

about 8,000 words

Last Post

Act 1

Again, he exhales, a sound between breath and whistle, moving through spring. Sunkissed patches are already warming the fresh air between pleasant stretches of cool shade. He continues his easy jog South, steadily elevating his heart rate, past C-block dormitories, between the officers' mess and laundry, sharply sweet scents of breakfast and detergent merging sickeningly before him, inhaled deeply and purified in exhalation. Taste of hot iron beneath his tongue. Hale and healthy. Out through the wrought bars and lockturn gates – *mens sana in*

corpore sano. Run until you are free. Beyond the sentry's gaze. Out here, gathering speed, he feels himself awaken. Tendons and muscles loosen at will.

He dips down to the footpath that parallels the railway line. Sycamores line his side of tracks. Hanging branches shade him from the rising sun. He knows them by their roots, which flex and lift the paving slabs, some bursting through entirely. Serious hurdles. Keeps him on his toes. He hears the day's first engine approaching behind him, a gathering thunder, and for a few seconds, he races alongside it, floating in the roar of speeding carriages by his side, a great drumming pulse in his chest. And then it is gone, way off ahead, and he is left behind by the banks of the Cart. He follows the cool blue vein of burbling water, seeing his own form reflected back at him from the surface, a titan shadow against the sky. This, himself, he sees, towering mirage, becoming... each and every day, before he opens his eyes from the night's dark silence.

This day, another. His daily resurrection, changeless. He had awoken precisely sixty seconds before the alarm sounded, dependable and coiled as a watch spring, a tension of imminent action. He used this minute to command his breathing and centre his intentions. In sinusoidal waves, he inhaled the scent of sawdust, sweat, and disinfectant of the dorm, and exhaled a morning breath as inoffensive as clay. Birdsong broke through the quarters' windows and ducked beneath the occasional squeak from a few of the five other cots in the room, springs protesting the weight of the dreaming bodies borne. Dawn flared in peach circles through his eyelids. He finally opened them in slow-march solemnity. The light poured in. His muscles pulled him through the motions of orderly, ninety-degree arrangements – a clench and swing to seated upright, soles on concrete, a firm rowing motion into socks and boots and, rising, rifle straight, shoulders back, the clarion rang out through the barracks, and he was formatted. Staff Sergeant Matthew Fisher, ready for inspection.

I'm up, I'm up.

Ugh.

Oh, Biggs, was that you? Jesus.

Get fucked. That fruity tooty is Rollo's, nae mistake.

Fair play, like, ha.

Absolute rotter.

Christ, can a man no get a coffee in the mornin a'fore this
shite patter starts.

In twenty seconds all six beds were made, sheets in sharp hospital corners, and the soldiers were stood by their heads, attentive for inspection. Captain Valentin Fox strode into the dorm, tall and slender and sharp as a spear. His green eyes, pristine as cut emeralds, shone in languid appraisal. He swept over his men with well-worn brisk efficiency, inspecting from boot heel to brow.

Campbell, sort that cuff. I see you've finally got those boots up to snuff, Mr. Rollo, and not a day too soon. McLeish, that belt's seen better days, report to stores. Fisher...

Their eyes met. Fisher tried to look past them, through them, without falling in. Unspoken kinship smouldered within. He thought he might feel its heat within his Captain, too. Today the eyes said something else as well.

Very good. At ease.

Captain Fox knew something he wanted to tell him, but couldn't, not yet, but soon, very soon, perhaps. The day promised a bright future.

It does. Fisher wheels round westward and the rising sun stretches out his shadow – a tower, a crane – his shoulders rolling square like lattice-steel booms. His strong thighs pumped like pistons as he settles into a firm-footed pace, chasing the water through the heart of Paisley. He feels blood thud within him, messages of ancestors delivered to cells dying and reborn. Endorphins wash down like a drippy egg cracked inside his skull. He finds himself in a liminal space, this locomotion, a body unfurling from sleep in a town about to stir. In the distance he sees the early light catch the artillery-shell turrets, casting razor sharp shadows beneath the baronial gables of the grand old post house. A jackdaw cries against the burning of the new day. Fisher's wristlet buzzes to indicate his heart's entry into the fat-burning zone. Instinctively, he looks at the screen. 117bpm glowed amber between the graph lines. He feels a side stitch threaten. He acknowledges it, then permits it to retreat. He reaches the townhall now, pushing past the last Corinthian column of the sandstone portico, already ten full seconds behind his PB, the wristlet confirms. Another data point. Three years ago, but it never forgot, and it'd never let him forget either.

On the opposite bank, the memorial garden snoozes in the sun, long wilted grass waves the half-sleep of a sentry waiting to be called to watch. Towards the cenotaph, Fisher nods a private salute, mid-stride, to the fallen. His grandfather's lies amongst the names inscribed. Incorporal and omnipresent, Vasyl Pachenko lives on in Fisher's roaring veins. He blinks wetly to the sky, recalling the giant hand, calloused and knuckle-furred, that tussled his infant hair, tough little Matvey, playing so seriously with his toys in perfect rank and file.

His grandfather had been the real deal. At just eighteen, Vasyl had marched on Prague to neutralise the debauched Dubček, and there he had seen death first hand, the piling of a few dozen doll-eyed bodies being a small price to pay, it was felt, to avoid the collapse of the workers' paradise. Already a tall boy, Vasyl Pachenko had bulked up quickly, despite a meagre sustenance of rye bread and boiled cabbage and turnip soup and the occasional windfall of stewed goat, before he could benefit from the consistently protein-rich rations of the Red Army. He filled out like the farmer-warriors before him, Cossack and Krestyane stock, curing their knotted muscles and broad backs from toiling the earth of the Caspian steppe and chernozem of Kursk. Upon this genetic scaffold, he'd built his body in the barrack's gymnasium, swinging great ropes and hurling hammers, stone discs, and iron shot. His instructors pushed ever harder, while quietly marvelling to behold him. The growth swelled his sense of duty. Soon, Vasyl thrilled at the idea of righteous protection through military might. Behind the shelter of his body, the women and children of the great Republic could soundly sleep.

Even now Fisher feels, physically, more like those toy soldiers he arranged than the gargantuan figure his own grandfather cut. He ups the pace until he feels his hamstring twinge, and gently recalibrates. As the jackdaw cries out once more, he sees again before him Captain Fox's inscrutable yet suggestive expression. Something was happening, but, loose lips sinking ships, he couldn't say. Today, injury was not an option.

He turns back into the avenue to complete his circuit, noticing that the heat had already picked up. It'd soon be hot as hell. Every spring had started to feel more like summer right out of the gate. Straight, sticky lines of sweat stream from his crown, lateral canthus stinging, invigorating. Fisher taps his wristlet as his right foot crosses the threshold beneath the barrack's iron arch. The haptic thrums upon his skin. Gasping, he watches the instant calculation. Twenty-

six seconds slower than his personal best. Heart-rate a few hairs higher than his average. Already, at twenty-five, he was chasing the ghost of his twenty-two-year-old body. A race he was bound to lose, though he had no choice but to compete. Until the bitter end. What heroes are made of.

When his grandfather was his age, he'd already seen action, fighting against the Egyptians at Sinai, and had soon after brought back a wife, Aya, to Leningrad. Inconceivable that Fisher could do the same. Nothing stirred him about the plain town girls with their feeble cares and small minds. How Aya must have moved, sunbent flower, towards the great body of Vasyl. In Leningrad, he trained as an officer while his seed was duly sown and cultivated, first Anna, then Nikolai, then Aleksander. A line stretching out through time. He rose. The newly commissioned Colonel Pachenko led operations in Angola, reporting directly to Varennikov. As the Mbundu slew Ovi and Bakongo brothers and the green knife-blade leaves of the lala palms grew sticky with blood, he rallied bravely. Reckless. Once, pinned down in a cowshed, refusing retreat, salvation came only by a marauding misfit squad of British defectors, led by a buck-toothed brigand by the name of Ronson. He never thought he'd owe his life to an Anglo-Saxon. Still, they passed on quietly, exchanging cigarettes, handshakes, and few words. Out of the cowshed and across fields of fallen friends and foes, Pachenko followed the tracks back to base and to his reward of the Khmeltnitsky cross.

Back home, Aya enjoyed the deference of helpful cadets sent to attend to the household's needs. They sometimes played with the children, Aleksander's chubby hands clasping for the golden lighter of his favourite, Lev, a young ryadovoy with hazel eyes. A Colonel first, a husband by tradition and a father by conception, Pachenko returned, briefly, to a house of fearful, if thankful, wide-eyed strangers. He was glad to be deployed again, directing Castro's

Cubans to purge the Somali from the Ogaden. Petrov himself pinned the Order of Glory to his broad chest. Vasyl was set to retire with the most honourable of discharges. And then came Afghanistan.

Fisher holds his hands on his hips, fingers charting the diaphragmatic contractions, as he paces through the hot dust towards the track. Emerging from the officer's block, his Sergeants Coskun and Piegzik fall into step beside him. Coskun began to sing with a tease

We know something you don't know, Sir

Yes?

Guess. Go on.

Well, from your grin, it'd have to be something miraculous from the Saints.

That's tomorrow.

Right.

Och, dinnae be an eejit. We're shipping out. Tomorrow.

Word's come down from Colonel Robertson herself. D Company need certified today.

Truly, the day was fulfilling its promise. A shine of emeralds. Fisher, fascinated to find that he had unconsciously started, stops twisting his wristlet. Skin reddens raw beneath.

How many stations left?

Most have three.

Including The Wall.

Right, including The Wall. Turner and Black have The Well to do before that, though, still need to break ninety seconds.

Where are they now?

Schick has them warming up on the track.

The three physical training instructors break into a light jog round the perimeter of the parade ground towards the unmistakable cattle sound of dozens of desert boots in purposeful, semi-synchronized trots on burnt blaes. Red dust rises, murmuring. A squat figure with bright white hair sprouting like mould from a deep-pink scalp stands stiffly on the sidelines. They salute Schick who blows his whistle, calling the troops to a halt.

Tallest on the right, shortest on the left. Move, move, move.

The mass resolves into a steady slope of growth. One hundred chests rise and fall, puffing raspy breath like hungry dogs. Fisher's eyes picked out the dozen women more or less, but not entirely, at the tail end of a swelling mass of sharp-eyed boys eager to flex. Sallow slack faces, all. Country folk, decedents of crofters and cotters and ploughmen and weavers. This was no pageant, though, and the line looked strong. Legally, steroids were still forbidden, but Fisher, following custom, keeps his suspicions to himself. He surveys his charges with cool eyes, calms his heart, ready to rouse.

D Company, we need you certified fit for duty and action-ready today. Not tomorrow, not by week's end. To-day. Infer from that what you will. This means everyone completes final stations. First time. No excuses. Understood?

SIRYESSIR!

And how are you going to do that?

IN-TEN-TION, SIR!

Precisely. Very good. Right, then. Num-bers!

They called off.

One to fifty with Sergeant Coskun, fifty-one to one hundred with Seargeant Piegzik. Black, Turner, you're with Corporal Schick to The Well. Let's go.

East and West they fan out to the obstacle course stations. Fisher unrolls the hose onto the hard, dry ground, fits the end to the brass spigot poking out of the equipment shed, and gets to work preparing The Crawl, soaking the earth to mud beneath the cargo net. As the water seeps into the cracked dirt rolling like old blood through the valleys, he thinks of a garden he'd seen in a photograph his aunt kept in an album under the bed. Hyacinths and gardenias. In amongst the leaves, a young woman in denim overalls stood, tilting a watering can to the roots, a baby strapped to her chest, while at the edge of the frame a short, thin and dishevelled beatnik leaned on a spade sunk into a great mound of earth, drawing at a long cigarette. Aunty Anna had taken that picture, she told him. His mother and father, and him. The only family portrait they had. The next day, Anna watched over little Matty in his crib, and, while his parents were returning from the garden centre, their little green hatchback full of compost and bedding plants, the oncoming

black jeep took the blind corner too wide, and crossed the divide. But there were worst things in this world.

Fisher mounts the iron platform on the north face of the circuit to gain a vantage. He watches his officers with their whistles and their clipboards monitor each fatigued, ghillie-helmeted and pack-bound hunchback soldier perform the necessary motions – dip, dive, haul, stretch, swing, plunge, squat, scramble press – barking unceasing red-faced encouragement. He watches one then another disappear into a round hole in the earth to rise again, reborn and screaming, minutes later, hands rope-raw and stinging, catch their breath, then follow Schick's pointing arm to where Coskun bent over the dirty net, undulating in the mud as writhing figures enter, flail, and slide out of The Crawl, and, hopping across the slalom of bald jeep tyres to where Piegzik pounds his flat palm the climbing wall that shudders against the tidal smack of bodies which scale, crest, drop to the tired springs of burning knees, and hobble over the finish line. One after another, some faster, some slower, all straining, private after private, crosses, until, collapsing now into a heap beneath Fisher's elevated feet, at last, D Company was certified.

The three PTIs join their Staff Sergeant on the platform as he moves forward to address the gasping troops. The field throbs like a Challenger engine, sweat-sharp heat rising in the late morning air. From far across the town, a great bell tolls the hour. A pang of childhood summer, when Aunty Anna stationed him at the end of table outside the pub where, between serving punters, she could keep an eye on him, and, if he stayed good, sneaking him a bowl of ice-cream and a dollop of strawberry jam as he sat out there among bawdy builders and travel agents on lunch, peacefully occupying himself with his Places Of The World book with the pictures of all

that lay over the horizon and almost just beyond belief. He felt his aunt's body behind him, shade cast over the leaf-shaped country without a sea.

Afghanistan?

She spat to the pavement. She put a firm hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at her eyes, glassy with the look she got when she thought of her father.

Oh, Matty, what a mess. After Kunduz... what he saw... He swore to us he'd never go back. Mamma was dead and the wall was down, and he brought us here to have a chance again. But he was still a soldier, after all. He always said the British kept their honour. He thought it'd be different with them, thought he could really help the people. Make amends. Hopeless, hopeless.

With 1st Armoured Division he deployed, for the last time. The explosion was instant and total. His name, embossed and shining through blades of meadow grass, persists.

Fisher follows D Company into the briefing room, all welcoming the cool, conditioned air. He notices how the space had been softened, taking in the inspirational posters of swans keeping calm, grumpy cats, and unbelievably photogenic comrades in pristine cammo tacked across pastel green walls. He stands behind one of the occupied oversized turquoise moulded chairs, which jutted out haphazardly from low, yellow crescent-moon tables arranged to face the projector screen. An infant schoolroom for, legally speaking, consenting adults. Captain Fox brushes Fisher's shoulder as he passes – sandalwood – bringing up the projected slides with his clicker. Horror quickly manifests, meticulously abstracted with acronyms, line-drawn maps, terrain analysis, and audience participation.

We'll liaise with 6th Paras at Karlash Alpha.

They'll be where all the rain and birdshit is – all the rest of the crap that falls from the sky.

We'll advance North West, rough going, chaps, approximately sixty hard minutes.

O'Brien, that's when Mickey's big hand's gone all the way around the watch.

Who are ya? Who, who?

WHO WHO!

Barricade construction will commence under armoured cover here and here.

Aye, Proctor, you'll be a dabhand at that, right enough.

Whatsat?

Digging a big hole and napping deeply.

Nearly dying.

Never daring!

My duty to you all is that...

... I dig your bogs for piss and shat.

Gallow's humour of the third degree. A time-honoured necessity. Fisher chooses not to hear the nervous undertow, or the louder silence from the other privates, or the occasional mutterings about whether part of this, or maybe all of it, might just be an April Fool's Day hoax. Captain Fox, his thin mouth stuck in a rare smile someone must've once, persuasively, told him

was charming, pressed on ever shrilly through his slides and maps and manoeuvres. Disembarkment schedules. Partial duty details. Nothing too specific.

D Company quickly shuffle out to their bunks and change into civvies, matching jeans and royal-blue crew necks. Fisher follows the loose gaggle of plainclothes soldiers at a chaperone's distance. The surface of the Cart shoots dazzle-sparks of sunlight. Some soldiers skip pebbles up the river, as they did on walks to school, their reflections rippling in the wake. They walk with intense chatter, belly laughter, followed by long stretches of profound silence, broken then only by the crunch of gravel under boots and the rising hum of traffic. Fisher's wristlet buzzes and he pulls his sleeve down low. They pass the townhall tower, the sun still shining high above, saltires and union jacks hanging limp in the still, scorching air. They wheel into County Square which has sprung into a market-fair, burger vans, shooting galleries, bell-clattering high strikers and siren-blaring punching machines, all framing the pub, which has turned itself inside out, barmen having hauled the heavy-wood tables and antique leather-studded chairs from its postal office years out into the courtyard for a make-shift beer garden, while a chorus line of lassies, still clad in the same quasi-Bavarian aprons as their fore-sisters had worn for generations, are keeping the foaming pints flowing from within. Pulling up whatever they can to sit and lean upon – chairs quickly claimed, but vegetable crates and empty kegs were soon appropriated – the soldiers establish a territorial foothold in the glare of the sun.

A GLASS, A GLASS! OF AMBER ALE! OF LAGER CRISP! AND FOAMING
BRIGHT!

Fisher, c'mon pal, sir, get this doon ya!

Harman's bet a round she can pushup ten reps wi' Tansley on her back.

If she can do five she'll no pay for a drink the night.

Here, I thought I telt yi tae get me a hawf'naw!

Calm doon, yah plook, Miller's got the rest.

Here, you seen Jones flexing them weapons fir Broadie?

Glamour muscles. Fair play, though. Gid luck tae 'im.

Wristlets chirp like cicadas, heartrates rising, blood-alcohol swelling, passion stirring. A sketchy and somehow familiar-looking bloke in a trenchcoat, big arm draped over a morose specky accountant or something, flashes a wicked grin over in the direction of Captain Fox who, sipping a Bailey's, doesn't seem to notice. A barmaid, who smells like caramel, places a hand on Fisher's shoulder and asks if she can get him anything. He recoils reflexively, rudely, apologising. The wet stink of meat wafts over from the burger van. His leg starts to bounce, restlessly, and he tries to cheer himself with the jovial sight. The drinks are flowing, and the faces are glowing, indeed the whole town seems ready to burst into strong, strident and triumphant, as the Ministry of Defence train clatters overhead, whistling its high note strong and pure, pulling the first crop of infantry, it'll be A Company, and a few senior officers, most likely, out south now, to glory. The beams of the lowering sun catch the metal of the carriages – rumbling down the tracks, loud as applause – and send it shining white into Fisher's eyes, blinding, and a chorus of angel faces, dozens now, pierce the burning sky like stars, and at the centre of it all, one shines brighter than all the rest, and it is she, the maker, and the sky falls away, the firmament dissipating like burnt fog to reveal the steep rows of plush burgundy chairs

in the darkwood fixtures of the auditorium and the veil is finally dropped and all is seen for what it is.

She has found me.

Intermission

Here, she has found me, unearthed me.

Again.

It's been weeks since the pub door swung open, ringing the bell above, and I looked up to find, not a punter, but her. It had been a slow Tuesday, just a couple regulars by eleven o'clock, a couple sherries for Mrs Aston and Mrs Webster, to be nursed for hours, Tam Shearer and his sad-eyed collie lapping their stouts. They all squatted and shuffled and slurped in this dank, dark cavern – the once-grand post house, reupholstered in Standard British Pub fashion, cheap absorbent carpet and vinyl imitation-leather, long lattice windows, panes opaque with a smear of condensed fluids varied and foul – sneered at by the gilt-and-dust-framed portraits of bewigged and bygone postmasters. It was quiet enough to hear, every now and then, the train whistle cry out from the station across the road. Brian had put me behind the bar myself 'til close, and I was taking advantage of the lack of surveillance with an informal standing break in the camera's blindspot, sneaking some chips and a half-pint of Deuchars, idly scanning one of the flyers that this guy Samuel – a rather earnest bespectacled thirty-something community theatre director, who'd managed to get Brian to rent him some rehearsal space in one of the unused floors of this old building just a few flights of stairs above the bar itself – asked me to hang on the notice board a few weeks ago. For some reason, this was the first time I properly read it.

Community Amateur Repertoire Theatre Needs You! Local Production of
Goethe's Faust. Ensemble Cast Needed. No Experience Required.

Evening rehearsals Tuesdays and Thursdays. My nights off. Kismet. I could avoid her for the whole week, I thought. And, no sooner had my mind spoken of the devil, the bell rang and there she was, and everything became once more so immediately, unbearably present.

Attention. I stand up, poker-straight. Slouching is for slobs and harlots. Braced. I smooth my apron and the dark skirt beneath. I roll back my shoulders once more into wings, fix a smile, and lift the bar flap to enter this newly hostile territory. There is Maw. Maw is. She stands for a moment in the doorway. She looks through me, her eyes full of the condemnations she's already swept over the dirty, cracked stone of the entrance way, the chipped paint on the door and grimy brass of its handle, eyes which now she throws into the interior, this meagre den. She lifts a royal blue oxford high over the threshold as if nonchalantly avoid a tripwire. Unwrinkled stockings meet perfectly together at easy attention. She glides across the carpet, between the empty tables, to stand before me, an apparition, out of time, a gas lamp salvaged from a cobbled street and replanted in a museum's laminate floor, cast iron shining defiant under the light of electronic diodes. I still wear my smile. Face to face. Though she is shorter, petite, she somehow looms, her face eclipsing mine. She peers into me like a well. Her lips move and sound shudders down through me.

Good morning, Francesca.

My eyes water from contact. Ripples tremble through aqueous humor from the detonating soundwaves that Maw blasts at me. No, not soundwaves exactly. Never once does she raise her voice, so no one lefts their eyes. What she emits is more like radio waves, microwaves. Gamma. X-ray. With a look, she tells me I'm her wrack, her ruin, her devil's debt come due. I shrink before her, useless and awkward as always, always the same since, at seventeen – twice that now, impossible – I truly became aware of how much I, with my mediocre grades and friends

and measurements, disappointed her. I smell the chip oil on my fingers and itch to bite my nails. My stomach is a kinked hose, membrane straining round an arterial airbubble. I let my eyes blur to focus on the flying flies, *muscae volitantes*, that let me leave my body long enough so I won't boil and vaporise. Not on her pot-watch.

Mum, Mother, what are... you're here.

Most observant and correct.

The pain does not come from the outside. It rises from within. Drawn to the surface by Maw's words, which raindance upon me like gullfeet, a tattoo to trick the worms to tunnel upwards to their death. Shame chews and burrows its way out of my heart through my meat to skin that crawls. I am a failure, a squandering. Still dressing in dirndls and pulling pints in the same dump that's paid my way since I left school for a part-time course in marketing – might as well have been hospitality, human resource management, horology – trying to push into my head, in my fifteen-minute breaks sat on an empty keg by the greasy kitchen amidst the dishwasher roar and barked orders, the principles, essentials, and foundations of global perspective positionings and strategic brand analytics. Risk management. It was all so soulless and safe as a grave.

Do you... do you want to find a... Would you care to sit down, there by the window perhaps, and I can bring you a tea. I can probably take my break early actually and, yes, would that be ok. It's good to see you.

She flashes her eyes towards the table I suggest, with outstretched arm, hairs rising above gooseflesh, finding chill even in this torrid air.

Very well. Strong. Not too hot. You always forget.

Prim, precise ambiguity, but I had never forgotten. It was just that her standards kept shifting. She could not be approached by familiar roads. My unfortunate inheritance. I had noticed, for instance, when others would try to get close to me, significantly. Boys and girls responded instinctively to whatever wounded animal pheromones I emitted. But, inevitably, after a first flush of shy curiosity, I pushed each one away – waster, thespian, fog, freak, dorothy, pauper, artist – already condemning them with Maw’s final judgement. She was always inside me. I had my studies to postpone the worst of her scorn for a while. Still, whatever choice I made just didn’t seem right. I opened a door and a hundred others slammed shut. I found it hard to breathe sometimes. Often. Once I was on track, I found, there was nothing to be done. It was there, in the regulations, irrefutable black and white. The four-week grace period had elapsed, so either keep on rolling or derail. Leave. The Clerk of the Senate’s email came heavy with the authority of the Dean of the Faculty and through including an invitation, of sorts, to *discuss this further, please secure, through correspondence with the Faculty Secretary, an appointment during office hours, as listed in your course handbook...* There was no way I was going to go through all that, much less tell Maw I was giving up, for that’s all she would see it as. So what else did that leave but to plow ahead. Joylessly, in first or second attempts, I passed the exams, on-track for a life of six-point strategies and personalised slide-decks. And now – as I lift the bar flap again and move out of my way the box of pop-up signs for Ruddles Ale and Monday-To-Thursday-half-price Cosmo Pitchers, which it is my sworn duty to unfold and arrange and replace when, before long, the cardboard soaks up all the spillage of a dozen bleary eyed patrons, air swirling thick with yeast and sugar and sweat, enveloping – I barely feel that cold stomach wound of missed chances.

Back behind the bar, safely separated from her glare by two and a half feet of mahogany, I fill a pot with urn water. I am conscious of being watched on this narrow stage. I don't want to be here. I just can't bear to be there, before her, not for long. I don't want to be forgotten in this sad pub, in this grey town, smiling as I numb the misery of strangers. But I don't want what she wants for me either. I don't want a respectable position, a husband in finance and lacrosse-academy brats, and investment portfolios, and transcribed community association board meetings. I don't want to feel like a piece of nose-curling rotten apple core for wanting something else, something more... what, expansive? Vital.

The spoon rattles accusingly on the saucer next to the cleanest cup I could find. White nucleated porcelain. Indestructible. I set it down, much too loud, in front of her, and then the pot. By habit, a paper napkin. She waits for me to sit, narrows her eyes at something on my face, lips curling, and slides the napkin back towards me, looking away.

Ketchup.

Sorry, with what?

On your face. Other side. Good grief, Francesca. Chips, I do not doubt.

I wipe and try to ignore her eyes flashing back over my ineptly shrinking body, my loose spread of bicep flesh.

Your cousin is expecting, did you know?

Kirsty? No, I didn't.

Well, you wouldn't, would you.

...

I'll be frank, Francesca. You need to be getting on.

Getting on with what, babies?

As a matter of fact, yes. Our time is finite and Lord knows you've squandered enough here already.

And yet, these little catchups seem infinitely renewable.

I beg your pardon? Don't mumble.

Nothing, I said nothing. It's nothing.

...

...

...

I'm sorry.

...

I apologise.

You know, it's not just the pregnancy. That's just biology. Seven years with Rundell's, paid her dues, Kirsty did, enhanced maternity, reap and sow. And she has Alexander, too, of course. Married well, hard worker. Youngest regional deputy director of operations, I hear. In Northern Europe, she says. Going places. A four-bed in Giffnock and a company Audi.

I am delighted for her.

Oh, will you stop it.

I am not Kirsty.

Clearly.

...

And, of course, I don't want you to be. I don't. Truly. But do you give a single thought to how I... Would you just look at yourself, please. In a pub. A waste of a degree, when, Lord knows, you could've been there at Rundell's, too. Kirsty would've only been too glad to help. Or GlacTine, I'm sure Alexander could still have a word with his cousin in Marketing.

Merchandising.

Merchandising, yes, see, that could hardly be worse than

Mum.

All I'm saying is, would you look at your prospects. You've got to look at yourself. You're not an idiot, something in between the ears at least. And still young enough to... with a bit of effort... I just mean, what are your prospects? Because you will be needing money for a baby or, if not, if you're going to keep house, you need to be fishing in a much deeper pond than this, a man who can take care of all that for you, which was more than good enough for most for many a year, and you'd be the first to admit, I'm sure, that you can't be that surprised to find yourself without... but time, my dear, time, it marches on doesn't it.

There's nothing wrong with not being with a man, you know.

Of course not, if he's not the right one, and yes, you know I'd rather see you single than settle for any of your... colleagues. Or, good gracious, your punters, of course, of course.

That's not what I

But being single is a phase, it's ok, like the other's you've had. When you have kids of your own, you'll see. But some phases can be pernicious. So look, here's a little...

She pulls the crisp note, flower-press perfect, from her cream Moreau purse, hands it over to me across the table. A fifty. Her hair resembles the printed monarch's, I observe. King is cash and cash is king. I hold the note with both hands, flat and wide, for a moment, so much larger than I remember, big as an envelope, then quietly fold it into my pocket, clocking her pursing lips.

I want you to find something to feel confident. Something to pull yourself up with. Dress for success.

I match her rictus smile.

Thank you. Very much. I'll try.

Yes, well. I best be off. Thank you for the tea, I suppose.

She glances down at the untouched set.

Francesca, you will hear what I'm saying, won't you.

Yes, Mother. I said, I'll try.

Very well. Goodbye then.

Bye.

She rises and sweeps away, bell ringing, out and onto wherever rainclouds reform.
Already I can feel the atmospheric pressure return to a more bearable barometric reading.

Oh, Margaret, ah'm so sorry. ah cannae believe ah left you there carrying that
table off the stage yersel.

Ach, not at all, it's fine. We got there didn't we.

Well done, troops, good half! Crackin turnout, too. Nearly full.

I think I left my cup onstage.

My mind went blank at the soldier's bit. No idea what I was meant
to say.

Too many words to remember, and we're all talking over
each other.

Exactly, no one will have noticed.

It could've gone a lot worse.

Guys, guys, gather round, just one moment, I promise. I've just popped back to
say what a splendid job you're all doing up there and that we have some very
special friends from London sitting next to us and, what can I say, they are rapt, I

must tell you, rapt. So let's keep that energy up up up and have a terrific second act.

Our illustrious director performs his signature exit, placing his hands together in prayer and bowing low. It was a gesture with which he had greeted me when I met him a dozen weeks ago at my first rehearsal. After my early shift, I changed in the staff toilet, and headed up the back stairs, barely used, to the second floor, which until recently held dusty office furniture unused since at least the forties and which Brian had decided to, behind the backs of corporate, clear out for a little cash-in-hand space renting to folks needing a wee venue for their grief support groups or their antenatal classes or even, as in tonight, for local thespians. They'd done a decent job. Not only was the space clean and decluttered, but the platform which once held the sorting machines already formed a suitable stage, upon which the principal actors were already blocking out a scene while the community chorus rehearsed on the floor. A few turned to look at me as I slid from the shadows into the soft overhead light. I was definitely one of the younger ones here, everyone else seeming to have lifetime of history together as they stood in easy gaggles. Our director clapped his hands and drew everyone into a big circle of chairs. I blushed as he introduced me, then sat quietly took my place in the ring. An old man who smelled like cloves and dry sweat kindly shared his script with me. The director took us through the next scene, dissected, analysed it, then had us read through before we got on our feet to block. He asked us to think about who we were in this scene, imagine their backstory. Make some choices on their behalf. This was to be our homework for the days and weeks to come, to more fully get under the skin of our parts, to prepare, to build our character, to create our role, to feel as they

would feel, react as they would react, here in this world at this speculative time, on an April Fool's Day, just a few cataclysmic years hence.

A few rehearsals later, over interval, I got talking to one of the Tea Ladies. Margaret had a daughter my age, she said, and she would sometimes pick her up here from rehearsal and would have a nice wee dinner together. Maybe I'd like to join them sometime. And that was how I met Jessica. Jessica had wide eyes, a strong face framed by short dark hair with a dark pink fringe. The peak of a much larger tattoo – a body-enveloping kraken that I'd soon come to know well – curled, just, into demure visibility at the nape of her neck.

Hey.

Hi.

Act 2

Without a public address system, the volunteer ushers – obliging husbands of the Tea Ladies – have to shout above the din of the pub, full of mingled regulars and those here for the show, to ask the audience to extricate themselves, from the throng. They shoo them, waving their arms wide, like oarsmen, herding livestock, back upstairs, to find and reclaim their folding chairs.

From the wings, I watch Maw returning, her face a stony and silent mask. Then, heart-tight, Jessica. She slides into the row in front of Maw. Of course, they'd end up so close. I am atom-split by their eyes. I pray to whatever higher power arranged it thus that Jessica might find some way to shield herself from the negativity that radiates like gamma out from the poisonous rock behind her head.

An usher rings a handbell, then stops. Conversations fall into whispers then reluctant silence. It is time. Come on, now. Concentrate. I'm not here, this isn't happening. Something else, someone else, is.

A buzz in my pocket. Shit, should be on airplane mode. I pull the phone out, swipe the glass to tap the cartoon jetliner. Unreachable. But I catch the preview of the message. Jessica.

You are awesome, darling! It's going so well. Lo...

The lights warm the stage like a Kincade cabin. Sound effects rumble, locomotive, whistle. Staff Sergeant Matthew Fisher swallows – think, feel, the metabolisation of intense joy, expected, gulped down quickly, thick as the sweaty glug of a protein shake – a proud smile stretching now like a bayonet wound across his face as he disembarks the offstage train, returning to Paisley's streets – suggested to the audience by purloined benches draped with

Saints scarves – and those he'd left to protect, now thronging with drab Home Front uniforms, those who maintain order in the line of weeping faces, older folks, unfit folks, helpless, grateful, everyone grinning with tears in their eyes, towards his comrades and now, shining, to him, their hero. And there they are, his Aunty Anna and her friends from the bridge club, all he has left here, arms open to him, clutching, pulling him down and in and close to perfumed chests and he bristles for a moment at their floral embrace, just a moment, before he surrenders, as directed, to it completely, allowing deep sobs to tumble out, from within. Any minute now. Ok, maybe just a little push. Come on, come on, just like in rehearsal. These are his moves, his motions and his emotion, and all... unreal and fleeting. Faked.

I'm pushing too hard, too stiff, too conscious of the eyes boring into the back of my head now, Jessica's eyes, Maw's eyes, pressing down and down, on my shoulders, narrow bird, bingo wing, fit for breaking.

I see the electrical cables, taped down in arresting chevrons of yellow and black, health and safety, risk assessed, running from the luminaires to the lighting desk, behind the last row of the shadow audience. They are not fooled. They gawp at the pretence before them.

Incongruous wristwatches and anachronistic shoelaces.

Unconvincing semiotics.

All around, all around, the world a stage from sky to ground. It's a farce that's falling down.

Ok, come on now, pull it together, who are you, what is happening here? This is war, yes, but you have survived. Returning now, triumphant. A hero's welcome. You have defeated... the enemy, yes. That's all you need to know. Grandfather would be proud. You have restored the

Pachenko-Fisher family honour. Too elaborate a family tree, perhaps, but better than Company Soldier Number Five. Scarcely featured in script or cast list. Shine once more in glory. Not you, me. I am Fisher. And my Captain, dear Captain Fox, you stand beside me now, beaming with your pride, firm shake and clasp on my shoulder, words moving silently, recommending me for further honours, medals, promotion, officer-track a fine career, so much promi...

Fingers linger.

The people gasp. The crowd. The audience.

Fisher looks into his eyes with love, masculine and deep, as the Captain's smile falters, confusion furrowing his brow. A single word

Slain...

rolls down from his mouth with the dark ooze of blood, and is his last. And as he falls into Fisher's arms, that bastard, that devil in the trenchcoat, Mephistopheles himself, emerges, grinning above his prey, blade wet and gleaming at his side.

Had it coming, Buddie. Always. Say hi to yir slut of a sister while you're cookin' doon there.

Damn him, damn him. The beast is held fast by the company. They don't notice the weedy accountant-looking fella who'd summoned him slip out back. Fisher lays his Captain down, slowly, upon the bar floor. Horror. He folds closed his lovely eyes. The town tears that devil limb from damnable limb.

Fisher watches those lovely closed unblinking eyes, life draining, and he knows he should feel it now, the heart break, but does he, does he, do I, can I... I try to imagine it's you.

What it would feel like to lose you, and not this man, this bloke, this stand in, heavy now, and I try to feel that all we've had all along has been each other and yet it has all come to naught and that no glory is worth this pain, the poisoned pin-pricking badge of honour that I will have to wear for the rest of my

I have nothing. I freeze in the lights, for a moment, caught in light, illuminated, until

Blackout.

Curtain Call

The houselights rise in a roar of applause. I look out onto the shabby space, folding chairs rusting under damp anoraks, cobwebs clinging to fixtures of flickering strip-lights. My fellow amateur thespians are by my side. Margaret squeezes her bony fingers into my hand, and I try to crack a smile in response, try to resist the urge to flee now, at this most conspicuous of moments. The principal cast take their moment – a whoop and a holler for Brave Captain Valentin, mock-jeers at the trenchcoated Mephistopheles who laps it up, roars of approval for the handsome Faust and whistles galore for the radiant Marguerite – before beckoning our director onto the stage to lead us through the final bows. I can't get off the stage fast enough, flying to the makeshift dressing room to tear off the clothes of Staff Sergeant Matthew Fisher, musty and ill-fitting military surplus, so obviously, unbearably a costume now. The cast are a blur of back-pats and grins and camaraderie all around me.

We did it, we did it.

Fantastic. That was class. Well done, Alan, well done Janey. Oh, I'll remember that for a long time, I will.

What a relief.

I think I got most of my lines, that time.

And Valentin's death, I mean, wow, could've heard a pin drop.

My sister brought her whole family, she was texting me. See. Watching from the middle. Great. The grandkids loved it, she said.

Frankie, did you have anyone in

So proud of us all.

from the middle. Great. The grandkids

Well, I tell you what, there were moments, honestly, when I
actually believed

loved it

I barely notice. I can't keep eye contact with anyone.

I'm just... makeup. Quick as.

I rub but it's like paste on my skin. Behind the mask, the bathroom mirror shines back eyes that don't belong. Not to a soldier, nor a lover, nor a daughter.

My skin prickles beneath the rough cotton of my vest and jeans. I descend into the infernal heat of the pub where – separately, each completely unaware of the other – stands Jessica, cradling a bouquet of carnations and, arms clasped in front of her, taking care to avoid brushing up against any surface, Maw. The front door gapes between them, impossible to make it any other way than through. Behind the bar, Brian calls for last orders, his meaty arm clattering the old brass bell. As I push through a trio of regulars, double-taking in bleary half-recognition, Jessica moves to embrace me, and I catch Maw's eyes. They widen then narrow, undulations of a lioness, tracking, recalibrating. I extract myself from her softness and, moving towards Maw, turn a bemused Jessica along with me by the hand.

Mother, you came.

Oh, Mrs. Turner? Delighted to meet you. Jessica, Jessica Fox, I'm Frankie's

How do you do.

You didn't have to come. Really.

Oh but you must be so glad you did. You were wonderful. Frankie. It was amazing, wasn't it, Mrs. Turner, wasn't she incredible?

Indeed, simply hellacious.

Yeah, really really great, Frankie. You should've said your mum was coming. We could've chummed each other, but oh, let's get a drink.

What's your poison, Mrs. T?

Most kind of you to offer, I'm sure. I think

Actually, I can't, I mean, thanks so much, everyone, but the cast have this, well, I mean, you know, I'm wiped, and I've got an early one tomorrow, in fact, I'll probably have to help with the break down now here first, oh yes, Brian, Brian, I'll take those empties out back, no, no – no problem, and, Mother, you'll want to be getting up the road before, so maybe it's best, yeah, actually, we all just, look, thanks so much, though, and yes, the flowers and everything, I'll text you, but now look, I'll just, ok, goodnight, cheers.

I push out gasping into the cool wet night air. If I just keep moving, just short of a run, and don't look back, because in motion I can't quite fixate on the image of Jessica now trying to

pick her jaw up off the floor and fully realise what I've just done – departing airspeed out back with bin bags rattling in my hands as Maw stands there rolling her eyes, a model of complete unsurprise – and feel the irresistible need to come after me. I drop the bag with a crack. I take giant breaths, but the air just swirls stalely around inside my mouth, my lungs burning dry. I crumple over by the recycling skip, down into a knee-hugging squat alongside the crystals of broken glass, the burger wrappers, the unidentified ooze that shimmers in the dim moonlight. Stink of piss and trash. No one else here, a pocket of silence. Above me, through the great steel beams of the bridge that hold aloft the rail, the metallic thunder of an engine rises, pierced now by the high-pitched whistle, a falling minor third, as it pulls its train of carriages out of this town and far, far way.