

3

I could hear my downstairs neighbour suck on his asthma inhaler from climbing one flight of stairs before knocking theatrically on the open door. Donnie was broad, with an enormous belly and the bearing of a rather grand turtle. He slobbered slightly as he spoke from a crinkly face with haunted, baggy eyes. In fact, there was a general bagginess to his skin, like his immune system was rejecting his face. He would occasionally – especially when drunk – launch into stories with gusto and then suddenly catch himself, as if remembering that everybody hated him like this, and mutter the end of the anecdote into his drink. He was mean with money, insensitive, and filled with petty hatreds, but I liked him. Maybe because he wasn't capable of pretending to be anything else or, more accurately, couldn't be bothered. He was an English teacher at a local college when he could face going in but was off with stress, a kind of modern code word for unhappiness.

Donnie was heavy: not quite documentary fat, but too fat, and it put a major strain on his cardiovascular system,

which groaned and wheezed loudly on exertion. He was from Edinburgh and had a contempt for Glaswegians which he pretended was a breezy affectation, but seemed to be underpinned with genuine hostility. His voice was somehow booming yet gasping, like he was speaking to you from a vast tunnel where he was running for his life. Sometimes he spoke like a man falling asleep, and other times like the same man waking up on a bus.

He glided past me casually, as he always did, and abandoned himself to gravity three feet above the sofa, landing with a sigh from both it and him. He was drunk and already in the middle of some slavering recrimination that I couldn't hear because he had his back to me.

'... not that she's a bad person,' he continued, as I sat in the armchair across from him, 'but obviously she's being a fucking cunt about this!' He delivered these final words with the passionate fury of a poet. As I tried to find a movie on Netflix, he embarked on a soliloquy that suggested his wife may have caught him in some infidelity: 'Technology wants you to break up, to be on your own, where it can talk to you. Look at your email – you contact an ex, you've got to delete it from the inbox, the sent folder *and* the deleted folder. That's a lot to remember when you're horny. You'll never make it every time. The actual technology itself wants to split you up.'

'Did your wife find some kind of email that . . .'

'No! I found the fucking email. I found the email between her and this . . . sexykev69.'

Kevin either had a juvenile sense of humour or was

I knew about Marina. There was nothing in the papers, or not yet anyway. Marina had been found dead, but where? I wrote WHERE? in the notebook, and underlined it slowly, then had a drink of coffee and tried to think. WHY? I wrote underneath it. Then WHO? I didn't seem to know anything, except that there was some possible sexual motive. I wrote SEX, and put a tick beside it. I looked out the window for a bit and tried to think of when I'd last seen Marina, but it had maybe been months. Eventually, I found myself looking at my phone. I scrolled through the BBC News headlines.

There, under the heading 'Scotland', I saw the headline: 'Police seek witnesses to park murder'.

Strathclyde Police yesterday launched an appeal for witnesses after the brutal murder of a young woman in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Park. Marina Katos, 31, a US citizen, was known to regularly cross the park on her way home from work. Police are keen to speak to anyone who was in the park between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. on Monday evening. They would particularly like to talk to a bearded, middle-aged man who was seen speaking to the victim near the park gates on Broughton Street. At a press conference today, Detective Inspector Jack Ian asked for anyone who had seen anything untoward to come forward. 'This is a cowardly and despicable attack on a young woman, a guest in our city, and we are currently pursuing several lines of enquiry.'

I felt a numbed moment of total dislocation and stared down dumbly at my notes.

WHERE?

WHY ?

WHO?

SEX ✓

WORKED AT THE GO-GO

WORKED AT TV COMPANY WITH IAN

WORKED FOR ALTERNATIVE INDEPENDENCE

LIVED AT CHARING CROSS

GREEK

I put a line through the word 'Greek', pending further investigation.

I decided I'd drop in to the Go-Go on my way home. It was in the basement of what had once been an old school and was now three floors of different bars in the heart of the West End. Nothing for everybody. Even at 6 p.m. there were already two bouncers on the door of the main venue, gazing at a table of loud students at the end of the beer garden with the emotionless hostility of saltwater crocodiles.

The wee gate to the basement was open, which meant somebody was in, so I headed down the steps and rang the bell. I went through the awkward rigmarole of positioning my face for the little camera in the door and smiled. Quite probably it was the manager Mikey who was in, opening up. He didn't like me much even though I often bought him drinks after hours; maybe because I felt guilty I had fucked his sister one Christmas and she had missed the family dinner, or possibly even attended it as a drugged shambles. One of the Mexicans had told me that Mikey was in hiding from some gangsters and his real name was Miguel,

'I don't sleep much anymore. I like the dark, it helps me think.'

There was a long pause. I couldn't think of anything useful to say.

'What kind of cancer do you have?'

She laughed and shifted in her chair. 'Not the good kind.'

We were both quiet for a minute or so.

'Guess what song I've chosen for my funeral.'

'Is it the theme from *Poirot*?' I whispered up into the darkness. I was surprised at how drunk and heavy my voice sounded.

There was a silence during which I wondered if that had been entirely appropriate.

'If You Don't Know Me By Now,' she muttered. 'Now, go to sleep.'

I had an email from Ian.

Dude, I sent you something over. I had a wee think about what you said, and had a look through my email, and there was a pitch from Marina. From about a month ago, a sci-fi thing. It's pretty weird. I don't think I've had an email from her since she left – like I said, she normally comes in and pitches. Know what's extra weird about it? It mentions this psycho we were at school with remember that big Chinese guy, Davie Chong? Anyway, I've sent it ya. Black Power, and Brown Pride, Worldwide x

Diane Jones is a TV executive. She's an all-rounder, an ideas person. We see her coming up with shows, she pops into a writing room and one of her jokes is so funny they put it in the script. There's a new quiz show starting that's just something she mentioned to a friend over lunch. She was asked to write

One day he loses a lens and notices that the news looks the same with and without the lenses. He thinks that the TV might be made of the same material, or the TV cameras, but they aren't. Eventually he discovers that we all already have a very advanced version of these lenses put over our eyes at birth. The only way they can be removed is with corrosive acid, at great risk. He feels he must see reality as it is, and uses the acid. We see that his reality is really a horrendous dystopia, our world a sort of concentration camp, just before he goes blind. It ends with him as a blind prophet screaming at people in the street, but they only see a humorous street performer.

Later on, there was a page in Marina's handwriting where there were a few notes in a hurried scrawl.

'SCC – Friday/ 1' – I thought about this for five solid minutes without forming a single idea.

'LTF' – Was this 'Letter To Felix'? And at the bottom of the page were just the words:

'CD Research' with a box drawn round it.

What had Marina been researching? Who the fuck still used CDs?

I caught May's eye and pointed at the jotter, as a way of asking her if she wanted it back. She waved it away. I got up, skirted the growing queue of people waiting to be seated

and drifted outside. Absently, I read the list of bands on the front window.

May looked up from the pint she was pouring and saw me. She lifted her hand in front of her face and, smiling, clicked her fingers. Valium suppressed a shudder for me.

ideas – technological utopianism – as a kind of bargaining.’ As we swung onto Fenwick Road, Jane nodded at the view out of the window on her side. Through the grubby glass, hoisted high above the elderly shoppers, a gigantic *Love Island* contestant glowered down at us in what may have been an advert for glasses. ‘It’s definitely a simulation, just not a computer one. Anyway, we’re off to Edinburgh Castle this week. A Burns supper that will be attended by all the great and the good, and Mr Gary Mount. I need to talk to him. I couldn’t think how we’d get invited, then of course it turns out it’s a charity thing, and you can just buy tickets for a grand a head. Thank God I steered clear of art in my writing. We have five tickets.’

‘Five?’

‘Yes. From what Mikey said, his handlers will be all over him. I just need to bring some people along who can cause a bit of a commotion, distract these guys for long enough that I can talk to Mount, see what he knows.’

‘Well, it’s not often I get to say this, but I have absolutely got that covered.’

In bed that night, it occurred to me that I didn’t actually have a contact number for Docherty. I suppose he’d been around the office so constantly at BBC Scotland that I’d never needed one. I did an email search for anything from him. Nothing. He must have always used my old work email. Half a joint later, I had a brainwave and searched for emails from Robert Nairac. There was one from back in the period when he’d do writing jobs for us on a day rate, when we

were making an entertainment pilot or something. I’d used these occasions to throw a few quid his way, on the grounds that the producers would remove every joke from the script anyway, no matter what it was.

It was an opening monologue I’d asked him to do for a chat-show pilot.

Hello.

How are you? Are you OK?

Oh, good.

That’s nice.

History is dead.

[PAUSE]

I’m just going to take a sip of water from this mug if that’s OK.

[TAKES SIP]

That’s better.

I have to admit, I was lying to you just now – it isn’t actually water.

It’s lemonade . . . benzedrine, Vicodin, PCP and just a pinch of tramadol.

I’m joking, of course.

enough. What I'm wondering is what you're doing here. My guess is that Felix here is – understandably – concerned about his friend's murder, and you're assisting in some way.'

'Indeed. And perhaps we could clear everything up just now if you'd like to tell us exactly what happened?'

He laughed an ugly, sudden laugh. 'Anyway, I just wanted to say: I think this is going to be fun. I mean, normally this game – I won't lie to you – it's a case of simple leverage. But you two! You both, in different ways, have absolutely nothing to lose. That's all I wanted to say – let's try to enjoy it!' He clapped his hands together with a loud crack and smiled at us in a satisfied way.

There was an awkward silence. We stood up and shuffled awkwardly past him to the door.

I turned back and held my hand out. 'My phone, please?'

A flicker of annoyance crossed his features and then his face resumed its usual irony. He held the phone out to me between his thumb and forefinger and I forced a smile as I took it. I rubbed at the screen like I was cleaning it, but I was actually swiping it on.

I took a photo of his shocked face and scrambled out the door.

The security guard was gone, and I pulled hard on the handle so that the door slammed. Jane had disappeared. I started to squeeze my way through the crowd and I'd gotten about a ten-foot start when I heard the door fly open behind me.

In my panic, I only gradually became aware of the loud, hectoring voice that was booming through the speakers and

across the room. Docherty was dead ahead of me and in full cry, the microphone pressed hard to his mouth, and waving his pamphlet above his head. His voice rose in peroration:

Ph'unglui mglw'nath Cthullu!

Yon dreich, archonic King ae Voodoo

We raise a glass tae Hope Destroyed

All hail the droothy, endless void!

Some of the crowd at the front had got to their feet and some seemed ready to make an ugly lunge for the stage. The whole scene looked like something that normally happened in a partitioned room at Stanford University.

I could see Amy getting her coat handed to her at the front door. I stopped and looked around for Jane or Donnie. There was Jane outside the gents, deep in conversation with Gary Mount. From the corner of my eye, on the other side of the room, I could see Brond stop too. The merest glance and he seemed to have put the whole thing together. He looked over at Gary and Jane, then turned to glare in my direction. He began to bowl through the crowd towards me.

Luckily, I've always had a strong fleeing instinct. I tried to negotiate my way through the crush of people that was now at this end of the room, possibly all trying to get as far away from Docherty as possible. I could see the front door, where people were still coming in, but a glance over my shoulder showed me Butler was gaining fast, flashing some pass on a lanyard at people to make them move.

I took in the rest of the room. In the far corner, Donnie