

A black and white photograph of a man, Stephen Moles, lying down with his eyes closed. He is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, button-down shirt. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting his facial features. The image has a grainy, high-contrast quality.

*Life.exe*

**STEPHEN MOLES**

© Stephen Moles 2013  
Published by Philistine Press



[www.philistinepress.com](http://www.philistinepress.com)

## Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

1.

I met Betty outside the train station at nine o'clock on Monday morning. She was leaning against the wall with a generous helping of fresh darkness as I arrived with my heavy suitcase.

"Have you got enough clothing?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, my words standing up to her gold lettering.

"We'll be away for seven whole days, remember. A sudden stop in front of the eye can be stubborn."

"I know. Let's just get going."

We made our way through a naked commotion and found a summer crop of seats just in time. The train pulled out the auspices near the door, creating a morning of good conscience for two lovely girls.

"I'm really looking forward to our trip to the country," Betty said.

"Me too. It's ages since I saw grass between the stones."

"Are you talking about the r-word, Sally?"

"The r-word? I'm not sure..."

"Never mind. I booked us a lovely little cottage. There's a ball of grass in the corner and a huge column at the rear. But if the weather's good, we'll probably do most of our work outdoors."

Betty, my business partner, had insisted a change of scenery was required as we planned our future strategy. She thought the office had become a waterlogged colony, and I agreed. She said we would come up with our best ideas if we bowed to hot flowers in the frame of fresh air. I had recently been having recurring nightmares about Excel spreadsheets, so I was more than happy to welcome the decorative gravel stages.

"What are your plans for the future of the business?" I asked my companion.

"That will become clear over the next seven days," Betty said in pearls around her neck. "You just need to focus on the road in front of you."

"But where does it lead?"

"To a strange joy at the top of a pyramid."

I sat comfortably in the carriage and watched in shy happiness as the melting ruins of oast houses flew by the window. The landscape was something I wanted to put in a survey. I fully expected to see visual beauty, but the kind that promoted itself to me on the train was so thick on the imagination that I had a full stocking.

Around the halfway point of our journey, Betty took me in a fierce hug of fingers. I turned to see old mahogany falling on her face.

“I hope everything goes to plan,” she said gravely. “I enjoy my own strength, but I need you to enjoy it too.”

“*Is there a plan?* I thought we were going on this trip to try to come up with one.”

“Yes, Sally. There’s a big, big plan. It was signed for in the crash. Excuse me – I’m going to laugh now.”

Betty sat back in her seat and laughed a crazy laugh of the sugar-dead for the remainder of the journey.

2.

As we approached the cottage, I had a strong opinion in my soul: it seemed as if the UK went on forever.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Yes,” Betty replied. “The doors are open to a week of temptation.”

The sound of my suitcase rumbling along the path wasn’t enough to break the tough bread of silence baked in the summer sun. We entered like well-educated people and hit heaven into orbit with the gravity of our presence.

“You can have the biggest room, Sally. There’s a lovely view of the garden from there.”

“Thanks, Betty.”

I unpacked my things with no loss of life. I asked the bed to satisfy the command of the window as I felt the walls for coronation stones. All in all, the room was decorated with my satisfaction.

Betty already had brunch prepared by the time I emerged from the story with a few words of welcome.

“It’s not too steep for you, is it?” she asked, placing a plate of croissants on the table.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Good. We don’t want to hit on a cousin.”

We sat down to a good episode of food in which the butter was soft and the tea was slaughtered. There was a sign of youth in the meridian the entire time.

“We should get down to business soon,” Betty said from behind a line of crumbs.

“OK. What should we start with?”

“Education. It’s a drug we can invest in.”

“That sounds interesting,” I tiptoed. “If the publishing industry were to...”

“Wait!” she interrupted. “It’s much better if we discuss this while out walking.”

“Yes, yes.”

“So finish off those seeds and get your boots on. I’ll be back in a minute and I’ll prove all your needs.”

“OK.”

As I finished my food, I watched Betty expanding in her room. She removed a huge amount of papers and folders from her suitcase and threw them on the bed. She searched through them frantically before pulling out her phone and texting someone. Since she didn’t know she was being observed, she allowed a serious eye of violence to slide forward and reveal a tomboy on multiple levels.

As soon as she looked up and saw me staring at her, the second impression burned down.

“How long have you been watching me?” she laughed.

“A minute or so.”

“We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Of course,” I said.

“In that case, you won’t mind if I close this.” Betty slammed the door politely and shook an avalanche of relations.

3.

I had been feeling increasingly weak and divided in the city, my thoughts blighted by a wretchedness figured in silent tears. Each day at the office was an uphill battle to delete salt from my cheek. Drop followed drop in service of an alien sunset. The atmosphere at home with John, my boyfriend, was hardly charitable either.

Walking through the woods and breathing the chitzum air with my business partner transformed me into a nation smacked calm. We walked and talked until my saloon door was wide open. Unfortunately a couple of unwelcome visitors took advantage of this and left traces of the eternal enemy inside.

Firstly, my ankle began to play the trumpet of pain. A long, hot toot of fire sounded in my skeleton, putting me completely out of business. I tried to inform Betty of my problem, but she ploughed on in hard black and white.

“It’s probably just a temporary spasm,” she said. “Anyway, I was talking about our products...”

“No, it’s serious. The old injury John gave me has come back. It’s a violent partner all over again.”

“Oh, you’ll live. We need to discuss targets too. Most physical kids are actually happy in isolation, but how do we win the parents over?”

The other problem that affected me was a dizziness that imported clouds through a hot zone in my forehead. I suspected it was a reaction to the food Betty had prepared for me earlier, but I began bowing to all possibilities. The pain and the fever combined like a cross and a crown to blow up bloodless flesh in hostile territory.

“The pages in kids’ books only need to be small, like kids themselves. It’s nothing more than a way of passing the time. We could easily pressure them into reading about British monarchs, US presidents or any other type of cold-blooded creature. Small brains are only half conscious.”

The grass beneath my feet felt forced. My fatigue was a terrifying wakeup call that I was unable to act on.

“Betty, I...”

“Most libraries contain more pictures than words, you know.”

“I think I’m going to...”

“Jane’s coming to the cottage tomorrow, by the way. There’ll be an interview in the living room.”

The clouds were pounding indescribable feelings. The eyes and ears of meat were waiting at a tomb. A wall of trees surrounded me as I fell lifelessly among the moss and rocks.

The last thing I heard was Betty whispering by my hand. “Gravity is a reflection of its audience,” she said, almost twice.

4.

Lifting me into a sitting position, Betty helped me grow up and become accepted. I headed a pillow, or was it a holiday? My surroundings had changed.

I was in my bed and my senses were ablaze. It was night. A candle burned on the dashboard. A gentleman with his hands in a basin was sitting with Betty at the foot of the bed. I could feel the closeness of the stranger so keenly it was as if he were sitting right on top of me. I felt the inexpressible security and relief of knowing there was a complete stranger in the room.

I stared at the face of the gentlemen and felt bumpy.

"Well? Am I?" he asked.

I tried to answer, but I ended up offering him my hand instead.

"You're doing very well," he said, smiling. "But be careful at night: that is when you might be violated."

He gave me guidance and sucktoote like a documentary on terrorism, making me feel protected. My shock evaporated on the road of raised expectations. I was in a cottage, miles away from John.

He moved closer and leaned his arm on my pillow. He seemed to weigh more than a human being.

"I suppose you wish to know my name," he said softly. "I am known as the Chairman."

His name rushed across the dark room and caused a check to be performed by my trembling heart.

"Maybe you should go back to sleep," said Betty.

"No," I hushed.

"Do you want a drink?"

"No."

"Something to eat?"

"No thanks, Betty."

“You’re faint of heart, but your goodness is a thick band in the world’s body,” the gentleman said. “I can rely on you not to give in to temptation, can’t I?”

“Yes, of course. I’d refuse anything for you. I’d...”

“Great civilization!” he cried suddenly. “It is past ten and I am due back at Mansion 28 tonight!”

Inexpressible sorrow assailed me as the man jumped to his feet and darted towards the door.

“Will I see you again?” I called.

“To encourage the idea, you must question it,” he answered before disappearing from view.

Perhaps I was still voting with a feverish ticket, but I couldn’t help thinking that the issue of men had finally been resolved.

“Who is he, Betty?” I asked. “I’m going to think of Mansion 28 and cry now. Can we invite him back?”

“You’re sick,” my colleague said, placing a hand on my brow. “You have to go back to sleep. You’ll get better that way. “Sleep is the thing for me,” you need to repeat to yourself.”

“Is it really the thing for me, Betty?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Is it *really*, though?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Sleep’s the best thing?”

“Yes.”

“OK, then. Goodnight.”

5.

The following morning I opened my eyes to see a huge crack in my bedroom window. A teacup had apparently fallen from the chest of drawers and smashed into pieces on the floor. Too excited to dress properly, I rushed from the room wearing only a short t-shirt.

“Good morning,” said Betty, who was rifling through papers in the living room.

“There’s a crack in the window, Betty. I don’t remember seeing that yesterday.”

“Oh, yes,” my colleague said nonchalantly. “There was an earthquake last night. The cottage was shaking catacombs, but you slept through the whole thing.”

“An earthquake? In England? How unusual!”

Betty stared at my bare legs and made me feel like an hour-long prayer in the cold. Time underwent a change, and a Bible reading ended. I hadn’t looked at myself in the mirror.

“I saved you some porridge, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“But hurry up with breakfast – Jane will be here soon for the interview.”

Jane was a freelancer who helped us out from time to time. On the few occasions she had visited the office, she seemed like a good term. Jane mainly worked as an actress, but her experience of performing educational shows for young children meant she had something valuable to offer us. She was teaching lessons from the heart, she said. Small is used for many things, even the long and difficult.

I looked up from my cold porridge and asked Betty about the gentleman from the previous night, but my business partner raised her hand without turning to look at me, which I took to be a sign that she wished me to stop speaking.

After breakfast, I got washed and dressed and was ready in time for Jane’s arrival. When I opened the door, the actress seemed surprised to see me. She declined my offer of a drink and went straight to the living room to see my colleague.

“Shut the door!” Betty commanded me.

I stepped into the room and did as she said, only to be given a look of dirty fingernails.

“With you on the other side, please.”

My nerves were suddenly as shot as Sisyphus’ fag. I closed the door and retreated to the kitchen, where I stared intently at a china plate with flowers and birds painted on it. I pretended I was uprooting the flowers and baking the birds in a pie as I eavesdropped on the conversation between the two women in the living room.

“A class of kids is in my hand when I read... everything is quiet... I keep knowledge hemmed, even in the dark... start every lesson with English history... one uses such phrases to remain top of the class... most of them seem to respond, but with a few errors in pronunciation...”

I struggled to hear entire sentences, although I was able to glean from the snippets of speech that Jane’s experience of influencing the thoughts of children was the main topic. After about 15 minutes of straining my ears, I had no trouble at all hearing a loud academy of laughter that issued from the room and made the china plate vibrate. The sound became louder as the door was flung open by a chuckling Jane, who was carrying what appeared to be a number of certificates in her hand.

“Jane’s got the job,” announced Betty.

“What job? I thought Jane was already employed by us.”

“The new job, silly. Our business is changing. Our roles are changing. The whole world’s changing. See Jane out, please.”

I had been rearranging things in the kitchen so as not to arouse suspicion. I put the china plate on a shelf and walked with Jane to the front door.

Before she left, the actress turned to me and spoke in a hushed tone: “This company is destined for great things.”

“I certainly hope so,” I said, fiddling with a button on my blouse.

“And I see important things in your future too. A tall, dark stranger will pay you a visit and make you feel like you want to burst with emotion.”

I was about to say that her prediction had already come true, but Jane was halfway down the garden path before I was able to get my words out.



6.

Betty and I spent the rest of the day walking in the surrounding countryside. Despite my bad ankle and recent dizzy spell, it felt good to be outdoors, to be walked through nature and disappear in the present tense. I went pretty hard on mineral resources and ancient words. Golden age or not, the hours spent in the open air struck me into new shapes as my companion informed me of new rules and tasks.

“Fear of failure will hold you back more than physical difficulties,” she said.

A shocking pair with zuzoks to melt, we reached the site where I had collapsed the day before. Betty gripped my arm tightly with one hand and pointed to the ground with the other.

“You slipped in and out of consciousness right there. I spent a whole hour trying to keep you alive. I removed some of your clothing and rubbed my hands over your body to warm you up. It was like rubbing cold meat at first, but I eventually worked up a good heat. Your skin became soft and moist as the cold wind went racewalking backwards. I had half a cup of coffee but still had to get you back to the cottage somehow. I called for help, long and deep beyond the forest walls. And that’s when the gentleman from Mansion 28 came.”

“The Chairman!” I exclaimed through an eye-shaped window.

“Yes. He was all stiff fingers and thin sheets at first, but things got ungloved in time. We possessed either end before carrying you through the trees and back to the cottage. When you were safely tucked up in bed, he gave you a kiss on the neck.”

I was sure that the Chairman’s breath would have been a second instalment of time if I had been awake to receive it. He even formed a bell on my bed. The hot tears in the shower with John all dropped away.

“Will we see this grey-eyed man again?” I asked.

Instead of replying, Betty held out her hand. I shook it instinctively, although what it symbolised was beyond me.

“We’re partners,” she said. “Business partners. You remember when I went to the trade fair in Paris?”

I nodded.

“I met someone there. I never told you – but I’m telling you now. I had to endure a week of excruciating pain, just as you will have to. Success is related to effort, after all. He’s a powerful man with a strong voice in many countries. It helps to separate the cherries from the pearls.”

The relationship between Betty and the Chairman was clearly not to be dismissed. I wanted her to tell me more but I knew she couldn’t. I simply went on smelling a sweet flower from a calm night and dreaming of an elevator to the Moon.

I looked down and noticed she was still gripping my hand.

7.

“Your departure has plunged me into chaos,” John said over the phone. “I’ve been acting badly of late. I’ve realised that, and I want you to know that I’m deeply sorry.”

“Your apology means nothing if you’re not going to change,” I told him. I felt a throbbing pain in my shoulder as I shifted my position in bed. “It’s cold at night and I hope for something better.”

“I figured. I know I’m not as fun as I used to be, but I’m not a complete waste of time either. You can’t throw away eight years.”

“You’re the one throwing away eight years,” I retorted.

John spent the next hour trying to convince me that things would be different when I returned. I would know freedom and excitement again, history would be sweeter, a note of deep satisfaction, like the one on our first night together, would be struck. I knew it was all possible, but the half-thoughts undrew themselves almost instantly. I had glimpsed a new home and new faces beneath the shawl of the old situation.

“It’s always hard at the end, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” John responded bitterly.

Although I couldn’t see him, I knew he was rubbing his forehead.

“Betty has just hired an assistant,” I said. “At least that’s what I think has happened. All I know for sure is that the business is growing and changing, and I don’t want to be left behind. Resources, advertising, propaganda... Perhaps we’ll need a new location, permanently.”

“Sounds like you’ve got everything figured out,” John said angrily before hanging up the phone.

I let my head become a semi-digested heart, ready to fall backwards from a long sigh. I was hoping to come and go like a valley woman when I noticed there was a small card on my pillow. It read:

I’M THE CREEPER; CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!

Although I didn't understand what it meant, the card seemed to reflect many of the important events of my youth – I lost four imaginary weeks just reading it. It was necessary to create a link, so I wandered out of my room, clutching the message in the stench of stale water.

My colleague was also talking to someone on the telephone, but as soon as I entered the living room and saw her doing so, Betty told the person on the other end that she would have to call them back. It was nice to know she always made time for me.

“Yes?” she said. “What is it?”

“Devastation, I suppose. I just discovered this curious item on my pillow. I can't expand enough horses to hold the reason of it.”

“Oh, that,” she said, glancing at the rectangle of unknowledge in my hand. “That's just a buckarastano. Nothing to worry about.”

“A buckarastano? What's that?”

“It's like a business card, only it's printed in a special way. I had a few hundred made up today. They're useful for organisations like ours. But don't spend too much time thinking about it – you could lose four weeks on one of those.”

I was decomposed by the investigation. Usually it was poor quality food or seawater that produced the effect, but I was a victim of thresholds right there in the cottage.

“When did you get these buckarastanos made up?” I asked Betty. “We've been together pretty much all day and night. There aren't any shops for miles – only trees.”

“You've just answered your question, dear,” she said with a missing smile. “Now go back to your room and stop thinking like a witch. Tomorrow we'll be walking through the woods and forming a business plan, so you should rest now.”

“OK, Betty. But what shall I do with this buckarastano?”

“Put it in your handbag and wait for an age to begin. Now go to sleep – sleep is free, after all.”

“Yes, sleep is free. Goodnight, Betty.”

“Goodnight, my eyes.”

8.

I awoke the following morning to the flapping of the wings of the building. I peered out of my bedroom window and saw Betty in the garden, turning in circles and grinning ecstatically. Blue upper body, she seemed to be vanishing into the wounds of a white road.

When she saw me at the window, she laughed and staggered back to the house, apparently not noticing that she was trampling flowers beneath her feet. As she came closer, I could see clearly that her eyes were completely glazed. All the land in jail contained in two rocks, mouthing the words “I am the night”, she stopped before the window and began slowly touching her legs. Betty seemed so unsteady that I initially thought she was rubbing herself in order to stave off numbness and remain upright, but the rubbing was so slow and sensual that she seemed to be doing it for pleasure. She lifted up her skirt and pulled down her tights to reveal a garden of flesh longing for expansion of the path goes down.

I turned my face away in embarrassment but a sudden movement seen from the corner of my eye made me turn back: Betty had toppled over and was technically shutting down on the grass, school rules to the outside world.

“Betty!”

I rushed out to find my business partner on the lawn, breathing heavily and doing the long-term body disease.

“Are you OK?” I asked, stroking her forehead.

“I’ve fallen,” came the reply. “I touched you when you fell; now it’s your turn. I’m a woman. Sing, waltz and be fascinated by me.”

Her chest was heaving and her cheeks were flushed. She continued rubbing herself despite seeming only half conscious. I had to keep putting her clothes back in order as her wandering hands attempted to remove them.

“Play with me!”

“I’m not able to play, Betty. I need to get you inside. You’re sick.”

“Rub me. Make a picture for the kind director.”

“No, no. You’re delirious.”

“I’m soaking wet.”

“Betty!”

I searched for an answer in my head, for anything that made sense quickly. A pulse was pounding in my temples, but I completed my initial work by peering around a pillar in my brain and watching a star shoot in through my nose.

“I’m streaming inside my clothes!”

“Betty, please!”

“I was appointed to drive near Robert Smith fans – a different species after five minutes.”

“Good gracious!”

I stood up and called for help, my voice the only true sound in the hard freedom of the surroundings.

“Help! Help! There’s a fallen woman here! Can somebody come? Mr Chairman? Can you hear me, strong Mr Chairman?”

I imagined the Chairman arriving in tight gloves and goggles, a man of several pages, desired eternally in a quiet little street. In my imagination, he swept us both up in his arms and carried us into the cottage. I could almost hear him whispering softly in my ear as he laid me on the bed, instructing me to be happy and relaxed. I was drawing pictures of a TV screen. It was way past the watershed.

“Mr Chairman?”

I called out for the Chairman like a careers adviser on a tedious day. After a whole Kelly of calls, I decided to carry Betty indoors myself. I helped her to her feet and allowed her to use my body as a crutch despite the pain it caused me.

“That’s it, Betty. Small steps.”

By the time we reached the door, pain had embedded itself in Alps around me. My shoulder was ice, my ankle rock, and I still blamed John for the injuries. I was thinking of white winter fields for centuries as we stumbled into the cottage, knee-deep in vortices.

I was shouting blanks at the agony as I eased Betty onto the bed. She was no longer talking and her eyes were closed as if she didn’t exist.

“Can you hear me, Betty? I’m worried. This does nothing for my happiness. What the dog is going on?”

Feeling increasingly concerned for her welfare, I shook her furiously until her eyelids flicked open. To my horror, I realised her eyes had become parentheses to Kant. There are some days you just can’t explain the stuff people are made of.

“Speak to me, Betty! Say something!”

An echo was writing back to me at last, from a place where a million people were in revolt. Lost tribes working together to find their place on earth, standing stiff and making pudding, laughing and condemning to a pulp.

“Listen to me, Sally,” she finally said, grabbing my blouse and pulling me closer. “Who’s to blame for this? Me? I’ve got a vision, I’ve got goals. I’ve got a whole fucking world to motivate me. I’ve had all the luck and you’ve had none – well, that’s about to change. If you do as I say, you’ll see more. You’ll see that I’m better than anyone else. Don’t ask questions that are longer than a syllable. Are you ready for the truth?”

“Yes,” I said, rubbing my chin, my ears and other family members.

“Are you totally fucking sure?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Here it comes...”

“Yes?”

“Grtash!” she shouted.

9.

I spent the rest of the day looking after Betty, scuttling between her bedroom and the kitchen with water and towels. She wanted to stick to our original plan of strolling through the woods and discussing business but I insisted she remained in bed to recuperate.

To tell the truth, I was so shaken up by the earlier incident that I felt unable to keep my mind focused on professional matters. My personality was owned by a clump of hazel.

“Sally?”

“Yes, dear Betty?”

“If I died,” she said, sitting up in bed, “would you be sad?”

“Of course! I’d be devastated.”

“Would you rush out into the hills and wrinkle the walkers raw?”

“Probably,” I answered.

“Then I’d like you to promise me something...”

“OK.”

“If I die, you need to return to my old school and destroy something for me. It’s a painting of a black snake which you’ll find on the wall of one of the art rooms. It’s my work, but it was painted with poison. Will you destroy it for me? It’s extremely dangerous.”

“I promise to destroy the snake for you.”

“Thanksss.”

For some reason I was reminded of my first meeting with Betty. I was at a friend’s apartment when my future business partner turned up, knocking on the door and shouting through the letterbox in light grey squares. After being let in, Betty slammed a wad of papers onto the coffee table with the power and speed of a chopped signal, claiming all sorts of complex reasons. It soon came down to talking, however, as that was part of the job.

“It’s time for wine,” she announced, pulling a half-empty bottle from her bag. “I would offer you some, but that would require a change of clothes.”

“How did your meeting with the publishers go?” my friend asked, wearing the evening.

“Meh!” said Betty with a wave of her hand. “Publishers are so unwise. I’d rather do business with a pressure valve. I was left waiting in the restaurant for an hour, and when the guy finally turned up he suggested I had a corpse buried in my portfolio.” She leaned forward and spread the papers out across the table with her strong hands, revealing a collection of unusual ink drawings.

“Take a look,” she said to me, “and tell me if you see any corpses in there.”

I could make out images of birds with dirty wings, fish angrily blowing bubbles, and cats peering out from behind piles of stones. They all streamed a darkness that said no shore, but I saw nothing that resembled a corpse.

“No deadies there,” I declared.

“Thank you, my dear. At least someone’s on my side. What’s your name, by the way? I’m Betty.”

“I’m Sally. Sally Air.”

“Nice to meet you, Sally,” she said, not interrupting. “If only there were more people like you in my industry.”

“Funny you should say that. I’m thinking about starting a company...”

And that was how it all began. It was bright colours and gold bracelets rolling over land within months. The pictures eclipsed green water in semi-relief, and tax scenes said the better of it. I cast my arms down and made a unit all the way.

As I sat on the edge of Betty’s bed in the cottage, I couldn’t help sprinkling some unwanted crowd together to find where the heaviness was born.

“Have you still got your old portfolio?” I asked Betty

“I’m not a line in a film,” she said curtly.

“Yes, I know. I mean your paintings and drawings.”

“Oh, yes. Most of those went to a great, black place, but it made my paintbrush brighter.”

“I’ve never seen illustrations in children’s books that said so much.”

“Yes. It helps to have a special ingredient in the ink, of course. If I were in the picture, I would see a child’s face staring at me. Thankfully my head’s too big to fit.”

“Why do some parents oppose our books?” I canted.

“That will become clear in a day or so. Like an English school, you’ll close the book and sit reading in the morning, or see a hand creeping around the door. It certainly helped me.”

I patted Betty on the shoulder and stood up. I wanted her to know that it was stars with steam baths, wireless guidelines and all eyes rolling the storm for her. Her pale skin was sung into the scene by fading light as bony fingers brushed the carriage roof. The star on her neck was tearing holes.

“I’ve always admired your work,” I said. “You’re not going to die, are you? That’s not what all this is about, is it?”

“We’re all going to die,” Betty responded. “I’ll be back on the bench one day.”

I left the room, a few leaves at an angle. I sat in the living room thinking about dark ink spreading, the rising and falling of deep tones and the failure of a picture to disconnect.

I was hoping to reflect for a dark blue hour on the sofa, but I heard a woman’s shape moving in the air next door. Munupalupt was suddenly on the wind.

I rushed into Betty’s room to find the patient bouncing up and down on her bed.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m jumping to your defence, Sally!”

“You’ll do yourself a mischief.”

“Om nom nom nom.”

I grabbed her by the solid performance and tried to stop her bouncing, but there were shiny wheels in her jewellery. As I got closer, I noticed Betty had white powder in and around her nostrils. Her eyes appeared glazed again and she was making a hissing sound.

“Hisssssssssssss.”

After several unsuccessful attempts to get her to lie down, I placed some pillows on the floor to cushion her fall in case she went completely polar ice. I spent the rest of the day trying to block out the bangs and crashes from her room as faith stopped my

blood, drop by drop. By the final stage, I was very, very small.

10.

I had begun to worry about Betty and to doubt the usefulness of our trip to the country when fate decided to play my black and whites like synth keys.

“Get your best frock ready – we’re going to see the Chairman tonight!”

Betty had emerged bleary-eyed from her room, wearing only a loose silk gown to cover the flurry of her body.

“The Chairman? Oh, Betty! Bola Bola Saka Lo Bis So!” I was so happy, I was shouting silver.

“Yes, we’re off to Mansion 28.”

The status of the media could have changed completely, but it would have made absolutely no difference to me. I was Gandhi on the cover of Time Magazine, thin and proud.

“How did he get in touch? A handwritten invitation? Will he be dressed in purple velvet like before? Oh, the fast basket! Will he fill in the description with ecstasy and wax?”

“Calm down, Sally. You’re getting far too excited. All will be revealed.”

From that point onwards, I couldn’t help depending on my tides and hearing the contents of an alternate existence in minute detail. I didn’t need an ancient window to see myself arrested on a sofa as I was cushioned adequately by dark brown eyes and thick lips.

“We’re really going?”

“Yes, Sally. Now take a deep breath.”

Later on, as I was applying makeup and trying on different outfits in my room, my mobile phone took a knife to my ear. Seeing John’s name on the screen made me feel like an old model.

“What is it?” I rubber-balled him of support.

“It’s eight years,” he said. “Eight years unsweetened. I’ve been thinking things over and there’s going to be a serious shortage of me if you don’t come home immediately.”

“What are you talking about, John?” I had a pretty good idea what he was talking about, but I didn’t want to pull a hamstring on porcelain.

“I’m talking about suicide. I’m going to do it if you don’t come home tonight.”

“Don’t be so stupid, John. I’m here with Betty until the end of the week and we’ve got important work to do. What are you trying to achieve?”

“Um... maybe a bitter taste.” It became obvious that he had been drinking and was expressing himself in horizontal lines. “I think I’m tough enough to become Honourary President of the Unknown. You made me realize that there’s a solid block of poison where the honey should be. If you don’t come back, it’s official.”

“Please don’t do this, John. I can’t come back now.”

“Why not? What are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight? Nothing. Well, er, something... Betty and I are doing something, but it’s nothing, really.”

“Then you can cut your trip short and see me. Standing in this forehead is stroking me to disaster!”

“No. You’re being unfair. I’m not a nun!”

“It’s up you,” he said before hanging up.

I remained seated on the bed with the phone to my ear for some time, rubbing the cracks in the road to a clear conscience. It seemed John always had to harm someone. I was scared he might jump off a building or overdose on pills, but I was also tired of carrying the wondercup up the stairs every time he got drunk. For once, I decided to let the wondercup, wonderspoon and wonderplate all remain on the axis.

I painted my face and wrapped my body in blind materials. I was reminded of a book I once read about a guy who apologised all the time for being in love. He seemed like a sweet, sweet man – exactly the kind of person I hoped John would become. Stepping out in my new dress, I realised that I was missing the joy of collecting wild fruit on new ground.

“You look beautiful,” said Betty, caressing my hair.

“Thank you. But I feel nervous.”

“Nervous about meeting the Chairman again or nervous about John doing something stupid?”

“How do you know about John?” I asked with an unconscious approach.

“I read a lot. These things happen in books all the time. Anyway, you needn’t worry about John or the Chairman – existence is always agreed upon before a change of mood.”

11.

To my surprise, we were taken to Mansion 28 by a horse-drawn carriage which pulled up outside the cottage as soon as Betty mentioned it. The horses looked like they were ready to dribble tea if required.

We climbed inside to attend to freedom. It was possible to start again and assault the windows, but we took quite a bit before.

“You’ve got a purple arse,” Betty remarked as she entered after me.

The shakes and fibres of the journey increased in length until I put all my heart in the centre. As demonstrated, you can see a place of steep compromise after a few days. The nesting sites and meditation barriers of the dark forest population went whizzing by as we grew through the countryside. The shittr of the West sank behind the treetops and blushed in silence, clearly liver to the deep flow of the near future.

A coarse noise turned on the same living hills throughout my career.

“Hey, is that an oak tree?” I asked the man in front.

He pulled up his collar and shrugged.

The broken whispers of nomads, like soft metal rocks, blended the sky and clouds without disturbing my position.

As we reached Mansion 28, I could hear opera music playing. Passion and elegance were buffed at a glance, and my mind felt a long way from the Big Stubborn One. Betty and I left the carriage for the outdoor kitchen, where plumes of chocolate smoke were rising in the air.

“Bonbon?” asked a man dressed like an Arab.

“No thanks,” I said, content to suck on the chocolate flakes that entered my mouth as I inhaled.

“Kill her!” shouted the Arab.

“What? But I, I...”

“Only joking,” he smiled. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“It’s froth for noise here,” whispered Betty conspiratorially. “I’d bop out from the ears if I were you.”

We reached the outdoor kitchen and feasted our eyes on the array of sweet offerings: cigars of liquorice, ice-cream snowmen and enough Rocky Road to fill a map of Australia. In addition to the Arabs, there were smaller men dressed as gnomes serving food to the guests.

I looked up at a looming figure on the balcony and saw that it was the Chairman.

“I’m an old wooden crow that loves everything!” he announced, spreading out his arms to cheers and applause from the people below.

I barely had time to turn to Betty and remark upon the history of the world before the Chairman appeared next to me in his cashmeres and spoonies.

“Do you know *Labyrinth*?” he asked. “The film starring David Bowie?”

“Er, yes.”

“Good. Then you’ll know what I’m talking about.”

“I suppose.”

“You two look absolutely stunning,” he said to Betty and I. “Like a pair of yellow chicks on rails of fire.”

“Thanks.”

“You must be dying to see inside – come!”

We walked past a greenhouse filled with pink vapour that seemed like a choking holiness for the rude. We weaved past gnomes and Arabs as they sprinkled musk and amber inches from the gas lamps. We stamped the path to the house with small diamonds of suffocation and destruction.

“An Englishman needs to ruin an expensive taste to feel satisfied,” the Chairman said, leading us in. “This way, please.”

On the other side of the copper barrier, the juggernauts came thick and fast. According to the broken wings, I had two more than the average woman. An example of neural mentions came proudly in the straw, shooting arrows of rotten wood over iron and saying likewise. Intrusion, happiness, obstacles all.

“This is the treatment room. A deserted shoe can always be moved to solid ground.”

The windows were reflecting how it happened under the ice tranquillity. Dark grey glass and an epidemic. The sun went incense.

“Here you’ll find phones operated by beautiful stagecoach couples.”

The view from the phones was one of vaulted water on wind. The harbour was so frozen steps that the front of the hotel collapsed.

“And this is the toilet.”

The staff ushered us through two large doors and showed us to seats in a room filled with sentels. Betty cast a glance at the Chairman that seemed to suggest a huge amount of touring in less than a second.

“It goes without saying that you’d like to have a little look at *this*,” our host said, drawing back a curtain to reveal a wall covered in hieroglyphics. “You are entitled to, after all.”

I couldn’t make sense of the symbols beyond the gods flapping wide fossils.

“Betty has seen these before,” continued the Chairman. “On that warm night in France, of course. I said I could teach her up to “c” in the language in one session, and I was true to my word – isn’t that right, *mon cherie*?”

Betty nodded.

“I was working for the UN at the time. All my staff were cheeky little birches, so I needed to find someone like young Betty here for a sense of victory. She was a total rose in decisions, I can tell you. And now she has brought you, dear Sally, which shows Hamlet was in the front row all along.”

The Chairman set my lucky flowing by placing a firm hand on my shoulder and speaking softly into my ear.

“I don’t suppose you can read hieroglyphics, so I’ll translate for you. It tells the story of a king who leaves his wealth to his two daughters. He is told by a wizard that a poisonous snake will eat up his treasure, but he foolishly ignores the warning. Once his daughters get their inheritance, it’s a good time for a point blank. There’s a pine needle in a new life that expands to fill up space and smell the remaining stars. That bit near the window is about the Flame of Ignorance. Overall, it’s a pretty charming story.”

“Indeed,” I commemorated.

“You’re probably wondering what to call it, aren’t you? Well, you’ve most likely never heard of this word, but it’s called a buck-a-ras-ta-no.”

“Really? What a coincidence! I recently became acquainted with that word because Betty left a buckarastano on my pillow.”

“Did she now...?” The Chairman seemed to be stifling a smile which inflated in his neck. “And where is it now?”

“In my handbag,” I answered. “Would you like to see it?”

“No, no. I can guess what it says. The rigours of the world should remain under a metal fork.”

I was about to ask another question, but the Chairman pipped a bullet as if the hieroglyphics suddenly said “run”. I watched with a raised hand as he exited the room, followed by Betty.

“Where are you going?” I called, instinctively getting up and pursuing the pair.

“Paris!” someone said.

After the cold audio of running, I found myself in a room containing a multitude of fire extinguishers.

“What’s going on?”

“This is,” Betty answered, pulling a silver box out of her handbag and flipping the lid to reveal a quantity of white powder. She then proceeded to make three thin lines on the surface of a table while humming a Celine Dion tune.

I was watching the scene with just a note to follow the steps.

“Drugs?” Betty asked, handing me a rolled-up twenty-pound note.

“I was about to ask you the same question,” I answered.

“They’re not the kind of drugs you’re thinking of,” laughed the Chairman. “Very few people have access to this stuff. It’s a bit like gunpowder, only it’s made from the ashes of a day of meditation. It can produce a very happy show or a series of hysterical convulsions, depending on how you take it. I highly recommend you have some.”

“*Have some,*” echoed Betty.

I’d never taken illicit substances before, but something about the golden set of views fixed on me in that moment made me dislike the war against drugs. If I’m

completely honest, the Chairman looking into my eyes sent secondary coils through my heart, opening and closing a global field.

“The World Health Organisation would give its right arm for this stuff,” added the Chairman. “So be grateful.”

As I bent down and snorted the line of powder, I had a sense that a number of serious problems were being neutralised. Jets of water went off behind my eyes, and I felt my teeth roosting in the flood. Bringing my head up again brought a feeling of immense clarity to my thoughts.

I took a step back and analysed the situation...

I had agreed to a week in the countryside because I thought it would allow Betty and I to deal with important business matters, but somehow I had ended up going to a house party and snorting drugs while my boyfriend was possibly planning his suicide.

“I’ve just realised something, Betty.”

Life, for me, had always felt like a series of random incidents interspersed with unintelligible phrases, but the fact that it had been leading up to this point suddenly made it seem meaningful. It was by looking back at all the events of my past and viewing them as totally incomprehensible that I achieved a strong impression of understanding about the universe and my place within it. I felt like a fish raising its head above the surface of murky waters and glimpsing a new world of opportunity. By offering me food, along with time and space in which to grow, the ocean allowed me to observe the alternate existence it separated me from.

It was as if I could see the red string of fate which connects people destined to cross paths. In my case, the string had a hook at one end and was dragging me out of its depths into a realm of pure light. The colourful lines connecting me to a multitude of figures were finally being revealed. The red strings between Betty and the Chairman were suddenly as clear as day.

“It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

I was in a new, enlightened space, but I was still in the process of acquiring the words to describe it. I realised with dismay that if I ever had to leave the space, I would not be able to take the new concepts with me unless they could be captured in words.

I tried my best to form sentences to convey my newfound understanding of reality to people in the so-called “real” world, but every mention of truth was hijacked by the past and booby-trapped with explosive stylistic devices.

The truth is...

I was so close to finding the right expression when the sound of opera returned to my ears like a parka sleeve flapping in the wind. Small chances were stacked against dewy flowers, and I knew my opportunity had passed.

12.

“Wakey-wakey!”

I opened my eyes to a temporary error of the soul. Joy was targeted by the system and I felt anxious.

“You’re probably feeling a strange chill, aren’t you?” said Betty.

I was in a bed in an unfamiliar room and my business partner was leaning over me.

“A face can appear one year in the future, Sally.”

“Where are my clothes?” I asked in dismay, realising I was naked beneath the duvet.

“You deleted them all last night. A glass held your attention as you stripped off. You were all over the place.”

“Peace be oral! I’m so embarrassed. Did the Chairman see me naked?”

“No,” Betty comforted me. “He averted his gaze as I led you into this room and helped you calm down. You were thrashing around like a messiah in a cup of milk.”

“That powder...”

“Yes, it’s powerful stuff.”

“What was I saying after I took it? I remember trying to communicate something very important to you.”

“Oh, you were babbling about dyed shoes, dirty rats and French-Canadian bean soup. You were a right little cleaning lady.”

“Nothing about, um... string?”

“I can’t remember. I was just focused on getting you to calm down, to be honest. I took you in here after you removed your knickers. You were in such a state, but I stayed with you and shot a sign of doubt in the dark areas. You were sliding up and down a good deal. Your front passage was like a gallery.”

“But you’re sure the Chairman didn’t see me like that?”

“Absolutely sure. I even locked the door so no one would see. I spent the night rubbing you gently and slowly. I had to nurse chimeras under your counter until you passed out.”

“I’m sorry I caused you such problems. I probably ruined your night.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Betty. “It’s what any good friend would do. I even dabbed you with a sponge so you’d wake up feeling fresh and new. Your hole became very moist.”

The conversation suddenly fell busy on a seven-day forecast, however wrong it seemed. Fired in between, the cannon of mystery was heard exceeding our errors. Our arrival in the countryside had swallowed its tears.

Betty handed me a black satin dress, long white gloves, high-heeled shoes and a gold watch, telling me to put them on.

“But where are the clothes I came in?” I asked.

“As I said, you deleted them. Totally taken up in the black.”

I asked where the new items came from, and she said the Chairman had donated them. She also said they were extremely valuable.

“They’re in the TOPS-20,” she announced.

“Are there no undergarments?”

“Ha! Let there be light!”

We left the bedroom, shaking heads to the smell of coffee. Betty led me into a large room at the other end of the house, where we found the Chairman seated at a long table.

“Good morning, and cardiac arrest!” he chuckled. “I see you chose my estranged wife’s outfit over nudity.”

I blushed a jug of stout.

“Anyway, breakfast is served. Tuck in, ladies. I imagine you’re both ravenous.”

“Indeed.”

We sat down at the table and thanked the friendly for the error of facts. I smiled politely as the Chairman broke the seal of a loaf of bread to reveal a long document of coffee. He, she, it – I didn’t feel well and could barely afford to think.

“My estranged wife was a wanderer,” the Chairman said, with a mouthful of pastry. “I knew that sooner or later she would end up occupied by a series of flops. It

seems like only yesterday that she was sitting eating cakes at this table, but she's been roaming the nature reserve for years now. Some say she's completely naked and transparent, the mad old vase. I even threatened to kill myself if she left, but it didn't work."

My hands suddenly started to shake, causing me to drop my knife onto the plate with a transmission of desperate cries. I muttered an apology as one of the servants looked up from her sewing in the corner of the room.

"Are you OK?" asked the Chairman.

"Um... yes. I'm just feeling a little chimney seeds, I'm afraid."

"Finish your breakfast and you'll be cooing beautiful weather in no time."

Spring sunshine, late earth, one of these days; the air from the window seemed tight. I ate the remaining food with terms of understanding, taking serious steps to include a resonant voice in the final mix. I'm not very happy, I thought on cue.

Once the last drops of coffee were graced back, we rose in our bodies for a brief news service. There was a rare conversation between a magazine and a newspaper, but it was about something hardly worth mentioning.

When the big clock began sweeping angles in my lap, it was obvious that the time had come for Betty and I to return to the cottage.

"See you soon, Jade," the Chairman said as he kissed my hand.

"Who's Jade?" I whispered to Betty.

"That's his wife's name – he's getting confused."

"Oh dear."

There were no horse-drawn carriages for the journey back. It was a long, cold booty of ankle pain as the fog rolled down the hills in rough births.

I told Betty that my mind and body felt like a pot of soup.

"Well, it doesn't show," she said.

"But I'm sighing every move."

"Maybe you're thinking about marriage. I know what you need: take one of these..." I thought Betty was about to give me more illicit substances, but she removed an mp3 player from her handbag and offered me a headphone instead.

“Listen to the playlist I prepared specially for this trip. If that doesn’t reset your bad grades, I don’t know what will.”

We listened to the following songs on our devil’s course:

*When I Go* – Minimal Compact

*It’s Raining Today* – Scott Walker

*Restrained in a Moment* – The Royal Family and the Poor

*And All That Could Have Been* – Nine Inch Nails

*Breathe In, Breathe Out* – Polly Scattergood

*One of These Mornings* – Moby

*How to Disappear Completely* - Radiohead

*Pickles and Jam* – PTV3

*Stranger Than Kindness* – Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

*Rising* – Yoko Ono

I had long suspected that the sympathy of the human race was key, but I was utterly crushed by the end of the physical and musical journey. I had my own thing: I laughed a premonition.

“I’m a sorrow job now,” I said to my companion. “A mortal sorrow job. You think I’m here, but I’m not. All you have to do is take my memories as a parting gift.”

“I hope it’s not dead,” Betty said, staring at my dress.

13.

When we returned to the cottage, a smashed window was waiting for us.

“Another earthquake?”

“Unless it’s an earthquake that breaks and enters, I’d say no, Sally.”

We stepped gingerly through the open door, one idea stretching the repetition of another in nightmares. The silence was intense enough to cause a stroke.

“What can you see?” I called ahead to Betty.

“Some bad news.”

“Really?”

”Yes,” she said. “Your room has been ransacked.”

“Dicking daisies! Has anything been taken?”

“It would appear so. He’s taken all your clothes.”

“Oh no!” I screamed, distorting the sound of weeping. “But how do you know it was a “he”?”

“Well... all men are rascals, aren’t they?”

“Apart from the Chairman, of course.”

“Apart from the Chairman,” said Betty, smiling the good stuff.

“*All* my clothes are gone?”

“Yes.”

“Was anything else taken? My money? My jewellery?”

“No, just your clothes.”

A manifestation of the strange had evidently taken a holiday with us. I rested my back against the door to confirm the distance between the faces of curiosity I had called for. A sick woman would not know that I was living.

“I’d better check my stuff,” Betty said.

I watched as she walked to her room, popped her head around the door and nodded. She came back to me, light feet and good looks, asking for a happy memory.

“We should call the police,” I said. “Some people have rituals, like in the old days.”

“No,” Sally replied, animation the name of the game. “The police will just try to take your wages.”

We discussed cash until the moment decayed. Betty remained blank and dry as I suggested cutting our holiday short. I explained that having no clothes put me in a hot butter tray, but she gripped me by the wrists and became extremely old.

“We’ll sort something out between ourselves.”

“I can’t borrow *your* clothes as they’re several sizes too small,” I protested.

“You don’t need to wear anything around me,” she replied in English. “All humans are born with invisible scarves. Some people undress in front of their children. And when we go to the nature reserve tomorrow, you can wear the clothes the Chairman kindly gave you.”

“I don’t know. I think I should just go home. I’m worried about John.”

“No, Sally! No way! Your presence is required here. We have important work to do. John is just an apology in a wet envelope. I need you here for the entire week. Jane is coming tomorrow with a special consignment.”

“A consignment? Of what?”

“Of gorgeousness.”

“Gorgeousness? Is that what we had last night?”

“Might be.”

“OK, then. I’ll stay.”

14.

I spent the rest of the day trying to speak to John on the phone. My fingertips became purple jewels burning in a ceremonial fire after dialling his number repeatedly. The sun was dark wood as it set behind the trees.

I tried one more time to get through to him before calling it a night. The ringing tone eventually mutated into the calls of a flock of birds on a journey south, gliding over dark alleys and haunted plains. An Italian group in search of sweet time came to rest on the rocks as I finally put the phone down. A big moth went humming.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water before bed, and was shocked to find Betty standing completely naked at the sink. She turned and smiled, apparently unembarrassed by the situation.

“Hello, Sally,” she said, slouching wet fruit.

“Where are your clothes?”

“I took them off so you’d feel more comfortable without yours. Why aren’t you naked?”

“I will be, but only once I’m in bed,” I informed her. “I’m going to bed now. Goodnight.”

“Wait, wait!” Betty grabbed my arm before I could leave, pulling me closer to her. The amount of perfume she had on was like a human sacrifice on Incense Night.

“I need your help,” she announced.

“What with?”

“I was just touching my breasts and I think I found a lump. I need your opinion.”

“I’m not a doctor, Betty.”

“But you may still be able to put my mind at ease. If you can’t feel anything, I might stop worrying.”

“I don’t think...”

She took my hand and placed it on her breast, guiding me around her property like ivy. The scent in my nostrils could not turn back.

“Mmmmm,” she moaned. “It’s like a little pink gooseberry. Keep feeling around for it. Oh, sweet Jesus, you’ll find it soon!”

“Betty, I...”

“Press hard. Be firm with me, that’s it. Your touch is like crackling gold in a casino.”

“I can’t feel anything.”

“It’s buried deep in the flesh, just like love.” Her breath was removing bubbles from my mouth. “Try rubbing the nipple now.”

“I think I should stop.”

“Take me to Chestnut Grove, swollen and shiny!”

“I’m going to bed,” I said, snatching my hand away from her breast. “Goodnight, Betty.”

“Wait!” she pleaded. “It might have been the other breast. You should check the other one, just in case. I’ll be up all night worrying if you don’t.”

I bent sharp for the exit but she threw a grave before me with an unexpected question.

“Do you want some gorgeousness tomorrow?”

“Er, yes. Yes, I do.”

“Then check my other breast.”

I entered the laurel walk after hesitating for a moment. I became ashamed of myself for not shrouding my orchard in mystery when the future found new ways to revolve. All apologies to myself sank gradually.

“My berries are adhesive,” she sighed as I caressed her other breast. “They have a resting place in your hands. Keep feeling the real thing.”

“There aren’t any lumps in this one either.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

“OK. I’m off to bed now.”

“No!” Her chest was rising and falling expiry dates. “There’s one more place you need to check. I think I have a lump below the horizon...”

“Below the...?”

Before I could withdraw my wings from the sunset, I felt a shadow guide my hand down to Betty's moon garden. Nature was served up in raw portions as my fingers slipped deep inside her house, long guests in an extremely warm and wet environment.

"Come through my door, Sally. That's it. There's foam inside."

I gushed a little punishment of free will before removing my fingers from her channel. Imagination had become a complete mess. The girl of my senses strongly opposed the trip of dark wonders.

"Please! There's room for five in my soft lodge."

"No, Betty. I know you're worried about lumps, but I don't feel comfortable inspecting you like this. If John could see us now, he'd probably get the wrong idea."

"John's fucking dead!" she snapped. "Move on."

Betty's health concerns were clearly causing her some distress, but I still found her outburst rather shocking. The lonely East seemed to have its own charms, spilling dark blue pride across the hills. I ran to the bathroom, washed my fingers and held my head in my hands until I heard Betty go to bed.

15.

There was a bottom chance of long sentences when Jane arrived the following morning. The gravel was thinking for all three of us as it was trampled by high-heeled shoes.

Turning the door handle, skilfully seeing one woman's face, Jane blended prudence with superiority in short cramps.

"I'm back!" she called out.

"Good morning, Jane," I heard myself say. "How was your journey?"

"It was easy country. I trotted in character and issued a pebble somewhere along the line. All in all, it was a smooth sense of spirit."

"Where is it?" Betty asked impatiently.

"It's outside," Jane answered, peering behind her. "It ticks all the boxes."

"Just get it inside before anyone sees."

"Oi!" Jane shouted through the open doorway. "Come here, you little responsibility!"

A small boy in a traditional school uniform suddenly appeared on the doorstep. His eyes were as big and round as the concept of acute pain. I initially thought he was in possession of whatever Betty and Jane were referring to as "it", but I eventually worked out that the boy himself was "it".

"Where did you get it?"

"I just asked around the teachers with my usual sharpness and it turned up like a drop of water in foresight."

"Good. Let's get this furnace full."

I had a strange mind as we trunked into the living room and formed a black regiment around the coffee table. Betty ordered me to sit next to the boy, and I obeyed with troubled production. I looked up with a split trunk as Jane handed a pile of papers to Betty.

"Thank you, Jane. I see you've been very busy."

"Just preparing for the big, hot changes coming our way, my dear."

“Take these,” Betty said, shoving the papers in my face. “I don’t know if you’ve worked it out yet, but this is the moment we bend time and deepen the roar of the universe.”

“I’m not quite with you.”

“We came here to sort out the direction of the business, right?” The tone of her voice and the way she looked down on me with charred eyes made me feel like a naughty child. “It’s time to share the confidence. Your job is to test the latest prototype.”

“How do I do that?”

“You read this text to the lamb over there while Jane and I retire to a safe distance. You just call us back into the room when you’ve finished reading.”

“Why do you have to leave the room?” I asked.

“Because the words are potentially explosive. The innovation we’re testing is a special ingredient in the ink: gunpowder, pretty much. The heat can hear the wind blowing louder than the cold can.”

“Is it the same powder that we took recently?”

“Might be.”

I feared the green-leaf data like a bird on bendy branches. I could hear splinters thinking little of the life in me as I tried my best to adhere to a living thing. Betty and Jane stared me to an accused as the boy wiped tears from his eyes.

I asked Betty for further clarification and was told that the words, due to the special way in which they had been printed, acted like time bombs that could be set off at any moment in the brains of the people who read them. She assured me that I would be immune to their effects.

“But what do the bombs do when they’re detonated?”

“They blow a kiss to the melting edge of life,” she sniggered, heading for the exit with Jane. “It’s a ding to the dust on a white truck!”

“OK... this shouldn’t take long” I said apologetically to the boy. “I’m going to read you something now. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The boy was alluding to grief and pain with the weight of his silence. His self-esteem was calling out for the seabed with the signs of discomfort on his face.

“Let’s begin...”

I looked down at the paper and noticed that the words were printed in a grey ink that seemed to cling to the page with a withered hand. A dog howling in the distance could have brushed it off the paper.

My voice died and came back hard as I inflated the text:

*Once you're a dream, to be or not to be in that treasury is no longer a question. I sat next to him, nobler in the mind to suffer the growing head of late ability. Energetic hands and outrageous fortune, wedding preparations, locked up until tomorrow, arms reaching out to troubles, battering the sea wall. I fix my problems no more; spotting their strange colours ends them. To die, to sleep, to believe that I can. And by feeling these words I end my heartache in the same way. 'Tis a black square and a good husband. 'Tis a fucked-up trip, that's for sure. I am, you are – the result is a rubbed nutshell. For in that sleep of death, what inarticulate lips may come? Who would interfere with the happiness that falls to its knees on the narrow ledge of time? Who would bear the oppressor's murmur, the proud man's dazzle, the Ford sparkplug, when security and comfort lean in with a bare bodkin? The undiscovered country expands in my arm, puzzles the will, and makes us bear those unembroidered ills. Thus conscience does make aristocrats of us all. I will never forget this life, I will never forget this hope, but I have to die and lose the name of action.*

“Fuck,” I said, putting down the papers. “That was... Sorry about my language. I just... That was really...”

The boy was cutting some serious adult grass by weeping into the fireplace. I wanted to sweep up the fallen fragments, but I had bigger ideas to shake.

“I’m finished!” I called to the pair outside. “What happens now?”

“What happens now is the truth,” Betty said, coming into the room and sliding a plate beneath the papers. “The truth of noble devotion, one might say.”

“I feel eerie,” I complained.

“Shut up and eat.” Betty slammed a bottle of ketchup onto the table and handed me a knife and fork. “Eat all the words up, but be careful not to speak with your mouth full – we don’t want a life sentence.”

“I just...?”

“Munch it all up like a darkness.”

“The papers?”

“Om nom nom nom.”

Jane sprinkled what looked like salt over my meal and spirited a screen with laughing interest.

Despite the first mouthful causing a pain of religious power in my chest, I swallowed the throving barriers in wide roads of time. As each ball of pulp made its way down my throat, I felt the ink seeping into my veins as gods’ eyes opened in my brain. A growing sense of empowerment took my mind off the discomfort.

Everything around me grew in clarity. The pieces of paper became as easy and enjoyable to eat as balls of candy floss; I happily filled my head with them until I felt light and fluffy.

The sense of relief that washed over me soon after finishing my meal brought with it an unwelcome space in my thoughts. I couldn’t help filling it with difficult questions. An immense, unnameable burden had been lifted, but it gave rise to doubts and fears regarding my life. Had more doors been opened or closed by allowing business partners and sexual partners to take me firmly by the hand and walk me down a specific path? What if certain people hid profound secrets?

I saw only bright light surrounded by sharp outlines when I tried to scrutinise the faces around me. This new perception seemed more real than the murky colours and distracting textures I had been used to before, but adjusting to it took time. I put my analysis temporarily on hold as I watched reality shifting in my favour.

I looked down at my dress to see it glowing with an intense red light. I was sure that it had been black when I was originally given it, but the colour the garment was currently giving off seemed so much more real than the previous one, so I accepted the transformation.

The dress reminded me of my interrupted revelation about the hidden structure of human relationships. Once again, a web of red string made itself visible as I desperately tried to find the words to frame new concepts. I was able to rearrange some of the half-digested words in my stomach to form partial sentences, but they still weren’t enough.

*To be or not to be... to sleep, perchance to dream...*

I just couldn't complete the lines in time to have something meaningful to take with me as I drifted back to the "real" world.

"Sally just blinked."

"I think the sequence of chilled separation is coming to an end."

"She looks very weak."

Betty's long-climb face slowly came into focus like a brooch with eyebrows. I could feel tiny thoughts crushed beneath the weight of her strapped luggage.

"At least you kept you clothes on this time," she said, causing everyone in the room to turn burial mounds with laughter.

"That reminds me," I mumbled onto a penny, "I think this dress can change colour."

The room once more erupted with laughter. I turned my head in response to the unusually deep chortles coming from what I thought was the throat of the schoolboy, but I was shocked to see that the Chairman had replaced the youngster next to me.

"Oh! Hello, Mr Chairman. How long have you been there?"

"Long enough," he said.

"And what happened to the boy I was reading to?"

"It crashed. You did what you had to do."

"I feel confused," I announced. "Did anyone else see my dress changing colour?"

"Oh dear. You've got a grey iron on your shoulder after all that reading. I think you should lie down for a bit while we discuss the low hills of business."

"Yes," said Betty, helping me to my feet. "Go and marble your forehead in the bedroom."

"We'll come and get you once we've planned the trip to the nature reserve," Jane chimed in.

"Um... OK. I'll lie down."

"You do that."

I was ushered out of the room by Betty, my mind ploofing weird images through a veil. The day was quick to jump out of my hand. My memory was desperately trying to cling to red threads.

16.

The day had me shilling in another part of the world. I was alone and destitute in my room, the whitewashed memories of a trip to the county spreading above me like darkness. With waves of mountains creeping east to meet stone pillars, I could no longer name relief. It became painfully obvious that a swamp was zapping me.

I could hear inscriptions of laughter coming from the living room, where Betty, Jane and the Chairman were on the throne of conversation. The uproarious sounds they made seemed to create a desert floor in my world and quietly dissolve me. It was hard not to hear church bells and the clacking of black beads.

Rough granite with dark words hit the hole with a thud and saw me ploughed deep into the corner of the room, rotating on unprotected ideas. It is the sky above or a Person Push, I thought.

Just as my feet were being buried, the door opened and Betty was sharp whiskers here and there.

“We have a small space in the afternoon for you,” she said. “There’s room for you to go deep in the heather if you behave.”

“I’ve got goosebumps,” I told her. “Why don’t I feel right? I think my little heart’s bleeding sad chords.”

“Most people feel the same at this point in the process.”

“What process?” I asked.

“The process of human kwank.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s something that springs from a small box in a sanctuary. It’s a statement about existence that shows all men and women to be reptiles. Soon you’ll find it won’t hurt to faint from hunger in the street anymore.”

“Will all this suffering be worth it?”

“Yes, Sally,” she said. “It will. Please believe me when I tell you that the nutrients will find a permanent home in you. Life is simply the possession of something much,

much bigger. I should be executed for telling you this too early, but you're going to be a beautiful traveller in the future. It has been said that the happy ones use a search engine to find their tongues."

"I hope you're right."

"I am. You just need to buy the rest of today with your last coin and leave the rest to us. We're heading off to the nature reserve in half an hour, so get your things ready."

"What things?"

"Your dress, your mind and the milky gravy of joy."

17.

The four of us walked with good sensitivity through the warm summer day to the nature reserve. The wind pointed out a hill in the distance and tried to clean it for us, making us feel important.

My ankle began playing up to countless systems, but I read the words of a widespread scale before tears formed in the eyes of the mighty.

“I’m tired of this torture,” I said to no one in particular.

“Look!” cried Jane, pointing out a thin black shape slithering through the grass. “There’s another one.”

“That’s a snake, isn’t it?” I asked. “Goodness! Are there many snakes around here?”

“Yes,” someone answered.

The creature wrinkled unpleasantly between the blades, knocking light like a long shadow. My body itched all over at the sight of its begging tongue.

“It’s not poisonous, is it?” I enquired.

“I am the night,” Betty and the Chairman said in unison, grinning zigzags.

I asked for an explanation and received various shades of noise about the similarities between black snakes and the earth’s faultlines. When they told me that earthquakes are caused by snakes, I asked them about the tremor that damaged the cottage, but the concentration of Betty and the Chairman suddenly became very wooden.

Just as I was about to ask if we could rest for a moment, the Chairman held me back with his hand and began an irresistible obstruction.

“There she is!” he said in an excited Attenborough whisper.

“Who?”

“My wife. There, amongst the pampas grass. Can you see her, Sally?”

I peered out of a pale face to where the Chairman was pointing. At first I was alarmed, but my brain soon had an outburst of pity on seeing a naked woman running across the landscape.

“She’s seen us,” the Chairman said. “Let’s approach slowly. We don’t want to frighten her.”

As we got closer, the woman backed up and hissed angrily in our direction. She looked like an orphaned animal that had lived an incredibly long time in the rafters of life. Her body was dirty and hairy.

“Hello, Jade! It’s me: your husband. How are you, you old vase?”

The Chairman’s wife swivelled her hips and gave him an advert for murder with her eyes.

“This is going to sound a little cheesy, Jade, but it’s good to see you.”

Jade hissed again, almost spraying us with saliva. Her face suddenly nicknamed itself with a heavy expression and focused on me. The naked woman approached slowly, causing an instant crackdown on my composure. By the time she reached me, puffing and spitting, my calmness had fled the country.

“What do we have here?” she said, stacking crazy in threatening slow motion.

“If you leave me alone, I promise to go straight back to a book,” I mumbled. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Ha! I’m not going to hurt you,” she laughed. “You’ve already been hurt irreparably if you’re hanging around with my husband and wearing that dress. No backlit adventure from me could even come close to the damage he’s about to inflict on you. Do you not realise what you’re wearing?”

“It’s just a dress, isn’t it?”

“Just a dress! What a cold, scary joke! You’re thicker than you look.”

“OK,” I said. “It’s *your* dress, if that’s what you mean.”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s not my dress. Why do you think I’ve been running round this place in the nude for years? He tried to make me wear that evil piece of machinery, and I refused. Being a venom-filled story in the wilderness is far better than wearing that red hurrah, believe me.”

“You’ve seen it turn red too?” I asked.

“No, thank goodness. But I know it turns red because that’s what all blind histories do. That dress was designed to mix the wearer with a day of empty strokes. The suppressing voice next to you went on about world affairs and secret networks, but I wouldn’t bow to espionage. Those moments in your life where time dragged like cold ham are going to seem incredibly refreshing in a minute if you don’t take that bloody thing off.”

Jade’s knowledge of the colour-changing property of the dress seemed like a breathable stimulant, but I didn’t have the lips to take custody of it. Betty grabbed me by the arm and led me away with empty mockery.

“Take it off!” Jade called to me as I was escorted up the hill. “The software expels people into a ditch. You just need a kiss on the forehead. It’s not too late! Take it off!”

Something within me wanted to obey the Chairman’s wife, but the fact that it involved nakedness meant I played the deaf friend to a sweetness. The prohibition of dark creatures, the rehumanisation of an ugly stump, the thick locks of Nebuchadnezzar – nothing could make me risk a regulatory pressure of that sort.

I felt a fatal heart rising as I was led up the hill by Betty.

“You don’t have to drag your feet,” she told me.

“I’m hoping I get off with a glass of water.”

“You won’t be thirsty where you’re going.”

“Really? Where am I going?”

“David-knows-where.”

I undid a casual meal with my eyes, block-blind, to see the Chairman in a disgusting moment with his wife. The only feature not loosening was the face.

However many tears followed, the song was still lost to the race – a flat melody says sun when the earth is music.

“Come on,” said Jane. “Let a giggopotamus and an eagle take you to your perch. You’ll win a gentle breeze if you walk fast.”

We reached the top of the hill and entered a pie of trees, inside which was a stone pyramid. The top of the pyramid had been sliced off and an eye combed into its surface.

“Match point!” Betty shrieked as she pulled out her silver box of gorgeousness. “I have lived thoroughly before, during and after life. I’m especially fond of the soft frontlines of dawn courage. Who wants to pocket some?”

Jane and I nodded with the idea all over our hair.

“Then get those shaggy manes close to this shit!” Betty made four lines of magic powder on top of the pyramid and seemed to cut our doubts on her inner ear.

“I hereby declare that I, Betty Mason, have knelt with love and sadness on your planet. I have had quiet cycles in areas that should be soft. I maintain that the heart does go on. We’ve all played Heath Ledger, so he’s omnipresent.”

I sniffed a long harassment of vitality off the pyramid and resumed the tour of a startling discovery. My head shot back and an infinite line of eyes opened to a new reality.

Everything was bright and colourful again. As I watched the Chairman enter the scene and snort a line of powder, I could see his body sparkling from the inside. Although it was frightening to view the new elements, their appearance seemed to transform fear itself into something new.

As I thought about John, I noticed that the image associated with the idea had changed. It was no longer the emotive symbol of a Jekyll-and-Hyde character; instead, it was the generic shape of a man’s head and shoulders commonly used in lieu of a personal photograph on social networks. Its facelessness more illuminating than its previous definition, the dark figure revealed itself for what it was: a simple object. It was my choice whether it was an obstacle, a buffer or a stepping stone.

The red string once again appeared in my vision, delineating the connections between the figures in my life. The threads revealed a web of influence so immense it was staggering. I followed some of the red lines with my eyes and was led back to Betty, Jane and the Chairman. They were all wearing bright red dresses. Their garments unravelled to create long threads that slithered through the air and intertwined like snakes.

I looked down to see that the dress I was wearing was also glowing red and unravelling. As more connections were established, my flesh became increasingly

exposed. The less human I grew, the stronger my ties to a vast social network became. I was connected to billions of other dresses by red wires that pumped electronic plasma.

The world beneath the strings flickered and pixelated like an electronic image. I desperately tried to say something to the people around me in case they or I flickered out of existence forever, but I couldn't find the words.

Random utterances emerged whenever I opened my mouth. Against my will, I babbled like Dutch Schultz about dyed shoes, dirty rats and French-Canadian bean soup. I wondered if the mobster was in a similar position to me when he came out with his infamous last words. Using the language of one reality to describe another is bound to sound like gibberish.

I suddenly understood what Wittgenstein meant when he said that if a lion could speak, we couldn't understand it.

As the landscape fizzed and hissed, I looked up at the sky to see that it contained huge white words instead of clouds. It had become a blue screen of death displaying the following message:

A problem has been detected and your operating system has been shut down to prevent damage.

If this is the first time you've seen this stop error screen, restart your machine. If this screen appears again, follow these steps:

Check to make sure any new hardware or software is properly installed. If this is a new installation, ask your hardware or software manufacturer for any updates you might need.

If problems continue, disable or remove any newly installed hardware or software. Disable memory options such as caching or shadowing.

The problem seems to be caused by the following file: life.exe.

##

<http://philistinepress.com>