he could continue my city education. It didn't help, mostly I never returned, preferring to keep to those familiar paths.

Despite being close to midnight, the evening was warm and didn't call for a jacket; any breeze brought with it summer's heat. Within a block, Victor cracked.

'Did that scare you?' he asked. 'I mean, I jumped in a couple of places, but it was kind of boring too.'

'I frighten easily,' I confessed. 'Especially stuff with kids, like those little girl twins. I won't watch films like that in my room. The scariness infiltrates everything. Even after it's over – the TV, the chair you sat on, the bed – it's all a reminder. I can't do it. Better to leave it in the cinema.'

'You're such a scaredy-cat,' he said.

'But I've got you to protect me.'

He reached for me, but I ducked to check the street. There were places we could be together, especially at night, when we outnumbered them, but I wasn't sure this was one. Victor must have realised it too; he didn't touch me again but we continued, our bodies close, but not by too much.

It was our date night, Victor's idea designed to appease. Once a week we'd spend an evening together, alone and without his friends, a contrast to our weekend ritual. Normally, it was a movie, sometimes a concert. Mostly I let Victor decide. A few weeks before he'd taken me to see Parliament and Funkadelic – music to get freaky with, he'd joked. In preparation, he'd made pot brownies. Stronger than expected, he'd had to spend the first half of their set talking me down in the toilet, feeding me courage to leave its confines. Without any ill

humour, he had looked after me. It was those times that meant the most, when I had someone who cared, even if it couldn't be shown in public.

‘How about a drink? There’s a bar we should check out,’ Victor said.

We’d demolished a large popcorn, half salty, half sweet, and which left my mouth dry and ragged. ‘Sure.’

‘It’s a block or two east. Jack says it’s quite the scene.’

The area seemed more residential than anything; there were few other pedestrians but cabs would pull up and deposit passengers outside apartment block entrances whose awnings stretched to the kerb.

‘This is it,’ Victor said finally as we came to a wide road, traffic running in both directions.

There was a blacked-out window, a neon *OPEN* sign offering the only clue. He pushed through and I followed after.

Inside was as dark as the window. The sole light was a glowing yellow rope that snaked the liquor bottles behind the bar then twisted its way around the edge of the counter. Alongside, a handful of men sat on stools. Each seemed alone. An older couple, one wearing a stetson, sat in the booth opposite and supped their drinks without speaking.

The bartender was short and almost as wide; even in the dimness, his black beard shone. When we mounted the stools by the corner, he blinked a greeting, neatened the plaid shirt into his jeans and walked slowly to join us.

‘What can I get you two fine men?’ he asked.

‘What do you recommend?’ Victor replied, matching the barman’s flirtatious tone. His hand found my leg and squeezed reassurance.

We settled on Margaritas which he promised would give us a kick. Our drinks were mixed with enthusiasm, if not accuracy; he dropped more ice than he collected but when our cocktails arrived they looked the part, rim frosted with salt. We cheers-ed each other and the sour taste of lime made us both pucker.

‘So,’ Victor started, poking his drink with a straw, ‘you know it’s my birthday soon.’

I nodded. It had been something I’d been fretting over, unsure what to plan. He’d made a fuss of mine, my first since arriving in the city. Under orders, everyone had come out that night, despite it being deepest winter and only days after New Year. He’d made it special.

‘Well, Mom is insisting on cooking me dinner – brisket in Coke. I know, but it’s my favourite. Or it was when I was ten. Anyway, maybe you should come. It’ll be her, my sister and the kids. Probably Jimi too.’

‘How? What will you tell her?’

‘I’ll say you’re from work, my new partner – that they’ve teamed me up with a handsome young Irish man.’

I couldn’t imagine that we’d pull it off, that I would be able to play the part. For me, omission was easier than deception. I’d never mentioned Victor in my letters home, not even in passing as a friend. I’d told them of people at the restaurant, people I couldn’t care less about, but never anything close to the truth.

‘So, what do you think?’ he repeated.

‘I’m really not sure. What if I mess up?’

‘What’s to mess up? I deliver appliances. You know how to carry, how to ring a doorbell. That’s all there is to it. Truthfully, you look like the most you

could lift is a Mister Coffee, but she knows her boy can handle more than his share. We'll fix the details later. It'll be fun for you to meet.'

If I could have watched them from a distance, Victor and his mum, across a restaurant, or on a crowded subway, I would have jumped at the chance, to see how they differed, how they were the same, but I was no good at lies. My mouth rose to a smile with each one I told; it's why I hid myself from my parents, why I'd put such distance between us.

For the moment, I said nothing and let my excitement show. That Victor wanted these two separate worlds to touch, if only for one evening, meant there was no lying or pretending to be done; my excitement was real.

When our drinks were finished, Victor gestured for the same again. The bar had a lazy, easy atmosphere, different from the frenzied sociability of those bars in the Village. As I glanced around the room appeared more empty, although I'd seen no one leave. I'd been busy venting about work, listing my frustrations with the other staff and explaining how they ignored me except when it came to a dig or a slight.

'You need a vacation,' Victor said as the barman set out fresh drinks. 'Makes working worthwhile. How about San Francisco? In the New Year? Walt says the discos are outrageous and the grass is just crazy. Plus, they've almost as many queens as New York.'

'Won't it be expensive?' I asked.

I'd yet to fly home, even for a visit, and San Francisco was just as far. Any attempt to put money aside had yielded little; there was always a party, another night that couldn't be missed. Rent, the Club, drugs – that's where it went. I had saved fifty bucks at the start of the year, but then Victor had come across a cheap

TV, one that would make the evenings without him more bearable, and I'd had to have it.

‘Start saving now. There’s months to go, almost six,’ he said. ‘I’ve some saved already, enough for our tickets. If I buy them soon, you can pay me back.’

I excused myself to the toilet, too excited now to let him see. With this double offer – a holiday, the family dinner – what we had was becoming real, almost proper.

The barman directed me to the doorway in the corner. The stairs were steep and, with no handrail, I flattened my palms against the wall to steady myself. There was no door at the bottom, and no signage, just an opening to a large, dark room.

Inside, the bluish glow of a blacklight picked out teeth and eyes, then flesh. There were more men here than above. In the corner was the man with the stetson, his partner kneeling at his feet. A small group gathered by the cubicles and, though their backs were to me, I recognised the bustle of masturbation.

Desperate to pee, I stood by the low trough urinal. Despite my best efforts, my dick hardened. I willed myself to concentrate, held the end tight and imagined my bladder squeezing the urine out; the only thing that flowed was more blood, rushing to engorge. It didn’t help that I could hear soft moans and whispered directions. I stole glances over my shoulder and, between a set of legs, spied a bare torso, another man on his knees, working the group without haste.

Mistaking my curiosity as a signal, one man peeled off to stand beside me. His flies were open and his erection loomed. When he turned, I couldn’t help but look down, his fist gripping his cock like a newspaper, poised to swat a fly. I

stepped back, bladder still bursting. I needed to leave; Victor was upstairs. I tucked and zipped, hid the truth as best I could.

At the foot of the stairs, I rested my hand in pocket, pulled my erection close, hoping to discourage it. Suddenly, at the top of the stairwell, Victor appeared.

‘Everything OK?’ he asked, his face breaking to a grin.

‘You knew?’ I asked as we met in the middle.

‘I didn’t. Honest. The barman told me. They have it once a week, on a Tuesday. Coincidence.’

‘It’s not funny, I couldn’t even piss,’ I complained.

‘For someone who didn’t piss, you took your time. Something down there interest you?’

He pinched at my cock, still semi-hard.

‘Maybe something caught your eye,’ he said, rubbing me through the fabric.

Tequila flushed my face. Sometimes, when it came to sex, he managed to belittle me, treating me as the innocent. Compared to Victor, I was.

He leaned in, close to my cheek and whispered.

‘Let’s go down. Have a look-see. I’ll protect you.’

Heat tingled in my feet and I was lost to the desire I’d fought so hard to deaden. With Victor’s permission and guidance I could return. He pressed a reassuring kiss on my lips. As we descended the final steps I felt faint with anticipation. Inside there had been little change to the choreography, and the shapes remained where they had been – a circle in the corner, a couple by the stall. Victor directed me towards the group and I felt him straining behind me, his

breath on my neck. Two men shuffled in silence to allow me entrance and Victor craned over my shoulder to see.

The circle had gathered around one man, on his knees and naked. The other men had trousers pulled to their ankles or knees, or had simply left their flies open. Victor unfastened me. My stomach tightened as he released my erection then pressed his against the seat of my trousers. I turned my head and kissed him. Victor reached for the man on his knees, and, with a hand on his cheek, guided this new mouth to me. I grasped the hair at his temples and pulled the man closer; Victor's whispered encouragement caused goosebumps on my neck.

You Gonna Make Me Love Somebody Else – The Jones Girls

Jimi hands me a paper cup, patterned with large blue, yellow and red dots.

‘It’s only juice,’ he reassures me as I peer at the contents.

At certain times, when the DJ has played a run of head-wrecking songs or if whatever’s been sold that night is particularly potent, the Lounge is transformed into a kind of field hospital; friends tend to one another and casualties are laid on every available space. Tonight, I may be one of them. Gifted with the same sweet nature as Victor, Jimi motions for me to drink more. I take a large gulp to please him. When I lower the cup, Bobby is upon us.

‘Hey guys.’

The skin on his face is pulled so tight there’s no space for flesh or muscle, only bone remains. With a twirl, and without encouragement, he holds his waistcoat open so we can admire it once more.

‘You guys don’t happen to have any more coke you can lay on me?’ Bobby gets right to the point. ‘Jack will square it with you next week. I swear some kid made off with ours.’

I search for Jack but it looks like the kid might have made off with him too.

‘Find me in an hour. I’ll see what comes up,’ Jimi replies.

Satisfied, Bobby nods, then departs with an awkward half dance, half walk.

‘He can try and find me in an hour,’ Jimi snorts and, again, I’m reminded of Victor; it’s the same derision and contempt he’d reserve for that clown.

‘Not only did that motherfucker never visit Victor,’ Jimi says, as if explanation were needed, ‘he stopped Jack from coming too. Said he couldn’t handle the reality. I mean, what a fucking piece of shit.’

‘I wasn’t much better,’ I concede.

‘Man, I’m not blaming you. With you...it was complicated. Besides, you did come. You tried. Victor just wasn’t in his right mind. What they gave him for the pain, it was some strong shit, even I didn’t know what half of it was. He was really out there those first weeks.’

‘I pass his apartment,’ I say. ‘On purpose. I look up and wonder who lives there now, if the place still reeks of pot.’

‘Whoever’s there won’t be having as much fun as Victor did,’ Jimi replies.

I watch him, momentarily lost in the thought.

‘It’s hard for him now, back at his mom’s,’ he continues. ‘Auntie Clar, she takes care of him, but it’s not the same. He has to wait ’til she’s in bed to get high. Then he’s up all night, the dark spooks him. He sleeps the day through. And now she’s been gone since before New Year’s. Walt and I have been looking in on him, making sure he gets enough to eat. Clean up a little.’

Suddenly, I’m jealous. No one has looked in on me. I’ve been alone, Christmas and New Year, with only the TV for company. I’m not attuned to its traditions. None of the programmes can transport me back to that warm space on the off-cut of carpet by the hearth. I’ve had to endure someone else’s sentimental history, exiled from my own.

‘Have you thought about what I said?’ Jimi breaks the silence. ‘I still think he’d like to see you. I can take you.’

‘And you think he misses me?’ I ask, uncertain I want the answer.

‘Victor misses the old life, everything he had. You’re a huge part of that. Maybe you could be again.’

Tonight has not progressed as I’d planned and I’m more receptive to this idea than before. For months I’ve been stuck. My legs have seized in protest and my body has stopped reacting to whatever I throw at it. I’m caught in the same loop as those plants, those robots, repeating the pattern. If I wait any longer I’ll lose the will to change.

‘Then it has to be tonight. I have to see him now.’

The urge is overwhelming and sudden. I’ve never been more certain.

‘Man, it’s late. You’re fucked,’ Jimi pleads. ‘What’s the rush?’

‘He’ll be up. You said it yourself, he never sleeps at night. Don’t fob me off.’ My logic resounds with anger.

‘Even in daylight I can’t guarantee he’ll be overjoyed to see you. Either of us,’ he clarifies. ‘It was just something to chew on. It doesn’t have to be now. You could rest. There’s always next week.’

His hand rests on my knee, the comfort of a friend. But I can’t see beyond this night; he’s suggesting a future I’m not sure exists. If I’m to see Victor, it must be now, tonight. I don’t need permission. The heat from his hand warms my skin, then rises and catches in my throat. I’m overwhelmed. Tears come and my head collapses to his chest.

His fingers comb my hair; it’s been so long since my body has been quietened by another’s touch that I succumb to the relief.

But I only rest a few minutes. The need remains. I rise up to ask, 'Please let it be tonight?'

Jimi shakes his head, beaten. 'We can go, but it's on you, OK? He has to know it was not my idea.'

'Agreed,' I say and, with a resolution of sorts, energy surges. 'Let's bring him some dance floor sweat.'

I drag Jimi from his seat, convinced my legs will submit to one more punishment. Soon we're bouncing along the corridor and through those doors. Heat and noise swamps us until, as if in deference, the lights drop and the music halts. We rush forward, to the point just between the lighting rig and the booth, where everything sounds sweetest. Victor's spot.

August 1980

I did not realise how long Victor's touch had been absent from my body. Replaced by others, his hands had not been missed. Then I saw him circling the group and I hoped he would return. Pausing by a tall guy opposite, Victor lifted the man's shirt to reveal a perfect stomach, solid yet flat and shadowed with hair. I yearned for a nod from Victor, or a smirk of collusion, but he didn't acknowledge me. Instead, his lips rose to the man's ear and he coaxed him to the far corner, out of reach. The prize was for Victor alone.

I tried to smother my jealousy with the mouth before me but my gaze returned to Victor and the man who was more his match than I could ever hope to be.

Shutting my eyes, I tried to focus only on the sensations, not the disappointment. I concentrated on the sounds of wet flesh, rhythmic and certain, the growls and low murmurs that chorused throughout the room. I pretended that the men close to me were people I knew – boys from school, classmates from Tech, faces I'd followed in the street – the touches I'd craved made real.

Suddenly, afraid I might come, I pulled free of the lips that had captured me. A hand grasped the soft fat of my backside, then pinched and twisted until the unbearable pleasure forced me to jump from its grip.

Too late; my cum splashed the concrete where I had been standing. The man on his knees glanced up in disappointment, then shuffled sideways and set to work on my neighbour. A bald spot, no bigger than an apple, glinted with each bob of his head.

I scoured the darkened room for Victor. When I finally picked him out his face was turned to the wall and there appeared to be no way to join him. With the pleasure of my release already fulfilled, the close bodies, the exposed dicks ceased to titillate and instead became measures of my shortcomings. Stranded amongst strangers, I zipped and ran to the stairs, taking them two at a time.

In the doorway I paused to check myself for evidence, not that it would matter in this place. Music, faster and lighter than the tracks played at the Club, echoed in the near-empty room. The sole customer was an old man slouched by the corner, too drunk to stand. My drink remained where I'd left it, side by side with Victor's on the bar; the glasses sweated in the heat.

As I sat on the stool I wondered if perhaps I should have stayed or at least pulled Victor from the body he'd favoured over mine. The thought of him below, oblivious to my whereabouts, caused a dull thud in my stomach. I gulped from my

glass then licked salt from the rim; its taste brought a shiver. I kept a watch on the stairs, hopeful that my absence, once discovered, would bring Victor chasing.

The bartender finished cutting limes and returned to the counter.

‘Something down there rattle you?’ he asked, drying his hands on a frayed dishcloth.

I shook my head and took another slug, finishing the drink.

‘I guess it’s kind of dead tonight,’ he said. ‘You should come back in the autumn when it’s colder. More choice. The college kids are back too. Your friend’s still having fun?’

I shrugged then glanced again to the stairs.

‘Let me freshen this.’ He took my empty glass. ‘On the house.’

Filling it from a jug, he squeezed a wedge of lime on top. When I thanked him and he flashed a smile of commiseration that made me sink on my stool, the humiliation of my desertion made public.

Behind I sensed movement and turned to catch sight of the older man in the stetson as he lumbered through the doorway. Trailing by his partner, he touched the brim in greeting as he passed. They stepped outside, the cowboy courteously holding open the door, and I wondered how much history they’d shared and whether this was the future they’d imagined. Previously, Victor and my plans had extended no further than the next weekend, the next dance. But earlier, as we’d sat, knees touching, those promises of holidays and birthdays had left me excited for our time ahead. Since there could be no marriage, no house of our own to fill with children who would grow to be just like us, those tentative arrangements, made only months in advance, were as much of a future as I could hope for.

As each minute passed, the stool beside me empty, those plans became all the more remote. I cursed Victor for coaxing me down to that place; I cursed myself for letting him.

The barman peered at the corner and I followed his gaze to find Victor, hauling himself through the doorframe. He took small, casual steps towards me; a grin spread across his face that seemed both knowing and superior. A long slug from my glass did nothing to abate the anger and shame that seized me.

‘You missed my finale,’ he said, taking his stool. ‘I looked around and you’d gone.’

‘Surprised you noticed.’

‘Baby, please. I didn’t hear you complain. Last I saw you were coping just fine without me.’

I hated that he could make light of what we had done and that his actions could come without recrimination or analysis.

As if to provoke me further, the tall silhouette of Victor’s accomplice rose from the stairs. He twisted sideways to fit his broad shoulders through the doorway and even in the bar’s dim light I could see he was older, Victor’s age. Though he said nothing as he passed, his hand traced the width of Victor’s back. Again, Victor’s lips curled suggestively and I was crushed that I was no longer the cause of his smile.

The man took a space further along the counter, but still in view. His every movement and gesture was a distraction and I couldn’t settle.

‘Can we go?’

I stood before Victor could answer. If we left now our acts, the knowledge of what we'd done, might remain contained within this bar, like the earlier horrors we'd confined to the cinema.

Victor signalled to his drink. 'I'm not done.'

I seized the glass, raised it to my lips and drained the contents.

'Can we go?' I repeated, the tequila a fire in my throat.

Without a word he slipped from the stool and paced to the door. It flapped twice in his wake before I could follow.

'Come again,' the barman called after.

It was only at the end of the block, as Victor paused for traffic, that I was able to catch him.

'For once you couldn't be cool. You couldn't just let it happen.' He spoke without turning.

I hadn't expected his anger, and it only served to amplify mine.

'You promised it would be OK. That's why I let you.' Muscles tightened in my chest and heat rushed to my cheeks. 'You said you'd take care of me. Someone better came along and you dropped me. Left me alone.'

He shook his head. 'Like you were concerned what I was up to. You weren't alone. I saw your hands tug that guy closer. Don't pretend you didn't want it.'

An approaching siren swelled to deafen us and I was grateful for the respite – I had no response to his accusation, given its truth. The ambulance slowed at the junction, bringing traffic to a halt and I watched its lights round the corner.

'C'mon,' he said, as the noise receded. 'Don't be a baby.'

Although his voice had softened, it was the first time he'd used *baby* as an accusation rather than an endearment.

'You planned this, didn't you. The cinema, the bar.' I stopped to face him. 'You planned it, like the other times. Like Jonathan. These things don't just happen.'

'What? Who are you talking about?'

'Jonathan. The lost keys. Don't pretend you don't remember. It doesn't make it easier.'

'I don't remember names. I never do. And that's the difference. To me, it's sex. A fuck. I don't have to set up home with every cock I touch.'

'You'd need a fucking big house. Or perhaps just move into that bar. Every day there'd be a new face, a new dick. You'd never be disappointed or bored again.'

'You didn't disappoint me...maybe you're beginning to.'

'Don't worry,' I interrupted, 'I disappoint myself too. All of this, it makes me feel like shit. It doesn't come easy like it does for you.'

'You only feel shit because you allow yourself to,' he said, grasping my shoulders. 'You need to change. Don't torture yourself. Enjoy this freedom. We fought for it.'

'Enjoy being abandoned, being second best?' I shook him off. 'You chose him when you said you'd take care of me. You're a fucking liar.'

'This has to stop.' The strength of Victor's voice surprised us both. 'I'm not crying just 'cause you put your cock in someone else's mouth. I understand. I get that need.'

'But I need you to give a shit about where I put my dick, like I do yours.'

‘Maybe I’ve evolved. Maybe you need to grow up.’

‘Fuck you,’ I shouted. ‘You just can’t control yourself.’

‘From what I saw, it’s you who lost control. So excited you can’t last more than five minutes.’

I pushed him; both palms struck his chest. His feet tripped on the kerb and he stumbled backwards to the road. As his backside hit the ground a passing taxi beeped then swerved to avoid him.

I fled.

Every act I’d committed, every transgression, had been down to him. I had to believe that he was the bad one. I couldn’t admit those desires were mine.

I kept on without looking back. If I was fast enough, I could outrun the city too.

I Need Somebody To Love Tonight – Sylvester

In the absence of light and music, Jimi rests his hands on my shoulders to settle any fear, but I know there's a reset coming; our senses are being cleansed as the DJ prepares for the next transition. The strobe begins with a slow throb that catches the nervous movement throughout the crowd. I brace myself for the aural salvo that will push us through to dawn.

But there is no assault, only the strobe. It synchronises with the beat of my heart and I can't tell which one slows the other.

'Sure you don't wanna leave?'

Jimi shouts to be heard; although the sound system is silent, a restless murmur has risen to fill the void. I shake a 'no'. The final act is about to begin and I won't quit. Anticipation ripples through the remaining dancers and touches me too. At last I've found the synergy that's been missing. Even Jimi, once eager to leave, can't help but peek over the heads as if the next track can be seen in the distance, a break on the horizon.

In the absence of music, the strobe beats on and, with its snaps of light, provides a montage for the evening. A head rolls back and blows smoke to the ceiling, lips meet, fingers touch, a grin reveals teeth. At each flash I search for the previous faces, so that I can follow the story, but they're always displaced and replaced in the hubbub. We are being teased and I don't fight it. For now the

pleasure is simple and lasting; with the release will come the knowledge that its joy will be short-lived. Right now the promise is the beginning, not the end.

Jimi gives in; he's as expectant and ecstatic as anyone here.

'What the fuck,' he leans to shout, but his mistimed mouth grazes my ear.

These flashes of white light are the crumbs that lead us on; without them it would be easy to believe the night has ended. A face behind Jimi is twisted in bewilderment and I'm reminded of Dad, waking in his chair after one too many fingers of whiskey, the struggle to gauge his surroundings, the time and the occasion. This memory of him brings fleeting pleasure but I shut it down.

If it is to work, this moment must hold my attention; only the present can exist. I concentrate on Jimi, the surrounding dancers and their raised arms. I join the clapping, hands connecting at each bang of light. The booth is as dark as the floor and I can see no DJ, just the flicker of a glowing cherry on a cigarette or joint.

The light quickens; it's now the darkness that comes in flashes. Our claps accelerate to keep time, faster and faster until it's simply applause. Jimi's cups his mouth and cries, his tongue rolling like a machine gun. Any thoughts of leaving have been abandoned. Everyone roars and I'm drowning in noise; the shimmering white light is a hand pushing me under, pinning me without mercy. Faces grow concerned as their expectation morphs from delight to fear. This onslaught has been borne too long.

I fear the stimulus is too much and that I'll have a seizure. I force my tongue to the floor of my mouth where it will neither be swallowed nor bitten. It's happened before, I've seen it; he dropped beside Victor in the early hours. Older than both of us, his back arched in spasms but his feet continued their dance.

Victor cradled his head to save it from smashing, then helped him to the side when he came to rest.

Thankfully, the strobe begins to slow. And still, the only noise is that of the crowd, our claps decreasing in tempo to match. Anxiety lifts and we cheer our survival through the ordeal of light. Jimi pulls on a cigarette; smoke curls upwards, strands separate like a frayed rope and swirl in the air. Flashes pound like heartbeats, the pulse so solid it can almost be heard. In the absence of verse and chorus there's no way to mark time and I can't even guess how long this has gone on. It's hard to believe there ever was music, only the rush in our ears marks its absence. But there's been no exodus, in fact the floor is busier than ever as people gather, craning towards the booth in anticipation. It's part of the mythology; the DJ creates these moments of drama that carry us through the week, that keep us coming back.

Suddenly, undulating through the light, comes a soft bass thump. A drum, equal and opposite, weaves its way too, synchronised with each flash. Cheers rise in recognition. The DJ raises the volume further and I'm rendered immobile. Jimi pogo. The couple beside us pull each other tight, legs entwined.

It takes the first tentative notes from the falsetto voice to assure me I'm not imagining this.

I need somebody to love tonight.

Mouths match the singer's plaintive longing. Greg has done it; the song is mine and I almost weep.

I need somebody to love tonight.

The song belongs to everyone, articulates the need of every man in this room. Those with partners pull them close, those without seek them. Jimi's head is

bowed and his feet patrol the square foot perimeter he has marked out as his own. I'm grateful not to meet his gaze; the sentiments expressed in the lyrics are too intimate for us to share, reserved for strangers only. For the first time, perhaps because I requested it, I'm embarrassed to dance to this song that lays bare my desire so directly.

I need somebody to love tonight.

Once more the singer implores us. The backing track is so liquid, so reminiscent of sex, and the dancers try their hardest to equal its fluidity.

I'm reduced to swaying on the spot, as if caught naked and ashamed.

May 1979

The door stuck. Something was preventing it from opening. I reached behind and freed a crumpled dressing gown. It was Dad's, the threadbare burgundy one he seldom wore. In the middle of their room, I stood gripping long strands of carpet with my toes, teasing individual fibres from the pile, and wondered what had brought me here. It had been years since I'd stepped inside, possibly before my teens, when I was welcomed. As I'd grown older, although there'd been no specific rule, it seemed inappropriate. But the house was empty and I wanted to experience my parents' room one final time, to imprint a memory I could call upon in the coming months.

On the dresser, resting atop a pile of romantic novels, were the notelets I'd bought Mum for Christmas. Pieces of jewellery sat amid the dust and I spotted the dull metal bracelet made of chunky square links that had once resided in the drawer of the telephone table. As a boy, I'd loved to place it on my wrist when no

one was looking, gathering its links with my other hand to create the perfect fit. My hands now bigger, it was a squeeze to get it past my knuckles but just feeling its weight brought a rush of pleasure. I dropped the bracelet in my pocket.

Their bed was high, had previously seemed like a mountain, but I climbed on with ease and lay perfectly centred, my head in the dimple between pillows. Movement disturbed the air beneath the sheets and the scent of my parents rose like an echo. I remembered lying between them, when I was still young enough to do so. I'd join the dots of freckles on my mother's face with slow ticklish strokes. When it became too much she would turn quickly, jaws snapping at my fingers, and I would kick and scream with delight until Dad admonished us both.

The front door rattled and I heard the smack of Rose's bag on the hall tiles. Quickly, I stood from the bed and fixed the sheets as best I could, erasing any imprint. The house was no longer mine alone and I retreated to my room.

There were clothes stacked neatly on the chest of drawers that had been washed and folded for the greater part of a week. Although I'd managed my own laundry since leaving school, Mum had insisted on taking care of these last loads. There was precision in every crease.

The day before, Dad had left a suitcase outside my door and I set it open on the bed. It had come from Granny's house but had never been used; Granny had never travelled further than ours, and even then she'd carried her belongings in a tartan holdall with a chunky zip that threatened to graze her knuckles each time it was opened or closed. As I smoothed the case's silky lining, dotted with tiny embroidered fleurs-de-lys, my fingernail caught the material and sent a shiver through me.

It had been easy deciding which clothes to bring – there were only a handful of jumpers and t-shirts that I liked and that still fit me well. For the last week I'd been relegated to old clothes – my jeans with the ripped waistband, the shirt that pinched every time I raised an arm. Mum had insisted I find a new pair of trousers, for a job when you get one, she'd said. When I'd made no effort she'd bought them herself, in two different sizes so I could try them at home. The smaller pair had since been returned but the larger pair were laid with my own clothes, although the tags remained attached, as if the trip might be cancelled.

First, I threw in the socks, wondering what Granny would think of her suitcase travelling further than she'd ever managed. Then I packed seven pairs of pants, enough for a full week, but it was too final, too soon, and I removed them at once. Instead, I thought, I should concentrate on those things that would not be coming with me – the clock radio, the dimples of its speaker left to gather dust, or my records, languishing in their sleeves unless by some miracle Rose were to discover a taste in music that went beyond the old-fashioned songs she sang with Dad. But they were just things, incapable of offering solace, unable to reassure me now.

I shifted the case from the bed and lay in its place. The bedcovers were relics from childhood and had shielded my sleeping body for as long as I could remember. For years I'd examined their blocky red and blue pattern, especially at the seams where the repetition was broken. I'd spent afternoons, at twelve, thirteen, fourteen, maybe later, with my head buried deep in the design. Breath would condense on my face and mingle with the tears I could not explain. Once or twice Mum had found me and would turn me over to ask what the trouble was. Her hand would sweep the hair from my flushed face, and if Rose came hovering,

she'd shoo her away so that I had the space to begin. But I had no idea where to start; there was no way to describe the disconnect I felt and no words to explain how the world appeared solid, certain and impenetrable to me. I learned quickly to shut my door so that no answer was required.

Downstairs, I heard voices raised in greeting. From the landing I listened as Margaret protested that she didn't want to intrude, while Mum reassured her she was always more than welcome. Although they had come to see me off, I remained where I was, not quite ready to begin the goodbyes, even if it was only Margaret and Robbie.

As their conversation trailed to the living room, I imagined myself already absent. Their visits would carry on without me, as would the hellos over the hedge. Mum, Dad and Rose's days would continue, the house emptying each morning as they set out for work and school. I wondered if, at times, they would stop to imagine where I was, what I might be doing at that particular moment, whether something on the television might spark a thought of me. More likely, my departure would leave only a shallow, thin gap, easily filled by the sweep of routine. The fault of this faint imprint was only mine. For so long I'd withheld parts of myself, removed pieces bit by bit so that all that was left was an outline. I existed primarily in the past, through stories of childhood, told and retold. My present lacked definition or substance.

'You're to come down.' Rose arrived at the top of the stairs. 'Margaret and Robbie aren't stopping long.'

She had taken on a demeanour of seriousness close to grief over the last week, at least in my presence. The night before I'd heard her laughing in the kitchen with Dad but when I'd appeared she'd hushed immediately then lowered

her head in respect. I wanted to say something, now that we were alone, that was both truthful and heartfelt, something she might remember after I was gone.

But ‘Clear off,’ was all I could manage, my anger misdirected. ‘I’ll be down in a minute.’

She left without a further word and I regretted at once the short shrift I’d shown her. A rage, slight but perceptible, had built over the week, as if they were all to blame for my departure. With their arrangements and suggestions they were forcing me out – Mum, Dad, even Rose – the choice no longer my own.

I trod softly down the stairs, listening carefully in case someone let slip words unintended for my ears. At the door I waited to be noticed.

‘There he is,’ announced Robbie, ‘the traveller himself.’

His right hand reached for mine, pumping it with a vigorous shake while his left grasped my shoulder tightly. I realised then how he’d shrunk over the years; he was no longer the strong man who could throw me over his shoulder without a thought, but a shadow of Robbie.

‘We’ll not keep you back, you’ll have a lot to do,’ Margaret said, her eyes rheumy with age.

‘Here.’ Robbie passed me a neatly wrapped package from the carrier bag at his feet.

The paper was thin and tore easily. Everyone watched as I pulled out a roll of buff-coloured fabric.

‘It’s for your money. You wear it round your waist, under your clothes,’ Robbie explained.

‘For your passport too,’ Margaret added. ‘They say New York is a very dangerous place. You see it on the television. It’s in the papers, too.’

‘I’m sure they say the same about us,’ I replied.

‘That’s very kind of you both,’ Mum said and shot me a glance.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ I added.

‘Will you stay for a cup of tea?’ Dad asked. ‘Something stronger?’ He looked to Robbie.

‘No, we won’t. We’ll let you be.’ Margaret spoke for the pair of them.

‘You should be spending what little time you’ve got together. You don’t want visitors getting in the way of your final night.’

‘No,’ Mum agreed.

A silence filled the room and I stood, money belt in hand.

‘Well, thanks again for the gift.’

‘Not a worry,’ said Margaret, pushing Robbie towards the door.

I followed them out.

‘Take care of yourself fella, won’t you.’ Robbie grasped me as he had before. ‘And be sure you don’t come back with one of them funny accents.’

He tried the accent himself, something like a John Wayne. Margaret grabbed both my cheeks and pulled me in for a kiss.

‘Take care and keep in touch with your mother, won’t you. She’ll miss you.’

Dad had appeared behind me and Margaret whispered loudly over my shoulder.

‘Tell Maureen I’ll pop in and see her tomorrow if she’s fit for it.’

I watched as they walked from our driveway to their own. It was a light, long spring evening, and I stepped down to the mat. Saturated from the earlier rain, water pooled under my feet and soaked through my socks. Dad had returned

indoors, and I stood watching the birds dip to the grass at the front. I wondered if Margaret and Robbie would miss me. They had been a greater part of my life when I was younger, sometimes babysitting, often bringing Rose and me to the things our parents never would – the circus, a vintage railway. Older now, we saw them less and less, but they still brought us gifts each Christmas and birthday. Their presence already dwindling, I would not miss them much but I regretted they had no family of their own.

Rose's hand touched my back.

'Harold Lloyd's on soon if you want to watch.'

We took our usual positions on the settee, her nearest the door and me closest to the TV. I ripped off the sodden socks and hung them on the radiator. Through into the kitchen, I could see that it was Dad who fussed with the pots and frying pans; Mum had vanished as soon as Margaret and Robbie left. I didn't inquire as to her whereabouts in case it would spoil some surprise for my departure. Rose burrowed close to my shoulder, lifted my arm and placed it around her. When the opening theme began, we sang along as we usually did, but neither of us had much enthusiasm.

All through the programme I glimpsed periodically to find Dad, alone, lifting pot lids and twisting dials on the hob. When the show finished, Rose and I helped by setting the table while Dad fried the sausages. Finally, Mum appeared in the doorway, watching each of us in turn. Her hair was flattened on one side and her eyes were small and shrunken in their sockets.

'I'm sorry love,' she turned to Dad. 'I had to lie down. The worst headache came over me. Anything I can do?'

She spoke wearily and with an accusatory tone, as if her energy had been stolen and we were all to blame.

‘There’s not much to be done,’ Dad said, ‘a boy of simple tastes, our son.’

Dinner had been my choice, whatever I wanted, they’d said. No meal had come to mind and I couldn’t imagine what food would be difficult to come by over there. If anything, I’d wanted toast swimming in butter or a crusty bloomer thick with jam, but neither felt appropriate for tea. In the end I’d decided on bangers and mash with baked beans, even though I was pretty sure baked beans were American anyway. It was the tea I’d loved as a child, that Mum always made so well. Sometimes she’d mix an egg with the potatoes to make it extra creamy and call it Duchess Mash.

We loitered with impatience while Dad mashed the potatoes. Mum poked at the sausages in the pan, marshalling them back and forward with a spatula, until he waved her away.

‘Sit down and I’ll dish up,’ he said.

The plates arrived one by one and each was met with silent disappointment. The mash was watery yet lumpy, no mean feat; all moisture had been evaporated from the sausages leaving the insides almost hollow in parts. The beans were about passable but had been spooned sloppily onto the plate so that their sauce had splashed everywhere.

‘Not the usual standard, I’m sorry,’ Dad said as he joined us.

‘It’s lovely dear,’ Mum said. ‘Sorry I wasn’t much help.’

She turned to me with a faint smile of commiseration, the type you’d flash a stranger, but it matched the demeanour she’d shown me over the last few days, weeks even. There had been a shortness over any upheaval my plans would cause;

my trips to the passport office, or to the bank for travellers cheques, seemed to invoke great inconvenience. Although she had helped ready my clothes – in fact she'd taken over – it had all been done with ill-humour. She had not tried to dissuade me, as she had when I'd first talked of my plans, but she made sure to remind me of the impositions my departure involved.

Across the table, she prodded at the ruined dinner she had promised to prepare and the atmosphere she brought prevented any easy conversation. She avoided meeting my eyes, and when finally I caught her gaze it was as if she was staring through me. Already, I'd been erased.

Finally Rose spoke, above the crunch of sausages and the scrape of plates.

'I've got a solo,' she said with some excitement. 'Mrs. Graham auditioned us today and told me I'd got it. Straight after. She didn't even wait to think.'

'That's my girl,' Dad said.

'It's in June, the fifteenth,' she continued. 'Tickets are twenty pence.'

'Put us down for two,' Mum said. 'Maybe ask Margaret and Robbie too.'

'I'll save you the programme, for when you come back,' Rose offered me in consolation.

The gap was closing behind me and I was sure they'd function better than before. Rose was able to please them in ways I couldn't, her achievements understandable. Where I'd tried to remain unremarkable, giving them neither cause for celebration nor concern, Rose enjoyed the spotlight without fear of what it might reveal.

'What time for the bus tomorrow?' Dad asked.

'Seven, if that's OK? The next isn't until half past eight and would be cutting it fine.'

‘That’s an early start for your dad,’ Mum said without looking up.

‘We’ll manage it. It’ll be an easy run in,’ Dad said.

‘Are you not coming back after? Does that mean I can’t come?’ Rose asked.

‘You can say your goodbyes here. Nicer than the depot,’ Dad replied.

Mum’s plate looked more full than when we had started; the sausages were cut in tiny pieces and the beans had been mixed through the potato. I’d hoped she would protest and demand that they all came to see me off. Each time Granny had left us, we’d been bundled into the car and driven with her to the bus station so that we could wave from the stand. The same courtesy would not be extended to me. I wanted to know that I’d be missed but the most I had to look forward to would be a silent journey with Dad and a stilted, awkward goodbye.

‘There’s ice-cream in the freezer,’ Dad said, patting Rose’s wrist.

As Rose leapt out of her seat and rushed to the chest in the utility room, Mum finally addressed me.

‘You can change your mind, you know. No one will think any the less of you,’ she said, her head remaining bowed. ‘I’m sure you could get your place back at College, maybe the airline will let you trade the ticket for somewhere else. It happens all the time, people changing their minds.’

Dad gave a shake of his head. ‘Leave the boy. His mind’s made up, and sure it’s not forever, just an adventure before he settles down.’

I was glad when Rose returned with the block of ice-cream and I did not have to reply. Dad stood to help her serve. Mum and I remained, no food to occupy us. I longed for her to utter some benign and inconsequential comment, or to simply throw me a wink. This sullen and pitiful woman was not the memory I

wished to take with me. I would have been happier to have her snap at me and treat me as her son rather than a stranger she couldn't comprehend. Her behaviour unnerved me, and if I could have stepped straight from the kitchen onto the plane I would have done so.

I finished my pudding quickly and excused myself to pack, then stopped to listen from the stairs. The usual chatter resumed – Rose made arrangements for choir practice and there was a discussion as to whether they would drive up the coast at the weekend.

Halfway up, I sat on a tread. It had been years since I'd got this low. I ran my finger along the creases of carpet I used to know in such detail and thought of those wet afternoons when I would have to play indoors and my whole world would shrink to these stairs, the loose threads where the carpet met the bannister, the thin layer of dust that crowned the knot of the spindles. The smell remained as I remembered, dry and tickling, but I was too old and too large to bury my head as I once had; here, I could no longer hide. The recollection of it came with a sadness I couldn't quite place, a sadness that seemed to permeate every aspect of my presence in this house. I was sure it hadn't existed in the beginning, when I was a child, but the unhappiness of the present was polluting everything. An escape had to be made before every last memory was ruined.

There was a scrape of the kitchen door then the sound of TV; I scrambled the remaining half flight and retreated to my bedroom. Door shut, I reached for my records, now neatly stored in the wardrobe, beneath the hanging school shirts and old blazers that would remain after I was gone. Near the back and slightly bulkier than the rest, I found *Young Americans*. I wasn't sure why I'd kept it, the record itself was broken in two. It's how Keith had returned it, when I finally

found the courage to enter his shop. He'd said he was sorry, that a box had dropped by mistake, but still, I took it as a sign and never returned. I squeezed the cover's edges so that it opened like a pouch and removed the hidden pages within.

They were the catalogue pages, men in swimsuits. Even after five or six years, these photos still brought the same lurch of excitement to my stomach, the queasiness I felt when I first brought them back to my room. Since then, I'd summoned these men regularly, one or all of them, to hold me and use me. Numerous times I'd resolved to destroy the pages, but they survived each guilt-ridden exorcism. I hid them in a notebook at the bottom of my case, placed my t-shirts on top. The pictures would have to come with me, so I could recognise these men when I found them.

There was a faint knock at the door and my cheeks reddened with years' worth of secrecy.

Mum stood on the landing.

'Can I come in love?'

There was a softness in her voice that had not been present at dinner.

'Thanks for doing the washing.' I ran my hand over the neat piles.

'I couldn't have you going off without clean clothes. The Americans would think us a dirty lot.'

We laughed a little but it was an effort to rid the room of the discomfort she'd brought in. She stood, hands by her side, halfway between the door and the bed and I wasn't quite sure what we were meant to do.

'I'm sorry love,' she said finally and stepped forward to smooth the cover on my bed. 'Today's not easy for me.'

I wanted to remind her that I was leaving and her life would continue without disruption; she could remain where she was.

‘I’m just not ready to see you go. You’re still my baby boy.’

The words stuck as she struggled to eject them. I could not match her emotion and I worried she might cry. The baby boy she talked about was not me; I was an interloper with a lust for catalogue men. She sat on my bed and looked to the floor. I felt a pressure to comfort her but did not move. No longer would I do what was expected.

Instead, I packed, making sure those pages could not be seen, and hoped it would give her the excuse she needed to leave.

‘Have you said your goodbyes to the ones from Tech?’

‘Yeah, we had a drink at lunchtime on my last day.’ But there had been no goodbyes; I had stopped going long before these plans – another secret to keep. My attendance had been sparse since the party, and when my tutor had summoned me to explain it seemed easier to leave than give an account of myself. As I’d cleared my locker and my feet clapped the length of the corridor for the last time, I’d expected a release of sorts, an unburdening, but forced to keep the pretence at home, I was no better off. Afterwards, not one of my classmates had called me. I wasn’t even sure they knew my number. I’d passed Kevin in town, a couple of months or so later, but there was a whole road between us and we’d simply acknowledged each other with a nod.

‘If there’s anything you forget,’ Mum said, ‘we can post it on. When you get your address you’ll let us know?’

‘Of course, I’m not going to just disappear,’ I replied.

‘And you’ll take care of that money your Granny left, you’ll make it stretch? Don’t waste it on telephone calls, just a letter now and then is all we need.’

Already there were checks in place and duties to be performed before I’d even managed to leave.

‘Your Granny was worried when I left home too,’ Mum said, unprompted. ‘A friend of my father got me a job in Gallaghers. Of course your Granny knew of someone who could offer me digs, and so off I went to Mrs. Smith. She owned a handbag shop then, on the Sandy Row, a widow since the war, although it was heart attack that killed her husband. I didn’t like her at first, she kept a cat that she allowed on the table, but slowly we got used to one another. I grew to think of her as a friend.’

I nodded but said nothing to encourage her tale.

‘She liked you,’ Mum continued regardless. ‘I took you with me once when I visited her in hospital. She said you had the softest skin. Anyway, what I mean is, I understand. Sometimes we need to get away. I left and, although I didn’t like it at first, I enjoyed it, by the end. You don’t have to love every minute. But if you hate it more than you like it, remember there’s always a room here. Your father and I will always take care of you.’

She couldn’t understand, if she did she would realise that there could be no return; I could not escape if I planned to be caught again. While her offer of a room, a retreat, should have soothed me, I couldn’t help but feel suffocated. I had never agreed to those terms of adulthood, that future that everyone else seemed to slip so happily towards.

My eyes squeezed tightly shut and I tried to vanish from the room. Mum's hands pulled me to the bed. At first my body stiffened under her touch; I lay awkwardly beside her, legs overhanging the end. She tried to turn me over and I submitted, shuffling close so that my head rested on her collar bone. Although my height made the position impossible, I persevered until I found a resting place close to the one I remembered.

Breathing her scent, I wanted to remember that time before I felt apart, when she held me and I felt complete. That time must have existed, when the child she embraced matched the one she imagined. Yet, it wasn't in my teens, when she'd clasp me close and I would curse her for not recognising the source of my unhappiness. It might have been earlier, when she cradled me after a fall then watched me all night, wary of my mild concussion. Perhaps I would have to go further back, to that moment after delivery, when she guided me to her breast. But even then, at birth, my propensity to be different would have been marked. I had always felt this way. Perhaps it was only when the first wave of morning sickness hit, and her hand moved to guard her stomach, that I was able to embody the child she so desperately desired.

As she hushed me and rocked me, my legs hanging off the too-small bed, I realised that the gap could never be spanned. Whatever had caused this fissure, whenever it had occurred, there could be no reversal. I squeezed tears from my eyes so that she felt wanted and necessary; I allowed her to imagine she was able to sooth me once more. The fault was not hers.

Heartache No. 9 – Delegation

I sink in solitude, but there's satisfaction in the presence of others, just beyond that wall. The need to leave the dance floor came like a purging retch that could only be calmed by this cool concrete tunnel. I stroke its smooth finish and my finger finds a hole, the tomb of an air bubble. The tip of my finger glides inside where it's so cold it's almost damp. The edgeless space would make a perfect nest for me to gather my strength until I'm able to face the world.

Doors flap open at the far end and Jimi rushes towards me, trailing light and noise.

'Can we go?' I ask.

My finger finds the hole again, pulled into its sanctuary, and I know if I wait any longer I'll lose my nerve and this limbo will continue.

'It has to be now. Tonight,' I reply to Jimi's silence. 'I need him.'

The doors flutter once more and two boys pass by. Although I can't hear what they're saying, there's a giddiness to their chatter that makes me envious. What's said in the beginning is of no importance, only that the enthusiasm for communication is shared. It took a month for Victor to confide that my words were sometimes lost on him, my voice too soft, my cadence too quick, my accent too thick. But the way he said it made me believe that he didn't care; I could have spoken a foreign language and he'd have still listened.

‘You’re paying,’ Jimi says. He reaches forward and prises me from the wall. ‘And if there’s any shit, it’s on you.’

In this straight corridor, there’s no hiding the wobble to my step. To restore balance, I drag my hand along the wall like a tiller. Jimi, beside me, walks on fresher legs and the night’s excesses are absent from his face.

When my support disappears at the doorway to the Lounge, I’m almost swallowed inside but Jimi grabs my shoulder and hauls me upright. Still, I catch a glimpse of Ricardo in the corner with a head in his lap. Shaking free of Jimi’s grip, I peer in. Ricardo’s eyes are fixed on the perspex chandelier that showers rainbow prisms throughout the room. Absently, his hand picks at the hair of the boy in his arms and joy radiates through me when I see it’s Darryl, his legs stretching across the banquette. A smile broadens his lips, he reaches to pat Ricardo’s hand and I have to stop myself rushing in to urge them to savour this moment. Opposite, Jack and Bobby sit with their backs to one another. Bobby is holding a fistful of cash, presumably Jack’s, and waves it at the sweating boy beside them whose head shakes a ‘no’. The craving etched on Bobby will never be satisfied and Jack’s disappointed face knows it.

Jimi’s pressing me on, but a flute swirls in the air and I recognise *Expansions*, a home-listening favourite of Victor’s. The first time he played it for me, we smoked a pipe each as sacrament and he would not speak until the arm clicked off the deck. Tonight, Victor is everywhere.

I throw a final smile towards Ricardo and Darryl as Jimi tugs at my sleeve and, although they won’t see it, I hope they can sense my desire for their happiness.

We collect our jackets, the overstuffed coatcheck evidence that, for others, the night is nowhere near over. Denise is on her own at the kiosk, and with no queue to contend with, she thumbs a magazine.

‘Leaving so early boys?’ she asks. ‘I just sent a group of three hot things your way not ten minutes ago.’

‘Thanks for caring, but I need my beauty sleep,’ Jimi replies.

I say nothing, but reach for her hand, the nails painted an acid orange, and place my lips delicately on her knuckles.

‘You’ll make me blush.’ She waves us away. ‘Safe home.’

At the top of the ramp, cold air tightens my chest. John is at the bottom, hands tucked beneath his armpits. Now he’s here to see us safely home, not welcome us in, but this block is so quiet that even the muggers and robbers steer clear. Still, John acts as watchman and guardian.

The slope speeds me downwards to the footpath and my legs stiffen under its pull. A fear I can’t quite resolve twitches through me; I’ve left something behind or undone. There’s a desire to follow the pulsing flashes on the ramp back into the guts of the Club where I can pace every square inch and see and experience everything that’s contained within its walls – a map of memories to take with me. But Jimi’s hand reinforces the gradient and guides me gently to the street.

‘Almost there,’ John says, eying the sky.

I squint upwards to discern the time but it’s impossible to guess; snow has brightened everything and the light has been diffused to resemble day.

‘You might be lucky, but there’s not many cabs,’ John says, ‘least not since the snow came. Peaceful, though.’

We peer the length of the street. Tyre tracks dent the covering but the road beneath is hidden. Childish excitement rises in me and I can't help but grin as if the promise of a day off school and the speed of a sledge are within my grasp.

‘We'll try Sixth,’ Jimi says.

‘If you get stuck, come back to shelter,’ John suggests.

The snow is fresh and soft and our shoes sink rather than slip. Surprisingly, I'm not cold; the white glow from the snow brings the suggestion of heat and it's only my feet that detect the chilly bite. At the end of the road, we pause and I rise on tiptoes to save the canvas on my gutties from the frigid damp.

‘This might be a lost cause,’ Jimi says and we grip one another for support. Sixth Avenue is clearer, the uptown traffic having turned the covering to a dirty slush.

‘How about we leave it, meet tomorrow when the weather breaks,’ Jimi says.

My silence is a refusal. The snow is evidence that this is the night; it brings change to everything. As if to prove my point, a taxi blinks round the corner, its sign still lit. I jump with excitement and knock the snow from my soles.

‘I'm going home,’ the driver says, leaning out his window, ‘but if it's on my way, I'll take the fare.’

‘170th, by Broadway,’ Jimi tells him.

‘Good enough,’ the driver replies. ‘You can pay for my gas.’

We heave in. I press my head against the icy glass and watch the passing streets. Thankfully the driver seems to be talked out and even the engine purrs mutedly in respect of the early hour. By my feet, snow has fallen from the cuffs of

my jeans and sits puddling on the mat. Jimi squeezes himself deep into the seat, hands wedged between his thighs and shoulders hunched.

In the months we've been apart, I've taken to rehearsing what I'd say if Victor and I met once more. The conversation's been acted out many times in my mind, but despite Victor's injuries, I could never play any part other than the victim. I would remember that trip to his hospital bed, and how, through the swollen and battered face, he told me to leave with such conviction that my dismissal could not be questioned. With that recollection, all sympathy for him would evaporate. He brought me into this world then left me to fend for myself.

Tonight, I won't dwell on that expulsion. Instead I watch snow fleck the window and try to remember those kind eyes that sought me out, the arms that sheltered me so firmly yet carefully. This journey should not end with a row.

The meter clicks as we rush through streets unknown to me. I stick to familiar routes, reducing the city to only a few well-worn passages. Once found, it's the recognisable paths that make this place bearable, banishing the anxiety of the strange and uncharted.

We slow. Here, snow has fallen only lightly.

'This right?' the driver calls over his shoulder.

I nudge Jimi, drowsy with heat from the cab's blowers.

'This us?' I repeat.

He squints into the ink-blue morning then nods his head. When the door-seal is broken, the shock of air unnerves me. The need I had is disappearing rapidly; replacing it is the certainty that I should not have come. But Jimi's already on the street, so I peel two fives from my meagre bundle, and feed them to

the driver. I wonder if I should pay him more to wait, a getaway if it's required, but remember his night is over; he has his home to return to.

Jimi drags himself with bunched shoulders and shallow paces to the wide steps halfway along the street. The building is large and functional, four or five floors high. Behind, the sky is lightening; it's later, or earlier, than I imagined.

As I climb the steps a dread takes hold but I push on. Without pausing to buzz, Jimi shoulders through to the stairwell.

'It's been busted for months,' he explains. 'Auntie Clar has been going crazy to get it fixed, calling everyone, but...most of the street lights are busted too. Nobody does a thing.'

'You're certain she's not here?' I ask and he shrugs.

I mitigate the fear, reasoning that her presence would at least cut the visit short.

Jimi's body seems to waken as he zigzags the stairs. I chase after. A flickering light on the first landing causes the stairs to vanish then reappear. By the next flight he's slowed.

'This way,' he calls and I follow.

There are a couple of doors on either side of the corridor and Jimi stops by the farthest, on the left. I take cover in the nearest doorjamb, out of sight.

'No going back,' he says, almost off-handedly, and gives three sturdy knocks.

I hold my breath and listen. Jimi repeats the knock and something stirs. There's a thump against the door from the inside, then it opens as far as the chain will allow.

'Jimi?'

It sounds like Victor but less certain. An eye squeezes into the gap and finds me. The door slams. I want to run to the floor beneath and disappear with the next blink of the light. That brief glimpse was more of a shock than I'd prepared for. With a rattling sound, the door opens, this time swinging loose and wide. Jimi beckons me with a twitch of his head then steps inside.

I straighten my clothes, run fingers through my hair, sticky and tangled with dried sweat. Pulling my jacket and t-shirt from my body, I lower my head and breathe. There's a bitter smell, like chemicals. I remind myself that this is not a date.

The apartment is warm. I close the door and deliberate whether to fasten the chain too, but leave it hanging. Canned laughter rises at the end of the hall and I can hear whispers too, low and serious. I pass a coat rack but keep mine on.

Closer in, the smell of grass hits me and I think of the afternoons at Victor's when we'd smoke and doze and eat and repeat until the night was ready for us. That easy companionship is now so distant I sometimes think it never occurred, a figment of my need.

The room flickers in the television's light. Jimi stands beside a wide armchair, his back towards me. I see the top of Victor's head above the chair and I clear my throat softly. Jimi turns to wave me in. Victor doesn't budge.

'You mind if I lie down?' Jimi asks.

'Use Mom's bed,' Victor says, still facing forward. 'Take your shoes off. She won't want snow and shit on her floor.'

His voice has lost its depth, like hearing a favourite record with the bass muted. Jimi squeezes past, sending me into the room with an encouraging pat, then disappears to the darkened door by the coat rack. Again, I hesitate, hoping for

some signal that I am welcome, but Victor is still and the TV plays on. I'm left staring at the crown of his head, its unruly covering of hair, more grey than I remember.

'C'mon then.'

Finally, he breaks and I step closer. There's a galley of kitchen units to the left and a small table with folded leaves. To his right, I spot a low footstool and make for it without stopping to hug or even touch him. I'm scared to face him in case that hate still clouds his eyes, but when I do, he watches me blankly. My gaze retreats to the coffee table, littered with dirty plates and soft drinks cans.

He's wearing grey tracksuit bottoms scuffed with dirt. One leg stretches beneath the low table, oddly straight, and a walking stick rests beside it. I track up to the thick beard that coats his cheeks. His face is undeniably chubbier and less firm. His complexion is dusty, the brightness gone, and it troubles me.

He gives me a once-over in return and, embarrassed, I turn to the TV.

'You lost weight,' he says finally. 'Is that what you came to show me?'

He lets go a laugh and I smile with him, uncertain the joke is designed to include me.

'You look good too...much better.'

'Liar. I haven't seen the inside of a barber's in months. My mom stuffs me full of fried food and then buys me stretch pants to cover my belly.'

He pulls his waistband to demonstrate then lets it snap back in place.

'What about your leg?'

Victor grips the top of his thigh with both hands as if testing its strength.

'Coming good,' he says. 'I have exercises. They gave me a routine when I left the hospital. There's not much space, but I get them done.'

Furniture crowds the television and every surface holds small ornaments or trinkets, left to catch dust. It's the kind of room Granny would have been at home in, but Victor looks lost in its clutter, a far cry from his spartan flat above the deli.

'Still,' he adds, letting his leg drop, 'I can't get around without this.'

He picks up the dull metal stick at his side and gives two strong taps to the coffee table. Empty cans bounce.

My eyes threaten tears but I dismiss them; I did not make this journey to be consoled.

'Why are you here?' Victor asks, as if eavesdropping my concerns.

'I saw Walt tonight. He'd seen you. I wanted to, too. I've missed you.'

Even to my ears the explanation is not enough.

'And you think I want a visit from some kid who's tripping? At seven in the fucking morning? On a Sunday? That's what I need most in the world right now?'

There's no increase in volume but anger resides in the precision of his delivery. I turn again to the TV, avoiding his reproach. The show's old, black and white, and the couple squabble; her hair is perfectly set, his face is clean shaven and sharp edged.

'I'm not that fucked. Not anymore,' I say uncertainly. 'It was a pill Greg gave me. Well, two.'

His beard parts to expose a smile, a likeness to the Victor I remember.

'Baby, your eyes are dancing and that leg of yours hasn't stopped since you sat down. You're making me jealous.'

I give a tentative smile, still unable to read his mood.

‘It’s OK, though,’ he continues. ‘I’m so stoned right now I can’t even swallow. It’s the only thing that really stops the pain. Gives me crazy cottonmouth though. Make yourself useful and go fetch me a soda. In the fridge. Have one yourself. The sugar might do you good.’

He signals to the corner, as if the great white hulk of a refrigerator could be missed. I weave behind him, avoiding his straightened leg. Dirty plates are stacked in the sink and the counter is strewn with takeaway cartons. Jimi’s been neglecting his job. There’s only 7-UP in the fridge door and I grab two.

I sit again and pass him one. This time, when we face one another, I sense a weakening of his anger. I raise my drink in a cheers. He does the same. My first gulp spreads a syrupy energy.

‘Why did you come?’

There’s no animosity in his inquiry, at least none I can detect. He leans forward and with a click of the remote, the picture and sound disappear. The room darkens.

‘I need to know what I’ve done, why you won’t see me. The argument we had, before, it wasn’t the worst. It didn’t seem like that would be it. I thought the next day we’d be OK. We’d be back to dancing. Then...’

I can’t bring myself to describe any more, the assault, the hospital.

But he’s silent, too. Instead, he brushes a magazine across the table and reaches for the box beneath. I recognise it at once – our ark of joy. He swings the lid then packs the pipe with grass. After a hit he passes it and I taste the heat of him on the stem, a delicate wetness.

‘Walt’s?’ I ask, the smell familiar.

‘Course, best on the East Coast.’

I nod and hit it again, inhaling as he'd taught me at the beginning. Smoke fills the room and I watch its blue layers tumble to the carpet. Still, there's no sign of the answer I deserve.

'I wanted to see you, too,' I say to remind him.

'Maybe I'm glad you did. And you're right, I should explain.'

He sighs, long and resigned, like the precursor to an involved tale, but then is silent. I glance away, hoping to alleviate the pressure and permit him to speak. On the wall, to the right of the television, is a framed photo of Victor. Although he's young, not even a teenager, there's no mistaking his eyes, good-natured and sympathetic. Despite the years between us, I think of playing together after school. We would have discovered the same things at the same time; we could have been best friends. The twelve-year-old me would not have been so alone.

'I saw the fear on your face,' he says, 'that first day you came. You thought I was asleep, or sedated, or whatever but I saw you. I watched you run off.'

I remember, too. His face had been so shiny that day, so swollen; there was a large cut on his temple and his leg was plastered and hoisted above the bed. His eyes had seemed closed, or maybe I'd just hoped that they were. The sight of him scared me and so I ran. It took two whole days before I could return.

'Four weeks ago I still needed help to piss. Did you want to deal with that?'

'I could have helped you. We could have managed,' I reply, although I'm beginning to feel as helpless as he suggests.

'And there was my mom, my family. What would I tell them about you? It was impossible. I'd put everyone through enough.'

‘I could have just stayed away, at least for a while. We could have been discrete,’ I reason, but I can’t even convince myself. When I’d snuck in to see him, I’d avoided any face that bore a familial resemblance – the same shape to the eyes, the dimple on the chin that sat just off-centre. The truth is there’s no world in which his family and I could co-exist, at least without being found out. He needed them and still does; the fact that I needed him is irrelevant.

‘It’s better like this, you not being around. I can’t worry. Maybe when I’m healed, we’ll meet up.’

‘I was sure it was because I left you that night,’ I say. ‘That’s why you were angry. If I’d stayed...’

‘If you’d stayed we’d both be here, only two good legs between us,’ he interrupts. ‘The guys that did this, they’d have done the same to you. They called me a nigger, a faggot, but the truth is they did because they could, because I wasn’t one of them, and they’d have done the same to you...’

He fills the pipe and I wait, unsure he’s explained all he can. The sight of him, bloodied and beaten, fixes in my mind once more and I can’t dislodge it. It’s his powerlessness that jars most; if Victor is unable look after himself, what chance do I stand. He was meant to take care of me.

Without saying a word, I rise from my seat and place my lips on his, their softness a welcome memory. He doesn’t push me away, but neither does he yield. After a few seconds I realise I am the only party to this kiss; Victor is not ready to give up control, or perhaps I’m not ready to take it. I pull away and I see there’s no judgement.

‘Thank you,’ he says quietly, although for what I’m not sure.

He rummages in the box.

‘No more weed,’ I say.

A sweat beneath my hairline that tells me I’ve already had too much. From inside he pulls out a tightly rolled bill and holds it towards me.

‘No coke either.’ I shake my head. ‘I’m done.’

‘It’s not for that, dumbass. Have it. It’s yours.’

There’s more than one, wound and secured by elastic band. I unfurl the money – six notes, each a hundred dollars.

‘It’s the money I saved, for our trip to San Francisco. I can’t use it and I want you to take it. Go home, go anywhere. Just have it.’

Victor sits forward, excited for me. I flatten the bills on my thigh and the dry paper makes my fingertips crackle. I struggle to show enthusiasm; there’s an embarrassment to receiving that I’ve never overcome.

‘Don’t you need this? What about your mum? Your job, you can’t be earning?’ I ask.

‘I got everything I need. Work still have me on a salary, union benefits. Mom won’t let me pay for a thing. I don’t even have rent any more. If I keep it, I’ll just spend it on Walt’s grass.’

It’s too early to argue and I know I’d lose, so I fold the notes and stuff them deep in my pocket. This settlement feels final, a pay-off I haven’t earned.

‘Think of it as an early birthday present. Tomorrow, right?’

That he remembers almost makes me kiss him again but I’ve been rebuffed enough.

‘Here.’ He scribbles on a piece of paper and passes it to me. ‘It’s this address. Wherever you end up, send me a postcard. Make me jealous. Just

remember, no dirty stuff, Mom will read it. My number's there too, if you feel like calling.'

I tuck it safe, as valuable as the cash.

'Open the blinds,' he says.

I pull the cord and am momentarily stunned; sunlight flashes off the snow. Dust swims in the air and I turn to find Victor, small in his chair. The day shows the sagging creases on his face, and the dull, worn skin. I would cry for him if I thought he'd accept my pity, but know it would be a cruel move.

'I have to sleep now,' he says. 'You can crash if you want. I don't think Jimi is off any time soon.'

But this is a nicety, I realise it's best I leave.

'I'll go. Anything you need?' I ask.

He shakes his head, then rises in his seat, hand grappling for the stick. I want to help him, but fear doing the wrong thing.

'You don't need to see me out,' I say instead.

Using the armchair as a handrail, he stands and aims for the door.

'It's on my way to bed.'

I walk slowly through the hallway so he can catch up. When I reach the door I don't turn; I can't witness the effort he must expend or the concentration on his face, but I can hear his laboured breath. His stick thuds at even intervals and my body tenses for him.

When he's close, I open the door and turn to him. This man, who could once throw me on his bed like I weighed nothing, who could out-dance and out-drug any of us, stands before me, stooped, weary and older.

Finally, I understand Victor's need to finish with me. It's the same need that drove me to this city – to be absent before you can disappoint.

'Say goodbye to Jimi. Thank him for bringing me here.'

Victor nods.

'And thank you. For taking care of me, always.'

'I wish I still could,' he replies.

This time, I press my lips to his cheek. Obscured by beard, I can't taste his skin but the smell remains and I breathe him in. No hand rises to hold me. He is static and I realise this is the end.

I walk the corridor and listen as his door shuts, then the scrabble of the chain on wood. Outside, the fresh morning has brought an icy crust to the snow and my feet crunch with every step. In his absence, I search for a landmark that might help me orientate myself. The daylight eases my nerves but, still, I force my fists deep into my pockets to bury the notes within.

At the corner the wind catches some stray snowflakes, sending them into the air where they rise on a draught as if the night is being rewound and I'll have the opportunity to live it again.

March 1979

The organist played descending scales, the notes falling like leaves. I could hear murmurings and the settling of the congregation on pews, but kept my eyes forward to the board above the pulpit where the hymn choices were displayed on black numbered tiles. The first row had been reserved for us, Mum, Dad, Rose and me. Still, I felt a fraud. Granny's people, the ones who saw her everyday, who

told her their news and visited when she was unwell, would have to crane over my head to glimpse the casket.

It stood a few short feet from us, on a trestle at the centre of the chequerboard floor. Just above where her head would be, a display of white lilies burst in all directions. There had been a fear that there would not be room for all those who wished to attend. Granny's usual church was in town, a much bigger, modern one only a short walk from her house, but this smaller church was where she belonged, the centre of the village she had grown up in and where she'd spent every Sunday as a child. Mum, too, had lived in the village and was first confirmed, then married, within these rough stone walls.

The Reverend stood at the lectern then cleared his throat to hurry those still shuffling into their seats. Once silence had been established, he began, biting into the consonants so that his words would be heard. I followed the prayers and passages in the Order of Service, but did not speak or even mouth silently when the instructions indicated *ALL*. Rose enunciated every response as if the call was directed only to her and was first on her feet when the organ piped up, sharing the hymnal with Dad as they sang together, battling to fill the church.

At the conclusion of each, I shuffled through the folded, printed sheets to estimate how much time remained. The service provoked no memory of Granny. Even when the Reverend spoke of her directly, no longer referring to her in the abstract of borrowed words, he could summon nothing of her being – the shared grin across a quiet table, the smell of her as she gathered me for a hug, the cardigans whose material matched her temperament, rough yet warming. Granny was nowhere in the Church.

When at last the service ended, I was called upon to be a bearer. Paired up with Mum's cousin, Dessie, we were to be at the front. He was a good half foot taller and I worried the casket might tip, but we strapped arms on one another's shoulders then leaned in close. Once lifted, the casket remained in place, despite being lighter than I imagined. It was hard to believe that she could be contained by that flimsy box.

We walked a foot's length at a time, gravel crunching. A squally wind blew rain sideways. Grey mossed stones and squat white marble bricks stretched in neat rows to the ragged wall that circled the crest of the hill. Beyond its perimeter the land dropped to the shores of Lough Erne, its water forced to dirty white peaks by the breeze.

The procession came to a halt by my grandfather's grave, the headstone bright granite that had yet to weather, and I thought of him buried there in his blue tie and cream shirt. Beside it was a freshly dug hole; the undertakers delicately lifted the coffin from our shoulders and placed it on the ground. The flowers were arranged once more on its lid. In the same plot was a small white block, put there for Mum's younger brother. The dates showed that he had lived for just six months.

He was the first to be called Colin and Granny always thought it had been a fitting tribute that Mum had given me his name. When they spoke of him, it had been to remind themselves of the age he would have been, the children he might have had and the life that should have been his. The dead had the potential to please rather than disappoint. I disliked our connection, the name tainted with childhood weakness and bad luck. Not only did I have to satisfy those expectations placed on me, I had fulfil my uncle's as well.

We gathered by the graveside, the onlookers shifting to allow the family the best view, and I realised that once Granny was interred there would be no space for Mum, or any of us. The plot was full. Perhaps she and Dad had another place in mind but I doubted there would be room enough for me.

As the Reverend spoke the wind swooped to snatch the words from his mouth and I could make no sense of what he said. The coffin was lowered and he flung some earth after it. I expected men with shovels to fill the hole, then flatten the mound with thick boots, but the Reverend raised his head for the final time and the congregation moved as one to return slowly to the church lane, busy with cars.

Ripples of whispered condolences passed through the crowd. I sped to escape them, past the Church and the shiny black Ford that had carried us there. A path led through the older gravestones, where death had come regularly to parishioners aged only in their forties and fifties. Generations of families were buried together, their entire lives conducted within a ten mile radius, their time spent in the company of the same people they now rotted with.

I hurried as far as the stone wall and stretched to view the network of fields and lanes that climbed and dipped with the contours of the land. Smoke puffed from a small, solid cottage on the shore, rising only a few feet until it was blown to the west, passing over the churning grey lough. Although sparsely populated and offering plenty of space, there was a stifling presence to the land and I wondered how anyone could survive its confines.

‘Colin.’

My sister stepped carefully along the stony path. Behind, while some mourners were descending the rocky trail to the road, others milled by the church, my parents among them.

‘What are you doing? You’re such a freak sometimes. Dad told me to come and get you. You’re supposed to stay with us.’

‘I came to see the view.’

‘Well, you’ve seen it. Everyone’s coming to Granny’s for tea and sandwiches. It’s what you do afterwards.’

Message delivered, she padded back over the path, holding her skirt high from the wet grass. I watched as she wriggled between Mum and Dad and, without any acknowledgement, they both threw an arm around her and clenched her in. My mother combed Rose’s hair gently with her fingers.

There was no place for me. Beyond the lough the green fields dulled as the wind drove distant rain in sheets over the land. I wished to be blown away with it.

Take Me Home – Cher

I wake to daylight. Hours ago, I'd opened my eyes to darkness but this must be a new day, Monday – my birthday. In the stairwell there's no stench of cooking, no echo from blaring radios; the building is empty. There's not even a wait at the bathroom and I'm able to shower straight away. The weekend's grime still hangs on me; the trek back from Victor's left me cold and unable to perform even the simplest task. I needed no aids for sleep, it came quickly and without warning as sat on my bed and my frozen fingers grappled with the stubborn laces on my sodden shoes.

I've no soap of my own but find a thin sliver in the nook on the wall. A quick rinse rids it of others' dead skin. I lather and wash. The water is warming but I fight the urge to remain under its stream – it will make the return to my Arctic room more unbearable. Better to not let the heat in my bones at all. I dry off and drink from the cold tap; the water burns as it flows to my unaccustomed guts.

Back in my room, I lay the towel over the end of my bed, too damp to be packed. I reach beneath and remove the suitcase. The outside is dulled by dust, but inside the lining is as pristine as ever. I dress in the warmest clothes I can find, doubling up with two t-shirts, and throw the rest straight from my drawers to the case without scrutinising. There's not much else that I want to keep; the television is too old and cumbersome, the blankets too bulky. I find Mum's bracelet, the

clasp somehow broken, with Granny's leaping hare; I wrap both in a pair of socks and hide them deep within the case. Rose's notes are tightly folded and I distribute them amongst my clothes, in pockets and creases, so that they can be rediscovered when I next unpack.

Leaning against the wall is the Bunny Sigler record Victor bought, still unplayed. Inside, are the cards I've been sent for Christmas and birthdays, only half a dozen or so. Also, squeezed within, are the catalogue pages of the men I've yet to find. I place the record and its contents with my clothes, and cushion it with an old shirt. The case closes easily; I seem to have lost more than I have gained.

Finally, hanging on the back of the door, I find Robbie and Margaret's belt. Inside is my passport and I add Victor's money, save a few loose dollars for the cab. Since there's room, I fill it with the weekend's leftovers. It's not much, but I count five quaaludes, two and a half hits of acid and enough weed for a couple of joints. I'll have my party on the way. When I fasten the belt above my waist it's slightly stiff with age but after a few minutes next to my skin, it becomes more pliable. There's more strap spare than previously.

And that's it. It seems too easy, too simple. I pause by the door, empty the jar of quarters, and try to summon some kind of attachment for this decrepit, dismal room. It's so familiar I could pace its perimeter with my eyes closed, but if I never set foot in here again, I would be none the poorer. That it was never a home meant it served its purpose well. I leave my keys on the floor for the landlord to find when he comes in search of the week's rent, then shut the door. The television can be his compensation.

A chill wind has kept the thaw at bay but no more snow has collected. Almost immediately a cab stops. I tell him Penn Station. The smell inside carries

the memory of all those previous fares. It's not unpleasant, just lived-in. There's perfume, rich and deep, like the thick scent of an older lady and a hint of stale cigarettes, too, though that may be the cabbie.

Traffic is light, the trip inexpensive, so I tip him more than I should. Entering the station is like extinguishing the day; low ceilings crush down on me and white lights sicken my stomach and remind me I've yet to eat. I stop at a deli and buy two meat sandwiches, wrapped to go.

There's a bank of payphones opposite and I head for one in the middle, placing the sandwiches on top alongside my stash of quarters. I feed a fistful to begin with and when I dial the number I'm told I have insufficient funds to complete the call. The remainder of the quarters follow and finally I hear a distant tone.

Someone answers.

'Rose, can you hear me?'

It's her voice, I'm sure. There's a connection; the coins clatter through the inner workings then rush to the change tray like I've struck the jackpot. I hurry to slot them back but the line is dead. I hang up, pause, then reload, my fingers shaking as I rush to cram the quarters, one at a time. Carefully, I dial again.

There are clicks and whirring and as the signal crosses the ocean. I wonder if it stops at England first, or is it routed via the South and then to Belfast, the countries tied together in ways their inhabitants could never imagine.

Faint, the distance sapping its strength, a ring sounds. Coins drop and I jam in more.

'Hello,' I say in the silence. 'Rose?'

'Hello.'

I can hear the reply.

‘It’s me. It’s Col. Colin.’

I’m interrupted.

‘Love, is that you?’

‘Mum?’

‘What’s happened? What’s wrong?’

I can’t begin to tell her.

‘I’m fine. I wanted to tell you, I’m leaving New York.’

No reply; the sound of static.

I say ‘Hello’ again and wonder if the line might be dead.

Finally it comes. ‘Hello,’ but so muffled and detached it could be an echo.

Then, ‘You’re OK? You’re coming home?’

‘No, I’m leaving New York. I’m going to California, to San Francisco.’

Another silence and I’m not sure I’m being understood.

‘Would you not just come home? It’s been long enough.’

I think she begins to say more but cuts herself short, possibly acknowledging the economy of the call.

‘I can’t,’ I admit for the first time.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks again and I want to tell her everything.

I want to lie on my bed at home and utter the words I never could. I want her to hold me as I explain. She will hush me and rock and tell me that everything will be fine; she will promise to keep me in this safety and comfort forever.

‘You there love?’ she asks. ‘Your father and Rose say Happy Birthday.’

I hear shouting in the background, a chorus of singing. The final coins drop. We talk at once, stopping, starting, encouraging each other to say our piece.

In the confusion of the delay we can say nothing meaningful.

If only she would ask the right question, I could explain.

‘We all miss you,’ she says.

‘Me too.’

‘God bless.’

The line is dead. I press the receiver to my ear, but hear her no more.

Reluctantly, I hang up, but repeat the words I’ve practised so often, as if the difference in time zones could carry them to her.

‘I can’t come home because I love you too much and I don’t want to hurt you.’

It’s three o’clock. I take the sandwiches and my suitcase and search for the Amtrak ticket desk.

Section Two

“By the way you dance”: an essay on disco and identity

Discovery: an introduction

We communed. The music wasn't being done to us; it was being done with us.¹

Andrew Holleran, author of the 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance*, describes his experience of disco in the essay "Dark Disco: A Lament". In what follows I investigate the disruptive attributes of music and club spaces, with particular reference to gay men. Focusing on the disco scene of 1970s New York, Holleran's novel, and my own creative work, *Each Distant Light*, I examine the transformative effects of dance music and club culture, their role in the development of gay liberation, and the possibilities they offer dancers in contemplation of the self. I further describe how discos helped shape, but were also shaped by, gay men: 'it was being done *with* us' (emphasis added). In short, how and why is disco so gay?

I came to writing this critical thesis in much the same way as I came to write the novel *Each Distant Light*, the creative piece that accompanies it. That is, I had a feeling, or a submerged idea, that I wanted to examine but was unsure how to frame it. At first, I attempted to write both contemporaneously, moving from one to the other as deadlines or frustrations dictated; if the creative and critical should represent a dialogue then it made sense that they should be given the opportunity to converse. However, I found myself stalling with the critical. With the novel emerging I found it difficult to critically analyse this evolving piece. The

¹ Andrew Holleran, "Dark Disco: A Lament", in *The Violet Quill Reader: the emergence of gay writing after stonewall*, ed. David Berman, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), p.192.

novel had yet to resolve itself and without that resolution the critical work had no anchor. I had to finish the writing of my novel to understand what it was about.

In writing fiction I attempt to answer a question I've yet to ask, hopeful that the journey's end will provide insight to its conception. With the novel complete, I can see this was certainly the case. In writing *Each Distant Light* I was interested in examining the often imperceptible ways in which, as a gay man, I have felt segregated, or even erased, from the world and to further determine how this can affect a sense of self. In the novel, therefore, my protagonist faces a similar drip-feed of ostracising experience while growing up and I hope to show that this can, in part, explain the isolation he feels. It is important to me that my character's state of being is not informed by one life-changing incident, but that the accumulation of experience can account for his loneliness and world-view.

In addition, I wanted to set the novel in a dance club and have the main thrust of the narrative take place over just one night. My interests in clubs and dance music will be expanded below, but the decision to have my main narrative span a single night was to provide a structure for the story. In the absence of a traditional narrative arc, I felt this constraint would provide a backbone.

Throughout the process of writing the novel I reflected on my own experiences of attending nightclubs, and also the sensation of feeling somehow apart from the world in a way that was, and still is, not easy to account for. In writing the novel I came to understand what it was about dancing in a club that I specifically enjoyed: its ability to transcend the past, future and present and to create an environment whereby the separateness I felt was eradicated, if only for a moment.

I was reminded of the following description from *Dancer from the Dance*:

There was a moment when their faces blossomed into the sweetest happiness, however – when everyone came together in a single lovely communion that was the reason they did all they did; and that occurred around six-thirty in the morning, when they took off their sweat-soaked T-shirts and screamed because Patty Joe had begun to sing: “Make me believe in you, show me that love can be true.”²

Each rereading of this passage has me rushing to my computer to listen to Patti Jo’s *Make Me Believe In You*.³ The technology, from record to CD to digital file, may have changed but the desire remains the same. I press play and take time to bask in the imagined moment, to experience, as those dancers did, communion and to believe that love can be true.

The song is a recurring motif throughout *Dancer from the Dance* and I’m not sure which I encountered first, Andrew Holleran’s novel or Patti Jo’s plaintive longing. Both have coalesced in my memory to form a single experience. Even without access to the song I can’t read this passage without conjuring the first drum beats, the thump of the bass in my head; any encounter with the song throws up an image of those sweat-soaked dancers and their shared unity that I still yearn to be part of.

Holleran’s novel features a group of gay men living in New York in the early- to mid-1970s. Among their number is the unnamed narrator who describes how the protagonist, Malone, a recent arrival to New York, is taken under the wing of Sutherland, an ageing speed freak; Sutherland introduces Malone to the city’s gay nightclubs and extravagant parties on nearby Fire Island. Malone finds

² Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance : a novel* (New York: Perennial, 2001), p.39.

³ Although Holleran ascribes the record to ‘Patty Joe’, the artist is noted as ‘Patti Jo’ on the original record release. See discogs entry: <https://www.discogs.com/Patti-Jo-Make-Me-Believe-In-You/release/797989>.

some ease with his sexuality amidst this community, but is ultimately disillusioned with the lifestyle he finds. Writer Edmund White, a contemporary of Holleran's, said of the novel that it 'shows gay people living amongst other gay people, a brand new portrayal that nobody had ever done except Genet.'⁴ The music and clubs in the novel are central to the characters, 'a group of people who had danced with each other over the years, gone to the same parties'.⁵ Holleran himself was no stranger to these clubs, admitting that passages detailing this scene were written from personal experience: 'I began with David Mancuso's Loft... And then I was taken to the Tenth Floor...And then I started going to Fire Island.'⁶

Similarly, the Club in my novel, and the music played there, form a pivotal role in the life of my character, Col; both allow him space, mentally and physically, to evaluate the world and his place within it. In the chapters that follow I examine firstly the music, and secondly the space of discos, reflecting on the disruption both brought to the wider society and also the internal lives of the gay men that frequented them. Between chapters I pause briefly to investigate the role certain drugs played in acting as a catalyst for this transformation. Before this analysis, however, I want to detail my specific interest in the culture with the hope that it might overturn some preconceived ideas as to what constitutes disco.

⁴ Frank Pizzoli, "In Conversation with the Violet Quill: Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, and Edmund White", *Lambda Literary*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/04/10/in-conversation-with-the-violet-quill-andrew-holleran-felice-picano-and-edmund-white/>.

⁵ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.38.

⁶ Ali Gitlow, "Interview: Dancer from the Dance Author Andrew Holleran", *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, November 9, 2015, <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/11/interview-andrew-holleran>.

Journey to Paradise (or how I came to disco)

When I started thinking about the novel I wished to write, or more truthfully the scenario I wanted to explore to see if it could become a novel, I was certain that a dance club would be central to the story. More particularly, that dance club would be a re-imagining of the New York club, the Paradise Garage. The reason was purely selfish; I wished to insert myself into a period and location I had not been able to experience. Opening in 1977, the Paradise Garage finally closed its doors after a forty-eight hour marathon session in 1987, many years before I'd even heard mention of its name.

It's hard to define what first ignited my fascination with this particular era of dance clubs and their music. Growing up, any mention of disco often brought a roll of eyes and the nagging sense that the music's pleasure could only ever be a guilty one – choreographed dance steps, afro wigs and platform shoes were brought to mind. My parents, older siblings and relatives who had witnessed disco's rise perceived it as faddish fluff; among my contemporaries disco did not receive the nostalgic kudos that was bestowed on rock music from the 1960s and 1970s. Any concept of disco's gayness resided in the fun and frivolous nature of the music, seemingly constructed to be the perfect throwaway accompaniment to a party. Any sense of liberation in the music was confined solely to the trite lyrics of songs such as *We Are Family* by Sister Sledge or Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*. The Disco Sucks campaign of 1979, a stunt by a rock disc jockey (DJ) which culminated in 50,000 disco records being blown up during half-time at Chicago White Sox game, sought to belittle the music and was waged with an undercurrent

of racism and homophobia.⁷ According to Nile Rodgers, record producer and founding member of Chic, '[t]he Disco Sucks movement and its backlash were so toxic, people in the industry – people who were eating off of the record sales coming from dance music – were all afraid to be associated with anything disco'.⁸

The fallout of this event, combined with the commercialisation of the genre so that any song could be disco-fied with a four-to-the-floor beat, resulted in disco's legacy becoming that of a novelty party-starter. Even those in thrall of the culture became disappointed with its evolution. In an 1979 essay for *Christopher Street* magazine, Andrew Holleran writes in anguished terms about the loss of what he calls 'dark disco' – the 'songs that went inside you' – and lambasts the preference at that time for 'the Muzak of disco...the fast, mechanical, monotonous, shallow stuff that is being produced for a mass market'.⁹ Disco entered the 1980s as something of a joke.

In the mid 1990s I became a devotee of dance music, attending club nights and parties when my finances and location made it possible; I scoured shops for records and CDs, stayed awake to record mixes from DJs on late-night radio and read accounts of the culture provided by magazines such as Mixmag, DJ and MUZIK. I followed dance music's numerous mutations – house, techno, drum and bass – my preferences adapting as each new iteration became less fashionable or more mainstream. Like Holleran, I dismissed the popular and tried to be up on the latest musical style while it still had cachet and before it bothered the charts. I wasn't alone. The 1990s in the UK gave rise to the phenomenon Matthew Collin

⁷ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, (New York: W.W.Norton, 2010), pp.206-209.

⁸ Nile Rodgers, *Le Freak: An Upside Down Story of Family, Disco and Destiny*, (London: Sphere, 2011), p.154.

⁹ Holleran, *Dark Disco: A Lament*, p.191.

referred to as ‘Ecstasy culture – the combination of dance music (in all its many and various forms) and drugs’, which by 1997 had been ‘the driving force in British youth culture for almost a decade.’¹⁰

During this time I was blind to the connection between the culture I loved, and the disco culture that had enraptured Holleran. However, by the end of the 1990s, perhaps driven by nostalgia for the passing century, there seemed to be a reappraisal of disco. Compilations with titles such as *Jumpin’* and *Disco Spectrum* began to appear on respected independent record labels such as BBE and Harmless. Their covers eschewed the traditional images of flared trousers or a John Travolta pose and the music contained within reached beyond The Village People’s *Y.M.C.A.* or a Gloria Gaynor standard – tracks that, whilst representative of a popular disco sound, did not depict the breadth of music played in the clubs. Like the DJs of old, the compilers had dug deeper. Perhaps because dance music itself had come of age, the culture surrounding it too became a topic worthy of serious discussion. Books such as *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* traced the lineage of the modern dance club experience through rave, acid house, garage all the way back to disco and beyond. I discovered the music I loved, ‘house, garage, techno and hip hop are all reconstructions, deconstructions or selective evolutions of disco – the primal parent of the modern dancefloor.’¹¹ According to Brewster and Broughton, ‘[d]isco was the revolution’, and was ‘at the heart of some of the most radical innovations to date in the way music is envisaged, created and consumed.’¹²

¹⁰ Matthew Collin with contributions by John Godfrey, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House*, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997), p.4.

¹¹ Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*, (London: Headline, 1999), p.220.

¹² Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, pp.138-139.

I came to realise that disco music had always been enmeshed in the dance culture I loved, but hidden in plain sight as its records were plundered and recycled to create more modern sounding music: Z Factor's *Make a Move on Me* (1998) samples Bumblebee Unlimited's *Lady Bug* (1978), DJ Sneak's *U Can't Hide From Your Bud* (1998) samples Teddy Pendergrass' *You Can't Hide From Yourself* (1977), Black Box *Ride On Time* (1989) samples Loleatta Holloway's *Love Sensation* (1980). Even the first hip-hop record (and many after) is built on a foundation of disco sounds - *Rapper's Delight* (1979) by Sugarhill Gang has as its hook a sample from Chic's *Good Times* (1979). Disco had never truly left us; it was just never that cool to talk about it.

In my mid-twenties, in an attempt to understand the music, I began to read accounts of the clubs that had spawned it, books such as *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*. At the same time I was feeling isolated by an imposed adulthood I wanted no part of - the narrative of career, then marriage and children was one that was still subscribed to by my family and wider community in Northern Ireland, but one that I felt was unavailable to me.¹³ Without exception, my friends from school and university were straight. While I was 'out' at university, I was the only person in my college year (of approximately eighty students) who openly identified as gay; my attendance at a few meetings of the university LGBT group did little to widen my exposure to other gay people – there was reticence perhaps on my part to fully inhabit a gay identity. With few other gay people to fall back on I sought to reassure those straight friends, and perhaps myself, that save for my sexuality, I was just like them; my sexuality was such a small part of my being

¹³ The provision of civil partnerships in the UK did not take effect until 2005 with the Civil Partnership Act 2004.

that it had no real bearing on the person they knew. Also, as I had yet to come out to my parents, I remained with one foot in the closet.

Reading about the Paradise Garage, I could only dream of enjoying what the club represented - 'freedom, compassion and brotherhood...as much a community centre as discotheque.'¹⁴ Not only was the crowd predominantly gay, the club was owned by a gay man, Michael Brody, and its DJ, Larry Levan, was gay too. Tolerance, I believed, would not be conditional there. The club, although decimated by HIV and AIDS by the time of its close, was born in an era that predates the discovery of the disease and existed for a good four years before the illness claimed its first victim in 1981. Part of the attraction for me, therefore, was imagining a space prior to that knowledge; coming to recognise my own sexuality in the mid- to late 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis, it was hard to disassociate being gay from the disease. Early reporting of the disease in the UK had attributed it to gay men: '[t]he terminology of gay plague was used across the press, in quality as well as tabloid papers.'¹⁵ Simon Watney believes that the 'the broadly homophobic response of the UK media' had a profound consequence on gay identity since it 'tended to identify HIV as if it were a direct symptom of homosexuality as such.'¹⁶ Disco clubs of the 1970s seemed to possess an enviable innocence.

My initial clubbing exposure, restricted to my hometown of Belfast and my undergraduate life in Cambridge, occurred in predominantly straight clubs as those cities did not have a large enough LGBT population to warrant a full-time

¹⁴ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, pp.294-295.

¹⁵ Virginia Berridge, "AIDS, the Media and Health Policy", in *AIDS: Rights, Risk, and Reason* edited by Peter Aggleton, Peter Davies, and Graham Hart (London: Falmer, 1992), p.16

¹⁶ Simon Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.66

club, at least not in the early- to mid-1990s; the irregular LGBT club nights that did exist, taking place monthly or bi-monthly, were designed to appeal to a wide cross section of the community and the music played was more pop orientated and not of a type I enjoyed. The DJs and club nights I sought were frequented by a largely heterosexual crowd, although my memories of those experiences are among some of my most enduring. The recollection, however, is not dominated by a sense of belonging or unbridled freedom. In fact, while I can call upon the feeling and remember the sensations of being in those spaces at those times, I find it difficult to articulate exactly how it felt other than transformative. At certain points in the late hours, when the drugs, the music, the lights and the crowd coalesced to create a sensation that could not be induced, but which simply happened, I would feel like the best and most true version of myself.

My novel, *Each Distant Light*, is an attempt to understand that sensation. I took a chronological approach to its writing; the chapters as they appear were written in order, and the further I progressed the more I was aware of the Club acting as a necessary space for Col's transformation, an environment where the present and the past could unsettle him, but also where, for brief moments, he could be free of their ties. On his final night in The Club, as his interior life becomes more fraught, Col is searching for the release he believes the dance floor can provide: '[t]o move beyond that scrutiny, forget myself, forget the others, that's what brings the joy...in this room...I can suspend myself in the present.'¹⁷

Dancer from the Dance, too, offers clubs and discos as sites for transformation and when I came to re-read it the following extract struck me as

¹⁷ Andrew Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.75.

being able to describe what I believe a club, the experience of music on a dance floor, can offer: ‘For what was this room but a place to forget we are dying?’¹⁸

For an instant, the complexities of being human, of existing in the world, evaporate. This change in status is not, I believe, brought about by a sudden insight or clarity of thought. Attaining this state is caused by a removal; it is the absence of fear – fear of death, fear of loneliness, fear of censure or admonishment – that is so freeing.

In her account of disco’s history, Alice Echols maintains that, ‘the connection between disco and gay men is so well established that it is hard to imagine a time when disco was understood as anything but queer.’¹⁹ While I won’t attempt to claim that freedom from fear was the reason clubs and discos became important sites for many gay men in 1970s, I will try to understand what this environment offered a particular group of gay men.

¹⁸ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.42.

¹⁹ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.40.

Part One: Lost In Music

In what follows I give a definition of disco music, detail how certain types of song became representative of the disco sound and further examine the effect these songs had on the dancers (myself included).

Disco (re)defined

As I delved further into the culture of disco it became clear that disco music was not simply the generic late 1970s sound that I believed it to be, epitomised by saccharine strings and a four to the floor beat, the ‘Muzak of disco’²⁰ Holleran took exception to. There was a wealth of styles that came under the umbrella of disco; the disco sound was best categorised not by the similarity of each song’s structure, but by the clubs where people gathered to hear the DJ select records. In *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, an exhaustive history of DJ culture, Brewster and Broughton attribute an article that appeared in *Rolling Stone*, 13 September 1973, as ‘the first ever story about what would become known as disco.’²¹ In “Discotheque rock 73:Paaaaarty!”, writer Vince Aletti asserted that discotheques did not die during the era of sixties pop but that they ‘just went back underground where the hardcore dance crowd - blacks, Latins, gays - was.’²²

As Aletti’s article states, the deciding factor of what music became known as disco emanated from those spaces where the music was played during the early

²⁰ Holleran, *Dark Disco: A Lament*, p.191.

²¹ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.165.

²² Vince Aletti, *The Disco Files 1973-78: New York’s Underground, Week by Week* (London: DJhistory.com, 2009), p.5.

1970s – the discos themselves. ‘[D]iscotheques never died...[b]ut in the last year they’ve returned, not only as rapidly spreading social phenomenon...but as a strong influence on the music people listen to and buy.’²³ In the following chapter I will examine how these spaces were constituted, but in this section I determine the criteria for playing certain tracks in those spaces.

The first gatekeeper to the decision of whether a record was played in a discotheque was the DJ. It was both the DJ’s choices and technique of playing that came to define the sound. Francis Grasso, an Italian-American DJ, was one of the first to rise to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He is also credited as being the first DJ to slip-cue records – a technique that comprised of holding the incoming record on its first beat and then releasing it in time with the last beat of out outgoing record. With this technique the DJ could create a seamless mix from one record to the next, the beat never pausing. This was no mean feat given that the limited technology²⁴ available at the time allowed for no error and with most songs only lasting two-and-a-half to three minutes, there was little respite in a set that could span seven to eight hours of music. Certain longer records, such as *James Brown Live at the Apollo*, were reserved to be played ‘only when you had to go to the bathroom.’²⁵

Grasso was DJ at the Sanctuary, a club that initially catered for straight couples, but when ownership fell to ‘a flamboyant middle-aged queen’ in 1971 the club became ‘the first totally uninhibited gay discotheque in America’.²⁶ His style

²³ Aletti, *The Disco Files 1973-78*, p.5.

²⁴ Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *The Record Players: DJ Revolutionaries* (London: DJhistory.com, 2010), pp.58-64.

²⁵ Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.62.

²⁶ Albert Goldman, *Disco*, (New York: Dutton Books, 1978), p.114.

of playing was a complete departure from the DJs before him who ‘played records as if they were discrete little performances...Francis treated them like movements in a symphony: continuous elements in a grand whole.’²⁷

Alice Echols in *Hot Stuff* describes this leap of technique in the DJ performance as being of utmost importance to gay men who were ‘accustomed to being surveilled and harassed on the dance floor and being arrested during bar raids’. In the post-Stonewall world of the early 1970s, while previously ‘denied the opportunity of uninterrupted dancing with other men, gay men [now] took to disco like a drug.’²⁸ As the narrator in *Dancer from the Dance* remembers - ‘Any memory of those days is nothing but a string of songs.’²⁹ The first element of disco was in place – a never-ending beat on which the night could stretch to infinity.

Although the DJ could match the beat of one record to the next, the songs themselves did not necessarily fit the same stylistic framework and could have been recorded by funk or soul or rock bands. For example, in *Dancer from the Dance* that moment of ‘single lovely communion’³⁰ was also brought about because ‘the discaire had gone from Barrabas’ “Woman” to Zulema’s “Giving Up,” or the Temptations’ “Law of the Land.”³¹ These records were released in the years 1972 and 1973 but only “Law of the Land” had been a single release, the others were album tracks. All three came to be important in defining the new disco sound. The tracks had their different sounds but their common style is best

²⁷ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.144.

²⁸ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.57.

²⁹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.39.

³⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.39.

³¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.39.

described by Vince Aletti in his Rolling Stone piece, which name-checks both Barrabas and The Temptations as exemplars of the sound – ‘the music nurtured in the new discotheques is Afro-Latin in sound or instrumentation, heavy on the drums, with minimal lyrics, sometimes in a foreign language, and a repetitive, chant-like chorus.’ The most exalted DJs, such as Francis Grasso, were those that unearthed these obscure songs ‘with the power to make the crowd scream’ and then played them ‘overlapped, non-stop so you dance until you drop.’³²

These rhythm-heavy songs played in a continuous mix created the template for what disco would become, but the decision as to what songs made that mix was not down to the DJ alone. There was democracy on the dance floor as Peter Shapiro explains – ‘[b]y 1972, the dancers at Fire Island³³ had become particularly discerning – whistling and stomping if they enjoyed a record and abandoning the floor or even booing if they didn’t – and this almost symbiotic relationship between the crowd and DJ became one of the hallmarks of gay disco.’³⁴ Our disco blueprint now includes a discerning and forceful audience of gay men to help curate which rhythm-heavy songs could be played in a continuous mix. What perhaps is missing is the criterion for which certain songs were chosen by the dancing crowd; is there a feeling that is specific to disco music? In both *Dancer from the Dance* and my novel, *Each Distant Light*, the music is an important component to the protagonists’ growing acceptance of a gay

³² Vince Aletti, “Discotheque Rock 73:Paaaaarty!”, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 13, 1973.

³³ Over the summer months Fire Island was a popular destination for gay men holidaying from New York.

³⁴ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.92.

identity. I want to determine if there is something intrinsic to the make-up of disco music that makes it particularly appealing to gay men.³⁵

Disco as a feeling

While everything I read emphasised that disco, and therefore the wider dance culture I'd enjoyed, had had its beginnings in those underground gay clubs, I couldn't quite make the connection between the music and those dance crowds mentioned by Aletti – 'blacks, Latins, gays'. I wondered if there was something specific to the music, an inherent sense of otherness that meant it would appeal to those groups not represented in mainstream culture.

In 2002, a good twelve years after first discovering the joys of dance music, I found myself visiting Body & Soul at Club Vinyl in New York. Simon Reynolds, writing in *The Village Voice* in 2001, cites the club, 'founded in 1996 by two veterans of the '70s underground, François Kevorkian and Danny Krivit', as responsible for the 'renaissance in New York's pre-disco club culture.'³⁶ Furthermore Reynolds reported that Kevorkian saw Body & Soul as dedicated to "cherishing and perpetuating" a gay urban tradition that's over 30 years old and that survived both the disco backlash and the decimation of AIDS.³⁷ It had been a desire of mine to attend Body & Soul since its first mentions in British clubbing magazines of the late nineties. Writing for *Muzik*, a monthly round-up of dance music and culture, Frank Tope describes a visit to the club in 1998: 'New York,

³⁵ Other writers have investigated discos, and clubs more generally, as sites for transformation in a gay context, for example: Larry Kramer, *Faggots* (New York: Plume Books, 1987); Colm Toibin, "Three Friends" from the collection *Mothers and Sons: Stories* (London: Picador, 2006); Alan Hollinghurst, *The Spell* (London: Vintage, 2004).

³⁶ Simon Reynolds, "Disco Double Take", *The Village Voice*, Tuesday, July 10, 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/disco-double-take-6415308>.

³⁷ Reynolds, "Disco Double Take".

8pm on a Sunday evening and we're lost in music...Five hundred people are screaming, whooping, testifying to the power of music... All around, a disparate, multiracial crowd of boys, girls, queens and in-betweens are giving their all'.³⁸

I was over thirty years too late to the disco party, but that night at Body & Soul was the first time I'd experienced disco music in an environment that was as close to those original dance clubs as my age would allow. The dancers were the most diverse crowd I'd ever witnessed at a club – a mix of genders and a wide range of ages, ethnicities and sexualities. The music was a mixture of newer dance tracks and older throwbacks to disco's early years, the songs familiar to me only through the compilations mentioned above.

One track that sticks in my mind, whose opening bars still bring me goosebumps after my experience that night, is Inner Life's *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* (Larry Levan mix), originally released in 1981. It was as if hearing it for the first time. Suddenly, in that dark and disorientating environment, surrounded by those dancers, disco and its connection to my experience of being gay suddenly made sense. There was drama, melancholy and, at the same time, joy. It was as if the song could articulate every emotion I'd ever felt. Instead of being overwhelmed by these sensations, pulling in a multitude of directions, I seemed to find an equilibrium, a peace. Perhaps it was as a result of being in the company of dancers whose feet might have hit the floor at the Paradise Garage, or maybe it was due to dancing in the city where dance music had been born. Whatever the reason, there was something contained within that song that moved me in a way that I couldn't explain. Peter Shapiro describes Levan's mix of the song as 'absolute disco perfection: that unique combination of catharsis and

³⁸ Frank Tope, "Soul of the City", *Muzik magazine*, No.40, September, 1998, pp51-53.

seduction'³⁹, and I think that's a pretty good summary of my experience that night. I'd had dance floor epiphanies before – usage of MDMA was prevalent in the 1990s as I'd cut my clubbing teeth – but this was different. There were no intoxicants involved; the bar in Club Vinyl only served soft drinks. Though the song was recorded when I was only five years old and was mixed in a city thousands of miles from my home by someone of a radically different background to my own, it felt familiar and joyous and as if it had been created specifically for my pleasure. I understood that 'disco' was a feeling.

Given that the accounts of dance music I had read stressed the importance of disco and of gay men in its creation, my experience of the music in a club setting may have been clouded by these readings – the pleasure and release I derived from the music could have been in part explained by the knowledge I had gained of its inception. It is useful, therefore, to examine whether disco records were encouraging of a particular gay identity, or whether this music just happened to soundtrack an already emerging movement.

Disco disruption

With the definition of disco music in place, I now examine the ways in which it became a disruptive force, allowing a break from the traditional narrative offered by popular music, and how this in turn allowed a break from the traditions of society at large.

Firstly, it is worth examining the provenance of the songs that became popular in the discos of the time – the first break from tradition. Previously, songs gained popularity through radio play, or because they were the product of

³⁹ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.217.

established artists, or because a record company simply spent money on their promotion; often it was a combination of all three. Disco tracks, however, were obscure, were not likely to have been aired on mainstream radio and were not necessarily part of the music industry's promotional machine. 'Records like the O'Jays' "Love Train", Eddie Kendricks' "Girl You Need A Change Of Mind", the Intruders' "I'll Always Love My Mama", the Pointer Sisters' "Yes We Can Can", and the Temptations' "Papa Was A Rolling Stone" were broken or made in discotheques'.⁴⁰ Patti Jo's "Make Me Believe In You", the song that gives rise to Holleran's dancers' 'communal shout of ecstasy'⁴¹ and that causes their faces to blossom 'into the sweetest happiness'⁴² is another such example; *Dancer from the Dance*'s narrator notes the track's unusual power to provoke such a reaction, given that 'it was just a song played at discotheques one year, was never the most popular there, or surfaced in public'.⁴³

In the early days of disco, any chart success the tracks enjoyed emanated from their popularity on the dance floor and not vice versa – the records were tested on the floor first (a feature still present in dance music today). As Broughton and Brewster point out, despite no radio play, 'Gloria Gaynor's 1973 "Never Can Say Goodbye" had been the first disco record to chart as a result of club play'.⁴⁴ Disco records gained popularity from the ground up, rather than through record company promotion.

⁴⁰ Aletti, *The Disco Files 1973-78*, p.5.

⁴¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.229.

⁴² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.39.

⁴³ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.229.

⁴⁴ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.188.

The early disco tracks were also, for the most part, not recorded by established artists but performed by singers and groups who were not stars in their own right. In fact, it was the faceless music producers whose names were most sought after when it came to DJs digging for new records to play, not the artists themselves. Patti Jo only had two single releases to her name; “Make me believe in you” was, however, written and produced by Curtis Mayfield, a more widely known artist and performer.⁴⁵

Ken Emerson, writing for the *New York Times* in 1975, sees this lack of personality on the part of the singers as a reason for the music’s popularity, particularly among gay dancers. ‘An untheatrical identity...is extremely important to successful dance music, and the biggest disco hits of the past couple of years have been recorded not by stars but by relatively obscure performers’, Emerson writes. ‘This lack of personal identity on the part of disco performers allows unawed dancers to assert their own identities – through their dress, through their partners and through the steps they execute’,⁴⁶ he continues.

If the dance floor was the site where old identities could be shed and new ones adopted, then it was important that the dancers could emote a true sense of self, one that would be unhindered or compromised by the presence (if only vocally) of a straight male rock star. As Echols remarks, ‘disco advertised its facelessness. There were bands and orchestras, of course, but there were also machines, committees, corporations, sources, families, crews, commissions, conventions, and connections’.⁴⁷ These lesser-known groups of performers,

⁴⁵ Discogs, Accessed June 1, 2017. <https://www.discogs.com/Patti-Jo-Make-Me-Believe-In-You/release/797989>.

⁴⁶ Ken Emerson, “Can Rock Ever Learn to Dance Again?” *New York Times*, 9 November 1975.

⁴⁷ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.63.

mostly producer-driven, allowed a blank space in which gay men could inhabit the songs, their lyrics, with the purpose of formulating their own identities. Malone, on the night of his disappearance and presumed death, is seen enjoying such a reaction while dancing with the fertiliser heir (Schaeffer) that Sutherland has tried to pair him with: ‘Malone drew John Schaeffer nearer to him, closed his eyes, and began shaping the words that Patty Joe sang: “Make me believe in you, show me that love can be true,” his eyes wild when he finally opened them.’⁴⁸ Patti Jo, her voice described elsewhere as ‘metallic, unreal’,⁴⁹ allows Malone to imagine these lyrics as his own, leaving him with ‘an expression of radiant exhilaration’.⁵⁰

Tim Lawrence agrees but goes further to suggest that there was a specific type of vocal performance that would particularly appeal to gay dancers: ‘If performers were black, female, and intimately attached to night world, then their ability to overcome the double oppression of race and sex through gutsy emotion and bodily expressivity made them an appropriate candidate for the floor, especially if it was gay.’⁵¹ It is not unreasonable to suggest that one group on the margins, black and female, might be best placed to articulate the pressures and struggles of other marginal groups. In my novel, Col mouths along to a song from Loleatta Holloway, whose distinctive voice ‘saturates the air with pain.’⁵² Again, she is a singer who is perhaps not well known⁵³ but her voice allows the dancers to imagine the lyrics and emotion are their own. Alongside Col, ‘[a] heavy man

⁴⁸ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.229-230.

⁴⁹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.39.

⁵⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.230.

⁵¹ Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture*, (London: Duke University Press, 2003) p.372.

⁵² Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.93.

⁵³ Perhaps her most famous appearance was as the uncredited singer sampled on Black Box “Ride On Time”.

sings, as if alone, and his mouth stretches wide to let the hurt escape.’⁵⁴ The fact that this articulation could take place on the dance floor, a communal space, allowed gay dancers to see that there was a community of men facing the same struggles.⁵⁵

Secondly, given that the majority of the songs that became popular in discos were rhythm-led, it is worth examining how those particular rhythms could excite the gay dancers in a way that the traditional and more prevalent rock rhythms could not.

Peter Shapiro defines the kind of tracks played by early disco DJs as ‘music that tempered the “head music” of the psychedelic era with “tribal” percussion that connected more with the feet and groin’, and that offered a ‘retreat back into the body’.⁵⁶ This physical phenomenon of movement without thought is explained by record producer Tom Moulton in an interview given to *Newsweek*: ‘People react to cymbals like an electric shock. When you bring them down by just playing a drum or a conga, it’s like hanging them over a cliff. Then, with the tension of the instruments, you take them up a mountain and into a landslide until they’re free – floating and safe again. People don’t realise it but they love it.’⁵⁷ Strange and slightly confused metaphors aside, his explanation illustrates the effect these more complex rhythms were having on the dancers. Rather than the focus being on the straight-ahead beat of rock music, there was a more nuanced aspect to the disco rhythm with different percussive instruments eliciting different

⁵⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.93.

⁵⁵ This will be explored further in the section dealing with clubs and the spaces relating to disco.

⁵⁶ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.41.

⁵⁷ Maureen Orth with Betsy Carter and Lisa Whitman, “Get Up and Boogie!”, *Newsweek*, 8 November 1976.

physical responses. Holleran's narrator describes the sensation whereby the body is overcome, with disco-goers 'hell-bent' on experiencing '[t]he next song that turned their bones to jelly and left them all on the dance floor with heads back, eyes nearly closed, in the ecstasy of saints receiving the stigmata.'⁵⁸ The dancers are seeking to surrender their bodies to the control of this music which is able to envelope the whole of their physical being: '[t]hey lived only to bathe in the music'.⁵⁹ The body was played by the music. As I will elaborate later, these physical sensations were often enhanced by the use of recreational drugs.

Richard Dyer describes the effect of disco rhythms in his essay *In Defence of Disco* 1979. The essay was a rebuttal of his socialist peers' belief that it was 'politically beyond the pale'⁶⁰ to enjoy disco and in it Dyer offers a celebration of disco's delights. He asserts the importance of disco in disrupting the white straight male status quo found in rock and folk music. He argues that while our 'Puritan heritage' is probably the reason why 'Western music is traditionally so dull rhythmically'⁶¹ disco, instead, relies on 'insistent black rhythms' – a view similar to Aletti's description of discotheque rock above. Although he admits that rock music too was founded on 'black rhythms', for Dyer it was interpretation of those rhythms that created the difference between disco and rock music. He argues that rock is 'not whole-body, but phallic' and explains this to mean that rock music takes the rhythm and makes it even more driving – 'rock's repeated phrases trap you into their relentless push, rather than releasing you in an open-ended

⁵⁸ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.38.

⁵⁹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.40.

⁶⁰ Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco", *New Formations*, Summer 2006: Issue 58, p.101.

⁶¹ Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.104.

succession of repetitions as disco does.’⁶² He describes this as ‘whole-body eroticism’ – disco’s ‘willingness to play with the rhythm’ leads to the ‘sinuous movement of disco dancing, not just that mixture of awkwardness and thrust so dismally characteristic of dancing to rock.’⁶³ It could be argued that it was this sinuous movement allowed gay men to finally inhabit the whole of their bodies. The laws that had been enacted to criminalise gay people had, for reasons of practicality of enforcement, sought to police the physical, concentrating on sexual intercourse and dancing between men. Perhaps this ‘whole-body eroticism’ allowed gay men to take back ownership of the whole of their bodies, bodies the state and society had sought to control.

Physical reactions to different styles of music is something I explore in my novel. In Northern Ireland, Col is reluctant to dance to the straight ahead rhythm of punk at a party he attends; The Buzzcocks’ “Ever Fallen in Love...(With Someone You Shouldn’t’ve)” causes the other boys to jump ‘at each other like stags’⁶⁴ and to form a frenzied ruck that moves faster and faster so that ‘even the rhythm of the song was lost.’⁶⁵ Col waits for the song to end, sheltered behind an armchair. On his first outing to The Club in New York, however, Col finds the dancing there altogether different; on hearing Bunny Sigler’s “By the way you dance”, Col discovers that his ‘movements came without thought, as instinctive as breathing.’⁶⁶ The music brings a more collaborative, less antagonistic atmosphere

⁶² Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.105.

⁶³ Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.105.

⁶⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.194.

⁶⁵ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.194.

⁶⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.52.

to the dance floor where '[b]odies slide by, lubricated with sweat' and Col is able to slip 'through the dancers who parted with only the slightest pressure.'⁶⁷

The final song Col hears on his last night on the dance floor of The Club is Sylvester's "I need somebody to love tonight", a song I believe epitomises Dyer's notion of rhythm leading to 'sinuous movement'. Written by Sylvester and Patrick Cowley, both gay men who died during the 1980s AIDS epidemic,⁶⁸ the song formed part of Sylvester's 'first completely disco record,' and was intended to be 'hypnotic'.⁶⁹ Spin magazine selected the track as one of "The 30 Best Disco Songs That Every Millennial Should Know" and described it as embodying the sensation whereby '[r]aw physical need can take hold of your soul so badly that there's literally nothing else'.⁷⁰ As Col attests, the song 'articulates the need of every man in this room', and its 'backing track is so liquid, so reminiscent of sex...the dancers try their hardest to equal its fluidity.'⁷¹ Its rhythms work on the whole of the body.

In addition to disco's rhythm producing new movements on the dance floor, the very nature of the songs themselves may differ from the status quo. Popular songs, Dyer says, contain a tune which may be 'closed, self-contained' – that is 'although popular songs often depart from their melodic and harmonic beginning...they also always return to them.'⁷² In this way popular music offers no sense of a journey and the dancer/listener is returned to the same place they

⁶⁷ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.52.

⁶⁸ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.152.

⁶⁹ Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: Picador, 2006), p.168.

⁷⁰ Spin magazine, September 25, 2013. <http://www.spin.com/2013/09/best-disco-songs-daft-punk-justin-timberlake-robin-thicke/5k5f9oa4o2cg6kco0o8ccg0e846/>.

⁷¹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.220.

⁷² Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.104.

started. For gay men, this metaphorical place may have been an identity they perhaps did not want to inhabit – there is no space or distance to allow for transformation to occur. Disco music, on the other hand, Dyer sees as ‘often little more than an endlessly repeated phrase which drives beyond itself, is not ‘closed off’.’⁷³ The Sylvester track that Col dances to could be said to offer an example of Dyer’s ‘endlessly repeated phrase’; the only lyrics are the song’s title ‘I need somebody to love tonight’, sung repeatedly and with Sylvester’s intonation changing the words’ rhythm only slightly throughout its almost six minute duration. The repetitions of a disco track such as this can take the dancer/listener on a journey without limit.

Even if a song contained an end, it was an end that could be disrupted. One track that became popular in the clubs was ‘Girl You Need a Change of Mind’ by Eddie Kendricks. In *Love Saves the Day*, Tim Lawrence attributes the song’s success not only to the fact that ‘the track contained the kind of earthy energy that was perfect for peaking the dance floor’ but also because of ‘the ingenious redeployment of the break – a gospel technique that introduces a sweeping and apparently decisive end to a song the instantaneously followed by the piecemeal reintroduction of the instruments and vocal parts.’⁷⁴ The end was brought about, but then negated by building up the instrumental elements to create a whole once more, confounding traditional expectations.

This idea of the opened-ended nature of dance music is expanded further by Gilbert and Pearson in *Discographies*, taking as a starting point Susan McClary’s work *Feminine Endings* in which she creates a distinction between

⁷³ Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.104.

⁷⁴ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.113.

masculine and feminine forms of music. McClary defines the masculine as evidenced by the 'climax principle' in most post-Renaissance Western music: through the utilisation of tonality the listener is instilled with 'an intense longing for a given event: the cadence. It organises time by creating an artificial need....After that need is established...tonal procedures strive to postpone gratification of that need until finally delivering the payoff in what is technically called the 'climax', which is quite clearly to be experienced as a metaphorical ejaculation.'⁷⁵ Against this she offers a more feminine articulation in music, one that 'is equated with a refusal of linear time and directionality, an expression of cyclicity.'⁷⁶ Perhaps another way of viewing this distinction is that one type of music is of a more traditional, mainstream type and the other is, for want of a better term, more representative of the 'other'. I've often felt, in coming to the realisation of my sexuality, that since it was in opposition to the mainstream, certainly within the community I grew up in, I was drawn to things that were set outside that mainstream. It could be that it was a way to test my 'otherness', to enjoy being outside the mainstream through an assertion of identity determined by a particular art or culture, rather than the more problematic assertion of a sexual identity that was 'other'. Of course, music that celebrates 'otherness' can often become mainstream too, as Holleran experienced with the 'Muzak of disco'.⁷⁷

Using McClary's definitions above, Gilbert and Pearson conclude that 'most forms of contemporary dance music combine 'feminine' and 'masculine'

⁷⁵ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.14.

⁷⁶ Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies – Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.93.

⁷⁷ Holleran, *Dark Disco: A Lament*, p.191.

elements to an extent that very few forms of music can.’⁷⁸ The ‘masculine’ is represented by driving rhythm and narrative linearity that ‘of necessity most types of music have’,⁷⁹ but this is broken by the cyclical nature that comes from the possibility of being able ‘to mix a record in with the next one... The continuous DJ mix erases the distinction, creating a distinctively cyclical soundscape of breaks and crescendos, repetitions and returns, but at the same time it is never purely cyclical in that it is never simply repetitious.’⁸⁰ Although a climax can be present in the music it does not mark its end since another track can be played, the journey continued. It is this possibility in the music, first brought to fruition in the clubs, that is perhaps the most disruptive aspect of disco. In breaking the narrative expectation of the previous incarnations of popular music, disco music was able to offer a space for becoming, a journey without end that allowed the dancer to strip off the expectations and enforced identities of the wider world.

In *Dancer from the Dance* Holleran uses the idea of a DJ mix as a framing device in order offer glimpses of the various characters that make up the crowd at his imaginary Twelfth Floor club. From his position on a sofa the narrator firstly encounters ‘two strangers in plaid shirts’⁸¹ who discuss whether one of them should move in with his current boyfriend. The DJ mixes one song into the next – ‘Zulema’s “Giving Up” suddenly burst out of the recapitulations of Deodato’⁸² – and the men in plaid, rising to dance, are replaced by two different boys who discuss which of the men they would like to sleep with. They, in turn, leave at the

⁷⁸ Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, p.106.

⁷⁹ Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, p.106.

⁸⁰ Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, p.106.

⁸¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.44.

⁸² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.45.

next musical change – ““Needing You” began, buried in the diminishing chords of “You’ve Got Me Waiting for the Rain to Fall””⁸³ – and the subsequent occupants, again engaged in a conversation concerning sexual partners, vacate the sofa when “One Night Affair” rises ‘from the ruins of “Needing You”’.⁸⁴ None of their stories are ever finished and the characters are never revisited, but this section of Holleran’s novel comes close to representing the power of a DJ set. There is an overarching theme – in this case men searching for other men to love – and while each section is discrete, they remain open, incomplete, merging into the next without conclusion.

Finally, in addition to the cyclical and open-ended nature of disco music and its reordering and restructuring of traditional musical standards, disco music has the ability to emotionally connect with the listener. It was something I certainly felt when I first encountered the music in a club space. Jeffrey Dyer sees it as a romanticism that resides perhaps more in the instrumentation than the lyrics which are at times, he admits, often either ‘straightforwardly sexual – not to say sexist – or else broadly social’. He compares the soaring strings of disco ‘to surging, outpouring emotions’ and cites Diana Ross as a singer who is able to reflect the ‘inevitable reality’, as he sees it, of gay (male) culture, namely that ‘relationships don’t last’ but that while she is able to ‘express the intensity of fleeting emotional contacts’, her music ‘at the same time celebrates it, validates it.’⁸⁵ I am not sure that this could be said to be an ‘inevitable reality’ of gay culture, but I do feel that growing up gay in a world that was antagonistic towards

⁸³ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.46.

⁸⁴ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.47.

⁸⁵ Dyer, *In Defence of Disco*, p.106.

same-sex attraction caused conflicting emotions; there was the hope to love and be loved, but at the same time the despair that it would never be possible. This conflict is, I believe, at the heart of Patti Jo's lyrics too: 'Make me believe in you, show me that love can be true'.⁸⁶ While Sutherland scorns the young fertiliser heir for believing the words, Malone confides that he, too, believes them;⁸⁷ in the midst of their despair, hope exists that the next partner, the next exchanged glance, might lead to love. Disco music had the power to elicit these heightened emotions, and then, through techniques such as the break, offer the percussive space to tear them away.

What is harder to discern is whether the development in style of disco music, and therefore of modern dance music as a whole, was the product of these gay dancers and gay patronised clubs, or whether gay dancers flocked to an already established phenomenon that was better able to describe them.

As discussed above there was a 'symbiotic relationship between the crowd and the DJ.'⁸⁸ The music was chosen to fit the dancers' needs but, more than that, disco went further; dancers demanded the songs' structures were disrupted to heighten their intensity. Nicky Siano, DJ and owner of The Gallery, a club which operated from 1973 to 1977, would adapt already recorded records to suit the dancers needs, utilising three turntables to stretch out the crowd favourites in certain tracks, like 'Gloria Spencer's gospel stormer "I Got It"...Siano would work the crowd up to fever pitch by playing two copies...extending until breaking point the beginning where Spencer screams over the piston-pumping cymbals'.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.171.

⁸⁷ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, pp.171-172.

⁸⁸ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.92.

⁸⁹ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.26.

The original song structure is broken, allowing the dancers to inhabit a particular section of its intro, and the crowd drives the DJ to take the song further and further from its original form. 'Siano created a dark whorl of sound, a vortex of tribal drums and propulsive bass murmurs that was at once exhilarating and menacing.'⁹⁰

Tom Moulton, credited with creating the first twelve-inch single, experienced too how lengthening the songs could lead to a greater dance floor response. In an interview with Peter Shapiro he describes watching the dancers at the Botel, a Fire Island dance club favoured by gay men: 'all the songs are like two and a half minutes...they'd always walk off [because the clumsy mixing interrupted the momentum and flow]. I'm thinking, it's a shame, 'cause you could almost sense an emotional reaction there, but it wasn't long enough to get it out.'⁹¹

In response to this thwarting of emotional reaction, Tom put together a tape of his favourite new tracks, painstakingly spliced together so that the beat was never lost, a labour-intensive job that took him eighty hours. The tape, however, was a hit; Moulton had created the space for the dancers' emotions to emerge, holding them on the floor. Its success led to Tom Moulton being in demand as a remixer, an art-form he helped develop. These mixes tried to replicate the tricks DJs employed on the fly to lengthen and emphasise certain elements of the tracks for the dance floor. Moulton would take songs that had been recorded to fit the traditional three minute single template and tamper with them, 'using his equalizer to boost the bottom end and adding breaks to create

⁹⁰ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.27.

⁹¹ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.29.

disco extravaganzas'.⁹² This subversion of traditional songs and their structure was taken even further by a DJ named Walter Gibbons. Gibbons was famed for his highly percussive DJ sets, and his mix of Double Exposure's *Ten Percent* was the first commercially available twelve inch record. If that were not groundbreaking enough, Gibbons used his intimate knowledge of how certain sounds could affect the dancers to deconstruct the three minute song and create a nine-minute 'fantasia of orchestral swoops, pinpoint details and intense but almost soothing breaks.'⁹³ The methods employed by producers and DJs could create an atmosphere disorientating enough for a dancer to be taken out of themselves. The music Col first encounters at The Club has a physical effect on him: 'I became unbalanced by the horns and crashing cymbals...The tinny static of percussion raised hairs on my neck and was joined by a low frequency throb that detonated in my chest.'⁹⁴ At this point Col kisses Victor, taking the lead for once, his physical reactions to the music allowing him greater freedom.

It was not only the traditional structure and length of songs that the dancers, in collaboration with the DJs, sought to disrupt, but the meaning too. Tim Lawrence points to an anthem around which the emerging identity of New York's gay dancers coalesced – South Shore Commission's *Free Man*. The track features a dialogue between the two singers that could be seen as a negotiation prior to intercourse. Tom Moulton, in mixing the record, had thought the tempo too fast and slowed the record down to the point that the duet, originally between a woman and a man, now sounded as if it were between two men.

⁹² Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.32.

⁹³ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.34.

⁹⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.51.

Although this result was unintentional, as Lawrence points out, 'the intended meaning of the lyrics didn't really matter – what counted was the way in which the song was interpreted.'⁹⁵ DJ Francois K agrees, when it came to the meaning of disco music context could be everything. Interviewed by Brewster and Broughton, he remembers 'hearing the Bee Gees' "More Than A Woman" at the Loft⁹⁶ where, I think, it had a special meaning...it was being played alongside things like Barrabas' "Woman". It was not the same record that was being played on dance floors uptown.'⁹⁷ The Bee Gees' record had been an attempt by their record company to cash in on the disco sound which makes its re-appropriation and re-contextualisation by David Mancuso and the Loft dancers even more appropriate.

"The Greatest Performance Of My Life" by Loleatta Holloway is a song played at The Club in my novel. Originally recorded by Nancy Sinatra, then Shirley Bassey, the lyrics detail the heartache of a woman who pretends to be coping in the aftermath of a break-up with her lover. '*Tonight, I gave the greatest performance of my life...That not a single soul could tell I was lying.*'⁹⁸ Col mouths the lyrics and my intention was for the words to speak directly of his experience. The lyrics convey the pain he feels due to the breakdown of his relationship with Victor, but they also represent the performance Col feels he has given all his life; at home, he has pretended to be a certain kind of son, grandson, brother and friend, hiding traits he fears might cause those closest to him to love him less. In the flashback to his youth that takes place during this chapter, Col's

⁹⁵ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.193.

⁹⁶ This club will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁹⁷ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.209.

⁹⁸ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.93.

performance extends to accepting a gift of rugby boots with gratitude, determined to hide the truth that he hated the game, ‘for fear its discovery would bring forth others.’⁹⁹ The often simple lyrics of disco allowed the dancers to imbue them with whatever meaning they preferred.

Music’s ability to disrupt also extends to time and memory; in the section that follows I examine how this relates to Col’s experience and the construction of my novel.

Disco time

The discaire was mixing old songs with the new...and the old songs brought back the magic of whole summers to the people there.¹⁰⁰

This extract from *Dancer from the Dance* concerns the final party Malone attends, thrown by Sutherland on Fire Island. The narrator speaks of a song’s ability to embody an experience, and the way in which that experience can be summoned up simply by hearing the song once more. In this way, I believe, music can play with memory, collapsing time and allowing multiple disparate experiences to become one; music has the power to disrupt the linearity so prevalent in our lives.

While reading a recent collection of John Berger’s essays, I happened upon his description of this phenomenon: ‘The tempo, beat, the loops, the repetitions of a song construct a shelter from the flow of linear time: a shelter in which future, present and past can console, provoke, ironize and inspire one

⁹⁹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.103.

¹⁰⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.229.

another.’¹⁰¹ While his thoughts concern more traditional song formats than those tracks that would be played in a club or disco, the idea that a song can provide shelter from the dictates of time, that it allows the commingling of the past, present and future, is something that I hoped to investigate in writing my novel. The character of Col is searching for that elusive moment, when, he hopes, the complications of the world and his place in it will be removed, ‘that moment where all fear has been banished.’¹⁰² However, on this evening the break to linear time he encounters causes the past, both distant and near, to interrupt his present. Experiences from childhood and adolescence resurface and the emotions they evoke are felt in his present, contributing to and impressing themselves on his current state of mind. For example, whilst on the dance floor, Col imagines himself at home as child, hiding in a thicket of bushes near his house; he tries to summon the security this space from his past allowed, given its close proximity to his parents, in order that it might be felt in the present.¹⁰³

The method of embedding an incident from Col’s past in each chapter is an attempt to convey the emotional impact that a memory can bring. In recollecting an incident we remember, too, how it felt in that moment, not simply the mechanics of what happened; the emotion can be summoned, re-lived and dismissed in an instant. For example, the elation and trepidation felt by the two boys in the queue to The Club¹⁰⁴ reminds Col of the thrill, and also anxiety, of

¹⁰¹ John Berger, “Some Notes about song”, *Confabulations* (London: Penguin, 2016), p.96.

¹⁰² Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.111.

¹⁰³ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.198-199.

¹⁰⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.29-33.

meeting Victor for the first time.¹⁰⁵ Col's envy of the boys' friendship¹⁰⁶ allows the disappointment he felt at the breakdown of a childhood friendship to resurface.¹⁰⁷ As he tries to enjoy one last dance before meeting with Victor¹⁰⁸ he is reminded of the apprehension he experienced on the final evening at his family home before departing for New York.¹⁰⁹

This break with a linear narrative is one that can be seen in *Dancer from the Dance* also. The text offers a cyclical, open-ended account of Malone's life: the narrator begins the story of Malone as he clears the presumed-dead man's clothes from a boarding room on Fire Island,¹¹⁰ while at the end of the novel the narrator recalls Malone's final sighting as he disappears into the sea at night.¹¹¹ In between we move through time, Malone's life and the re-ordering of it presented in a non-linear way to maximise its emotional resonance. I see a similarity between this and the way in which the early disco DJs would reconstitute songs in order to create a building emotional effect, for example, Nicky Siano's endless repeating of the intro to Gloria Spencer's *I Got It*. There is a sense of defamiliarization here, the expectations of the dancing crowd are being altered. The emotional response to hearing an intro to a song they may know well is extended by repeating that intro; the moment is expanded so that the traditional concepts of time and its ongoing nature are confounded, the listeners are transported to the beginning time and time again. Even the nature of a DJ set,

¹⁰⁵ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.34-42.

¹⁰⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.54-56.

¹⁰⁷ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.56-74.

¹⁰⁸ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.217-220

¹⁰⁹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.220-234.

¹¹⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.28.

¹¹¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.232.

records played one after the other, offers a certain defamiliarization; although the records may be known to the dancers, the order in which they are played will differ each night so that their context is changed. Overlaying of one record onto the next, the foundation of the DJ mix, can bring together two separate responses, the emotions or memories stirred by one song join to another, creating at times a deeper and more complex reaction. It was this I hoped to achieve in the construction of my novel. Col's past experiences, and the emotions that return as he remembers them, coalesce to give stronger meaning to the 'otherness' he feels. His whole past is mediated through the present: a life remixed to emphasise its emotional intensity.

It is these emotional states I've attempted to convey, or at least soundtrack, in the novel through the use of song titles as chapter headings. This method of storytelling through record choice was something that was developed by the early DJs, with Larry Levan lauded as expert: 'To Levan DJing wasn't about mixing, skills or taste, but about feeling and, strangely enough, narrative. Levan often told stories or made comments through his song selection.'¹¹² The songs I have chosen are all credited to have been played at the Paradise Garage, the dance club The Club is based on,¹¹³ and each had been released before the night in question, January 1981. The novel starts with "It's Just Begun" by The Jimmy Castor Bunch; Col meets Victor in a chapter titled "You Stepped Into My Life" by Melba Moore; Col's introduction to The Club comes in the chapter "Welcome To Our World" by Mass Production; "Clouds" by Chaka Khan soundtracks Col's first feelings of otherness; the chapter detailing Col's loneliness and separateness from

¹¹² Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.262.

¹¹³ *NYRican's Garage Collection*. Accessed June 3, 2017. <http://www.theparadisegarage.net/pg/coquis/cpre76.html>.

his school friends is headed by Sylvester's "I (Who Have Nothing)"; his first sexual encounter occurs in a chapter titled by Teddy Pendergrass's "You Can't Hide From Yourself"; Victor's unfaithfulness occurs in a chapter headed "Why D'ya Do It?" by Marianne Faithfull; the novel ends with Cher's "Take Me Home". Col's life is described through song.

Disco Coda

And then those first unmistakable beats of the bass guitar, those first few notes that made everyone at the Twelfth Floor holler in a communal shout of ecstasy began...that curious song that had the power – even though it was just a song played at discotheques one year, was never the most popular there, or surfaced in public – to change the whole tenor of the place.¹¹⁴

Disco music was created by DJs and gay dancers, coming together to define a sound. This new style sought to disrupt the dominant musical structures to create a sound that was repetitive, open-ended and accepting of different expressions of identity; its stars were the faceless bands and producers who were promoted by the DJs, not forced on the public by a corporate publicity machine. Marginalised black and female voices allowed these gay men to act out their own hurt, heartache and celebration as they danced out of the closet to take on a new identity; moments were stretched so that this identity could be explored and inhabited. Gay men responded to the music and it, in turn, responded to them. In the next section I consider how drugs aided the disruptive power of the music.

¹¹⁴ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.229.

A brief interlude on drugs

You can't really give yourself over to serious discoing without drugs. You need the incredible level of energy they give the illusion of supplying, and you need their disinhibiting quality to allow the music's beat to take over your body, inhabit it, make it move with no sense of volition. Without drugs, disco can be fun, but only just fun.¹¹⁵

As Douglas Crimp describes so candidly above, there is another element to 1970s' club culture that could be said to have offered a transformative effect for those dancers: the use of recreational drugs. Again, the relationship between drugs and music was not one concocted by gay men – in the 1920s the jazz community felt that 'marijuana helped the creation of jazz by removing inhibitions and providing stimulation and confidence.'¹¹⁶ Founding member of the Grateful Dead, Gerry Garcia, said of Ken Kesey's mid-1960s musical LSD gatherings, the forerunners of Woodstock and the modern music festival: 'The Acid Tests were thousands of people, all hopelessly stoned, all finding themselves'.¹¹⁷

The clubbing scene of the 1990s I remember was synonymous with the drug ecstasy, the street name for Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). Even before I had any exposure to the drug, my musical heroes espoused its benefits; in a 1990 interview with *The Face* magazine, Ian Brown, lead singer of The Stone Roses, stated that '[e]cstasy had loosened people up who maybe

¹¹⁵ Douglas Crimp, "Disss-co (A Fragment): From Before Pictures, a Memoir of 1970s New York", *Criticism*, Volume 50, Number 1 (2008), p.13.

¹¹⁶ Harry Shapiro, *Waiting for the Man: The Story of Drugs and Popular Music* (London: Helter Skelter, 2003), p.44.

¹¹⁷ Shapiro, *Waiting for the Man*, p.151.

weren't in touch with their true spirit.'¹¹⁸ There was an idea that its effects could only be beneficial, and more than that, that it offered users a way to unlocking their truer self. Alexander Shulgin, a researcher in psychoactive substances, noted that on ingesting MDMA he felt 'absolutely clean inside, and there is nothing but pure euphoria' combined with a 'marvellous feeling of solid inner strength'.¹¹⁹

I'd attended clubs both with and without ingesting MDMA and while the experiences were qualitatively different, there was something about the existence of MDMA within the clubbing crowd that affected the atmosphere whether I had partaken or not. If, on a night out, the venue was populated with heterosexual people, more keen on drinking than taking drugs, I found the atmosphere was charged by a competitiveness driven by finding a suitable mate; as a young man navigating my homosexuality this did not make for the most comfortable of settings. If, however, I found myself in a club full of heterosexual people who were more inclined to be taking ecstasy, the atmosphere was more relaxed, less focussed on finding a mate and more predicated on dancing. Angela McRobbie agrees, finding that with the 'harmony haze of the drug Ecstasy...laddishness has been replaced by friendliness' and that young men, 'through the almost addictive pleasure of dance...also enter into a different relationship with their own bodies, more tactile, more sensuous, less focused round sexual gratification.'¹²⁰

While MDMA was not particularly prevalent in 1970s, except amongst a group of experimental therapists,¹²¹ usage of MDA – a close relation to MDMA

¹¹⁸ Collin, *Altered State*, p.156.

¹¹⁹ Alexander and Ann Shulgin, *Pihkal: a chemical love story* (Berkley: Transform Press, 1991) accessed online at - https://erowid.org/library/books_online/pihkal/pihkal109.shtml.

¹²⁰ Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity", *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.163.

¹²¹ Collin, *Altered State*, p.28.

with similar, if less pleasant, characteristics – had ‘spread into the gay club scene of the seventies’,¹²² particularly at Larry Levan’s first club, Reade Street.¹²³ A dose of MDA was described by Alexander Shulgin as creating a trip that was ‘euphoric and intense’ and that during it he ‘was reminded of living the moment to its fullest’.¹²⁴ If the music and the clubs of the 1970s allowed a disruption to the status quo for many gay men, then the addition of an experience such as the one detailed above perhaps took that disruption even further.

Encountering a club or disco for the first time could not guarantee that the attendee would be swept along in the atmosphere of liberation the space provided. In *Dancer from the Dance*, Malone is described as ‘a terrible dancer at first: stiff and unhappy...a detached look of composure on his face.’¹²⁵ Malone is also appalled by the music ‘the likes of which he had never heard before, and hadn’t the ears to hear at first’.¹²⁶ Although ‘Malone *never* does drugs’¹²⁷ (emphasis in original), his friend and guide, Sutherland, was a keen advocate, medicating on amphetamines to party¹²⁸ and maintaining a store of Valium for when he needed to come down.¹²⁹ When the young fertiliser heir that Sutherland takes under his wing laments being gay, Sutherland offers him a pill, assuring him, “I would never ask you to take anything that does not enhance lucidity.”¹³⁰

¹²² Collin, *Altered State*, p.31.

¹²³ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.198.

¹²⁴ Shulgin and Shulgin, *Phikal*, https://erowid.org/library/books_online/pihkal/pihkal100.shtml.

¹²⁵ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.110.

¹²⁶ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.112.

¹²⁷ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.161.

¹²⁸ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.49.

¹²⁹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.146.

¹³⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.52.

On Col's first visit to The Club he ingests some LSD given to him by Victor. While at first reticent to partake, Col is reassured by Victor's promise to take care of him and spurred on by his own desire 'to be part of that room.'¹³¹ His experience sees him becoming an advocate of altered states within a clubbing atmosphere: he funds his own partying by selling substances to friends and acquaintances¹³² and hopes to initiate one of the boys he meets in the queue by offering him half a LSD dosed sugar cube, rationalising that '[t]hese boys need their eyes opened.'¹³³

Sutherland, Col and Victor are not alone in advocating the use of drugs as a tool to aid release. Jorge La Torre, a club-goer in the 1970s, explained that '[d]rugs made it easier for you to lose your inhibitions...to remove yourself from everyday reality and travel to a different realm, or at least be open to that possibility.'¹³⁴ Again, if for many gay men it was necessary to escape the everyday reality, drugs were useful in hastening that journey.

The 1960s had seen an increase in drugs available to all Americans, not just gay men, from prescription medication to LSD. In 1965 there were '123 million prescriptions written for tranquilizers and sedatives...and 24 million for amphetamines'¹³⁵ and, due to 'a handful of enterprising chemists whose underground labs were flooding the market with remarkably potent product',¹³⁶

¹³¹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.49.

¹³² Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.6-16.

¹³³ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.125.

¹³⁴ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, pp.289-290.

¹³⁵ Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1995), p.306.

¹³⁶ Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, p.308.

LSD (Lysergic acid diethylamide or acid) was no longer limited to the medical community.

In spaces such as The Sanctuary, drugs were common: ‘dealers... doled out downers...as well as amphetamines and a lexicon of psychedelics from LSD to DMT.’¹³⁷ The DJ at Sanctuary, Francis Grasso, ‘would programme his ‘journeys’ in such a way that they would maximise the effect of the narcotics’.¹³⁸ When asked whether the crowd at Sanctuary was druggy, Steve D’Acquisto, a DJ at numerous clubs in New York, remarked: ‘All the crowds were druggy...Speed the drug of choice, LSD second, downers – Tuinal, Seconal – third.’¹³⁹

The rise in popularity of LSD, from a tool used for scientific enlightenment to the favoured hallucinogen of the 1960s counterculture was due to in no small part to luminaries such as Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and Ken Kesey, who advocated that you could ‘[d]rop acid and change yourself, change yourself and then change the world.’¹⁴⁰ The idea that LSD allowed users to ‘change’ was not simply hippie rhetoric, but has since been backed by scientific research. An investigation into self-experimentation of LSD usage by mental health professionals found that the overwhelming majority ‘responded that the experience allowed them to broaden and deepen their self-understanding.’¹⁴¹ In the context of gay men, this aid to the exploration of the self could have been

¹³⁷ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.147.

¹³⁸ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.18.

¹³⁹ Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.117.

¹⁴⁰ Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, p.xvi.

¹⁴¹ Petr Winkler, PhDr. & Ladislav Csémy, PhDr., “Self-Experimentations with Psychedelics Among Mental Health Professionals: LSD in the Former Czechoslovakia”, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Volume 46 (1) (March, 2014), p.14.

useful in uncovering aspects of themselves they had hidden for fear of discovery in a society hostile to homosexuality.

If, as discussed above, the music played in these clubs allowed men to inhabit their bodies in a way that had previously been unavailable to them, the addition of drugs such as LSD could certainly have accentuated the effect. A study into the drug and its synthesis with musical stimulus found that ‘LSD enhances music-evoked emotion’ and that, more specifically, ‘emotions related to “transcendence” would be enhanced by the drug.’¹⁴²

It is this aspect of drug experience – transcendence – which may also explain why these substances were so popular with gay men in the 1970s. Jorge La Torre recounts an experience which took place at the Flamingo club: ‘We all came as one, and I said, ‘This is it!’...I was so liberated I just let go of myself, but it was very fleeting...It was a welcoming but overwhelming experience.’¹⁴³ He was unable to say exactly what had brought about this transcendence, other than a combination of probable causes: ‘my mood that night...the friend I was with...the space...the drugs...the music’.¹⁴⁴ Again, this sense of belonging is something that perhaps many gay men had not experienced in their youth; if the ingestion of drugs helped attain this state, providing a commonality of experience among the dancers, it’s not difficult to understand that their use might be widespread.

The benefits of a catalyst in the creation of an atmosphere of togetherness or self-discovery in clubs was not lost on the organisers of certain parties,

¹⁴² M. Kaelen & F. S. Barrett & L. Roseman & R. Lorenz & N. Family & M. Bolstridge & H. V. Curran & A. Fielding & D. J. Nutt & R. L. Earhart-Harris, “LSD Enhances the emotional response to music”, *Psychopharmacology* (2015) 232:3607–3614, p.3611.

¹⁴³ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, pp.288-289.

¹⁴⁴ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.289.

particularly those private events where no alcohol was served. Inside The Loft, ‘Mancuso served no liquor, but with his acid-spiked punch no-one much complained.’¹⁴⁵ Also, at The Gallery, owner and DJ, Nicky Siano, remarked: ‘There was always acid, that was the big drug.’¹⁴⁶ After a police raid he famously passed out LSD-laced strawberries to the patrons congregating outside.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps this aspect of drug taking – a shared punch-bowl, a shared basket of laced fruit – added to the strong connection that the party-goers felt; not only were they dancing to the same music in the same space, they indulged in a communion of the same intoxicating substances.

At Flamingo and 12 West, the clubs Holleran’s club was based on, there was no alcohol for sale meaning the clubs could remain private affairs and escape interference from the authorities. Mel Cheren describes how, since both ‘adopted the policy of serving no liquor, only free punch and juice, the drugs flowed like water.’¹⁴⁸ He also remembers with fondness the camaraderie there, and how ‘[l]ove permeated the air’ so that no matter how many drugs he’d ingested he ‘felt utterly safe, taken care of.’¹⁴⁹ He puts forward the argument that since the ‘moralists rejected gay people and rejected drugs’, a lot of gay men saw the prohibition of drugs as just another ‘conspiracy against pleasure’.¹⁵⁰

Whatever the reason, with many dancers under the influence, in many clubs the music would be programmed in way that would respond to the particular

¹⁴⁵ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.56.

¹⁴⁶ Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.148.

¹⁴⁷ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, pp.127-128.

¹⁴⁸ Mel Cheren, *Keep On Dancin’: My Life and the Paradise Garage* (Damron: New York, 2004), p.163.

¹⁴⁹ Cheren, *Keep On Dancin’*, p.165.

¹⁵⁰ Cheren, *Keep On Dancin’*, p.187.

drug of choice, and with the DJs responsible for directing the mood, it was necessary that they sipped from the same cup. Sutherland's assertion in *Dancer from the Dance* that it was 'very important for the hostess and the discaire to be on the same drug'¹⁵¹ is not without basis. At Flamingo, the DJ, Howard Merritt, would consult with drug dealers as to their bestselling narcotic that week, then shape his playlist according to the drug's effects.¹⁵² The music played would be in thrall to the drugs consumed. Mancuso, too, would programme his records over the evening to reflect the three stages, or Bardos, that Timothy Leary¹⁵³ ascribed to a psychedelic trip: 'The first Bardo would be very smooth, perfect, calm. The second Bardo would be like a circus. And the third Bardo was about re-entry, so people would go back into the outside world relatively smoothly.'¹⁵⁴

Even many of the records produced would be created to complement a drug high. Producer and remixer Walter Gibbons 'was transfixed by the dance floor and introduced a drug aesthetic into his remixes that hypnotised his crowd, even if the sound made less sense outside of the club environment... "He wanted to make music for drugs because he knew it would invoke a better trip."' ¹⁵⁵

Drugs were there, not as necessity, but as a catalyst which allowed these men to dance longer, to lose themselves further in the music. In the next chapter I examine the final element of the disco experience, that is, the space in which drugs, music and dancers meet.

¹⁵¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.223.

¹⁵² Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.58.

¹⁵³ Ralph Metzler, Richard Alpert, Timothy Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008) .

¹⁵⁴ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, pp.85-86.

¹⁵⁵ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, pp.268-269.

Part Two: Dancing in outer space

The Paradise Garage, the basis of The Club in my novel, is only one in a long line of clubs and discos that catered specifically to gay men, each built on the foundations of those that came before. It is important to clarify that discos, or the idea of dancing in a room to pre-recorded music, was not the invention of gay men. Indeed, dancing as a communal activity has a lengthy history. In her study on collective joy, Barbara Ehrenreich uses examples of cave drawings depicting scenes of ritual dancing to suggest that ‘well before people had a written language, and possibly before they took up a settled lifestyle, they danced and understood dancing as an activity important enough to record on stone.’¹⁵⁶

The word discotheque can be traced back to Nazi-occupied Paris, a ‘combination of two French words, *disque*, meaning “record,” and *bibliothèque*, meaning “library”’.¹⁵⁷ In *Turn the Beat Around*, Peter Shapiro explains how youth groups in opposition to the Nazis, particularly a loose organisation known as the Swing Kids, would meet in ‘largely clandestine affairs hastily organised around a vacant spot and the availability of a portable gramophone and a connoisseur’s collection of swing records’¹⁵⁸ and that these gatherings ‘mark the first instance that a disc jockey played music of his own choosing...tailored to a specific crowd of dancers in a non-domestic setting.’¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (London: Granta Books, 2007) p.22.

¹⁵⁷ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.3.

¹⁵⁸ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.4.

¹⁵⁹ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.4.

It is also important to reiterate that discos and clubs as they exist today were not borne out of John Travolta's flashing dance floor or the celebrity catwalk of Studio 54. Discos, as we've come to know them, were created in the most part by gay men for gay men in the early- to mid-1970s. Peter Shapiro cites the gay-owned Tenth Floor club as the 'minimalist setting' that 'became the template for nearly all underground discos, gay or straight, that followed.'¹⁶⁰ The fact that the rest of the world caught on to this site of freedom and expression and turned it into a commercial enterprise should not diminish the value of discos in the liberation of many gay men. In this section I offer a brief outline of the history of gay discotheques and how they changed the way in which gay men were perceived as well as the way in which gay men perceived themselves. I look at the importance of these spaces in allowing a previously invisible community to gather and show that through the disruption of work spaces and leisure time discos allowed many gay men to question the values imposed on them by the straight world. Finally I examine how a disco or club might be a transformational space not only for a community of attendees but also for the individual, allowing the dancer freedom of movement and thought that could perhaps lead to re-evaluation of the self.

Disco space: The beginnings

It is difficult to put an exact timeframe on the emergence of gay discos; gay men had danced to jukeboxes in bars long before the 1970s.¹⁶¹ Perhaps one event which could be viewed as ground zero for a particular brand of gay

¹⁶⁰ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.58.

¹⁶¹ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, pp.44-45.

activism, at least in New York City, is the uprising that occurred at the Stonewall Inn on the night of June 28th 1969.¹⁶² Much has been written of its importance in the struggle for equal rights,¹⁶³ or at least in the fight for less harsh policing of gay venues. An articulation of the changing cultural landscape and anti-authoritarian discontent that emerged in the late 1960s, the riot that ensued was an example of how some gay men, lesbians and trans men and women were no longer content to hide in the shadows, wary of the next police incursion. The patrons took a stand against a heavy-handed police raid that sought to intimidate and embarrass them and in the riot's wake gay life, particularly in New York, became more visible, more prevalent and more celebratory. Mel Cheren, a record company executive who had lived in New York since the late 1950s, noted that: '[t]he aftermath of Stonewall almost took your breath away. Gay New York seemed to explode, bars popping up like mushrooms, splashy bathhouses opening across the city, discos and demos and books and magazines and a radical new spirit proclaiming "*Gay is good!*"'.¹⁶⁴ Alice Echols, too, notes that '[t]he Stonewall riot and the fallout from it had the effect of legitimising gay space. Bathhouses and discos, rather than meeting halls or community centers, became what journalist Andrew Kopkind called the "sensational glue" holding these communities together.'¹⁶⁵

Ehrenreich states that '[a]nthropologists tend to agree that the evolutionary function of dance was to enable – or encourage – humans to live in groups larger

¹⁶² Dennis Altman, *Homosexual Oppression & Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) pp.126-127.

¹⁶³ Robert Aldrich, *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), p.23.

¹⁶⁴ Cheren, *Keep On Dancin'*, p.89.

¹⁶⁵ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.53.

than small bands of closely related individuals',¹⁶⁶ the notion being that larger groups could protect themselves from predators. In the same way, it makes sense that gay men would want to gather their numbers, however loosely, against the predatory advances of police and state. Ehrenreich goes on to argue that even as speech and rationality developed humans still needed a 'primitive emotional mechanism' to bond these large groups together, and that it was to be found in 'music and physical touch'.¹⁶⁷ Coming together to dance allowed gay men to strengthen the community that had formed in the aftermath of Stonewall.

One of the first New York discos to emerge in Stonewall's wake that could be recognised as an antecedent to modern clubs was the Sanctuary. A former church in Hell's Kitchen, the club began life catering to a straight crowd, though it also had a loyal gay following. After complaints from the local Catholic Church shut it down, it was allowed to reopen under new management with the proviso that the religious iconography that had been daubed on the walls was covered over.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately for the church, the new management comprised a gay couple, Seymour and Shelley, who decided that the space should now become especially welcoming to the gay following it had already acquired, going as far as to employ 'gay men to handle the door.'¹⁶⁹ The couple retained Francis Grasso as DJ who, with the help of the gay dancers responding to his record selections, was partly responsible for the emergence of the disco sound. In an interview given to Bill Brewster, Francis Grasso explained Shelley's insistence on creating an exclusive place for gay men: 'they fired everybody, 'cos they didn't want women,

¹⁶⁶ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, p.23.

¹⁶⁷ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, p.24.

¹⁶⁸ Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, p.146.

¹⁶⁹ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.56.

‘cos this was after Stonewall...it was the first time they’d taken the concept of a gay bar without a jukebox.’¹⁷⁰ Also, a change for such a venue, was the new owners’ insistence that the club should be out in the open. Although gay venues had existed in New York, they were hidden in plain sight, such as Julius, ‘a straight bar at the front,’ which was ‘widely known to be gay in the back, where there were no windows and you could mingle and meet in the hazy darkness.’¹⁷¹ Seymour and Shelley did not plan on hiding, however. An example of the new visibility the owners embraced was when they granted permission for Jane Fonda’s film *Klute* to use the club as a location: ‘[g]ay establishments have always protected themselves by drawing a heavy curtain of obscurity over their activities. Not Shelley. He wanted to go Hol-ly-wood!’¹⁷²

Where Stonewall led the way on disobedience, other clubs followed. Albert Goldman, in his often hyperbolic photographic essay on disco, said of Sanctuary: ‘The police hit the joint night after night, but raiding such a mob was not an easy operation...hundreds of voices from the floor would chorus: “*Fuck you! Let the cops carry us out!*”’¹⁷³ Gay life in the city was becoming more open and less apologetic. Dennis Altman believes this new spirit was directly attributable to the wider societal changes that were taking place; since the counter-culture movement was questioning the traditional moral values of society, the same values that would oppose gay life, ‘it is no accident that gay liberation

¹⁷⁰ Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.59.

¹⁷¹ Cheren, *Keep On Dancin’*, p.27.

¹⁷² Goldman, *Disco*, p.114.

¹⁷³ Goldman, *Disco*, p.118.

emerged as a large scale movement in the wake of black, youth, and woman's protest'.¹⁷⁴

Outside the city, some gay men had already discovered a place away from the prying eyes of the authorities. As Shapiro noted, some of the first gay discos to emerge were on the popular resort of Fire Island. A short journey from the city, the resort was popular with gay men escaping the heat of summer in Manhattan and 'thanks to its bohemian atmosphere and lax policing'¹⁷⁵ the men who visited could act out their 'wildest fantasy...without fear that anyone from the straight world would find out about it.'¹⁷⁶

In 1970, two venues, the Ice Palace and the Sandpiper, emerged on Fire Island, catering to a new, emboldened crowd. In addition to sympathetic policing, Holleran's narrator describes the importance of the resort's geographical location in allowing the men who went there to 'put an even more disdainful distance between themselves and America: free, free at last.'¹⁷⁷ The land was 'as slim as a parenthesis'¹⁷⁸ and allowed its visitors to separate themselves from the pressures of society to its west. If the city could not tolerate the desires and needs of these men, they would find a space that could. A frequent visitor recalls 'getting off the boat in the Pines harbour and seeing all these beautiful yachts, a low row of shops, and men holding hands. It was like paradise. In the early seventies I couldn't wait to get there, and once I was there I didn't want to come home.'¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*, pp.194-195.

¹⁷⁵ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.55.

¹⁷⁶ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.57.

¹⁷⁷ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.24.

¹⁷⁸ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.23.

¹⁷⁹ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.42.

While some discos relied on geographical distance to create a space apart from the world, others worked to curate its attendees to minimise interactions with authorities and those who didn't share their values. In 1970, a less overt disco was opened by a gay man named David Mancuso, who used a system of private invitation to avoid police scrutiny. Cited as the blueprint for modern club culture, attendance was by invite only and, without a liquor license, the party could run all night without fear of intervention by any authority. The Loft, as it came to be known, took place in David Mancuso's own home, a loft space in the downtown area of New York. More a house party than commercial concern, once the entry fee was paid, everything else was free, from the food consisting of a buffet, to the fruit punch and cloakroom;¹⁸⁰ even the drugs that allowed the dancers to carry on into the next day were often distributed without money changing hands.¹⁸¹ Each invited guest was allowed to bring along another guest, thus opening up the potential attendees to those known and unknown to the host. According to Mancuso, the crowd of party-goers consisted of '[e]verybody. Gay, straight, bi, black, Asian. There were a lot of different people,'¹⁸² but without an invite, there would be no entry, ensuring a space free from anyone who did not share the host's ideals.

From the beginnings of the 1970s, encouraged by the popularity of clubs such as Sanctuary, the heaving dance floors on Fire Island and the assertiveness of the Stonewall uprising, more and more clubs emerged. As the summer ended, the men that partied in the resort of Fire Island returned to the city. Many wanted to

¹⁸⁰ Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.127.

¹⁸¹ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.101.

¹⁸² Brewster and Broughton, *The Record Players*, p.127.

keep this atmosphere alive, to bring a part of what made Fire Island so freeing back to Manhattan. Clubs such as the Tenth Floor and 12 West were opened by gay men to try and recapture the spirit of those summer nights. According to Tim Lawrence, Holleran's fictional club, the Twelfth Floor, 'a little club on the twelfth floor of a factory building in the West Thirties'¹⁸³, was a composite of these two disco spaces.

Even spaces that had opened primarily as political venues became caught up in music and dancing. The Gay Activists Alliance headquarters in an abandoned Soho firehouse held a weekly Saturday night dance that attracted on average 1,500 people. Alice Echols believes these happenings 'suggest the intimate and synergistic connection between gay liberation and gay disco.'¹⁸⁴ If, as Dennis Altman argued, gay men's oppression was due to a denial of their gay identity then liberation could be achieved by attending these gay spaces since attendance was an assertion of that identity – out of the closets and into the streets.¹⁸⁵

With the emergence of these discos, gay men began to take control of their leisure spaces. No longer were the venues run at the behest of unscrupulous landlords or mafia syndicates keen to exploit the fear many gay men had of their sexuality being made public – even the Stonewall Inn, as important as it was, was described as a 'real dive, an awful sleazy place set up by the Mob.'¹⁸⁶ Whether it was Seymour and Shelley's vision of a highly visible public space, the GAA's political space, or Mancuso's private space, suddenly gay men had room to

¹⁸³ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.37.

¹⁸⁴ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.50.

¹⁸⁵ Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*, pp.9-13.

¹⁸⁶ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.48.

congregate that wasn't policed, that wasn't run strictly to profit from their fears but that was set up by men like them, men they could, for once, identify with. In *Approaches to Human Geography*, Lawrence Knopp uses the term "quests for identity" to describe a 'search for emotional and ontological security.' In the context of gay men he sees this as the search for 'people, places, relationships, and ways of being that provide the physical and emotional security, the wholeness as individuals and as collectivities, and the solidarity that are denied us in a heterosexist world.'¹⁸⁷ These gay owned and run clubs provided the first instance of an environment where this quest could be realised.

Disco space: disruption of society

The provision of safe spaces in which gay men could congregate was not the only disruption to the status quo offered by the emergence of discos. The methods by which these clubs were brought into existence, and the attributes they were given, appeared to disrupt the order of the society around them in a number of ways.

Firstly, the spaces these clubs employed were not those usually given over to leisure pursuits. As previously mentioned, one of the first clubs to emerge was housed in a deconsecrated church. Where previously people had met to commune with God, they now met to commune with one another. This setting, familiar yet different, was, according to Robert Brezner, 'certainly the first place where gay men could congregate in such a large crowd.'¹⁸⁸ A space normally reserved for aspects of the creation and maintenance of family – marriages, christenings, a

¹⁸⁷ Lawrence Knopp, "Movement and Encounter", *Approaches to human geography: philosophies, theories, people and practices*. (Los Angeles : SAGE, 2015), pp.264-265.

¹⁸⁸ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.30.

weekly Sunday outing – was being used instead to bring gay men together, men who were at that time often seen as the antithesis of family – lonely, isolated beings engaged in un-reproductive sex.¹⁸⁹

As the disused piers along the Hudson became a cruising site for gay men to meet and have sex, the empty factories and loft spaces adjacent to them became venues for the marginalised to gather. As Shapiro puts it, ‘discotheques, many of which were situated in abandoned factories and warehouses, were recolonising the dead industrial space, replacing the production of goods with the production of illusions.’¹⁹⁰ Holleran describes the change to the streets surrounding these buildings which during daylight had seen ‘men running racks of clothes down the sidewalk...and trucks honking at each other to get through the narrow passageways of factory exits.’¹⁹¹ At night, however, the area was ‘as still as the oceans of the moon,’ until ‘late on Friday and Saturday nights, around one A.M., flotillas of taxis would pull up to a certain dim doorway and deliver their passengers, who, on showing a numbered card, would go up in a freight elevator to the Twelfth Floor.’¹⁹² Leisure time was no longer confined to spaces such as theatres, cinemas, bars, concert halls and sports fields; gay men sought nightlife away from the traditional haunts. Tenth Floor opened in a building in New York’s garment district, a space that had formerly housed a sewing-machine factory; 12 West was located in a former plant nursery underneath the West Side Highway; The Firehouse took its name from the former fire station it occupied; Paradise Garage was a previously a parking garage, its ramp remained intact as a walkway

¹⁸⁹ Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*, pp.63-65.

¹⁹⁰ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.190.

¹⁹¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.37.

¹⁹² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.37.

into the club. Any disused or abandoned space had the potential to be reborn as a disco. The Acid House scene of the late 1980s, which spawned Ecstasy culture in the UK, deployed similar tactics: ‘a diversity of spaces were appropriated and adapted as the venues for parties, from warehouses, barns, film studios and aircraft hangars, to council flats, motorway underpasses and derelict buildings’.¹⁹³

Where once things had been manufactured, people gathered instead to create an experience. What was perhaps disruptive about this coming together was that although an experience was created, it was ephemeral in nature. By the end of the final record, as the lights came up and the last of the crowd left the floor, whatever had been created dissipated into the morning. Despite the energy and exertions of the partygoers, the DJ, the staff, and in direct contrast to commerce and manufacture, nothing remained.

With spaces popping up away from the traditional centres of socialising, the varied make-up of their patrons, too, was able to break free from the societal dictates of who should and should not mix together. This ability of early discos to reach beyond prescribed social or ethnic sets was another disruption to the existing order. As Holleran’s narrator described: ‘All was strictly classless: The boy passed out on the sofa from an overdose of Tuinols was a Puerto Rican who washed dishes in the employees’ cafeteria at CBS, but the doctor bending over him had treated presidents. It was a democracy such as the world – with its rewards and penalties, its competition, its snobbery – never permits, but which flourished in this little room on the twelfth floor of a factory building on West

¹⁹³ Andrew Hill, “Acid House and Thatcherism: Contesting Spaces in Late 1980s Britain”, *Space and Polity*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 219–232, December (2003), p.222.

Thirty-third Street, because its central principle was the most anarchic of all: erotic love.’¹⁹⁴

Men gathered not because they grew up in a certain neighbourhood, or attended a particular school, or because their profession or ethnic background brought them together; they gathered because these spaces had been created by men who, like them, no longer wished to live a life alone.

The clubs offered a protective space for these men to meet, their attendance determined by this single commonality of purpose. With one man’s reasons for being there the same as the next man’s, there was little chance of encountering someone, even someone you might know in the confines of the straight world, who would want to bring your participation to task. As Col encounters Victor for the second time, the freedom offered by the club is replaced by anxiety on the street: ‘Although I’d arranged to meet several blocks from work, I nervously scanned the crossing for anyone who might spot me...convinced the world had stopped to gawk.’¹⁹⁵ In public, Col explains, ‘we could offer nothing of ourselves.’¹⁹⁶

Gay space became important as an alternative to the space of family and society in which to be gay was often to be pitied and where frequently the only gay culture to be found was one of oppression. Altman quotes Steve Dansky, writing in a *Gay Flames* pamphlet: ‘At the G.L.F. dances we have danced the circle dance as a show of community.’¹⁹⁷ The importance here is that the community is visible, and that it is one defined by gay men, not society. Kopkind,

¹⁹⁴ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.40.

¹⁹⁵ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.84.

¹⁹⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.85.

¹⁹⁷ Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*, p.155.

in an 1979 article entitled “Gay Life: Present at the Creation”, sees this need for exclusive community (a space apart from straight people) as ‘evident beyond argument: gay culture strengthens the fragile self-image of homosexuals, and the more complete the community, the stronger the image.’¹⁹⁸ He argues that space without straight people present is necessary since ‘[e]very gay person knows that the mood of a roomful of homosexuals is abruptly and irreversibly changed when straights enter.’¹⁹⁹ A lifetime of moderating behaviour in the company of heterosexuals is not easily forgotten.

Many gay men moved to the city to escape their families, but whilst being among strangers can be liberating it can also be an isolating experience. Ben Malbon, in his study on clubbing, suggests that city life consists of ‘strangers among strangers’ and that it is the ‘continual and often stressful presence of strangers that can result in the impulse for experiencing an alternate atmosphere of belonging or identification.’²⁰⁰ Clubs, he argues, can act as sites for strangers to come together and experience a sensation of belonging. While his study did not specifically examine clubs in the context of gay men, it is not unreasonable to imply that this might be why this phenomenon would be particularly true of gay men in the early part of the 1970s. While the gay men, like Malone and Col, who left their homes for the city of New York might have escaped an intolerant community, they are also then thrust into a world ambivalent towards them. On the night Col first meets Victor, he walks amongst the young gay men gathering on Christopher Street and, despite this being his fourth or fifth time visiting,

¹⁹⁸ Andrew Kopkind, “Gay Life: Present at the Creation”, *The Thirty Years’ War: Dispatches and Diversions of a Radical Journalist 1965-1994* (New York: Verso, 1995), p.328.

¹⁹⁹ Kopkind, *The Thirty Years’ War*, p.326.

²⁰⁰ Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, Vitality* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.40.

remains 'too afraid to be more than just a spectator to their rituals.'²⁰¹ Having left his family, he has yet to find a replacement community. Similarly, before Malone meets his first love, Frankie, and before he is introduced to Sutherland, he, too, finds himself wandering the streets; absent from his family and friends, he is bereft of company and describes himself as 'half-waiting to be born...a ghost, in fact, waiting to come to life through love.'²⁰² These clubs offered a new community to commit to and a chance, perhaps, to find love.

The very act of attending a disco, being able to pass through the doors unhindered, engenders a feeling of belonging. With many of the clubs acting on a membership basis, entry provided an assertion of identity. As Malbon argues, albeit with regards to a more contemporary club scenario, the early part of the night where a clubber gains entry indicates the passing of a test which 'can act to establish and reinforce the emergent belongings through which the clubbing crowd inside is bound together.'²⁰³ While on one hand this may facilitate a sense of belonging, it can also be a method of exclusion. From my own experience, it was this passing through a doorway to inhabit an identity that I found problematic. Outside of the club or space, the only identity that pertained to gay people were the (in those days, negative) attributes that society had placed on them. Caught on the threshold, it was hard not to summon up the qualities of sexual perversion and disease that had informed many discussions of homosexuality in my adolescence.

Once inside, however, discos allowed the individual to shed the self that had been created by the wider society around them, no longer under any

²⁰¹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.34.

²⁰² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.80.

²⁰³ Malbon, *Clubbing*, p.68.

obligation to adhere to the rules imposed by the straight world. Further, this gathering of gay men allowed for newer modes of behaviour and expression to be uncovered. Gay men could at last see themselves reflected in others, no longer so alone. At Sutherland's party in Holleran's novel some of the younger party-goers are described: 'their dark eyes wide and gleaming with the wonder and fear we had all felt at seeing for the first time life as our dreams had always imagined it... at seeing so many others like themselves, at seeing so many people with whom they could fall in love.'²⁰⁴ Col, too, feels the communal aspect that the dance floor could invoke, the realisation that a song 'articulates the need of every man in this room.'²⁰⁵ In the same section Col uses the collective first-person pronoun in places, as he loses himself to the crowd: '[o]ur claps accelerate'; 'we cheer our survival'; 'the DJ creates these moments of drama that carry us through the week, that keep us coming back.'; '[o]nce more the singer implores us.'²⁰⁶ The sensation of togetherness that the dance floor provokes allows Col to identify as part of a larger group.

While at first this identification with men who were similar only in their desires may have erased the social, ethnic and economic boundaries, as more clubs emerged the same societal barriers were erected. The ideals that were espoused at the Loft or Sanctuary were not to be found at spaces such as Tenth Floor, where the crowd was 'overwhelming Caucasian'²⁰⁷ and membership 'effectively functioned as the gentlemen's club of the gay elite.'²⁰⁸ But with new

²⁰⁴ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.226.

²⁰⁵ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.219.

²⁰⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.217-220.

²⁰⁷ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.79.

²⁰⁸ Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, p.58.

clubs opening all the time, this scarcely mattered. At 12 West, the crowd ‘was more racially mixed than many New York discos,’²⁰⁹ and where might be found ‘people who were overweight, people who were short, people who weren’t muscular, people who danced by themselves, people who just strolled around the dance floor, and people who were older’.²¹⁰ Despite the elitism of some spaces, disco’s popularity ensured there was a venue for everyone, and its history proved that if a space did not exist for you, then you could create it for yourself.

With the space of industry co-opted for leisure, the social barriers around assembly torn down, a disco also had the potential to disrupt life outside its walls by turning the idea of the working week on its head. The new clubs that emerged paid no heed to the notion of a good night’s sleep to guarantee a productive day; the parties carried on while the remainder of the population were tucked up in bed. The overnight parties, Lawrence believes, helped ‘invert the priorities of a society organized around daytime work’.²¹¹ Holleran’s narrator, in describing the life of the disco goers, details how the moon ‘already floated in the the sky when we awoke.’²¹² Once inside a disco the meaning of time would soon become irrelevant. As David Mancuso described, at the Loft ‘you were cut off from the outside world... You got into a timeless, mindless state. There was actually a clock in the back room but it only had one hand. It was made out of wood and after a short while it stopped working.’²¹³ With time allotted no value, the working week could not encroach on the party. The blacked-out windows banished even the

²⁰⁹ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.67.

²¹⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.195.

²¹¹ Tim Lawrence, “Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor”, *Cultural Studies*, 25:2 (2011), p. 238.

²¹² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.114.

²¹³ Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, p.24.

natural order of day and night. Famously, Mancuso once let the party run until it came to an organic end; it didn't stop until late on Sunday night, having started on Saturday.

Malbon sees the 'now-ness' of clubbing, 'its insistence on the present' as reinforcing the notion of the act of clubbing as being 'outside time, regulated temporally only through rhythm', and argues that the present as it is experienced within a club environment might 'temporarily obliterate the concerns of life before, beyond and outside'.²¹⁴ For many gay men of that era, the concerns of life might include unhappiness within their family or workplace and the pressures of leading a life that, outside of the disco, denied their being gay; it stands to reason that they might construct and enjoy an environment where these concerns could be suspended, at least for a night.

Another element to these gatherings might have been their ability to undo some of mental turmoil many gay men found themselves burdened with. Ehrenreich describes how the 'ecstatic rituals of non-Western peoples often have healing, as well as religious, functions, and one of the conditions they appear to heal seems to be what we know as depression.'²¹⁵ With depression being one of the outcomes associated with the stigmatisation of gay people,²¹⁶ perhaps the popularity of discos for many gay men was due to their ability to at least lessen the harm done by wider society. Ehrenreich asserts that those rituals 'serve to break down the sufferer's sense of isolation and reconnect him or her with the

²¹⁴ Malbon, *Clubbing*, p.102.

²¹⁵ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, p.151.

²¹⁶ Michael Radkowsky and Lawrence J.Siegel, "The Gay Adolescent: Stressors Adaptations, and Psychosocial Interventions", *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 17, No.2 (1997), p.200.

human community.’²¹⁷ For a gay man, attending a disco for the first time might also offer a counterpoint to their sense of dislocation, to feel part of something, at last.

This environment, in addition to the disruptive elements of the music discussed above, could make for a heady combination. As Village Voice journalist Kopind said of his favourite disco, ‘[t]he throbbing lights, the engulfing sound, the heightened energy and hyperbolic heat of Flamingo gives me the sense that the world is enclosed in this hall, that there is only *now*, in this place and this time.’²¹⁸ The dancers could escape those aspects of the world intolerant to them, the antagonisms of the past and the difficulties of the future. It is this state of being that the character Col in my novel is so voraciously chasing.

Disco space: disruption of the self

While discos disrupted the spaces they inhabited as well as the society outside, the environment created within a disco also had the power to disrupt the internal lives of its attendees. Even though dancing can be about ‘becoming part and submitting to the dancing crowd’, it also allows space for the dancers to individualise ‘the self through the bodily practices of dancing within that crowd.’²¹⁹ Crimp agrees, believing both states can be achieved at once: ‘[w]ith disco at its best, dancing is both individual and collective.’²²⁰ Within the crowd, the dancer is free to express themselves without censure.

²¹⁷ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, p.152.

²¹⁸ Andrew Kopkind, ‘The Dialectic of Disco’, *The Thirty Years’ War*, p.314.

²¹⁹ Malbon, *Clubbing*, p.91.

²²⁰ Douglas Crimp, “Disss-co (A Fragment): From Before Pictures, a Memoir of 1970s New York”, *Criticism*, Volume 50, Number 1, Winter (2008), p.15.

‘If their days were spent in banks and office buildings, no matter: Their true lives began when they walked through this door – and they were baptized into a deeper faith, as if brought to life by miraculous immersion.’²²¹ As the narrator in *Dancer from the Dance* attests, the safety that discos brought allowed the dancers to investigate their true selves, to inhabit their ‘true lives’. Indeed, the names of the earliest discos described themselves as places of safe congregation - the ‘Sanctuary’ and ‘Haven’ hoped to provide their dancers with the shelter they required. As mentioned above, the gathering of these men may have allowed them to experience a sense of identity previously unavailable and through association with others they were able to learn how one might be gay. However, the longevity and prevalence of discos and clubs in gay culture, and their appropriation by the wider world, suggests that their usefulness goes beyond being a site where gay men might meet and identify with others. Many spaces, such as bars or cruising grounds, might have offered the same opportunities for such assembly. I believe there is something intrinsic to the senses that are awakened, or indeed confused, when subjected to the lights, the music and the proximity of others when within a club environment that allows for the re-evaluation and transformation of the self. For gay men, particularly those coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, struggling to reconcile their sexuality against the negative values the world attributed to it, the importance of a space for re-evaluation cannot be overestimated.

There are very specific qualities to a disco or club that I believe make possible this state of re-evaluation, an instant where, as the narrator in Holleran’s novel imagines, the dancer may forget that they are dying.²²² One such quality that

²²¹ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.43.

²²² Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.42.

Malbon notes, in addition to the sounds, is the use of both light and darkness which can ‘sensuously disorientate and physically insulate the clubbers from, and within, the surrounding crowd, if only fleetingly. The combination of these effects, together with the extremely loud music, can evoke the sensation of being in a slightly unreal world, a space in which there is almost too much sensuous stimulation at once.’²²³ Within this unreal space, where the senses are overwhelmed, the dancers might further confuse their reality with the addition of drugs. If reality represents the oppression of their homosexuality and the strict adherence to the roles designated by family and society, perhaps the fabricated, unreal world of a disco offers space to re-evaluate these constraints, or at least to forget them. As Col sits by the side of the dance floor he can’t help but imagine what his family might be doing at home; he then takes a hit of poppers and it allows him to briefly escape these preoccupations: ‘[e]yes shut, I roll my head to the lights...Music whooshes back like my ears have been cleared of water...I’ve removed myself.’²²⁴

The experience of lighting within a club goes beyond a mere visual spectacle. In the same way that music is not simply heard in a disco but also felt, lighting can have an effect that goes beyond vision. In *Discographies*, Gilbert and Pearson explain how a light-show can work to ‘defeat the domination of the visual sense through a surfeit of stimulus akin to noise interference,’ and create what they call a ‘synaesthetic blur.’²²⁵ As Col takes to the dance floor for the last time, a strobe flashes in silence, heightening the experience for the crowd; operating at

²²³ Malbon, *Clubbing*, p.97.

²²⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.112.

²²⁵ Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, p.137.

maximum frequency, ‘the shimmering white light is a hand pushing me under, pinning me without mercy’, then as it slows, the ‘[f]lashes pound like heartbeats, the pulse so solid it can almost be heard.’²²⁶ The effects Col feels go beyond visual stimulation to create something that is physical. This blurring of the senses means that no one sense is dominant. The effect has its roots in the 1960s be-ins and happenings and the clubs that sprung up afterwards such as the Electric Circus in New York.²²⁷ Goldman describes a visit to this club, the embodiment of the hippie festival experience, as ‘a feeling of total immersion’.²²⁸ The hippie festivals themselves were ‘beachheads of a new, ecstatic culture meant to replace the old repressive one’.²²⁹ It is perhaps appropriate that Goldman speaks of ‘immersion’ and Holleran’s narrator alluded to a baptism of sorts when attending a disco.²³⁰ There is a sense that these spaces offered regeneration, or even purification, where one’s identity as it had been constructed and interpreted by society could be washed away. Again, these attributes of the disco recall Ehrenreich’s ecstatic rituals, which she believes ‘encourage the experience of *self-loss*, that is, a release, however temporary, from the prison of the self’.²³¹

As shown above, the music, with its percussive breaks and emphasis on sustained non-traditional song structure, helped gay men inhabit their bodies more freely, the addition of lights and the sensory overload they provided accentuated this freedom. Lawrence agrees that it was lighting, or more often the lack of it,

²²⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, pp.218-219.

²²⁷ Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, p.137.

²²⁸ Goldman, *Disco*, p.101.

²²⁹ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, pp.220-221.

²³⁰ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.43.

²³¹ Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, p.152.

that allowed the dancers ‘to exceed everyday constrictions’, and when lighting was used, ‘it was usually aimed at creating disorienting effects, again in order to encourage the dancer to experience the dance floor as an alternative and experimental space.’²³² In the darkness, this experimental space could appear to extend beyond the confines of the building and beyond the world itself. From a given point on the dance floor only the bodies surrounding you might be visible, or perhaps you catch a glimpse of the next body along, or the one behind that, until you might conceive that beyond each body is another, then another, on and on without limit. Malbon describes this aspect of the dance floor in his introduction as the creation of a space with ‘no edges, no end in time or space.’²³³ It is within this limitless space that a dancer might be able to imagine him or herself as they would choose, free from restriction.

Reading Malbon’s description of a limitless space I am reminded of Gaston Bachelard’s writings on ‘intimate immensity’, whereby a daydream ‘transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.’²³⁴ He describes this immensity as the ‘expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts when we are alone.’²³⁵ Perhaps for many gay men clubs offered such a space where the restrictions of the outside world no longer impeded their thoughts and inner life. Although a dancer is not alone by any means on the dance floor, many dancers have experienced a feeling close to isolation while dancing.

²³² Lawrence, *Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor*, p.239.

²³³ Malbon, *Clubbing*, p.xii.

²³⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 183.

²³⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p.184.

Goldman's description of the Electric Circus touches upon this notion when he recounts the effect that the culmination of extreme aural, visual and sensual stimulation has on the dancer. He notes that '[s]trangest of all, in the midst of this frantic activity, you soon feel supremely alone; and this aloneness produces a giddy sense of freedom, even of exultation. At last you are free to move and act and mime the secret motions of your mind.'²³⁶

The narrator, too, in *Dancer from the Dance* recalls this sensation of being alone: 'For that is the curious quality of the discotheque after you have gone there for a long time: In the midst of all the lights, and music, the bodies, the dancing, the drugs, you are stiller than still within, and though you go through the motions of dancing you are thinking a thousand disparate things...What will I do with my life? What can any man do with his life?'²³⁷ This state of being is, to me, one of the most important aspects of attending a club but one that is not often articulated. It is this idea of isolated reflection I tried to convey as Col transports himself from the dance floor to a space he encountered in his youth. Almost a miniature forest, he imagines the 'hedge that borders our garden.'²³⁸ Within the space, and its association with his childhood, Col tries to summon the safety he no longer feels, to conjure a place where he can be alone, but at the same time be assured that his parents are 'still within reach'.²³⁹

Bachelard describes the use of the forest by poets to evoke this state of immensity, a solitary place where we may be more able to transcend the trappings of life. By its nature, the forest is immense and Bachelard cites the poet Gueguen,

²³⁶ Goldman, *Disco*, p.101.

²³⁷ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.132.

²³⁸ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.198.

²³⁹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.199.

of whom he says, '[f]orest peace for him is inner peace. It is an inner state.'²⁴⁰ In addition, he quotes Rene Menard who writes, '[i]n the forest, I am my entire self. Everything is possible in my heart just as it is in the hiding places in ravines. Thickly wooded distance separates me from moral codes and cities.'²⁴¹ Reading this, I picture the dance floor as a forest, thick with bodies that separate and protect, indistinct in their multitude. Within the city a dance floor can offer an immense space, a place where the daydreamer can cast aside the world they inhabit for boundless imagination.

This may seem counter to my previous assertions that the space of clubbing brought many men together and gave them the opportunity to not feel alone. What is different, however, about the state of alone-ness described above is that it is elective rather than enforced. The importance of this loneliness is that it can be experienced in the midst of others – a state of being that is at once free, but without the anxiety of complete free-fall.

There is a comfort to be had that allows the self to travel further, to remove itself to such a degree that a whole new way of being might be enjoyed, however fleeting the feeling. It is these short-lived moments that both Col and Malone chase, moments in which the weight and regrets of the past as well as the anxiety of the future can be removed or at least forgotten.

Disco space: closure

Discos were borne out of necessity, allowing gay men to come together, away from a world in which they had been vilified, policed and pitied. Colonising

²⁴⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p.187.

²⁴¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p.187.

spaces that had been left derelict by dwindling industry, they sought to disrupt the nine-to-five society that excluded them. These spaces could only have been created by gay men, sites in which to learn from one another and ultimately to feel less alone. By using dance, the evolutionary function of which was to create bonds within a larger group, these men created a community of sorts. Once safely ensconced in this congregation of like-minded individuals, the sensory overload provided by the environment of lights and music allowed the dancers to turn in on themselves and experience a sense of self that the everyday world, with its sanctions and constraints, had inhibited. The subversion of time and space allowed for an experience of reality that was different from the everyday.

Last Dance

This final section is similar to Leary's third bardo: a precursor to re-entry to the outside world. Before being thrust, blinking, into daylight, I reflect on the findings of this critical essay and its bearing on my creative work in an attempt to bring both aspects together. As I embarked on this project, I encountered problems creating a dialogue between the two; I had to complete the novel before the critical essay could begin. Now that that work is done, I realise that the two are not as discrete as I might have believed. If the novel is an exploration of the alienation that can be felt growing up in a society intolerant to different sexualities, then the critical examines the ways in which that alienation can be overcome, or at least lessened. The focus has been narrow, concentrated as it is on a community of gay men in one place (New York) at one time (the 1970s), and their representation in the novel *Dancer from the Dance*. There is further work that might be undertaken to understand the effect of dancing and music in other marginalised groups and their representation in literature.

From its outset, this essay was an attempt to understand the relationship between gay men and disco, and, by extension, my own relationship to music, clubs and dancing. I posed the question: how and why is disco so gay? The answer could possibly be given in the simplest terms: because it is. That is, disco, as it has come to be known, originated from within a gay community.

Disco was created because it didn't already exist; it fulfilled a need that had yet to be catered for. Gay dancers pushed the DJs to play longer, to keep a flow and momentum that had not previously been provided; they favoured songs

that were rhythmic and preferred those less well-known singers whose pain and marginalised status might echo their own. The record producers and mixers, many of whom were gay, extended the records for the benefit of the dancers, accentuating those aspects of the instrumentation and structure of the song that acted on the body. Where no place existed to gather and dance to this style of music, gay people created such spaces; they used buildings that had been abandoned by industry, abandoned by religion, and when no space was available they used their own homes. They made their parties private and did not serve alcohol, insulating themselves from state intervention. A network of clubs was created that allowed these gay men to gather, to dance, to find love. The straight world was not going to offer these opportunities to gay men, so they constructed them for themselves.

However, this piece is not only concerned with the mechanics as to how disco came about; it is also an attempt to understand what it is about dancing in a club to this music that is of particular interest to my protagonist, to Holleran's Malone and Sutherland, and to many other gay men, myself included. As detailed above it can be understood as a combination of several things: the rhythms that produce sinuous movement, allowing these men to take control of their bodies; the open-ended nature of the songs and DJ sets that offer a space for becoming; access to a community of like-minded individuals; access to drugs that might enable release and introspection; a subversion of the societal norms relating to the working week and leisure time; an overwhelming of the senses that allow a break from reality; a safe space in which an individual might forget the past, forget themselves.

Perhaps all the above reasons merely show how disco was created to be separate from the society that had marginalised, vilified, criminalised and cast-out gay people. The culture of dancing in a community did not begin with disco and it certainly doesn't end there. The concepts tried and tested on those New York dance floors have been enjoyed by subsequent generations, straight or gay, not only as a pastime, but as an act of resistance. The Acid House scene of the late 1980s could 'be understood as presenting a challenge to the emphasis Thatcherism placed upon notions of social discipline, governmental authority, respectability, the work ethic and what constitutes good, 'common sense' behaviour.'²⁴² House music became known as 'disco's revenge';²⁴³ the dance continued to disrupt.

If I had difficulty creating a conversation between the critical account and my creative, then perhaps a better way to view the two pieces would be that the creative represents the question to which I hope the critical offers an answer. Given that, as a gay man, I want my novel to describe the experience of feeling separate, apart not just from society but from family too, it raises the question: how can that experience be unwound?

I suppose I need to add a caveat to the effect that, in my experience, I don't believe that the feeling of dislocation that is impressed on young gay people can be overcome completely. This is something I came to realise as I wrote *Each Distant Light*; I'd hoped my protagonist might find a community that he could feel part of, and that the alienation of his past might be replaced by a sense of belonging. But I couldn't write that story. It didn't feel truthful to me. In *Dancer*

²⁴² Andrew Hill, *Acid House and Thatcherism: Contesting Spaces in Late 1980s Britain, Space and Polity*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 219–232, December 2003 p.220.

²⁴³ Bill Brewster, "Frankie Knuckles Obituary", *Guardian*, April 1, 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/apr/01/frankie-knuckles>.

from the Dance, Malone, too, is unable to commit to the community he finds. Although he discovers some ease with his sexuality amidst this lifestyle, Holleran portrays his comfort as short-lived. The novel could be viewed as a critique of the gay subculture that Malone finds, a community as rigidly governed by rules and traditions as the heterosexual family Malone has relinquished: 'As a child Malone had consecrated his life to Christ; as an adult, to some adventurous ideal of homosexual love – well, both had left him flat.'²⁴⁴ If the isolating effect of the past cannot be overcome perhaps there are ways in which it can be diminished. As Malone offers on his final night, 'At least...we learned to dance. You have to grant us that. We are good dancers'.²⁴⁵

For a group of gay men in New York during the 1970s came the discovery that although the past could not be unwound, the experience erased, it could be, for a brief moment, forgotten.

²⁴⁴ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.221.

²⁴⁵ Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, p.231.

Disco Reprise: additional notes

Throughout my critical commentary, I directly referenced works that informed, illuminated and clarified my argument. However, this bibliography is far from complete; there are many more novels, works of non-fiction and academic studies that helped in the formulation of my thesis. In what follows, I will expand on the cited texts to discuss works in the additional bibliography, resources that I have used indirectly in the construction of my novel and commentary. I will also discuss works that provide possible further exploration of the themes expressed in this critical analysis. While this commentary might be drawing to a close, I do not see this as an end to my investigation; I believe the search for identity and belonging is an ongoing process and the questions that I've attempted to answer will, no doubt, continue to trouble me still.

Fiction

In the commentary above, I focused almost exclusively on the fiction of Andrew Holleran, namely the novel, *Dancer from the Dance*. There are, however, many other works which influenced the writing of my novel, both in its construction and its themes. Amongst those listed in the additional bibliography are: novels which offer examples of non-chronological narratives used to describe a character's life, the effect providing an accumulation of experience rather than a linear account;²⁴⁶ novels which, for me, articulate a familiar gay experience

²⁴⁶ For example: Evie Wyld, *All the Birds, Singing*; Teju Cole, *Open City*; Robert Seethaler, *A Whole Life*; John Williams, *Stoner*; Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams*.

despite an unfamiliarity in their time and setting;²⁴⁷ and novels that investigate a sense of displacement in the world, the feeling of not quite fitting in.²⁴⁸ My novel is an attempt to combine these themes and attributes.

While all the novels in the additional bibliography have contributed to my writing, I will focus here solely on one novel which I believe successfully incorporates the themes and techniques described above: Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*. The novel's protagonist, Richard Garay, was born in Buenos Aires to an English mother. Told in the first person, Tóibín details Richard's life in Argentina as the government transitions from the rule of the Generals to a more democratic model, the changes to society mirroring Richard's growing understanding of himself and his sexuality.

Part One of the novel describes Richard's relationship with his parents and his formative experiences. It begins, however, with Richard in his late thirties, at his mother's apartment; she died many years before, yet Richard has not opened the bedroom curtain, or window, in that time, worried 'that some residual part of my mother...will fly out over the city, and I do not want that.'²⁴⁹ Tóibín then moves back in time²⁵⁰ as Richard describes his confession, first to a student, Jorge

²⁴⁷ For example: E.M. Forster, *Maurice*; Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*; Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar*; James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*; Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*; Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story*.

²⁴⁸ For example: Anne Enright, *The Green Road*; Patrick Hamilton, *Hangover Square*; Richard Yates, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*; Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*; Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn*; Willy Vlautin, *Lean on Pete*.

²⁴⁹ Colm Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, (London: Picador, 1996), p.3

²⁵⁰ Evie Wyld deploys a similar technique in her novel *All the Birds, Singing*; interspersed through the present, a series of flashbacks recount details of the protagonist's past that illuminate her current situation.

Canetto,²⁵¹ and then to his mother, that he is gay.²⁵² This is followed by recollections of his father and his father's death when Richard is still young: 'I thought it would be fine without him; soon, I expected, we would be used to it.'²⁵³ Richard also recounts his first homosexual experiences as a teenager: 'I did not know what this was, but I let him do it.'²⁵⁴ Describing being at his mother's bedside on her death, Richard believes, '[w]hatever was locked inside her...did not die with her...it remains inside me, and I do not know how to get rid of it.'²⁵⁵ While not chronological, this accumulation of experience allows for a deeper understanding of Richard's interiority, and the description of his life that follows.

The death of his parents is not a discrete act but an ongoing absence that Richard tries to mitigate at many stages in his life.²⁵⁶ For example, Richard's relationship with Donald and Susan Ford, American governmental agents sent to smooth Argentina's passage to democracy, becomes almost filial as Susan buys Richard suitable work clothes²⁵⁷ and Donald introduces him to business contacts.²⁵⁸ Also, Richard's elation at beginning a relationship with Pablo is displayed when he visits his parents' graves and he admits that 'after years of not

²⁵¹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.9.

²⁵² Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.11.

²⁵³ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.17.

²⁵⁴ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.23.

²⁵⁵ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.60.

²⁵⁶ Similarly, in Seethaler's *A Whole Life*, the loss of Egger's wife, Marie, in an avalanche, resonates throughout the remainder of his life. Likewise, for Grainer in Johnson's *Train Dreams*, the deaths of his wife and child in a forest fire blight his life thereafter.

²⁵⁷ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.107.

²⁵⁸ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.109.

being all right, years when I missed them...I feel loved again and secure'.²⁵⁹ Tóibín shows that the past can inform all aspects of our present, and that, despite the distance that time creates, the emotions of the past can be felt as keenly. This is a phenomenon I attempted to convey as Col experiences flashbacks to his past while on the dance floor.²⁶⁰

In Tóibín's novel, I was also struck by the portrayal of Richard's gayness, the 'aspects of myself which I did not understand, desires and longings which did not seem part of the everyday world'.²⁶¹ In choosing to read fiction, I hoped to find an articulation of my own desires, the problems that occurred when that desire was realised, or indeed quashed; I sought out books that might act as a mirror to reflect my own experience, reading as 'a means of self-affirmation'.²⁶² In coming to understand the gay characters I encountered while reading, I hoped to better understand myself.

There are many examples in Tóibín's novel that chime with my own experience of being gay and the experience as recounted by other gay male writers in literature.²⁶³ Tóibín puts forward the idea of being gay as an innate characteristic: as Richard remarks, 'when I was a baby I was homosexual'.²⁶⁴ The consequence of this difference means Richard begins 'to see the world as separate

²⁵⁹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.198.

²⁶⁰ See Disco Time section, pp.293-296 above.

²⁶¹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.30.

²⁶² Bishop, Rudine Sims, "Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors", *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*. Vol.6, no.3 Summer 1990.

²⁶³ In particular, Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* and E.M. Forster's *Maurice* offer similar accounts of the ostracising nature of homosexual desire in childhood and adolescence.

²⁶⁴ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.10.

from myself',²⁶⁵ and finds that he cannot envisage a 'real future in which I would take part, in which I could find a job and start a family.'²⁶⁶ Fear of this difference being discovered leads to cautiousness and anxiety; as Richard teaches English at the university he is 'uneasy with the men in the class...careful not to pay too much attention to the one or two that I liked.'²⁶⁷ Only in a sauna, amongst other men who were attracted to men, could he begin to feel comfortable.²⁶⁸ After his first date with Pablo, 'a strange ease and feeling of happiness' comes over Richard and he wonders if this was 'how other people felt...Was I the only one who had not felt it before?'²⁶⁹ Richard's sexuality had made it impossible before now to experience the world as others did. In hiding his true self he'd taken to 'masquerading',²⁷⁰ 'mimicking their masculinity';²⁷¹ in living with Pablo, Richard understands 'something of the world around us, what made people happy, which I had not known before.'²⁷² These concerns are familiar to me,²⁷³ and I attempted to reflect them through Col's experiences: on the difference he feels, Col remarks, 'I had always felt this way';²⁷⁴ changing after rugby Col is anxious his difference

²⁶⁵ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.14.

²⁶⁶ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.31.

²⁶⁷ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.94.

²⁶⁸ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.144.

²⁶⁹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.191.

²⁷⁰ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.155.

²⁷¹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.109.

²⁷² Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.226.

²⁷³ See p.261 above.

²⁷⁴ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.234.

might be discovered, 'afraid my stares would find me out';²⁷⁵ after a visit to The Club, Col recognises the comfort that might be derived from being amongst other gay people, stating, 'I could live there.'²⁷⁶

Richard's internalised difference is compounded by the sense of displacement he feels due to his English heritage. His mother moved from England to Argentina as a young girl, 'forced to live down here so far away from home.'²⁷⁷ Richard is physically distinct from those around him, 'tall and fair-skinned and blond with blue eyes';²⁷⁸ he 'shared English' with his mother, making them 'different from everyone around.'²⁷⁹ During the occupation of the Malvinas, Richard's colleagues are 'unsure' about him, and his allegiance given the fact he is 'half-English'.²⁸⁰ Tóibín examines the way in which, on one hand this separateness can be an ostracising experience, yet can also provide a certain freedom. Attracted to the Fords as 'outsiders',²⁸¹ he enjoys their company, allowing him 'to take part in another life that had no connection with anything I had known before.'²⁸² The sauna he visits offers a 'hidden universe of unwritten rules.'²⁸³ On a trip to La Rioja, Richard enjoys 'my anonymity here, the fact that I

²⁷⁵ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.115.

²⁷⁶ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.130.

²⁷⁷ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.3.

²⁷⁸ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.7.

²⁷⁹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.57.

²⁸⁰ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.65.

²⁸¹ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.81.

²⁸² Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.104.

²⁸³ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.144.

was not part of this place.’²⁸⁴ When he finally leaves his mother’s apartment for a new house on the marina, Richard is gladdened: ‘I...smiled to myself about the future...I was away from them.’²⁸⁵

Escape from the world he inhabits allows Richard to become someone different. Although this is not without its drawbacks: when Richard is admitted to hospital with pneumonia he realises, ‘I did not have a next of kin.’²⁸⁶ There is no one to receive news of him. By the novel’s end Richard is diagnosed HIV positive,²⁸⁷ the status compounding his displacement from society. The tension that Tóibín demonstrates between the desires for belonging and freedom, with regard to both people and places, is something that struck me as truthful to my experience of being gay and a theme that is important in my own work.²⁸⁸ It was this state of being that I tried to portray in my novel’s conclusion; Col is caught between his life in New York and his life at home, between sobriety and intoxication, between desire and self-control.²⁸⁹

Non-fiction

In much the same way, when approaching the critical part of the thesis, there were a number of works which, while not thematically similar to my own, provided examples of how such an investigation might be framed. In writing this

²⁸⁴ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.165.

²⁸⁵ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.223.

²⁸⁶ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.281.

²⁸⁷ Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, p.287.

²⁸⁸ This is a theme Tóibín revisits in *Brooklyn* and one which Anne Enright examines as the children of Rosaleen Madigan return to Ireland in *The Green Road*.

²⁸⁹ Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.258

critical commentary I found it difficult to find a tone that might best express my thoughts; both the novel and the critical piece deal with ideas so personal to me that a strictly academic approach did not feel suitable. In an effort to achieve an appropriate register, I sought out non-fiction that offered a cultural enquiry while at the same time expressing something of the author's life, incorporating elements of the personal in order to strengthen the argument.²⁹⁰ These materials can be found in the additional bibliography, alongside other works of biography and autobiography which deal with New York at the time of my novel's setting,²⁹¹ providing insights into that time and place.

One example, which allowed me to imagine the potential of such an approach, is *The Lonely City* by Olivia Laing. A work of creative non-fiction, Laing draws upon her own experience of loneliness to interpret and interrogate both artists and their art, using the city of New York as a thematic link. After a failed relationship, Laing relocates to New York and discovers that, 'loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship'.²⁹² During this time she begins, 'to fall in love with images, to find solace in them that I didn't find elsewhere',²⁹³ and also to investigate the people who had created these images, artists who 'had grappled in

²⁹⁰ For example: Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, an autobiographical take on the subject of D.H. Lawrence, or rather, the difficulties of such an endeavour; Hilton Als' *White Girls*, a personal reading of race and gender through a collection of essays on culture and women; Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, an autobiography which also retells the history of the United States, bringing issues surrounding race to the fore.

²⁹¹ For example: Edmund White, *City Boy*; Patti Smith, *Just Kids*; Brad Gooch, *Smash Cut*; Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals*; David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals*.

²⁹² Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, (New York: Picador, 2016), pp.3-4.

²⁹³ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.5.

their lives as well as work with loneliness and its attendant issues.’²⁹⁴ Laing’s work is an ‘attempt to chart the complex relationship between loneliness and art.’²⁹⁵

Throughout the book, Laing uses personal prompts to introduce the work of various artists. For example, Edward Hopper is brought to mind when the nuisance of a broken blind leaves her feeling peered upon.²⁹⁶ During a period of intense loneliness, Laing feels unable to make her self understood and believes that Andy Warhol, ‘an artist I’d always dismissed until I became lonely myself’,²⁹⁷ would understand this reticence to communicate. At Halloween, the desire to don a mask leads Laing to ruminate on the connection between masks and loneliness, and, in turn, an examination of David Wojnarowicz’s work, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*.²⁹⁸ While subletting an apartment, Laing is reminded of reclusive Chicagoan artist Henry Darger.²⁹⁹ In a bid to console the loneliness she feels, Laing binges on YouTube videos and discovers Klaus Nomi, a performer ‘who made an art of being an alien’.³⁰⁰ The personal manner in which these introductions are made allows for a deeper understanding of the artists’ work and the connections between them. It was a method I attempted when describing some of the music highlighted in my critical commentary.³⁰¹ For example, on hearing

²⁹⁴ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.6.

²⁹⁵ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.8.

²⁹⁶ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.15.

²⁹⁷ Laing, *The Lonely City*, pp.49-50.

²⁹⁸ Laing, *The Lonely City*, pp.95-96.

²⁹⁹ Laing, *The Lonely City*, pp.135-137.

³⁰⁰ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.179.

³⁰¹ See p.284 above.

Ain't No Mountain High Enough at Body & Soul, I found that 'the song could articulate every emotion I'd ever felt.'³⁰²

Laing's critical appraisal of the artists' work is also personal in its approach, each being viewed through the lens of her loneliness. When describing the 'noxious pallid green' in Hopper's *Nighthawks* painting, Laing argues, '[t]here is no colour in existence that so powerfully communicates urban alienation'.³⁰³ Laing asserts that Wojnarowicz's Rimbaud pictures 'testified...to the experience of feeling different, cut off, incapable of confessing real feelings: imprisoned, in short, as well as liberated by a mask.'³⁰⁴ Encountering the works in this way, experiencing them as Laing does, strengthens her central thesis.

In finding a sense of loneliness reflected in the art, Laing then looks to the lives of the artists themselves for sources of the pain expressed in their work. Examining the life of Hopper, Laing finds a man who was not given to interviews, but in later years admits that 'I probably am a lonely one.'³⁰⁵ Delving into Warhol's past, Laing 'was struck by how hard he seemed to be struggling with the demands of speech.'³⁰⁶ Wojnarowicz, having grown up with an abusive father and then a neglectful mother, also lived rough on the streets of New York, and is described as 'being profoundly isolated by his past', a sensation 'intensified by the old anxiety about sexuality.'³⁰⁷ On unearthing Darger's autobiography Laing finds that '[t]here was never a sense of a *we*, of being part of a merry herd. Rather,

³⁰² See p.276 above.

³⁰³ Laing, *The Lonely City*, pp.20-21.

³⁰⁴ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.109.

³⁰⁵ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.43.

³⁰⁶ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.50.

³⁰⁷ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.106.

an impression of himself as outside'³⁰⁸ (emphasis in original). These biographical insights allow Laing to draw comparisons between her experiences and those of the artists, underlining the connection she feels to their work.

Laing corroborates her own experience of loneliness, as well as those of her subjects, with studies and findings by experts such as psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann,³⁰⁹ social scientist Robert Weiss,³¹⁰ psychoanalyst Melanie Klein,³¹¹ and psychologist Sherry Turkle,³¹² giving further depth to her analysis.

Laing's study is a way of interrogating not just the social and psychological causes of loneliness, but is also a reflection on the effects art can have on that loneliness. In conclusion, she discovers, 'by handling the things that other people had made, slowly absorbing by way of this contact the fact that loneliness, longing, does not mean one has failed, but simply that one is alive.'³¹³ Laing's account itself provides a similar function for the reader, who is perhaps feeling less isolated by the end.

While my critical commentary did not offer the space to pay the same close attention to the musicians, producers and DJs of disco music as Laing has paid to her artists, there is potential to follow Laing's example and expand my argument further. In a future draft, one that might find an audience beyond this thesis, I hope to strengthen my argument by building on personal autobiographical elements, and also by elaborating on the biographical accounts of certain gay

³⁰⁸ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.142.

³⁰⁹ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.24.

³¹⁰ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.26.

³¹¹ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.173.

³¹² Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.228.

³¹³ Laing, *The Lonely City*, p.280.

singers, producers and DJs. Artists I will examine include Sylvester,³¹⁴ Patrick Cowley,³¹⁵ Larry Levan,³¹⁶ David Mancuso,³¹⁷ Walter Gibbons,³¹⁸ Nicky Siano,³¹⁹ and Arthur Russell.³²⁰ As Laing was able to demonstrate the importance of art in alleviating her loneliness, I hope to provide further evidence of the importance of dancing and music to those who feel marginalised and isolated as a result of their sexuality.

³¹⁴ A performer whose hits included *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* and *I Need Somebody to Love Tonight*.

³¹⁵ A musician who wrote for Sylvester and produced his own hits such as *Menergy*.

³¹⁶ DJ at the Paradise Garage and producer of dance records such as Inner Life's *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*.

³¹⁷ DJ and founder of The Loft.

³¹⁸ DJ and remixer of the first commercially available 12-inch record, *Ten Percent* by Double Exposure.

³¹⁹ DJ at the Gallery and Studio 54.

³²⁰ A composer and musician who made dance records such as Dinosaur's *Kiss Me Again*.

Critical Possibilities

Throughout this investigation, I have remained focused on what disco offered to the men that gathered on the dance floors of the early-to-mid 1970s, and also the blueprint that it provided for subsequent generations of club-goers. Perhaps to expand on this work it is necessary to examine what disco might offer the future, or indeed to envisage a future that disco might allow. I have alluded to the power I believe dancing in a club can have on its participants: creating an absence of fear,³²¹ a sensation of belonging,³²² and the possibility of feeling the best and most true version of yourself.³²³ I have presented these states as fleeting and impossible to sustain.³²⁴

Cruising Utopia, a work by José Esteban Muñoz, offers an account of how these states of being, denoted by ecstasy, might help envisage a utopia. He seeks to imagine, through the works of artists and writers, what the future *could* be, describing a queer potential for that future. He offers a critical framework that will assist me in expanding my argument to assert disco's potential. Muñoz insists that, '[w]e have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.'³²⁵

Throughout my critical work, mirroring my everyday life, I have shied away from using the term 'queer' as a marker of personal identity. Coming of age when the word was spoken more often as an insult than an affirmation, it was not

³²¹ See p.270 above.

³²² See p.303 above.

³²³ See p.324 above.

³²⁴ See p.329 above.

³²⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p.1.

one I could comfortably use to describe myself. Reading *Cruising Utopia* has perhaps led me re-evaluate that stance. Grounding queer as an ideal, rather than an identity,³²⁶ Muñoz offers this definition of queerness: ‘a longing that propels us onward...the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing...the rejection of a here and now and an insistence of potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.’³²⁷ I was struck by the similarity between his description and the desired consequence I perceive of dancing in a club. If, as I have expressed above, my enjoyment of club-going was related to its ability to transcend the past, the future and present, and to eradicate the separateness I felt, then given Muñoz’s definition, this enterprise seems decidedly queer. While I took pleasure in the ability of clubbing to stall the future, it was the future that society had bestowed, not one of my choosing. For Muñoz the future as glimpsed can be a potential one, rendered as we would hope it to be. If, at last, the future is as we would wish it, there is no longer any reason to fear it.

To illustrate this potential towards a queer future, Muñoz cites examples of art, poetry, and performance from the period of the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, all of which he believes display utopian feelings. Even though these works are situated in the past and the utopian futures they envisaged have not come to fruition yet, for Muñoz they are important in representing ‘a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening.’³²⁸ In the same way, I argue that disco, arising from the same period, provides similar potential.

³²⁶ Or as Sullivan suggests in her chapter *Queer: A Question of Being or A Question of Doing?*: ‘it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb...rather than a noun’. Sullivan, Nikki, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p.50.

³²⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.1.

³²⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.9.

While the utopia that disco espoused – sexual freedom, togetherness, a society apart from the constraints of capitalism – may not have come to fruition, it was important that disco existed. That its potential was thwarted does not frustrate the whole enterprise; an opening existed. It is perhaps this possibility that attracts me, and others, to disco’s time and place.

There are other elements to Muñoz’s inquiry that offer guidance to a future examination of disco’s potential towards utopia. In response to his reading of the poem *Hymn of Life* by James Schuyler, Muñoz holds that ‘[q]ueerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time.’³²⁹ The dance floor, as I have illustrated,³³⁰ is a site where I believe this stepping out can occur. The mixing of songs allow for new moments of ecstasy, the remembrances of old ecstasies, the joy of an ecstasy that might be invoked in the future. The past itself is not fixed; as Muñoz describes, it ‘has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things.’³³¹ In my novel, Col’s experience in the disco can attest to the active nature of the past as it seeks to disrupt him on the dance floor, working to exacerbate his isolation.³³²

The dance floor more generally is important to Muñoz, who sees it ‘as a stage for queer performativity that is integral to everyday life...a space where relations between memory and content, self and other, become inextricably intertwined...we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each

³²⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.25.

³³⁰ See p.293 above.

³³¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp.27-28.

³³² Morwood, *Each Distant Light*, p.198.

other.’³³³ This echoes the idea of the dance floor as a space to learn, where a gay identity as it has been constructed can be assumed; the dance floor allows, as Butler would have it, the possibility of creating ‘gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.’³³⁴ Muñoz goes further to suggest that although the dance may end, it ‘like energy, never disappears; it is simply transformed.’³³⁵ When we leave a dance floor, or as the light comes up, what is left is important; we have managed to get lost, ‘lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality.’³³⁶ A future draft of my thesis, as described above, will allow me to investigate the ways in which that energy is transformed, detailing the ideas that we carry forward from the dance floor.

Utopia is needed, Muñoz believes, since without it, ‘minoritarian subjects are cast as hopeless’.³³⁷ Growing up, Muñoz was able to imagine himself in another space – the LA punk scene. His interest in punk, he says, ‘made my own suburban quotidian existence radical and experimental - so experimental that I could imagine and eventually act on queer desires.’³³⁸ In the same way, my interest in the disco scene allowed me to imagine a world apart from the one I was living, one in which I might find a sense of belonging. For Col, too, it offered hope; although by the novel’s end his time at The Club is over, the hope that it has

³³³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.66.

³³⁴ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.193.

³³⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.81.

³³⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.81.

³³⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p.97.

³³⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p105.

instilled in him allows him to keep searching. If disco has a future, it is in permitting us to glimpse utopia.

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