

Thunderclap Press
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Blurred Girl & Other Suggestive Stories

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Blurred Girl Diaries

5 March

My job isn't great but the girl on the bus makes the journey interesting. Neat black business suit, stilettos and shiny dark nylons showing at the ankle. She taps a text message into her mobile phone. Five minutes pass and then she gets off. Tall and slim with equine teeth. Mice End seems like the wrong destination for her.

6 March

There she goes again. All in black: ankle boots with high heels, pencil skirt, opaque tights, handbag and jacket. I take a seat near the back and study her profile. She stands halfway down the bus on the left, listening to music on headphones. Pop standards most likely. Nothing too weird. I bet she's a funny one in bed though.

8 March

At lunchtime, some guy from the factory gives me a lift to my usual stop. We discuss the merits of Nebraska. Then I get out and shelter in the doorway of a Mice End high rise. A few spits of rain fall on my copy of *Brave New World*. It's been threatening to rain all morning. As she climbs the steps, I get an eyeful of her brown tan patterned fishnets and pointed stilettos with straps above the ankles. Is this a basic instinct I'm feeling or something more emotional that the brave new world would frown upon? I'm right behind her as we board the bus. Her thighs are hidden under a stylish black raincoat and a black mini-skirt. She stands in her usual place on the short journey, her coat partly unbuttoned, showing off those long bird-like legs. Imagine working in an office next to that. Below the raincoat, a

lime green top covers her modest tits. She knows that her legs are her best assets. I can't help wondering if this is all for my benefit. She must have noticed by now that I like to take up a position where I can watch her. She puts on her headphones and listens to music, occasionally casting furtive glances backwards. Despite the leggy distraction, I take note of the large silver earrings and wonder if she has dyed her hair. It's a deeper, shinier black. I get off at my usual stop. My cock feels like a revolver that could go off at any minute. It's a very uncomfortable fifteen minute walk home. My pants are wet with pre-cum and my briefcase barely touches the floor before I toss myself off as violently as a fourteen-year-old.

9 March

I'm dating the girl on the bus. We're talking, laughing together, nodding in agreement. She reaches out and touches my hand. Seconds later, the alarm clock rings and I wake up. I want to have this dream every night for the next forty years. That's all it will ever be. She is probably married or at least has a live-in boyfriend. It's Saturday today. I hate sport and mediocre movies. There's nothing to do but think about all this.

20 March

It's been a while. My shifts at the Mice End factory don't coincide with her lunchtime journeys. She gets on the bus and stops at the front for a moment. The driver breaks suddenly. One or two passengers who haven't sat down skate forward. She's holding onto a rail while talking on the telephone. I'm too far back to hear a word she says. Her telephone bills must be sky-high. I wouldn't mind paying them. Perhaps they would be lower as she could talk to me instead. She soon moves to her usual spot. Her clothes are casual and unremarkable. I like the brown jacket though. It hugs her body and compliments her fine slender waist. She's wearing jeans and brown desert boots. She has several pairs of glasses. Today's pair have transparent frames and appear a little old-fashioned. This look is not far removed from that of the typical female Mice Ender, minus the flab. Her hair is getting

longer and is disheveled. It's what the tabloids call "a just out of bed look". Perhaps that's the case and her boyfriend has just sorted her out. Maybe she's so thin because she spends her lunch hour losing rather than gaining calories. She ends the phone call, opens a blue folder and starts flicking through pages of notes. She could be a student or a teacher. There's no more time to speculate. I've arrived at my stop.

24 March

Beige leather jacket with an untied belt hanging from the svelte waist, beige kitten heels, a beige handbag and even a beige purse, which she opens. I'm sitting just behind her this time but don't manage to get a glance at her ID cards. Only blue jeans interrupt the colour scheme and her hair is ruffled again. I like the combination. Beige is the new black. Occasionally she turns round and we almost exchange glances. I'm reading a book called *The Invention of Solitude*. The title doesn't make much sense. Nobody invented solitude. It's just there, like shit happens.

25 March

We meet twice today. I'm surprised to see her when I get on the bus to the factory. This hasn't happened since our first encounter. She's normally one bus ahead on the way to Mice End. We look at each other and smile but neither of us say hello. She's dressed in black. Even a guy, almost blind to these matters, cannot help but notice colour-coordination is a big issue with her. The beige handbag has been substituted for a large black one. She's wearing a knee-length coat, dress, patterned tights (or stockings?) with stiletto pumps. All black. In short, an impressive look. When she dresses like this it makes her hair look darker, newly dyed, but maybe it's all part of an illusion she creates. Later, we get on at the same stop to return to the city. Nothing much has changed, except her hair is a mess. It's a cold, windy day in Mice End, so that could explain it. Anyway, I've come to the conclusion she

has a boyfriend rather than a husband. They lose interest after marriage, don't they? I wonder if she looks this horny when she gets up in the morning.

28 March

It's a black week. Black dress, black raincoat, black skirt, sheer black tights, buckled stilettos and black skies, which keep her at home. I don't see her at all but I think of these things.

5 April

During her absences I notice other commuters. Young women I see more often than the blurred girl. In fact, there's one I see on my bus to Mice End every day without fail. A cracker she is too; in a predictable sort of way. Mid-twenties, long blonde pony tail. Skin tight jeans with big white boots or white stilettos. I can see a tattoo on the top of her foot if it's a warm, dry day. There's another blonde as well with long black boots and great make up. The blusher on her face makes it look as if she's having a constant orgasm. She's class actually. But out of my league.

8 April

The spring look. The beige outfit with jeans. Quite stylish. Fine in a catalogue but not the biggest turn on. I haven't paid that much attention to her arse before but it does fit nicely into those denims. Skinny legs; meatier in the right places. She drops her bus pass on the floor and doesn't notice. My stop is next so it would be perfectly natural to get up, hand it back to her, receive approval and maybe even get a conversation going. By the time I've run through the possibilities in my mind and risen from my seat, the girl with the tattoo on her

foot has picked it up for her. The blurred girl is listening to music. She nods appreciatively and smiles like a mare. I exit stage right without being seen.

13 April

No girl.

2 May

Why didn't I pick up that bus pass?

16 June

Still no sign of her. She could have finished her college course. Maybe she's pregnant. She might even be dead.

17 June

I assume the worst. I heard about a car crash that killed a young Mice End couple recently. This would explain her long absence. I decide to think about her less and focus on working harder now I've become a Human Resources Manager.

30 June

This is my first day in the company car. I don't have to take the bus any more. Due to my improved financial position, I will have new lifestyle choices.

2 September

It's been a busy week. On the way home, I pull into one of those motels off the motorway. Girls hang about with guys at the bar. They all come and go. I have a brandy. Then I go to piss it out and return to the bar for another. I light a cigar and wait to be approached. A blonde eventually comes up and makes some idle chat. I don't hear her. I think about making my excuses but remember that I'm not there for the conversation anyway. She might be able to show me a thing or two.

Another girl enters. Black pencil skirt, mega mesh fishnet tights, buckled stilettos, lime top, no raincoat. We are face to face.

"Haven't we met before?" she asks, in an accent that isn't local but has faint traces of Mice End.

"Indeed we have."

"Shall we?" She takes my hand and hints towards the rooms above us with her brown eyes.

"Why not?"

She leads me out. On the way upstairs, I take a closer look at the network that links her legs to the world.

We enter Room 101.

"Would you like another drink?" she asks. "Or shall we just get down to it?"

There are numerous possibilities for conversation. The bus route. Text messaging and phone bills. The blue folder. Clothes shops. Whether she has a boyfriend, and if so, does he know

what she's now doing for a living? And how the hell did it come to that? But instead I keep things strictly professional and hand over the money.

"We've wasted enough time," I say. "Let's see if you live up to expectations."

Boxing Day in Muros

It didn't seem much like Spain as he got off the bus. Fishermen were hauling in their nets to the rhythm of an invisible choir. Rab grabbed his faded sports bag from the luggage compartment and entered a cafe. He sat by the window observing the forest of green clouds that lay upon the hills. A waitress approached, taking a notepad from the pocket of her apron. She said something in Spanish that he didn't understand.

“Un café si'l vous plait,” he said.

“Tú eres francés?”

“Er, no, I'm not French.”

The puzzled waitress smiled politely. He was glad the place was empty. The choir sang Tidings of Comfort and Joy. Gulls spiralled in the grey afternoon sky.

“Un café solo.”

“Gracias.”

He looked down at the wee cup-like thing the waitress had put in front of him. Sunny Spain where the coffee was small. It was like one of those adverts you used to get on the back of old cereal packets. Gift not actual size. He swallowed it in one gulp, paid the bill and said adiós to the girl.

The hostel on the main street had a stairway with brightly tiled Celtic designs. He climbed up to the second flight and gave the bell a long ring. Serpents and dragons glared down from the walls. A young man in a sky blue tracksuit opened the door, and scanned him from head to toe.

“Sí?”

Rab had learned some Spanish for a holiday on the Costa del Sol a few years back so this shouldn't be a problem. Sounds came from his lips. The bloke was nodding, he must have understood.

“You are English?”

Thank Christ. The bloke spoke some English.

“No. I'm Scottish. You know, Sean Connery, Billy Connolly...”

“Ah whisky,” the bloke said, making a drinking motion with his arm.

“You've got it,” he replied, forcing a grin.

“Want a room? This way.”

He followed the bloke up the stairs to the top floor. The room was small but it had a television and large windows overlooking the harbour.

“A nice view, no?”

“Muy bien,” Rab agreed, sticking his thumb in the air. The lingo was coming back to him now although he still had the habit of speaking schoolboy French with foreigners.

“One night, only twenty two Euros. If you like a bath, towels are there.”

Was the bloke suggesting he needed a wash? Anyway, the room seemed okay and he would take it. All Rab needed was a base from where he could check things out. Maybe even look for work. He could bring the family over when things settled down. He owed it to Sandra and Marti to make a real effort while he was here. He handed over his passport as a deposit. The bloke thanked him and disappeared down the tiled stairway.

Rab sat on the bed and tore the cellophane from his last pack of Bensons. Soon he would have to smoke the foreign shite. Maybe he would just give up. He put the TV on with the sound down and listened to the choir outside singing the Little Drummer Boy. Parum parum pum. He watched some pretty women with thigh-length black boots dancing out of time in Santa Claus outfits. When the adverts came on he went to the window. A thin rain showed against the fishing boats rocking in the harbour. Music was booming from speakers on the seafront.

Rab put on his raincoat and went back out into the drizzle. He passed the cafe where a different waitress was now working. Parum papa pum. In the plaza, teenagers were laughing and smoking. Families were out walking their dogs, strange dogs, wee things with coats and flat faces. Wee things that had probably had a better Christmas dinner than he had. He

thought of yesterday in the freezing Santiago hostel where the window didn't shut properly. Too tired to go out, he had stayed in bed eating chocolate bars and tangerines while drinking 7-Up.

He was climbing the hill now, moving through the narrow village streets. A chant entered his mind. You are a lucky man to be on this trip. A lucky man. A bloody lucky man to be on this trip. Five numbers on the lottery wasn't life changing in itself. But it was a start and a chance to break away from the Alligator trap. Every time Ally appeared at the door he ended up getting drunk. This time it had started when the Alligator joined him for a can of Tennents while he was watching Marti's cartoons on the DVD. After another the Alligator asked if he fancied a couple down the Beastie.

"I can't Ally. I'm skint."

"Doesn't matter Rab, my wages are through."

"It's not a good idea Al. Sandra will kill us. We've got the bike to pay for now. It arrived from the clubbie this morning. It's in the shed if you fancy a look on your way out."

Ally admired the bike already customised with Simpsons stickers. He read the message, Merry Christmas Dude, love from Mum and Dad.

"It's a cracker, Rab."

"You think so?"

"The kid will love it."

Nothing had changed in the Red Lion. The racing on the TV and the same crowd of arseholes propped up at the bar. They broke into a chorus of 'The Wanderer' for Rab's benefit.

"I'm the type of guy who likes to roam around..."

"Ha fucking ha."

"They're into the final furlong; Spirit Level is losing ground..."

The Alligator cursed, tore up his betting slipped and tossed it onto the floor. The first pint was good. It even had a taste to it; a certain refreshing quality you might say. Rab bought

some fags from the machine with the money he'd borrowed. He offered the pack around the bar and each asshole took one for granted. The second pint didn't do much for the taste buds but the old glow was there. Rab put 'Glory Days' on the jukebox. Alligator Springsteen sang along, balancing an air guitar on his knee. A Regal mist descended.

The next morning Sandra was standing in the shadow of the doorway.

"See you later. I'm taking Marti to the playgroup."

"Listen Sandra, about last night."

"I haven't got time, Ally."

"Bye Dad, bye Uncle Alligator."

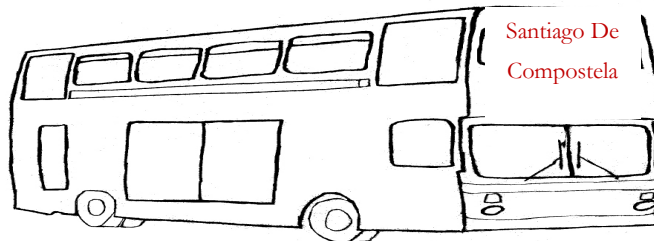
The door closed on Sandra and Marti. Looney Tunes rang out on the TV. A stick of dynamite blew up the coyote. Roadrunner sped into the distance. Meep meep. Rab sighed, half-relieved. The Alligator scratched his nose, flicked ash from his jeans.

"Where the hell's the bike Ally?"

The Alligator shrugged his shoulders.

"Forget it, Rab."

He'd thought of buying Sandra something nice in London; a fancy perfume from Harrods perhaps. Instead he just walked around the block at Victoria Station. A few overpriced restaurants and bars, scrounging pigeons. London, England. London Sucks. He considered going home. Then he saw the luminous lights on the front of the bus.



Maybe he wasn't using his loaf, like Sandra always said, but what the hell. He paid for the ticket and went ahead. Kept moving forward. It was a long journey but it was easier than flying. He had to get really tanked up for that.

Heavy rain fell on Muros. He was sitting on the church wall, listening to the sea and glad to be away from all that crap. But these hills, the rain. Speed bonny boat like a bird on the wing. He inhaled deeply through his nostrils, breathed out, then reached into his pocket for another Benson. He lit the cigarette and descended the narrow empty streets. He walked past the beads of festive lights and noticed the green tree logo at the entrance of a supermarket. It was just like the one at the end of his street, near the Red Lion. Good tidings we bring to you and your king. Rab took refuge from the rain. Detergents, biscuits, frozen foods but most of the brand names were alien. He emerged with a Mars Bar, a bottle of sherry and four cans in a plastic bag. It was growing dark as he walked out of town, along the hard shoulder, into the car headlight beams. The rain, lighter now, turned from grey to black. He took a mouthful of caramel and glucose. A cyclist pedalled powerfully into the darkness.

Rab turned left onto the tiny beach, unscrewed the top from the bottle and drank it hard. Then he took off his socks and shoes and walked across the shards of shingle. He hadn't arrived yet.

Notes on Flash Fiction

I started writing flash fiction in the early to mid-90's. I wasn't aware of a label for it then, nor did I think it would become such a popular form. It just seemed a useful bridge between writing a poem and a short story. I've never worried much about genre. That's for others to classify, if they must.

Back then, the only examples of what we might call flash fiction that I can remember reading was by Raymond Carver, in particular a piece called *Popular Mechanics*, and some ultra-short stories by Mario Benedetti from Uruguay; a part of the world where the short form has been taken seriously for many years. The novels of Richard Brautigan, made up of very short pieces, appealed greatly to me. I liked all these snapshots of life. So I began writing a few of my own and sent them off, by snail mail of course. Editors seemed puzzled. I got replies along the lines of "I like this but can we have a bit more, please?" or "Send us the story again when it is finished".

I'm not saying what I was doing was ahead of its time: it has been argued that some of Aesop's Fables or *The Canterbury Tales* were the flash fiction of their day; but why was it okay to capture a moment in a poem of less than a hundred words and not in prose containing almost a thousand?

However, the internet has changed all that. The number of websites featuring and even specialising in flash fiction, microfiction, sudden fiction, call it what you will, is growing by the day. The medium is ideally suited to a fragmented world in which readers want a quick hit without hanging around. But it should not be considered an easy option for writers just because it contains fewer words. The short stories of Chekhov say a lot more than many novels. It all depends who is writing and how good their style and content is – nothing to do with the length.

Of course, a flash fiction piece takes less time and dedication than a novel but a well thought out short can and probably should take longer to complete than a few thousand words of unedited prose. Having a go at flash fiction can be a useful exercise for any aspiring writer. If you cannot grab someone's attention in a few hundred words, then why assume any reader is

going to waste their valuable time reading tens of thousands? You might have already lost your reader after the first page due to over-elaboration and superfluous prose – even more so when they are reading on websites where something else can be found at the click of a button.

So flash fiction provides a valuable exercise in self-critique and editing your own work and is perfectly suited to our times. Yet, ultra-short stories don't have to be (and should not be) the literary equivalent of a frozen pizza from Miceland. The writer of flash, even more than the short story writer, has to ensure every word is relevant and necessary. The aforementioned maestros show that flash fiction is not about serving an apprenticeship before attempting fat novels. Some writers prefer this minimalist art form.

Lisa's Birthday Party

The pain inside her was easing when Lisa came to take her home.

"How are you?" asked Lisa, as she took Mona's hands and massaged them gently with her thumbs.

"I'm alright," Mona said.

They left the hospital and its sickly odour of disinfectant behind. The sun was no brighter than a peeled orange. Mona had put on some dark glasses to protect her eyes from the imaginary stares of passers-by. They waited on the pavement's edge.

A number ten bus swerved into view and as it ground to a halt Mona climbed unsteadily on board. Lisa paid the fares and they sat down in the seats reserved for the elderly and infirm.

Mona looked out of the window. Hundreds of faces. Bodies all shapes and sizes. Feet going places. She felt a twinge. Her empty womb. The hollow pain. She recalled the face of her unnameable lover. The hopeless fuck in the dark. Sex under the stars of the black orphan night.

But why feel sorry for Joe after his string of brief affairs?

Time passed. Things would improve between them. Joe and Mona endured. The bus was slowing down. This was her stop.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come with you?"

"Thanks Lisa. I appreciate that but I'd rather go alone."

"Oh well. If you're sure. Take care."

Mona removed the dark glasses and slung the strap of her handbag over her shoulder.

"Thanks again Lisa. I'll be in touch."

Joe was sitting on the sofa when she got home.

"Hi. You're early. How was Lisa's birthday party?"

“Alright. I felt a bit dizzy, so I came home. That’s all.”

“That’s a shame,” Joe said. “Can I get you an aspirin or something?”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“No. It’s okay Joe. I think I’ll have a bath and go to bed.”

Mona kicked off her shoes and lay on the duvet. A part of her had gone on living. She heard applause coming from the quiz show on TV.

A Cut above the Rest

I once knew a guy who had to get drunk before going for a haircut. That's what barbershops do to people. It's an environment where the ability to endure a good scalping is a test of macho identity. I hate barbers and their universal concept.

Hairdressers are different. I don't expect to encounter systematic chauvinism there. Even so, there's little room for complacency.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Never go near closing time when hairdressers will do anything to get home.
2. Make an appointment as uninvited customers are second-class citizens and will be treated with disdain.
3. On the whole, it's advisable to avoid business people trying to be wits. They're the ones with salons called Hairport or Shampoo Charlie. If they want corny names then Hacked Off, Edward Scissorhands or A Clip Round the Ear might be more accurate.

Hairdressing is like cookery. Women come up with the ideas and do the majority of the work before a Charlie or Edward appears from nowhere to take all the credit on daytime TV.

There are exceptions to the rule. I used to go to A Cut above the Rest. Hardly marketing at its most sophisticated, but the staff really were a cut above. There was an Australian with red curly ringlets who looked like Nicole Kidman. She was making her way round Britain, stopping off to give pleasurable haircuts in each town. A Hebridean girl stayed long enough to pierce my heart with her naivety. She had never heard of the Wicker Man.

Now and then, you get a hairdresser, who in spite of working with colours and highlights, acts as if she's taking part in a silent movie. The quiet ones don't disappoint with tedious

chat about the weather, their last holiday or what you do for a living. I wonder if they would be surprised.

I went home with the new script already half-written. A visit to the hairdresser can result in a horror story or a happy ending. These girls knew that. In *A Cut above the Rest*, the staff were aware that hairdressing is the last frontier.

Now That We Are Lovers

Don't get up, honey. Let me tell you a story about my college days. There was this guy who's playing over here now for one of the top Spanish teams. Our school was well known for basketball. This guy was huge. Six foot ten and shoulders four feet wide. Well, we were at a party one night when I said to him, I saw you in the gym last week. He said, Oh yeah? He was so used to people fawning all over him that he thought I was gonna compliment him. I used to hang around with Benny and Jimmy. Benny was a little guy, only five foot nine but a real good player for his size. One day there was this match between fraternities. You don't have fraternities in Europe, right? Well, in the US you kinda stick up for each other and Benny and I were in the same fraternity. This big guy dunked on Benny during a game. I dunno how much you know about basketball but it's not the done thing to dunk on anybody. I said to him, I heard you dunked on Benny. I mean, I saw him do it right, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I'd been watching. We used to have a few beers at the weekends and when I had a drink I could be a bit, well, I was a young guy, right? I'd had a few when I said, I heard you dunked on Benny. And he said, No. That's what he said. No. I mean, if there's one thing I can't stand it's a liar. Then he said, Who the fuck is Benny? Can you believe it? I said, You know damn well who Benny is. He's the guy you dunked on last week. Did Jimmy tell you this, the guy asked. You leave Jimmy outta this, I said. It's got nothing to do with Jimmy. All the guys in the fraternity team know you dunked on Benny so it ain't got nothing to do with Jimmy, right? He was fidgeting with his laces and wouldn't look me in the eye. He was running his thumb round the rim of the bottle top like a cocksucker. And this not facing up to the facts was really getting to me. And then you know what? He got up and started to walk out of the room as if I was some piece of shit on the bottom of his sneaker. You're gonna apologize to my friend Benny before you go, I said. I ain't apologizing for nothing, he said. You're the one who should be apologizing for bringing up this shit at a party. It's the weekend and I just wanna chill out you son of a bitch... Oh oh. Nobody calls me that. No-body. You might as well know right now that nobody talks to me like that. I got up and hit him hard in the guts and as he doubled forward I let go with a right hook that Tyson in his heyday would've been proud of. Blood spurted everywhere. All over the sofa and the carpet. Shit, it was like a Tarantino movie. If you see

this guy on TV today have a look at his nose. He'll think twice before dunking on anybody, I can tell you. And he's nothing more than a run of the mill player. Gee, I shouldn't be telling you this but I don't want any secrets now that we are lovers... Say, how about getting up and making me a nice cup of coffee now, honey?

The Voyeur

We often smoked hash in her room but this stuff was something else. I tapped the pipe on the edge of the bin and turned to face Maureen. She was staring through the TV where a bunch of amateurs were contesting the Junior Cup Final. Maureen didn't like football, in fact she hated it, but right now there was no way she was going to get up and change the channel.

"This is good stuff," she said.

"Not bad at all," I replied. "A sound deal."

"Lucky we bumped into Brutus last night, eh?"

"Very lucky."

She'd gone green and was talking to keep her mind off it. I felt a bit dodgy myself. Don't get me wrong. Normally I can toke till my eyes shut. But our man Brutus wasn't kidding when he said this was strong stuff.

"It's good stuff," I said.

"Really good," she said.

"You got any beer downstairs? I could murder a drink."

"There might be," she replied. "Go and ask my dad. And see what else is on TV while you're at it."

It was just possible that I could sneak downstairs and whip out a couple of cans without the Old Bastard being any the wiser. The fridge was usually full of beer. No doubt he would be in the living room, immersed in the Junior Cup Final.

"This is real end of season stuff."

"I thought you said it was good?"

"I'm talking about the match, Maureen."

“Oh. Maybe we should get remote control. Anyway, I thought you were going to get some beer. I’m almost dying of thirst here.”

I was doing my best but it was really difficult to get off the bed. Maybe if I could just get up and change the channel. That would be a start. Okay, we were thirsty. But it was a big ask. It wasn’t as if the kitchen was just next to the TV or something. I was going. I was really just going when I felt her hand alight on the zipper zone of my jeans.

Soon we were our Stone Age selves. But it pissed me off that she often liked to keep her t-shirt on when fucking. You might think she had something to hide, like small tits or a scabby back, but there was just no excuse for it. Yet, she insisted that I remove my socks.

Anyway, this time I was too spaced to make a fuss about her little hang-ups. I was on the verge, about to kamikaze into the ravine of orgasm, when there was a knock on the bedroom door.

“Maureen!”

I looked into the eyes of a cartoon dog.

“What is it, Mam?” she shouted.

The referee had blown for a penalty kick and the commentator had already shot his load.

“Come and get your ironing!”

“Leave it outside the door and I’ll get it when I’m ready.”

Goal Flash: Auchinleck Talbot 1 Newtongrange Star 0

“What do you mean ‘ready?’” What the hell are you doing in there that you can’t come now?”

“Nothing. What’s the big deal? Leave the bloody ironing outside the door!”

I shut my eyes but the volume level increased.

“I’m not leaving clean ironing on the fucking floor! What’s going on in there?”

Maureen’s heart was beating harder, as if a bird was trapped in her chest.

“I forgot to lock the door,” she whispered.

Any moment now, Mrs. McCaffrey was going to walk into the room. She would shout for her husband who would kick me down the bleeding stairs. The Junior Cup Final was over and Newtongrange were collecting their losers' medals. The beer adverts around the pitch just reminded me of unfinished business.

Footsteps faded away on the stairs.

Soon, Maureen got out of bed, put on her skirt and went to get the ironing. The weekend was almost over but we still had a couple of hours before she had to pack her stuff and catch the evening train. She opened the blinds to let in the late afternoon sun. The clean clothes at the bottom of the bed made up an awkward threesome. I could still smell the steam from Mrs. McCaffrey's iron. Downstairs, the Old Bastard cracked open another beer.

Second Hand Book Pollution

The bookshop is a city full of people whose faces you will never see; the cracked whisper of the barbed wire lover searching for anything connected with his pet subject.

“I’m sorry sir, we did have a copy of ‘The History of Barbed Wire’ but a gentleman came in and bought it just last week.”

The collector must trudge home and tend to his wounds.

A second hand bookshop is not a fiction but rather a polluted version of a writer’s intentions. You may come across an old friend unseen in twenty years or a lover you wish you had taken but didn’t get round to. There she is, left on the shelf, full of character, a bit rough around the edges, coffee stained, weather beaten, looks like she’s slept out all night in the park but is all the better for it. Now she’s going to tell her story, strangers make their way into other people’s books; each page is a nuisance neighbour that won’t let up. The copyright remains with the author but the story is no longer owned. Take Garrison Keillor for instance. In ‘Lake Wobegon Days’, he was writing about life in small-town Minnesota. A copy was plucked off an Edinburgh bookshelf some twenty years later. The book draws the Edinburgh man, not to Minnesota, the writer’s intended target, but to the Koala enclosure at a wildlife park in Sydney, Australia. A reader’s bookmark has hijacked the work. There’s potential for romance here. It is 9.50 am and crowds are gathering outside the enclosure. Edinburgh Man has joined the queue and is gazing at the long flamingo legs of the woman in front of him. Her name is Rachel and she is film-starringly beautiful. She is carrying a young girl.

“Auntie Rachel, when are we going to see the koalas?”

Edinburgh Man knows that the gates will open any second as it says so on the entry form Rachel slips into her book as she walks into the wildlife park. A copy of ‘Lake Wobegone Days’.

Edinburgh Man can write his own version of events. If his imagination needs a prompt then the bookmark provides it. That’s why he spends so much time walking between towers of second hand books. He searches for more material about his new favourite destination,

Australia. He scans the nature section but finds nothing on koalas and their habitat. He takes down, 'Flying Visits' by Clive James. A train ticket is lodged in pages 26-27, in a chapter called 'Postcard from Sydney 2'. Edinburgh Man is informed about drinking hours in a city, which 'has transformed itself, so that it is as rare to see a drunk on the streets as it once was common'. He wonders whether opening hours have been extended or shortened. Are all the drunks holed up in bars? This interests Edinburgh Man as he has given up drinking and now lives other people's lives behind mountains of second hand books.

He pulls up a chair in the drunk-free streets of Sydney and sits in the sun drinking cappuccino. He watches Rachel pass by again and drains the sugar from the bottom of his cup.

The shop will close soon. Boxes of cheap books are being taken in from the street. He hides behind a collection of the Encyclopedia Britannica and begins reading from 'Ulysses'. He stares into the grey cold Liffey but finds the day much too long. There's a postcard of Mexico in a brief chapter entitled 'In the Heart of the Hibernian Metropolis'. Its former owner might have been an Irishwoman distracted by memories of Aztec Temples or a Mexican on the way to Dublin who didn't want to prejudice his views with too much book pollution. Both are possibilities in the mind of the Edinburgh man. The owner, who he only vaguely knows, asks if he will mind the shop for five minutes before closing time. Edinburgh Man agrees and as she leaves he makes for the antiquarian section and finds his bag is swallowing expensive editions of Seneca, Plato, Walton, Dickens and Stevenson. Edinburgh Man makes a hurried exit, pausing at the door to drag a scarf across his face so that his Hydean features go unnoticed, passing by the courts before disappearing among the shift work drinkers in the Grassmarket.

He's looking forward to the day when the gasman will come over. Last time they had a good chat about Nietzsche.

Dusty Springfield

The nights were fair stretching again. I could still make things out when falling out of the pub at one in the morning. Geordie was clinking along the High Street with a bag full of bevy. He was younger than me but could really take the drink. He lived out at Giroville. A caravan site just outside town. Anyone could get a pad there.

“What’s happenin, George?”

“Fuck all, he said. Bunch of borin bastards.”

“You’re tellin me, I said. Let’s take a walk.”

Me and George wandered round the old part of town looking for a party. We soon found one and invited ourselves in. George was in the kitchen nicking bottles from the fridge while I checked out the action in the living room. A baby was crying upstairs but no-one paid any heed. Toys were scattered around the floor. I took the last spare seat, plonking my arse in the kid’s buggy. It was a tight squeeze, even for a skinny bastard like me. The party was going well enough. AC/DC on the stereo. Geordie shanxing the kitchen. We’d have a good supply to take to Giroville.

Then the head of the household appeared. A right fucking arsehole.

“Who the fuck are you?”

I looked round. He was clutching a can of Spesh.

“Aye, you in the bairn’s fuckin buggy. The big fuckin bairn. The fuckin hard man.”

He was coming my way, forcing me to get to my feet. He put his forehead onto mine. Gave me the stare. Freckles below his bug ugly eyes.

“Leave him Dave, he wasn’t doin any harm,” somebody said.

The ugly eyes kept staring, like a bug you wanted to swat but couldn’t.

“Out o the fuckin house,” Bug-Eyed-Dave said.

He led me through the door, head to head, toe to toe.

He kept repeating things like a total moron.

“Out o the fuckin house.”

I heard him first time. Where the hell was Geordie? This was his cousin for Christ sake.

“That’s it. Down the fuckin steps.”

I didn’t want to draw back in case he let the nut go. Straight onto my neb.

“That’s it. Down the fuckin steps.”

“Ach, let him go Dave,” I heard again.

But he shoved me down the last few steps and laid into me. I landed on my hip on the cold ground. I just had to lie there taking wellies around the ribs. The Bug must’ve been feeling generous because he left my head alone.

“What the hell’s going on Dave?”

It was Geordie.

“Your mate is he? Well get him fuckin out o here before I kill him. I don’t want to be moppin blood from the garden path the morn. It’s my day off. Get him out o here before I fuckin kill him.”

The kicking could’ve been worse. But I had a fleshy hole by the hip bone and it was a long walk to Giroville. Geordie was a practical boy and hot-wired a Cortina to take us there. On the edge of town he sparked open a can of Spesh. He turned on the radio and raked through the cassette box between the front seats.

“Let’s see what we’ve got here. Hoedown on the Highway, fuck that...Saturday Night Fever, Jesus it gets worse. Dusty Springfield ...”

“Magic. I love that. Put it on.”

Geordie glanced sideways.

“You serious? That kickin must’ve been worse than I thought.”

He sparked a can open for us, and we drove along by the river with Son of a Preacher Man blasting out of the stereo. It was soothing my hipbone. We stopped the motor after a wee

while and got out. The tape was still playing after we took the petrol can from the boot and dowsed the car. I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself. The flaming car rolled into the water.

It was now only a short walk to Giroville.

Unlovable Jambo

It's nae easy starin at a mob who are aw on their day off an expectin tae enjoy theirsels. An here's me in a yella jaiket wi Roakstiddy on the back. The rain's pissin doon an the haar's comin in off the North Sea. It's no lang efter fower an the floodlights are on.

Ye dinnae make many pals in this line o work. But it's nae my job tae be aw pally anywey. A get oot o the rain for a while tae go an sort oot some laddie A see swiggin frae a plastic bottle. Diabetic, he says. It's amazin the tricks they get up tae. Could be vodka for aw A ken. Some o them can hardly stand up. A've nae idea how they get in.

"A'm nae worried whit ye are," A says. "There's nae bottles allowed in the grun. Ye ken fine ye shouldnae hae taken it in."

Predictably his pal jines in.

"He's diabetic for fuck's sake! Davie, get yer caird oot."

The laddie's taken his wallet oot noo. But A tell him nae tae bother. A'm nae interested in seein fake identity cairds. A cannae tell him that but ye wouldnae believe the lengths some o them go tae tae get hammered during the game.

A pull the bottle off the kant and make ma wey back doon the steps. He might be diabetic for aw A ken. Then again he mightnae be. It's nae ma job tae make a diagnosis. A'm here tae ensure regulations arenae breached. But judgin by the abuse A get headin back doon the steps, A'd be surprised if there wiz anything much wrong wi him that a cup of black coffee wouldnae sort oot. If he wiz really diabetic it's nae gonnnae dae his blood pressure much guid shoutin an swearin an cairryin on like a bairn that's lost its sweeties.

There's nae ower much aggro the day. The usual stuff in the bogs at half time wi abody smokin. Whit a reek. Mair visibility ootside an whit a day it is. They get a bit radge in there owin tae security in numbers but maist nip the fags oot pretty fast when ye mention fines. Any wisecrackers an A can ayewiz call the control room for reinforcements.

It's the flags that start mair bother than anythin else. Union Jacks and Tricolours are the worst. Red hans or stuff wi the IRA on them are a no-go. But there's nae ower much o that stuff the day at a Hibiz an Arabs game.

The Hibiz in the North Stand hiv draped a giant flag ower the top tier. Problem is ye cannae see the advertisin an businesses pey a whack for that kinna thing. So A ask them nicely tae take it doon. They arenae too happy like, but they slowly start tae undae the strings whilst haein a wee mump and moan about it.

It's nae a guid time tae be up there hooevir. A can tell by the bad vibes aroond me that the Arabs have scored doon below. The Hibiz wi the flag stop whit they're daein an yell at their goalie whase made a right erse o things. A cannae wait any longer. A've ither work tae dae so A undae the last o the strings masel and the flag faws tae the flair. Mair dug's abuse as A head back doon tae grun level.

Five minutes tae go noo an the Hibiz go ballistic. Yin o the players runs towards the North Stand wi his shirt off an the fans aw dive on top o him. A get right in among them. Ye nivir ken when there might be a heidcase assaultin a player or whit hiv ye. A fish a wee yin oot by the collar. When A pit him doon A see he's just a bairn, six year auld at the maist. He's greetin for his da but A lead him awa tae safety as some o ma colleagues deal wi the kants roondaboot where the bairn wis standin. If he'd fawin ower the mob wouldae trampled his heid tae mince.

A'm at the ither side o toon next week. A prefer it there tae be honest. A've nae much time for the Hibiz. I prefer the Hertz like, ye ken, bein fae Shandon an that. A've nae went tae the game for a long time but ma da goes alang an ma brither tae. A feel a wee bit mair at hame among ma ain fowk even if ye find a few heidbangers at aw the games.

A'm nae that popular wi the Hibiz the day. Am A ivir? But A cannae help haen a chuckle tae masel. They're nae best pleased wi droppin points at hame tae the Arabs. But A'll be able tae go hame soon, get these drookit claes off an get in the tub. Ma hubby will be waitin wi a cup o hot tea an a cuddle. An he loves me. At least A think he does.

The International Red Star Hostel

I look rather handsome in my photo taken shortly after the Carnation Revolution. The card says I'm Antonio da Souza, and that I was a horticulturalist with the council of Setúbal.

When I arrived last week the Russian looked me up and down like I was some kind of tramp. But after she saw my ID, I was shown to a bed in the front room for seven Euros a night. The International Red Star Hostel is light and reasonably clean in spite of the people who live here. Señora Raskalnekov takes care of everything. Apart from the leg of ham that had been hanging on the wall, attracting flies, for longer than anyone could care to remember.

Señora Raskalnekov is blonde, shapely, and tainted only by a few traces of varicose veins on her legs. She must be about forty-five but you can't ask a lady that sort of question. Not that she's a real lady. Adrian pays her frequent visits. I'm sure he could afford a better place to live than this. If I was well qualified like him, I wouldn't be sharing. But I suppose Señora Raskalnekov is compensation.

Last night, she was showing Adrian her new nativity scene. Only the Lord knows why she had to turn the music up and keep him there so long examining such an unseasonable item. I put the lights out and tried to ignore the braying of the donkey and the rocking of the baby in the manger. On the opposite side, away from the noisy nativity play, the Georgians were having a marital dispute. The argument eventually died out and the voice of the male stopped buzzing like flies on the ham. Probably just as well I couldn't understand what they were saying. I'm not even sure where the hell Georgia is, and their language is about as much use to the rest of us as a spade with a hole in it.

Fortunately, the Georgians didn't stay long at the hostel. They rose early, shuffled past my sofa and out onto the balcony where they stood blowing smoke into the street. The view isn't anything to write home about but then neither is Tbilisi. I got up, put on jeans and sandals. The Georgians don't understand a word of Spanish. Señora Raskalnekov tells me Russian causes them some difficulties. But they nod, smile and give away cigarettes. They

can afford it due to their involvement with some cartel or other. Not any old former Soviet citizen has enough put aside for plane tickets to Spain. I nipped my cigarette halfway down and saved it for later while the Georgians flicked their stubs into the street below. It's not the done thing in a bourgeois city like this. But what can you expect from ex-communist peasants?

I bade them farewell and went for a walk through the old town. The narrow streets around Força were decorated with straw, petals and horseshit. My stroll was brought to an abrupt halt by a crowd gathering before a yellow barrier. There followed a discussion between two English speakers who seemed to own the rights to the street. I noticed that occasional glances were being sent in my direction as they talked. Then one of them came over, took me aside, and explained in Spanish that they could do with my help. A price was negotiated and the barrier opened. I climbed the steps leaving a crowd of onlookers clapping and cheering in my wake.

To be perfectly frank, making a film was not the most exciting experience of my life, though I did meet Dustin Hoffman. I was given a wide-brimmed hat and old gypsy rags. My teeth had to be blackened. In spite of the years that had passed since the demise of Salazar, I was still way too handsome for the role. For the most part the job entailed standing around doing nothing. That doesn't come naturally to a grafter like me. The bigwigs waved cameras around and argued with Hoffman over trivialities. Finally, I had to shout and pretend to fight with a pitchfork. Then I was sent on my way with a thank you in the form of a twenty Euro note.

In all honesty, I would prefer to do some good old-fashioned gardening. I don't think much of the people but this is a lush city and there's horticulture in the air down at the John Lennon Gardens. Though why the council named a park after a dead and over-rated English singer is beyond me.

There was an African planting rosemary in the gardens. I asked if he knew of any jobs going spare. He told me in limited Spanish that I'd have to speak to the foreman who had gone for a beer somewhere. What a waste of space the lot of them. Yet, guys like this are walking into jobs. That's how things are. Same goes for Germany where companies are falling over each other to employ Turks. I hope to find more rewarding work soon but twenty Euros covers

the rent for a couple of days and I had enough left over to treat myself to a carton of Don Simon.

When I got back to the International Red Star Hostel a party was in full swing. Señora Raskalnekov's son was dancing with the only Spanish resident; a young girl from the plains of Castile-Leon who works in a fashion store. She was wearing a short brown suede skirt, low-cut pink top and thigh length boots. I say they were dancing but I'll explain further just in case you have a tango or foxtrot in mind. The noise from the stereo sounded like lathes and drills and hammers working ninety to the dozen in a Stalinist factory. Zara was moving spasmodically to this industrial grind and every so often her skirt fluttered up to reveal a thong as red as the Soviet Army. Young Raskalnekov clearly approved and shouted to me in Spanish, "Hey, Portuguese Antonio, how's your only friend, Don Simon?"

These Russians could drink but they weren't funny with it.

Señora Raskalnekov was locked in a long embrace with Adrian in the kitchen. When I entered, they got up and left with the Russian lady towering on high heels. She led the Englishman out with the words, "Follow me to my castle, Sire Robin Hood". I somehow fell asleep at the kitchen table without finishing the Don Simon.

The buzz of the fridge woke me up early. The Georgians were on their way to Alicante, having taken the leg of cooked ham and some of the flies south. The industrial music had finished its shift. I returned to the front room, which was black as a mineshaft. Young Raskalnekov and Zara had exhausted each other on the sofa and were hidden under the duvet. Adrian came creeping out of Señora Raskalnekov's room after a performance of *A Night at the Opera*. He speaks Spanish pretty well, so we had a chat while watching a rerun of a Champions League game on TV. I told him about the time I got free tickets to go and see Bayern play in Munich when I was Franz Beckenbauer's gardener. Adrian looked at me disbelievingly. Nobody appreciates a hard working Portuguese any more.

Adrian went to his room as soon as Constantinople came in. Little wonder, but as the front room was my sleeping quarters I had nowhere else to go. Constantinople sits down, reaches for the remote and begins to watch some action movie. I'm not sure why as he always prefers to listen to his own monologues.

“Bad day, Portuguese, bad day. Lost a lot of money on the fruit machines. Big losses. But some you win and some you lose. Tomorrow’s another day. I hope it will be better than this one. Fucking wife still won’t let me see my daughter. My daughter, Portuguese! My own flesh and blood. I live in this shithole of a town, where there’s nothing to do except eat out in the same old square and think of the day when I can see my daughter. You got any children, Portuguese? Not that you know of, eh. Hits you right here in the heart. Every morning I wake up, work long days, drive a van to Barcelona and you know what? Work is fun. Meeting people takes my mind off my precious daughter and the slut that gave birth to her. But don’t you worry. You’ve got an easy life, Portuguese, with no children. I’m going to see my lawyer again tomorrow. He says he’ll get me access. In the meantime, better not to think about it too much I know... You ever been to Valencia? A lot more going on than there is in this dive. Nice place. Lively streets. Smiley happy people saying ‘Hi’. There are better places than Spain, you know. I wouldn’t be here if I could get a visa for Germany or England. You ever been abroad, Portuguese? Oh, I forgot. You are abroad. This is exotic for you, eh? Japan, I tell you, that’s the place to be. That Englishman, Adrian, must be crazy living here when he could be over there. The English are lucky. They don’t know they were born. They can go work anywhere. But me? It’s not easy for us Turks to get visas. Even you, Portuguese. You could try Germany or England. You were in Germany? Fighting over there, were you? Yeah, but it’s changed a lot since Hitler’s day. You should see it now. I’m thinking of buying a few BMW’s in Germany and bringing them down here to sell. You can get a good price for German cars. Well, don’t keep me up Portuguese. I’ve got a busy day ahead. Nothing but shit on TV.”

Young Turk. Wish I still had that pitchfork.

Incense and Nonsense

Bill drove me to the front door, making polite conversation on the way. “The Ministry saved my life,” he said. I never saw him again after that. He probably goes to a different branch. There are groups all over the city and throughout the world.

This Ministry building had a steeple, stained glass windows with images of a praying virgin, as well as crucifixes. Inside, it smelt of incense but it was not a church. The Ministerians lit candles, talked, laughed and prayed in a funny sort of way. I came out thinking they might be able to help me with my sickness.

I liked the fact that nobody forced me go there and visited whenever the desire arose. I felt better about myself. Scattered around on giant fluffy cushions were spiritual books that you were free to peruse, but only if you wanted to. There was no pressure to read them. Nobody barked out orders although there were always knowledgeable Ministerians on hand to give advice.

After the first few visits, I found myself staying behind to read because the cushions were more comfortable than my sofa at home and there was a constant supply of chocolate cookies. TV had become a waste of time. Who wants to watch entertainment for Normals when you can get all the drama and fun you need listening to the tales of Ministerians?

Occasionally, I swept the crumbs off the floor or mopped away the coffee stains in order to assuage any guilt about spending so much time there. There was nowhere else to go now all the bars, clubs, casinos and arcades had been shut down.

The majority of people didn’t want these things any more so they were done away with. It was a democratic decision. Most Ministerians support this law although they don’t interfere in the lives of non-Ministerians or “Normals”.

After a few months, I decided there was no point in paying rent on my apartment and moved into the Ministry. My new roommate, Kenny, had been a resident for a little under six months and was very enthusiastic about the place. He’d also visited for a couple of years before moving in. We talked about the spiritual books and agreed they made a lot of sense. It was a good thing to be spiritual rather than religious.

We didn't go out often as the Ministry contained pretty much everything that we needed. On sunny days, after we'd done our kitchen chores, we went out into the garden and sat under the rosebushes. We talked about our enhanced lives and about how difficult it was to feel comfortable with Normals. They seemed to sense we were Ministerians as well. We just couldn't relate to them and vice-versa.

But as the months passed, Kenny grew weird and non-communicative. He even stopped helping with the washing up and finally admitted to me in a private moment that he'd been told off by one of the advisors for reading non-spiritual books. The Trial by Kafka and a collection of stories by James Kelman had gone missing from the small bookshelf by his bedside. I had no idea what had happened to them. In fact, I hadn't even noticed these titles.

"Don't worry, I believe you," Kenny said. "I reckon it was that fuckin' spiritual advisor of mine."

Ministerians swore a lot. It wasn't a sanctimonious organization. But I began to wonder about Kenny's reading material and flicked through some of the books. He'd marked some passages with a green highlighter pen that he kept in a jar by his bedside. They were very bleak novels that offered no answers. Yet, it didn't seem right that someone had taken them away. They were Kenny's books.

"It's important to get a non-Ministry perspective on things from time to time. It keeps you healthy," he said. And he'd been honest with his spiritual advisor about that.

One morning, I awoke to the sounds of birds. The window was wide open and there was no sign of Kenny. His bed was unmade, the wardrobe was empty and there were a few gaps on the bookshelf where some of his non-spiritual books had been: Crime and Punishment, Martin Eden and Ham on Rye were all missing.

I couldn't believe he'd just upped and gone. Surely he wasn't going back to a life among the Normals? Kenny's spiritual advisor came by. He looked like a mature version of the Milky Bar Kid. Something like how John Denver would look now if his plane hadn't crashed. A graying blond fringe kept flopping over his glasses.

He examined the contents of the bookshelf closely, flicking through a number of other books. He paid close attention to 1984. Denver asked me if I'd seen Kenny reading this

book. I said I didn't take much notice of what he read. Denver held it up and flicked through it quickly making a sound like a gambler mixing a pack of cards. I only saw the pages for an instant, but from the green blur it was clear that Kenny had underlined chunks of text with the highlighter pen.

"You won't mind if I take this away?"

"I wasn't planning on reading it," I said. "Too depressing." Denver nodded solemnly and slipped the book into the pocket of his suit jacket.

"It's really very sad that you're roommate has gone," he said. "He won't last long you know. Ex-Ministerians never survive for any length of time out there. It's a well known fact. We don't make any secret of it. When people leave here they either die or come crawling back, begging for forgiveness."

He turned and left with a shake of the head, his fringe flopping back into place over his right eye.

I was worried about Kenny. I didn't need Denver to tell me about the dangers faced by Ministerians out there. That night, while washing up, I had a chat with Manitas about it. The Mexican did a lot of DIY around the place and was putting the finishing touches to a new wall unit in the kitchen.

"Kenny is crazy," he said. "Forget about him and throw yourself into community work."

Manitas was grafting more now than he had done as a qualified joiner. It kept him sane, he said, instead of dwelling on the wreckage of his past.

"And read at nights with the group as well. You spend too much time alone in the library. Make sure it's the right stuff or you'll end up like Kenny. Stick close to your spiritual advisor and keep on track. Things will get better that way. Hell, you might even find yourself a girlfriend like I have."

Alison was new to the Ministry. She quickly took a fancy to Manitas who had put up some new shelves in her bedroom to accommodate her books, many of which were gifts from Manitas and Denver. The latter was also her spiritual advisor.

"How many spiritual disciples can an advisor have?" I asked Manitas.

“Well, I don’t think there’s a limit,” he replied. “It’s not the Ministry’s style to lay down rules. God only knows.”

Although I’d been told the Ministry was not religious, you were free to talk about God if you wanted to and Manitas did a lot of that. In fact, he was beginning to sound like a walking bible.

“Only a few Deviators make it back into the flock. They invariably look as if they’ve suffered in the wilderness and are ready to repent.”

At other times, he would infer that the alternative to not following the Ministry’s Suggestions for Living was death.

“Nobody is forced to stay here if they don’t want to. It’s just a good idea, like wearing a parachute when jumping out of a plane.”

I wanted to ask him about the Normals. They didn’t follow the Suggestions for Living and they weren’t dead. It also occurred to me that, no matter how rigidly you followed these recommendations, you would still die one day. But I felt it was best to keep that to myself and not complicate things. That, they said, was my main problem and one of the reasons why I had ended up in the Ministry in the first place.

One night at the book club, I let it slip that I was starting to miss some of the Normals. Especially Kenny, who hadn’t returned. Maybe he was doing okay?

“The time has come to get God into your life,” Manitas said. “Let the Ministry truly enter your heart.” The others in attendance nodded.

“You mean you still haven’t found God?” asked an advisor, shaking his head.

“You don’t want God in your life?”

“I didn’t think it was compulsory,” I mumbled.

“It isn’t, but there comes a time... You’ve been here long enough. If you don’t look for him why should he come and find you? You must see God?”

Everyone in the room appeared puzzled, shocked or horrified. Another negative response could mean becoming homeless and hungry.

“God is all around you. Look him in the face. Face fear or you’ll end up like Kenny.”

I glanced around the room. Apart from a few frustrated or embarrassed Ministerians, all I saw was a radiator, the doorknob, some cushions that weren’t as fluffy as they’d once been and an empty cookie jar by the sink. The radiator was warm. I was going to choose that for symbolic reasons when I saw a distorted reflection on the cookie jar. It was only the outline of my own face but the jar became my temporary God of convenience.

I might still have stayed on at the Ministry were it not for the evening Alison came to my room. She wanted to know the deeper secrets of the Ministerians.

“I don’t know them yet,” I said. “You have to wait for the secrets to reveal themselves.”

“That’s what the spiritual advisors tell me as well,” she said. “But there are ways of making them talk. Do I have to suck you off, too?” she asked, raising her foot and tugging at my belt with her rouge-painted toes.

“I could make up a few secrets like the others,” I said. But I’ll be honest with you... I’m gay and don’t find it too difficult to resist your offer.”

I tried to dismiss Alison as a bit of a whore but after some thought I decided to tell Manitas about the incident. He went berserk, called me a devious lying bastard and said he was going to report this allegation to his spiritual advisor.

“Fuck your spiritual advisor,” I said. “Why don’t we get Alison in here and you can ask her yourself?” He pushed me aside and went to look for her. Soon he was running around the corridor with an electric drill and was threatening to turn my brain into mince.

My last hope was to see if I could get to the venerated Denver first. But when I forced my way into the control room he was standing there with his tackle hidden behind the head of a young semi-naked female Deviator who had just returned to the fold.

I ran through the corridor, making for the nearest exit with the sound of Manitas’ drill in my ears and the look of excruciating pleasure on Denver’s face lodged in my mind.

It’s three months now since I escaped from the incense and the nonsense. I miss a few of the guys. They weren’t all bad people, especially the less fanatical ones. I’m getting used to life among the Normals. Some of the old forms of entertainment are secretly sprouting up

but you have to be careful with them. I'm in temporary accommodation again. It's tough but easier than trying to have faith in something you don't believe in.

I just got a call from Kenny. He's back in the Ministry. He laughed at my story and told me life among the Normals plays tricks on the brain. "That's how it starts," he said. "I'm lucky to be alive, and so are you. Come back to the Ministry before it's too late."