

## Chapter one - extract from *Butterfly Tree* by Samuel Morgan

### Arriving in Mexico

I only go and get my cursed gut rot the day I'm flying to Mexico, don't I. There's a plane ride ahead, and a week sharing a hostel dorm. Enclosed air spaces—eek! I can't even let one out in a public place when I'm in this state. Well, not a place I'm staying in, at least—one I'm passing through, perhaps. No, *certainly*: there's a slightly sadistic relish in that, is there not? I'm toxic when it's like this, really. There's some bad bacteria in my gut that seem to multiply every few weeks like an algal bloom. Had it for years. I'll be fine, then all of a sudden, *boosh*: I'm the personification of the Bog of Eternal Stench. Girls, form a queue.

There's this pinch-eyed 'ARMY'-cap-wearing guy behind me in the check-in queue. On his luggage trolley sits a rifle case (presumably with death-dealing object inside), two big plastic boxes secured with gaffer tape (ammo?), and a copy of *Military Surplus* magazine, which he keeps picking up, leafing through, and putting down again. I presume he's American, and visited Canada with the sole purpose of shooting some of its magnificent wildlife. *What a pea-brained idiot*, I think. A guy that gets off on shooting things. *What a dick*. Probably creams his pants every time he gets a moose in his cross-hairs (perhaps only one box contained ammo, and the other, fresh underwear). His squinty eyes are too close together—always the sign of a dimwit. Or an inbred. George-Bush-junior type eyes. Perhaps I should hang back a little and launch an air strike of my own at him, from the silos of my gut. But before I get the chance, I'm waved to a counter.

I manage to check in with no problems, despite my thinking something might go wrong, like... well, I've no idea what. My booking not being in their system? I've turned up on the wrong day? My work visa will be annulled if I leave the country? (It wouldn't; I already checked.) I cringe when I notice that with age, I'm getting more like my mother—that is, negative and anxious for no good reason.

I'd cut sugar out of my diet a few months earlier, in an attempt to alleviate the gut issue. Processed sugar, at least. It was obviously feeding the problem (all organic life eats sugar in one form or another). The pain of denying myself sugary things (could one live without carrot cake?) finally

became less than the pain of allowing myself (the ensuing gut rot). I've no idea what provoked the colon critters this time, however. I still drink alcohol, and that contains plenty of sugar. *Did I drink much last night? Can't remember. Probably did, then.*

Whatever it was, the critters had been feasting, and I'm dealing with the aftermath of their merrymaking. Every now and then they throw a party like this, and I'm left cleaning up the mess and airing the house. And when they're not stinking me out, they seem to be zapping my energy, like tiny vampires. Tired or stinky... not much to offer a girl. But it's not like that all the time. I do have a tendency to wallow in self-pity and find all sorts of excuses for being single. Perhaps being the occasional 'smelly pants' (something an ex affectionately called me from time to time) is just another one.

My flight's at 5:45am, so I'm pretty tired, having woken up much earlier than that. I lie down on the chairs in the departure lounge by my gate, but both the worry of falling asleep and missing my flight, and the need to fart unfettered, soon have me up on my feet again. I wander around the terminal like a zombie—smelling a bit like the rotting flesh of one, no doubt—and then head to the toilet. There I sit in a somnolent daze for a good thirty minutes, massaging my gut and entreating it to settle, or at least allow me to expel whatever gremlin is in there. But nothing much happens, apart from almost falling asleep on the loo.

In sheer numbers, the mammalian colon harbours one of the densest microbial communities found on Earth. Really, we're all super organisms: 10% human, 90% microbes! The first person plural should be adopted by all of us. This colonisation of bacteria, good and bad, can weigh up to three pounds in a person. Amazing. Thank you, Google, for that fine fact. Or was it a TED talk? Or Wiki? (Where else does one go for insight these days, if not those three digital orifices of wisdom?)

Anyway, in the fight between good and bad in *my* gut, the bad is clearly winning. George, forget building a set for the next Stars Wars movie: just stick a camera up my rectum and click *Record*. Putting thoughts of royalties aside, however, I'd love to know how to cleanse my temple of these sinners. Believe me, I've tried a few things. Cutting out wheat. Various herbs. Colonics (they actually made it worse). Nothing seems to work—not for long, at least. The best temporary fix I've found is drinking bentonite clay with Psyllium husks. 'Highly fibrous and coagulating', the packet

says. Slimy and rank (to drink), I say. But it does make for very satisfying number twos. Avoiding sugar is just my latest strategy against the bad guys. They're a stubborn bunch, though, and I'm not prepared to consume just cabbage leaves and bone broth for six months (or follow one of the equally extreme 'remedies' out there to cure gut candida, the existence of which is doubted by some doctors). Not yet, at least. Maybe when I meet the girl of my dreams and need to 'clean up my act'. Who knows.

My seat on the plane is by the window. Not ideal—I like to be able to get out easily, and often, especially on tempestuous gut-spuming days like this. I buckle up and tell the lady next to me I may need to get out at some point. "What, now?" she asks. "No, later," I say, to which she's probably like, *yeah, obviously*. What I really meant was, *I may need to get out a few times if I am to save you from asphyxiation*.

I put on my eye mask, squeeze in my ear plugs, and blow up my inflatable neck rest, enjoying the challenge of trying to stopper the thing blindfolded (I seem to like making things difficult for myself). I actually manage to sleep for a good part of the four-hour journey, and miraculously, my gut seems to behave itself. I do sneak out a few farticles in the latter part of the journey, apprehensively sniffing the air each time for incriminating evidence, but luckily can't smell anything. They're innocuous; I'm spared embarrassment (or having to perform the dubious *who-is-responsible-for-that-abomination: it's-certainly-not-me* looking about me face).

It could be that they spray a powerful deodoriser through the aircon. There's definitely something they put in there that clears my sinuses nicely and puts me in a kind of daze. Or perhaps it's just that air blows at such a gale from the air vents that any offending smell, even my *olfactory coup d'états* (as the French might say), farts striking like a *coup de foudre*, are rapidly quelled. I guess it's either that or a *coup de grâce* for all passengers (I got caught in a 'coup de' whirlpool there. My apologies. Blame Merriam Webster dot com).

I only remove the eye mask and ear plugs as we're making our final descent, when we're asked to put our seat-backs in their upright position. That's always a bit like being asked to tidy up by the teacher at the end of a particularly fun lesson at infant school. I'm amazed how suddenly my gut can change. Had I been at home, I knew—from how it had started that morning and from the specific

grade of pungency—that I'd have it for days, having to cut all social ties, lock myself away in my apartment, and watch the wallpaper slowly sour in colour. How could it suddenly stop like that? If it was psychological, it was truly bizarre. I'm just grateful my gut was being kind on this occasion.

Flying into a paradise helps take my mind off it. It's so pretty down below. Turquoise ocean caressing a meandering coastline of broiled oranges, golds, and browns, then picturesque hills, and... mountains! For some reason, I hadn't expected to see any in this part of Mexico. I thought it would be all flat and desert-like. But there they are, brazen and majestic, now taking up much of the view in my little cabin window.

I notice an immigration form tucked into the seat pocket in front of me, put there whilst I was snoozing. I ask to borrow a pen from the lady next to me, and we chat a little as I fill it out—not as diligently as if I had been flying into the USA or Canada, mind. They take 'security' a little too seriously for my liking there (due to fabricated threats aimed at keeping the masses in a perpetual state of fear? So some shadowy elite can manipulate them, start wars, and pass laws they wouldn't normally get away with passing? Surely I'm not suggesting this. Anyway, I expected the immigration card wouldn't receive much more than a fleeting glance in Mexico.)

My seatmate and her husband had been coming to Cabo for “over twenty years”, usually staying for a month at a time. They had a condo there, “Two, in fact”—how forgetful of her: they'd just bought a bigger one.

“My husband even has a Huvur,” she tells me.

"Oh, really," I say enthusiastically, clueless as to what a Huvur is. *Surely she can't be talking about some snazzy vacuum cleaner?* I allow the cogs to turn a few times, but, still drawing a blank, ask for clarification (well, you'd rather I ask than pretend, right?).

“It's a dune buggy,” she informs me. A brand of. *Ah, the good life some people have*, I think, looking back at the Mexican version of Palm Beach below us, plush homes gradually getting bigger, as if I'm clicking 'zoom' on GoogleEarth on my iPad'esque cabin window. *A whole month!*

We're the first plane to land that morning. Immigration check is indeed casual and swift (“Buenos Dias” + smile + stamp). Once I've collected my luggage—an old green khaki rucksack that had belonged to my Grandfather—I come to a security point, flanked by two armed men, where a sign

and a nod prompts me to press an unmarked red button. I wait for a trap door to open, or green gunk to pour on my head, or to have a machine gun pointed at me, but nothing happens. I'm simply told to carry on. Noticing a luggage X-ray machine, I realise it's a kind of lottery—either they let you through, or you get your bags scanned and even searched. Who would be stupid enough to bring drugs *into* Mexico? Surely the profit is in getting them *out* of the country?

I proceed through a sluggish set of automatic doors and find several taxi drivers waiting (plus a host of timeshare sales counters the airline staff had kindly advised we avoid at all costs). The drivers eye me as I approach, but none of them asks if I need a ride. I do notice them asking the chap just behind me, though. Maybe it's my rucksack (it *has* seen better days) as opposed to the smart silver suitcase purring at his heel. My sandals versus his black leather shoes? Who knows. Maybe I have the air of a seasoned traveller who isn't about to get hustled on a cab fare. Or maybe I just had an *air*, green and putrid. The curse of gut rot.

*Hola Mexico!* Can you imagine how nice it is to step into warmth and sunshine after leaving a dark and -20°C cold Calgary (the most desolate place on Earth)? Yes, I'd ended up moving there after all. Telling myself writing would get me through it. And writing I was, every morning getting up at the crack of dawn.

My destination is the town of Cabo San Lucas, and I know I'll find a bus to get me there from a bus terminal near the airport. I'll be staying in Cabo one night, and returning to the airport the following day to meet three fellow kitesurfers I'd connected with online. We'd arranged to share a taxi van to the kiting resort two hours north.

I spot a Mexican lady wearing a white 'Enterprise' car rental shirt, and ask her if she knows where the bus terminal is. She's standing, one hand on a suitcase, next to a guy who'd obviously arrived on the same flight as I. She points vaguely behind and to the right of her.

"Puedo caminar allá (can I walk there)?" I ask. Her expression and the slight rocking motion of her head says "so so" ("mas o menos" in Spanish). I assume Mexicans aren't dissimilar to their North American counterparts in that they like to drive everywhere, and probably aren't aware we Brits like to walk places almost as much as we like to queue. I bounce my rucksack up onto my back,

tighten the shoulder straps, and am just about to get going when she says, “un momento,” and then in English: “I’ll get you a lift.”

“Gratis (for free)?” I ask. *I’m not about to get hustled here.*

“Solo propina (just a tip),” she says. I realise, however, I don’t even have money for a tip; just a wad of \$100 dollar bills I picked up from a currency-exchange kiosk in Canada. I tell her this, though not knowing the word for ‘bill’ or ‘note’, I draw that part in the air between us with one finger.

She waves dismissively, says, “No problem,” and wanders off. I start chatting with the guy. I assume he’s Canadian by his accent, but discover he’s originally from near Manchester. He’s been in Calgary for 18 years, working for TransCanada (oil pipelines). Lots of people work in oil and gas in Calgary. North of Alberta is tar-sands, -let’s-destroy-the-planet central. Another reason I hated the place.

I, of course, comment on the weather (we’re British: it’s tradition), specifically on how nice it is after freezing Calgary. He agrees, but says some Mexicans wear jumpers and think it cold at this time of year, to which I raise an incredulous eyebrow or two. It seems perfect to me. I can’t imagine anyone thinking it cold. (I hadn’t experienced a night there yet, though; the thick winter coat that I’d dismissively stuffed to the bottom of my bag at Calgary Airport could certainly be making a reappearance.)

The lady arrives back with a Mexican guy, who gestures to me to follow him. He’s also wearing an *Enterprise* T-shirt. I’m quick to tell him I have no money, but he just shrugs. He probably thinks I’m the one hustling, providing an excuse for what will turn out to be only a small tip. He opens the back of his van and indicates I should put my bag in. *Now what? Is he going to drive off with my bags and leave me here?*

*Why are you even thinking that, Dom? He’s doing you a favour.*

And he is, albeit holding out for a tip. I’m a tad paranoid, that’s all. I can’t blame that on my mother. It’s that Six thing. According to the Enneagram-literate ex-housemate, one of my biggest fears is *people are out to get me*. That, or I’ve smoked too much pot.

He closes the boot, points at the airport terminal, and says something in Spanish. *Ah great, now he wants me to go and get some cash. Not happening, mate. I'll be in there getting cash and you'll drive off.* I just stand there, by what I assume is the passenger door, waiting for him to get in his side and drive. “Lado, lado,” he says, pointing again. *Forget it, man, I told you: I have no money.* “No, no,” I say, mirroring whatever he’d just said.

Unfortunately, I’ve forgotten some basic Spanish, or am just having trouble understanding his accent. ‘Lado’ is a word I know: it means ‘side’. I am on the wrong one. “Other side,” he finally says in English, probably thinking: *who is this stupid gringo?*

“Ohhh!” I say, breaking a rueful smile, thinking: *what a plonker I am.* I’ve forgotten most countries don’t drive on the same side as in the UK. Just like I’ve forgotten people are generally nice and not out to get me.

I chat to him a little in broken Spanish, mostly to make him aware I’m English and not American (and therefore not technically a ‘gringo’, a word many associate, incorrectly, with ‘foreigner’), as if it might lessen the chance of him kidnapping me and leaving me to die in a ditch someplace. We only drive for a couple of minutes before stopping at an intersection. A chicken bus is drawing to a halt at the curb that very moment. “Ese bus (that bus)?” I ask. “Si”, he says, nodding *and* pointing, in case this dimwitted white man doesn’t get it. He hasn’t smiled yet, and again shrugs when I again apologise for not having any change to tip him.

I thank him instead with my best sincere-but-goofy smile as I hop out, and that finally cracks one from him. I quickly get my bags out the back—*quick* with the irrational anxiety he might just drive off, and so might the bus. A young guy is hanging out the open bus door by one arm, waving at me with the other to hurry up. *Oh shit, I’ve no money,* I remember, fumbling through my wallet as I approach. Luckily, I spy a \$20 note. No idea where that came from. “Solo tengo \$20”, I tell him (I only have \$20).

“No problem” he says, “just get on.” *Stop dithering, gringo.* I hand him the money as I do so. *Great... now watch me get screwed over on the exchange rate.*

I find a seat halfway down the bus. The other seven passengers on the bus are Mexican, and are all looking at me. Ticket guy is standing by the driver counting through my change once, then again. *Perhaps he's deciding by what degree to rip me off.* He eventually makes his way back to me and hands me a few notes.

I'm instantly zen about whether he's short-changed me or not. It's not like I could check anyway; I'd forgotten to look up what the exchange rate was. If he has scammed me, well, I hope the money goes to good use. Perhaps he has a disabled sister or something. *I'm sure he hasn't conned me, though.* I recall a mantra I've scribbled on various note-sticks and stuck to my bedroom wall over the years as reminders: *assume positive intent.* Yeah, I'm totally zen, totally chilled, enjoying the ride, till twenty minutes later when I find myself showing a young Mexican couple seated behind me the change I was given, and asking if it looks correct. It's just that, well, as more "gringos" get on the bus, it's obvious the ticket guy doesn't like them (us). Just something in his attitude. It can't be pinned on adolescent obnoxiousness, because he's definitely warmer to the locals. I got a little suspicious, I guess. Plus, he smirked at me strangely a few times, like: *ha, sucker—I just screwed you!* And when I tried to get his attention to check where to get off, he just stretched that smirk wider, shook his head, and continued chatting to the driver. I wonder what "arse" is in Spanish.

In these parts of the world, one is always faced with the dilemma of not wanting to be ripped off (especially by a teenager) and not wanting to be a tight arse when everything is so cheap. According to the young couple, the change looks about right, and I go back to gazing out the window, observing the new passengers getting on every few minutes, and absorbing the much-needed warmth.

Two white guys get on the bus. They look American (by how they're dressed) and gay (you can just tell sometimes, can't you). The fact that one of them looks at me with a twinkle in his eye (the fairy twinkle) and for slightly too long; and that the other has the limp-wrist thing going on as he gesticulates, confirms it. Anyway, twinkle-eyes gets out what resembles a giant golf ball and starts pumping away at it with his fist. It's one of those forearm-muscle-builder things. Or a stress ball.

He doesn't look stressed. Though you never know what's going on inside, do you. People can appear 'normal' one minute and be jumping off a bridge the next. Or pumping rounds into a



kindergarten. “Oh, he seemed such a nice chap. Though he did like to keep himself to himself,” says the neighbour on the evening news, about the homicidal paedophile\* just arrested on her street. We’ve all heard it. (\*Why is that word not on my spell check? I think whoever coded this word processor I’m using should be investigated. They’re obviously guilty).

Anyway, I think it quite the contrast to what I’ve just spied outside my window: a grubby-looking man picking up bits of plastic from the highway. One man seeks a few scraps to sell to survive, skin dark with dirt and destitution; the other seeks to tone his forearms, skin dark from plenty of sunny vacations, no doubt. The Patio Furniture shop we pass a moment later also grates, as I imagine all the posh holiday pads in Cabo (perhaps these guys have a pink one?) and the squalid out-of-sight dwellings (where the litter-picker lives, hunting rats for his family to eat, with spears fashioned from old clothes hangers [my imagination does sometimes tend to get a little carried away. Perhaps this entire trip to Mexico I’ve embarked upon and am describing is made up, who knows? Certainly if any parts put me in a bad light, those *are* made up]).

I’m reminded of the children’s Spanish book a Mexican friend gave me the day I left the UK for Canada (oh that dark, dark day). It’s about a little girl who lived in a slum in Mexico City with her father, and how they scavenged garbage dumps for things to sell. I intend to get through a few pages of it during my holiday. I’m finding learning Spanish to be a painfully slow process. A few pages is a realistic expectation.

A lorry passes, and two heads pop out the top of the back. Two guys hitching a ride? More likely two workers: not enough space to sit in the front cabin with their colleagues. Either way, it wouldn’t be allowed in Canada. It’s nice to be back in a place where rules are different, and can be bent, broken, or non-existent. In Calgary, I’m still getting used to not Jaywalking, obediently crossing the road only when when the little illuminated man tells me to, even when there’s no traffic coming. Well, I’m glad to be back in wilder lands, amongst a little more chaos. I breathe it in with a smile, along with the warmth of the sun beating through the window.

Clear skies and 24-odd degrees: delicious. In my opinion, the climate is just perfect. I’ve mentioned that, haven’t I. Perfect, perfect, perfect. When the bus starts to empty, I notice a couple of passengers cross the aisle to sit on the shady side of the bus. I stay exactly where I am. I imagine

myself as one of those leg-lifting lizards, basking on a hot rock. No need to move. Just keep doing the little Michael Flatley leg dance I start the moment the image comes to mind—no one will notice. It also helps unstick a sweaty ballsack from my inside leg.

I'm purring my pleasure. However, when I actually pay attention to the sound I'm making, I realise it's less feline and more low-rumbling-gargle: something from Jurassic Park, perhaps. I'm a mouthwash-swilling giant cat-lizard, with scales and fur and... and I'm going delirious with heatstroke. I retrieve a bottle of water from my backpack, realising I haven't drunk a drop since the flight. Half an hour later, when I'm sweating a little too much for testicular and general comfort, and a convenient space opens up next to a rather pretty girl opposite me (though after Calgary, almost every girl is 'pretty'), I consider moving.

After several minutes of anxious deliberation, I finally pluck up the courage, get up, and ask if she wouldn't mind me sitting next to her, all under the pretence of getting out of the sun, of course. During the little conversation I initiate, I ask her if she thinks it's cold. "No, not cold", she says, "but winter". Thought so; I knew the guy at the airport was speaking nonsense.

Someone wolf whistles from the back of the bus, and we draw to a rickety halt. *Isn't that great: the locals don't press a button to indicate they'd like to get off, they wolf whistle.* I turn round to see it's actually a gringo couple stepping off the bus (*actual* gringos, I'm sure). *Arseholes.* Wolf-whistling is no longer cool—it's rude and arrogant.

Now she starts asking me questions, beginning, no less, with "Casado?" (married?), and then "Hijos?" (children?), to which I laugh (if you knew me, you might too). I want to reply, "None that I know of," but didn't know the exact translation for that. So instead I say, "Would you like some?"

No, I'm joking. I don't say that.

I only know we've arrived at my stop in downtown Cabo San Lucas because the girl taps me on the arm and says, "Now you stop." That, or she wasn't impressed with my small talk. The ticket guy certainly wasn't going to tell me when to get off. I grab my rucksack and bid her "adios," tipping

my imaginary sombrero as I do so. She smiles and waves. Perhaps she saw the hat (hopefully *not* the scales or fur).

Another ‘pretty’ girl I’d noticed getting on the bus earlier, who’d been sitting at the front, had also got off. Like a cunning fox in heat, I trot along the pavement to catch her up (of course foxes *trot*, there’s a dance named after it). I don’t initiate contact by sniffing her behind (or is it only dogs that do that?), though I might like to, but instead ask her if she knows where my hotel is, showing her the scrap of paper on which I had written the address. She doesn’t know, and she isn’t so *fantastic Mrs Fox* up close.

The next person I ask is a random guy walking towards me. He doesn’t know either. I’m not worried; it’s merely ‘running the numbers’, as working in sales teaches you (see, sales isn’t so bad, Dom). Someone *will* know, just as someone will always buy. I spot an *Enterprise Rent-A-Car* office, and assume they’ll at least have a map of the city for me to look at. They do, and the lady is very helpful (*Enterprise* is serving me rather well so far, wouldn’t you agree?)—apparently, my hotel is five blocks and a right turn away. My whereabouts established, it’s time for some breakfast. I venture into the first restaurant I pass.

The music playing is jolly and traditional, and I spot Huevos Rancheros on the menu, which I know I like (eggs, beans, avocado, tortillas: *yum*). I’m offered a seat and am promptly poured some black coffee I didn’t order, but drink anyway. The food’s good and quickly eaten. I’m eager to find my hotel and start exploring—I’ve only a day and a night here to cause mischief. It’s a Saturday, so I assume there will be some nightlife. There’s probably something happening every night in a touristy place like Cabo. I pay my bill, noticing the coffee on there, heave my rucksack onto my back with caffeine-infused gusto, and sprinkle a few coins on the table as a tip (for once not wrestling with that ever-recurring traveller’s conundrum of how much to tip).

## Chasing Señoritas

A block from where I presume my hotel to be, I pass a restaurant—or rather, I pass a pretty girl who happens to be sitting opposite someone in what materialises to be a restaurant. It's her friend who gives me a smile as I pass, though. So what do I do? Why, I stop, of course. I'm on holiday, travelling alone, looking for companionship. No one knows me here. Why wouldn't I? That, and I have a sack-load of regrets relating to this type of thing. I'm determined not to add any more weight to it. So, I backtrack a pace or two, and, like a bee drawn to a colourful bloom, hovering on the vortex of it's thrashing wings, I swivel on the balls of my feet to face them—to face *it*: the fear, the unknown, the tantalising nectar of flowering possibility—and buzz, “Hello.”

What *fear*? Why the regrets? I guess I should pause here and tell you. Or at least *try* to.

It begins with a fleeting glance, a moment's eye contact, a smile from a stranger. It always seems to happen so fast. I'm awe struck, but flustered. Bound by fear, and hating it. *How do I look? What do others think?* I walk on. Self-conscious. Looking back. Walking on. *To hell with what others think*, I think, turning around, but too late. Too late for what? What did I imagine was there in the first place? Well, perhaps if you're a dreamer, you'll understand. If not, humour me.

An invitation from the Universe, that's what. A Spaghetti Junction where a whole host of possibilities intersect. *Shared* possibilities. Connection. Laughter. Adventure. Love? Yes, even love. Primarily love. Just a fantasy of love, of course. Two travelling souls arrived at a moment from far, far apart. Two specks swirling in a great dust cloud, momentarily passing. If only they'd reached out and caught each other by the hands, they might have spun about for a while, together.

But that courage is lacking, and the invitation twists and buckles on the wind. I feel it as a death. A haunting forever-now-unknown. My aloneness in the vastness of time and space becomes profound and suffocating. The invitation, shredded, settles in my hands as fragments, torn paper. It sits there for days, weeks even, tormenting me and yet cradled, strangely cherished. Till a fresh breeze comes to carry the pieces away and I cling and clasp no more. And wonder what all the fuss was about. No, that's not true. I merely hope next time will be different. But there is an aching undefined stretch of time ahead before that next 'chance'. And she is still there. The girl I passed and said nothing to. In some chamber of the mind where all the other apparitions linger. They surface now and then, to haunt me. When I'm thinking of my cowardice and paucity, and how I so want to find my *home* before I die. And when I die, not be alone.

I am ashamed of my fear. I implore myself to *act next time*. I plead for spontaneity. I hope. I curse. I am miserable. *You are too hard on yourself*, a voice says, but it is merely an echo of a whisper. *Dear boy, you are human. To be so means making mistakes, indulging ignorance, and being afraid.* Barely a whisper. There is little compassion for my 'failure'. Just the pain and loss only a fantasist can feel at such an insignificant thing.

Can you see him? The small boy, stopped somewhere, looking back, lost?

I begin by asking the two girls if they happen to know where my hotel is. I'm pretty confident I know its location already, thanks to Archangel *Enterprise*, but you have to start with something, don't you. Sometimes when I'm feeling bold, or perhaps just curious to see how they'll respond, I tell the girl she is beautiful, or her eyes are, or her smile (whatever it was I first noticed, unless it was her behind, of course), inferring that I stopped for no other reason than that. Well, it's true! That, and the fantasy of our life together I saw—an idyll scene of country home and family and laughter, that her smile sparked in some hidden but active corner of my mind.

I know no greater honesty than to tell her of her beauty. Is that tragic? I'm playful with it. There is no method like some men may adopt—like the kind that read 'The Game'. If the girl responds with delight and humble relish, we continue conversing. If they tut and scorn me with their heels, I've lost nothing. Because I'm not swaggering up to them with any intent to impress, and because they see it's not *a game*—it's real for me—they tend to respond well. They aren't threatened, but touched: "You made my day," I've heard professed numerous times ("Do you do this often?" much less so, thankfully—a much less satisfactory response, though one for which I developed a preferred retort: "more than I used to, but less than I'd like to").

It might also be the fact that most men, according to the girls I've spoken to about it, do tend to puff themselves up and act like arrogant baboons when asking for their number. Asking for it like they're doing the girl a favour or it's all inevitable. Assertiveness is one thing; arrogance, another.

It's never inevitable with me. It's an exhilarating, terrifying, delicate, alive affair. And, when I do find the bottle to do it, the results are quite remarkable, even if I do say so myself. You can meet some nameless angelette in the carriage of a crowded London tube train, and a few hours later be on rather more intimate terms. And all you did to trigger the affair was comment on the Pret® sandwich she was eating! I smile as I'm playfully groped by memories of such encounters: the shades of hair through my fingers, the pheromone-fragrant sweat that clung to skin, the harmony of voices, and the swirl of hazels, blues, greens, and browns with their dark desirous centre: revealing only so much, or nothing at all. An intoxicating tapestry of scents, sights and sounds. A lubricious cache of sensual mental souvenirs. (Probably a few mocking looks in their too. And disappointment. but let's ignore those.)

The one that smiled at me sounds French in the way she speaks English, but both of them are Mexican. I give her the most attention, because her English is better and it's her friend I fancy (trust me, it makes sense... gosh, perhaps I use techniques after all). She invites me to join them for lunch. They've already ordered, but their food is yet to arrive. I decline the offer because I've just eaten, and was only looking for my hotel, right?

But what's the rush? Why don't I sit down and relax? Why am I so rational when I don't need to be, and irrational when logic would serve me so much better? I languish in anticipation of such encounters, and here I am trying to flee already. Perhaps I'm nervous. Or presenting an image—subconsciously trying to 'look good' and worried I might slip up in my performance if I hang around too long. I do suggest we meet later, however ("Yes, let's," the friend says), but I'm vague in the plan ("The beach, perhaps?").

"Sure," she says, and asks me if I have Facebook. I ask the chef for a scrap of paper on which to scribble down my email. I also note the name of my hotel and '7pm'. "We could all meet there," I say, quickly adding, "and go for a drink somewhere," so she doesn't get the wrong idea (which, of course, would be the ravishingly right idea). *That would do as a plan, wouldn't it?—7pm, hotel...?* I'm *trying* to think, but not getting very far. The restaurant is a stage, and I'm more worried about forgetting my lines. So much for being real and not playing games. Well, that moment has passed. That's only ever in the first second or two. Did I not mention that? After that, face to face interactions are usually a lie (oh come on, they are; we pull faces we don't mean to, we disguise ourselves. Persona means mask). But writing. *Aquí está mi salvación!* Writing remotely, from a distance, is a truth. There I can vomit all my honesty.

I tell them I need to get going and find my hotel.

*Do you? Right now?*

I'm playing it cool, I guess.

*Deadly.*

"See you later, then," I say.

"See you."

And I'm gone.

*Deadly* to missing opportunities, or squandering them.

I'm offered several massages as I walk the next block to my hotel, not all legit, I suspect. I've no intention of getting one, but ask the price out of interest. "\$20. More for special massage," I'm told by a large lady, chewing gum in one of the doorways, roll of belly peeking at me from in between pink tracksuit bottoms and low-cut black shirt. *Told you so.* I politely decline all offers.

The hotel is small and charming, filled with young trees, creepers, flowers, and the sound of trickling water. There's maybe ten rooms in all, set about a central courtyard. A lady sitting there gets up when she sees me, carefully putting her laptop down and taking off her sunglasses. She introduces herself and asks if I have a reservation.

"I do. Are you the owner?" I ask.

"I am," she says. She has short blond hair, a rather pointy nose, and sharp blue eyes. She's wearing blue jeans and a loose, white, long-sleeved shirt. I guess her age as around 45. After having me fill in the necessary forms—which I do with perfunctory flare, i.e. leaving several omissions and a Mickey Mouse signature—she shows me to my room. It's right by the water feature. I imagine it will be rather nice falling to sleep to the sound of that. She asks if I have any further questions. I don't.

I dump my belongings on the double bed, have a quick shower, and head back to the restaurant to find the girls and suggest we head to the beach together. *Why did I said 7pm?* I think on the way. *It was only midday: we had all afternoon. And I'm only here a day. What was I thinking?!*

They aren't there, of course.

"Las chicas?" I ask the chef. He points in the direction of the town centre, where the bus had dropped me earlier. I just missed them. *Fuck...*

I'm aware of where I'm walking—what each step now represents—but I head that way regardless. The feeling isn't as pronounced or hideous as it can be, but it's there alright. I tell myself I'll spend just ten minutes looking for them, maybe fifteen, and then head to the beach—that's where I would head anyway, had I not met them. *That's right: just imagine you hadn't met them.* It doesn't work. I'm desperate to find them. Desperate because I know that if I don't, the rest of the day will be a write-off. Ridiculous, I know (or, as must be obvious, *don't* know).

I don't see them. Not in the market. Or in Starbucks. Or on any of the streets I walk down or scour from afar; eyes skittish, darting about to increase my chances of spotting them. I feel drained by it already, but... *just five minutes more.* Ten perhaps. *Maybe she's emailed me, or added me on Facebook.* I spot an internet cafe and wander in to check. No, I lie; I ask several people where an



internet cafe is and hunt it down feverishly. Unfortunately, I discover my email and Facebook accounts are both locked—I've signed in from an 'unfamiliar location' and don't have my mobile with me to receive the verification code. *Damn it. What if she's messaged me?! What if...*

*Stop, Dom. Stop! You've been here a thousand times, forget it. It's not really about girls, remember? It's something else, inside. You are the place you search for. I am two hot girls?*

Right now, as I pass the restaurant I had breakfast at earlier, I'm the antipathy of what new-agers call *present*. The feeling is one of unease. Intense unease. Let's sprinkle some panic in there, too. It's a panic that I can't deal with my reality—ultimately, the reality of *who I am* and *the choices I make*. Life is short and opportunities rare, and I just wasted one. I'm seeing my aloneness against the backdrop of potential togetherness. The beach: better shared. Whatever my crazy mind can throw at me to make me feel shit, it does. *Enough of experiencing things alone, Dom*, I mutter to myself.

Nothing. They've vanished.

The afternoon stretches out before me. It's no time at all, of course. But I feel wretched, and time feels like weathered asphalt I'm slipping on, gravel grinding on bare skin as I fall, over and over and over on "replay".

They're not in the little supermarket. Or any of the bars I pass. Nor in this souvenir shop I'm peeking my head into now. Of course they're not in a souvenir shop, they're *Mexican*.

I feel dizzy. I feel a fool.

The two girls build in my mind as no doubt much prettier than they are in reality. I fantasise about what I've missed out on. Two girls there for the weekend, looking for fun. I even imagine a threesome. That very afternoon. Ha! Yes, I'm crazy. But there is something in the fantasy—the sense of loss, the searching, the self-attack—that... serves me? That... wants me to recognise

something? That protects me from feeling... ? God, what is it?! (Yes, I begin grovelling to a 'higher power' for an answer. It's not the first time).

There is *something* there, happily feasting on my hopelessness. Something lurking in the shadows. Always a different circumstance, but the same wretchedness. What is it? I imagine that until I understand, it will only linger like a curse (or my own foul, gastrocolic expulsions). "SHOW YOURSELF, DAMN IT!" I feel like shouting. As if at the end of my tether after living in a house haunted by a particularly vindictive ghost. But I hold back. Perhaps, later, I'll play mental ouija board. But for now, I'll keep searching.

The marina is a few minutes' walk from the centre of town, and somewhere past that is the beach. It takes a good five or ten minutes to pass all the yachts and gin palaces, the many hotels and restaurants flanking them, and reach some sand. It's just a sandy path, mind, running alongside a wall. I assume the real deal is just up ahead, around the corner, and kick off my sandals.

As I bend to pick them up, I hear a disturbing yelp. I look around to see if a stray dogs are following me, injured somehow. But no: it's me. A hopeless, involuntary whimper sounding from quivering lips. I know it for the emotion I feel clattering about me like an aftershock. That, and the slight burn forming in my eyes. *How have I found myself here, again?* I think, rolling upright again, vertebrae by vertebrae, arms hanging like a crestfallen Neanderthal, sandals flip-flopping from each hand.

Eyes watering, I say a prayer. Not for world peace, or to end poverty. Or even for the dolphins to be spared from being butchered in that Japanese cove (I'd read it in the paper that week). No, I just pray to see the two girls again. So it ends; the nightmare mindscape that would otherwise taint everything for hours or days to come (oh, how I knew it). I even say the magic word: *please*. *How pathetic I am*: the judgment coats me like dog urine dripping down a freshly-marked lamppost.

Getting a grip of myself, I walk forward and turn the corner and, sure enough, there's the sea. A beautiful bay, a mile or more long. There's a few unsightly hotels along it, but it's still very pretty.

*I'll walk the length of it. Or three-quarters, at least. See if I spot them. If I don't, I commit to giving up on this sorry search.*

The sand feels nice and the heat delicious, but my mind isn't fully here to enjoy it; it's frolicking with two impossibly-beautiful and fair maidens.

Ha! I find them, halfway along the beach. Or they find me, in that I almost walk right past before they wave me over. Not an overly enthusiastic gesture, I notice, or so I think through my well-worn insecurity-filter.

"Oh, hi," I say, walking up to them like, *isn't this a casual coincidence*. The first thing I notice is that they look different somehow. Younger. Not as attractive as I remember, or in the interim have built them up to be. But they are still gorgeous and on the beach in their bikinis. Bingo.

They ask if I want to join them and, after a moment of mock deliberation, I whip out my towel and flop on the sand beside them. My manner is a tad blasé, but inside, I'm bobbing about, whistling my relief like the jiggle-top nozzle on a pressure cooker.

I realise I haven't asked their names, or given mine. The brunette is called Maria, and the blond, Liliana. My Spanish is clunky, and finding the correct words, let alone forming the right tense, is like pulling gristle from between my teeth. But they are patient. The one I like, Liliana, seems shy. She often looks like she's thinking deeply about something. Something sad. She assures me she isn't. I pull off my top, not because I expect to impress her with my near-anorexic torso, but because after a Canadian winter, I want as much Vitamin-D recharge as I can get. I lube myself up with sunblock, and lie back, effervescing with relief. I made it. *Thank you... God?*

"Do you want to have a swim?" Maria asks me. I'd just applied my sunscreen, hi-end organic stuff, so decline the offer.

When I see her wading in, cerulean water climbing up her slender legs, lapping against her buttocks—and oh, what pert and shapely buttocks they are—then devouring her whole as she dives in, I begin to question my decision. She reappears moments later, sparkling in the sun. Dressed in ten

thousand dripping jewels, she smiles wide and her teeth flash bright: she's the ultimate advertisement. Place something, anything, in her hand (and oh, my mind is happy to make many a lewd suggestion), and it would swell: sorry, I mean 'sell' (blame my dyslexia).

I realise that's why brands use such imagery, and imagine her standing there with a *Coke*. But that ruins the image, so I erase it. (Mexico has a bad relationship with fizzy pop, high-fructose corn syrup probably being the main reason they now have the worst obesity rates in the world).

Draping my towel to maintain my dignity, I change into my swim shorts and coolly stroll down to water. The sea temperature is perfect. The sun is perfect. It's all, so... perfect! Now, at least, not half an hour earlier. Or when I was still in cow town Calgary. *Thank you for letting me find them, thank you*, I whisper to the heavens, as I splash my way towards mermaid Maria. However it ends up now, at least it will be *real*, and not some fantasy in my mind. Right?

I swim to where she's hanging off a mooring line tied to a little orange bouy. After a minute or two of staccato conversation, and feeling sufficiently refreshed, I decide she's definitely not the one to go for (I was keeping my options open, of course) and swim back to shore, back to the other young siren luxuriating in the golden glow of sun and sand.

She has a lovely flower tattoo on one shoulder. Just the outline of a flower. It's funny: it reminds me of the night before, when a friend in Calgary had been showing me flower tattoos on her phone and telling me how much she wanted one just like it. I'd changed the Google-image-search to 'worst tattoos ever' which had provided a good half-an-hours' amusement. Now, I'm tracing a real one before me with my finger, and would have asked to photograph it for my friend, had I brought my phone with me. But no, that's back in Calgary. I'd feared it might get stolen. Or thought a break from it might be refreshing. Oh, how wrong one can be.

"Where are you from?" I ask, "Your parents, or your grandparents, I mean." The roots, the blood lines. It's something I like to ask, everyone being such an interesting mix these days.

"My grandma was Japanese," she replies.

*Aha! I knew it.* I can see it slightly in her face; her eyes, especially. Something exotic. Not that Mexican isn't already exotic enough. She's gorgeous. I think of a geisha, then how that's a

dangerous thing to do when on a beach in swim shorts, and pull the ghastliest woman I can think of into mental shot: Maggie Thatcher.

She touches her neck at some point and moans about an ache there. I'm no fool, and offer her a massage. We keep chatting while I get to work.

"I'm going to hitch back home on Monday," she tells me.

"Where's home?" I ask.

"Tijuana. Two days from here. Close to the border." I find a knot, and work my thumb in hard. She squints her face a little.

"You don't like it hard, then?" I ask with a grin, hidden.

"Medio," she says, something flashing in her eyes, then fleeing.

"I miss my family," she continues. "And I have a boyfriend there."

—*Oh...* cue sad face: concealed, naturally.

"And do you miss him too?" I ask.

"Yeah, but only because the sex is great."

*Oh! She just said the word 'sex!'* I think. (*And doesn't sound too attached to this boyfriend*). Cue maybe-I've-a-chance-here-after-all happy face (also concealed—yeah, I'm as cool as a cucumber, me). Plus, most people cheat, don't they? Though I prefer 'honouring our evolutionary desire to procreate with multiple partners.' Read *Sex at Dawn* if you don't believe me.

*And, what's this now...?* I feel her fingers stoking my free hand, the one I'm leaning on that isn't massaging her neck and shoulders. It's definitely happening; I look down to check. *That's so nice. Please don't stop.* Soft and tender. *Yes, maybe I'm 'in' here, after all.* And this is a stranger, remember. It's why I love stopping and speaking to random people. And so hate it when I let slip opportunities to do so. I'm never alone for long, see. It may only be fleeting, but I soon forget that.

I don't try to kiss her. Not at first, at least. And not on the lips. I like to kid myself I've more class than that. But my lips do touch her cheek, her shoulder, once, then twice—light, laconic, fleeing the scene each time, only to return. Am I feigning disinterest? Teasing? *Gosh, I am a player after all...* No, no, it's just *art*. Everything has a rhythm. Even seduction.

When I do attempt a light kiss on the lips, she turns away. I'm glad I try; I'd rather know sooner than later what this *is*, and where it might be *going*—or *not* going. *So... she's not as into me as she's making out. Or the boyfriend is an issue, after all. Hmm. Why all this affection then?* Perhaps stroking and petting was as much as she wants, which is fine. Whilst of course wanting more, I'm content—it's lovely. I asked to see them again, and here they are. *Best not get greedy*, my mother would say (though not with regard to such circumstances. In fact, let me get the image of my mother swiftly out my head right now. Done). *Perhaps she's a cat in human form?* A Siamese. Her skin is soft, creamy, almost porcelain, after all. Her eyes, oriental, almond-shaped. She's not as talkative as a Siamese, mind.

*Perhaps she's just playing hard to get?* I doubt it. Whatever it is, look at me, lying on butter sand by an ocean as blue as a gas flame, gently frying in the same pan as a beautiful 19-year-old, fingers interlacing and withdrawing as we *sauté*. I'm happy to enjoy whatever it is, however long it lasts. Honest. Six hours earlier, still in Calgary, godawful Calgary, the outside world had been bleak and cold; an hour earlier, my internal world hadn't been so different. Now, both worlds are harmoniously wrapping me in warmth. Strangers drawing closer, tender and sweet. Respite from the swirling storm cloud. Hands joined a moment.

Her friend, perhaps noticing our affections, left us a little while earlier to go sunbathe a little further up the beach. I'm conscious now she might be feeling left out, or resenting my meddlesome intrusion. I'm always thinking of what other people might be thinking. Sometimes it's good: you're conscientious, and that can be kind, but most of the time, it overrides your own needs or desires. It's my mother again, telling me to “be good”, not to embarrass her, and “don't be selfish” (and so on, and on, until my own voice became but a whisper against the crashing waves of *expectation* and *you're not worthy*. Shame, used as a means of control: was that her strategy? But that's all a story I remind myself. Besides, I'd banished her phantom voice under that glass in that restaurant in Calgary months earlier (Did she escape?!).

I attempt another kiss on the lips, and there's another deflection. The mutual massaging and stroking continue.

If this does end abruptly, I think, maybe I'll go and get a massage after all...

After about half an hour, Maria returns, and mutters something to her friend.

“She wants to dance and eat,” Liliana tells me, letting go my hand. She puts her book and bottle of suncream in her bag, and readies herself. *Dance... now?* It’s only 4pm. Apparently, there’s a party in some hotel.

It’s a leisurely walk back along the beach. We hold hands for most of it. Not all three of us—but wouldn’t that have been nice, and putting me on track to fulfil my earlier fantasy. *Dream on, Dom.*

We pass a crowded bar with dance music blaring. Perhaps this is Maria’s chance to swing her hips, but no: I look round and she’s talking to someone on her phone, kicking sand at the breaking waves.

“Her mother just called,” the Siamese informs me. A minute later, the brunette’s back and wanting a photo. The three of us huddle together whilst she awkwardly tries to take a selfie with her outstretched hand. Still, better than one of those selfie-stick thingamajigs: frightful implements of unabashed narcissism. I’d have refused to pose. She snaps a shot, but wrinkles her face up at the result. I suggest we ask someone to take it for us.

A guy from Colorado is happy to oblige. I can see him ogling the girls as he hands back the camera. They do look rather splendid. Girls do, at that age, when everything is still so smooth and firm and there’s an air of innocence. But their minds rarely provide sustenance, not if you’re my age (which is 27. That’s when I stopped counting, at least). You’re soon bored, if you’re looking for anything deeper, that is. Which I am. Aren’t I? Coming up to seven years being single now. Not including a few spluttering several-month long engagements.

“Have you been travelling with them a while?” the lad from Colorado asks.

“I only met them this morning.”

“Really?” he says, with a *how-on-earth-did-you-manage-that?* expression.

I feel torn between wanting to sound meek and provide sound advice, and the desire to puff out my little chest and show off.

“Enjoying talking to strangers helps,” I say with a grin. That’s not too cryptic, is it? No, it’s the Gods’ honest truth. I find myself sliding through the sugar sand towards the blond and giving her a

kiss on the cheek, like, *Yeah, I'm the man*—borrowing American swagger and confidence for a moment. She responds affectionately and puts her arms around me. I'm aware he's watching, and it's a fun moment of shallow showing off. Not something I normally indulge in, mind you. So let me enjoy it just this time. No guilt, please. For once, no guilt. *Mother, shush... back in your glass.*

As we walk back through the marina towards the town centre, it's amazing to witness all the Mexican men there—usually touting fishing trips or restaurants, or selling drugs—looking at the girls, Maria in particular, and making comments: lewd ones, I expect. My Spanish doesn't yet encompass comprehension and delivery of profanities. As a teenage student of languages, you often start there, don't you; outside the classroom at least. But alas, I'm a teenager no more. Those days of unrequited desire and random erections are over, *damn it.*

*Is this the attention pretty girls get all the time?* I wonder. Must be. You don't realise how much men prey on women like this, unless you walk with a pretty pair now and then—unless you're a creep and prey like that yourself, of course. I wonder how with all the attention, women aren't continually annoyed, or strutting round with massive egos. I guess they learn in time all women receive such attention, and maybe they're not so special, after all.

It's not only Mexican guys; tourists, too, sneak glimpses when their wives are looking the other way—or even when they're not. Perhaps their wives aren't the jealous type, or they have an unspoken agreement where *looking only* is allowed. Either way, I'm almost embarrassed to be a man. What crude, uncouth and disrespectful beasts we are. Well, *they* are. *I'm* a gentlemen, of course. English, don't you know (and not the football hooligan variety).

But Maria seems to be enjoying the attention, swinging her hips and ample bosoms a touch more than usual. To her credit, she even gives them a smile, a look-but-don't-touch-boys smile. Good thing this isn't India, I think. I read about the violence against women there just this week (same paper that had told me about the imminent dolphin slaughter). A smile like that could earn unwelcome attention.

“We'll meet later, ok?” Liliana says when we reach the edge of the marina closest to town. They're going to eat, and I'm clearly not invited. Maria keeps walking, I notice; she doesn't bother to say



goodbye. Probably did resent my presence, then. I'm dubious as to whether Liliana actually does want to meet later. It's not just that she hadn't wanted to kiss; it's the general *vibe* she's giving off. I smell her haughty, offish, Siamese scent. I smell it. Worse than week old cat litter.

"10pm, Fat Squids," she suggests, pointing to one of the clubs just across the road. The one with the purple giant plastic squid on the roof, I assume. It's she who draws me in to kiss goodbye, on the lips, no less, but sensing her insincerity, I give her my cheek instead, and laugh.

"Look, it's really no problem," I say. "Really; if that was it and you'd rather not meet later, let's save both our time and..."—she cuts me short, insisting she wants to see me, which is mightily confusing.

*Not bad for a first day somewhere*, I think to myself, crossing the road. *See, it's all there, just waiting for you to seize the moment*. I was happy with our little interaction. *If that was it, then so be it*. At least I'm not in a funk any more. Doesn't mean I'm not a little frustrated though, at parting company so soon (she hadn't wanted to come back to my place for a 'siesta').

I haggle a good price for a 30-minute massage, then double it and ask for two girls. I've never had a four-handed massage before, but being on holiday, decide to treat myself.

The massage actually isn't very good—I presume they're trained in techniques other than massage, because I've had much better one-person massages before. I feel relaxed enough, however, to head back to my hotel and sleep for a few hours.

## Forest Glade

I wake up confused. It was still light when I went to sleep—maybe 5pm—and now the digital clock reads a blood-red 18:02—*ugh: still so early*. I feel like I've been asleep for hours. I rub my eyes, mourning the fresh passing of sleep, killed in its prime.

I'm hungry, so decide to head out and remedy this. As I leave the hotel I'm greeted by the sound of Frank Sinatra singing "I did it myyy way." A tubby-looking man in an apron impersonating him, at

least, stood in the doorway to a taco restaurant, microphone in one hand, a car load of people outside clapping and singing along. Taco-Karaoke?

I turn the corner and a minute later find myself in the restaurant I'd met the girls in earlier. Well, they'd said it was cheap and tasty: why look further?

It's not on the menu, but I ask for a half-vegetarian, half-chicken burrito. It takes a little explaining, but with the right hand gestures, indicating *all mixed together* ("todo junto") and *half and half* ("mitad-mitad"), I reckon the waitress gets it. She seems to scribble an awful lot on her little pad, however. I wonder for a moment if she's an artist, esteemed at express mini-portraits, and will slip me one for a small tip. Wouldn't that be great!

My table is one of three set against a low wall running beside the pot-holed pavement. A car pulls up, and a Mexican family spills out. There's some debate as whether to leave the baby in the car or not, but in the end they do the right thing. They struggle getting the pram out of the boot and setting it up, so that was obviously the issue. The daughter, perhaps 15, is short and tubby, with huge breasts she's making no effort to hide. She's the spitting image of her mother but with no wrinkles, a fairer complexion, and if I'm not mistaken, *more* folds of fat (perhaps she drinks *Coke* for breakfast).

My food arrives as two separate burritos, one slightly bigger than the other. *Oh well, that'll do*. I'll alternate between the two. But first there's a dead fly to deal with, stuck to the end of one of them. I quarantine the infected end by slicing off a good inch and sliding it to the edge of my plastic plate. There I extract the offending *Drosophila*. Noticing a leg twitch as I do so, my stomach follows suit. I repress the gag reflex, however, take a breath, and remind myself I'm in Mexico, and I love Mexico.

There's a large, round bowl of burrito accoutrements in the middle of my table. Once I've added sauces and garnishing to my plate—checking for dead flies—I'm ready to go.

I spit out the occasional battery-chicken gristle, and occasionally pay my respects to the mother-daughter cleavage ensemble a table away. It would be rude not to. Why else would they wear such low-cut, mostly-unbuttoned, day-glo blouses (the mother's orange, the daughter's pink)? And no,

that is not the same as a rapist saying the woman's clothing was to blame for his wicked actions (as was reported to be the accused's defence in that India rape case I'd read about).

A man arrives with a meat delivery: a plastic shopping bag full of shiny pink and purple lumps. He chats, or haggles, with the chef a minute; the bag is then exchanged for a few notes. I hope he knows the guy, and he's not just some random meat peddler off the street. At least it's not Vietnam, and I don't have to worry about it being dog meat. Or do I?

By the time I finish, it's about 7pm. I still have ages till my rendezvous with the girls at Fat Squids, and decide to head back to the hotel and chill, read, maybe even sleep. When I pass the taco restaurant, the same chap is singing the same Sinatra song, to customers *inside*, this time. I'm not sure if it's his restaurant, or he's just employed to entertain guests. Either way, he appears to only have the one rendition.

I return to find my room unlocked. Naturally this concerns me, till I check inside and nothing seems to be missing—in particular, the passport and wad of money nestled under the mattress. There is an intruder, however: a little gecko on the wall. Gossamer ash-grey skin, beady black eyes. *Hello, my friend. I haven't seen the likes of you since...* Nostalgia bubbles up a moment.

Borneo. I'd lived there for six months on a gap year when I was 18. Geckos were a common sight in the stilted, wooden house that was 'home'. Especially with each spring tide, when the whole village would flood. They clung to the walls with their tiny suction-pump appendages, motionless, or quickly scuttling about: nothing in between. I missed tucking my mosquito net under my thin floor mattress each night, and listening to the geckos "chirp chirp", accompanied by pulsing, green luminescence of fireflies signalling in the dark. The latter, I always imagined, were dreams, waiting to slip into my consciousness as I slept.

I missed many things about my simple life in Borneo, like washing each morning with a beaker from a barrel of cold water. Reading each night—so many books: the first time I'd really read in all my life. Teaching English to the jungle children. Tearing down a narrow forest trail on an old Vespa, narrowly missing a low-hanging tree branch each time,

remembering to duck at the very last moment (almost forgetting to tell my gap-partner Jon to do the same, once when he was riding pillion).

It wasn't all idyllic and blissful there, however. Spiders as big as two hands would sometimes venture into the house (the geckos did little to intervene). The local priest tried to molest me. And two of the children I taught were eaten by a crocodile. Newspapers are graphic out there. The local one printed a picture of the murderous croc a day later, its belly sliced open, an arm and a leg being pulled from it. I never did swim in the river.

I inspect the lock, and find it's very easy to *think* you've locked it, but haven't. The catch sticks and needs an oil. I eventually find a technique to make sure it *is* locked—useful knowledge for any guest staying in that particular room—and go and inform the manager.

“Do you want to change to another room?” is her incurious and only reply.

I tell her I'll be fine, and about turn. I commence to curse under my breath, but stop myself before completing the rhymes-with-witch expletive. *You never know someone's story*, a voice reminds me. Seemed I was hearing this calmer, kinder, more level-headed voice more of late.

Back in my room, the gecko hasn't moved. He licks his right eye as I peer at him. A gesture of affection, I'm sure (and something far more kinky in Japan, I hear).

I read a little of my Spanish book, underlining words I don't know and will look up later, then decide to lie down again. Not to sleep, though: I don't have an alarm and can't risk sleeping straight through my date now, can I. No, just to reenergise. With luck it will be a long and strenuous night ahead (Oh, if only: even if the chance came, alas, I don't think I'd have the stamina and libido to deliver. The fantasy is better. A bit like when it comes to orgies: being an observer is often better than participating. So I hear).

There's a relaxation technique I do sometimes when I feel the need for an energy boost and have somewhere private to lie down. I don't think I learned it anywhere; I just followed my intuition one time, experimented, and liked the results. The body knows—even the mind knows—if you get out the way and let it show you. I lie down, legs uncrossed, arms by my side, and imagine a light at the

end of my toes. It's blue this time, and shimmers like heat rising from a desert. When I'm ready, I let it begin to travel up my body. Slowly. The slower the better. I need patience and a gentle guiding concentration. Several times I'm distracted by some thought, get lost in a day dream, quite forgetting the important work I was doing. Gently, I bring myself back to my body each time. The light is at the point I left it, purring like an engine left on idle—no nasty fumes, mind: this is a futuristic engine, with a psychedelic hyperdrive. When I finally let the blue light reach the top of my head, after ten or twenty or however many minutes it takes, it vanishes, and my whole body tingles and rushes with calm, cleansing waves of energy. As I connect to some ecstatic, revitalising source, I feel the tiredness leave me: stale, icky, stuck energy swept away in a flow of well-being. *Ah bliss: there you are.* That reassuring root of reality. It may only be a few spine-tingling seconds I return there, but what sweet relief.

My breathing has slowed; I assume my heartbeat, also. I'm simply lying, *being*, feeling empty, yet whole.

Behind closed eyelids, somewhere in a quivering tangle of neurones, a lone and empty house appears. Shutters closed. Door locked. The grass is long and lush in the surrounding prairie, swaying in a warm, late afternoon breeze. There's no one about, but there is *life*. It hums, chatters, and sings. Grasshoppers, birds, and who knows what other delightful tiny creatures stir out of sight. My viewpoint, though shifting, is from ground level. But the sound of leaves rustling in the trees is oddly pronounced, as if little microphones line each branch.

I sink deeper and deeper into the bed, my fossilised frame immobile.

The shutters and windows of the house open, and the curtains wave welcome to the fresh air that flows in. No one's lived here a while, but it doesn't feel entirely empty, or forgotten. It's of a sturdy build and smells sweetly of worked wood and safe shelter. The air circulates from room to room, drawing dust from dark, forgotten corners and long-since trodden floorboards, to drift and dance on sunbeams out into the open. Where light penetrates, and newly polished walls and floors glow treacle brown, like petrified tree sap. Is time in

reverse? Or are invisible hands giving the house a thorough spring cleaning? Either way, like outdoors was, it's bright and warm inside now.

I'm facing the front door, still within the house. A light, silken breeze works its way around me, lifting, coaxing, cleansing. Again I hear the sound of the rustling leaves, as if the walls are not there at all. Louder still. Grasshoppers and birdsong, too. The door opens and...

All falls still and quiet. So quiet. Even the wind through the leaves has stopped. Before me, a forest glade. Still as a photograph, but there. Right there.

I hesitate, then step through the door.

I know where I am. It's Wales, three months earlier. I'm at a music festival I took my eldest brother to, shortly before I left the UK for Canada. It's a scene I'd recalled several times since then, in various day dreams, wondering what it was about, how it might have been different, and who was leading who.

We're walking along a winding woodland path when, noticing an area off to the right that looks different somehow—sharper, otherworldly light—I stop. I know it's a special place, sacred. A portal where the ethereal veil between material and non-physical realms is much diminished. I know these things because of the magic mushrooms I'd taken which had altered, heightened, and no, not *addled*, my perception. That, and I was open to seeing it.

*We must tread mindfully here*, I think, as I step slowly into the clearing. My brother waits on the path.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

*There's something here to see, brother*; I think, but do not say. There's not much I feel I can say; it would all somehow sound so crass.

My brother looks at me, looking increasingly bewildered. *I hope he shares this moment with me*, I think. *I hope he doesn't run away*. I know all about running away.

It's only a few small steps from the path—but don't be fooled, the distance is far. This glade is the open heart of something, I *know* it. Fragile and tender. So very tender. But full of power.

And risk.

The risk of *feeling* deeply. Or feeling something *raw*, and *real*, at least. Not next week, or tomorrow, but right now. That takes a certain kind of courage, no?

"Come," I half-whisper, with a conspiratorial wave of the hand.

"I wasn't sure if this was a moment you wanted to yourself, or not," he says. On the contrary, I'm eager to share it, and I encourage him to follow. He does so, tentatively, looking about at first: checking to see if there are others coming along the path that might see us. No one is, and it doesn't matter.

"Just as long as you don't start talking to trees again," he says, breaking a smile.

He'd been most embarrassed a short while earlier, when I'd stopped to embrace a great old oak—gnarled and broad—like it was a beloved old friend or former mentor. And earlier still, bent down to admire some brilliant (truly brilliant!) purple flowers for a while. For quite a while, apparently. He'd been waiting on the path just ahead, getting agitated. I'd noticed his pacing up and down; him even apologising "for the antics of my younger brother" to some passersby. I took none of it personally. I was just observing, registering information. His reaction, his discomfort, spoke volumes about *his* relationship to *his* reality. It had nothing to do with me or my behaviour. Not stopping to give my full attention to the majestic oak or the purple petal pageant would have been... insanity!

The flowers, set against the backdrop of nothingness and void, of early Universe and outer space, and ultimately: death (as part of my consciousness seems to always peer into), how improbable and miraculous these bursts of colour were, rocking gently on the little humus stage they'd burst forth onto. What sheer delight! What intricate detail! What a merry tune they sang! How happy they were!

*Forget I'm your little brother*, I think again. *You can cherish your ideas about how the world and reality is for the rest of your life. But now, just for a few minutes, can you try this? Stand here with me. Really stand...* I don't say anything like this, of course. Silence fits better. It's a full silence. I do say, however, "Just for a minute, be here, with me," and to his credit he nods and steps closer.

I fix my gaze on a tree a few meters away, at a juncture of vines, moss, bark and leaves most pleasing to the eye. It's not long before I see her reaching out with fractal tentacles through the stillness. The forest. Gaia. Radiating. Welcoming. It's not long before I hear the faint, electric chatter of some other realm—whispering, inviting. *Come. Come a little deeper.*

But it takes a willingness. A focus of attention. A surrender of sorts. Yes, all three. And one must feel safe, and that it's *worth it*. Not so much that there's something to gain... more something worth losing.

Normally, I'd be stepping here alone, or with kindred spirits. With a brother, it's uncharted territory. But here we are. And the sacrament has long since journeyed down the oesophageal road of no return.

*Brother, there's something more to experience here. Beyond what you think you know.* I whisper it through the mind-field. There *is* a field of consciousness that unites us, isn't there? Perhaps he hears. He's still with me. He says something. It's muffled. "Black," I think it was, before he trailed off.

"What?" I ask.

He ignores my question, pretending instead to focus on the tree. On the tree?! Look at us here, staring at a tree; how charmingly ridiculous! *Is that what he thinks? (minus the 'charming').*

He's looking about, restless. Fear of those 'others' again? I know all about that. Ironically, not presently; not when elfish psilocybin dances merrily through my veins and tickles reality shades of purple. No, just in normal, sober consciousness, when fear taints the moment. *Why do I feel so right and safe and whole when... 'out of my mind',* I wonder, and chuckle.



“There,” I say, and point, guiding him back in. “Just look at one place for a while.” The spot I indicate is rich with ivy and moss. It’s where faint cracking, whistling sounds emanate and echo, like pixies skipping cheerily through some autumn, leaf-littered undergrowth, entering a disused train tunnel.

I’m not sure he’s a willing travel companion. I can sense his discomfort. I doubt for a second if I should be guiding him down a path he does not want, or need, to go down.

*Shh, we’re here. If it wasn’t meant to be, it wouldn’t be happening.* I have a penchant for such fluffy (usually unhelpful) thinking; but on this occasion it works to quell my concern, and onward we venture towards never-never land.

If only he could *let go*. Past the ‘comfort zone’, the discomfort, is something wonderful. Always. *Always?* Something, perversely, we’ve spent our entire lives avoiding, wasting so much energy on defence and distraction. Is there really anything to fear? If you’re mini-skirt-wearing girl in India, perhaps. Or a dolphin presently swimming off the coast of Japan. *Hmm.*

“Leave behind thinking, and enter,” a voice whispers.

“Can you see it?” I ask, turning to my brother.

He’s silent a moment, then answers, “Something.”

It’s encouraging, but I can tell he’s not sure about the whole affair. To his credit, though, he’s trying. Doing what to him probably seems quite mad: stopping to just stare at a tree with his younger, possibly insane, brother. I remember his earlier muffled comment: “black”, and wonder what he’d wanted to say.

“Let it be, truth-seeker.”—that voice again. Truth seeker? Is it mocking me? There is no truth but our own, of course. Oh how I’d have argued with that as a teenager.

I sink back into the scintillating, prismatic greenery—a most enjoyable tumble.

*My beautiful big brother, I do love you,* I find myself thinking a minute or so later, when I turn my head to check on him. He was like a guardian or mentor when I was growing up, teaching me things about the world. Scientific things, mostly. I still remember the day he left home to go to University and the distraught, uncomprehending tears I cried. I must have been 9 or 10 years old at the time. Here we are as adults, journeying together. My kind of journey. I'd been on plenty of his kind growing up: hiking, cycle rides, sailing trips. Where he enjoyed physical, externally-stimulated adventures, I preferred off-roading through inner space. Well, isn't that where it all happens? That mountain peak you reach, the whirl of a bicycle wheel, the surf of waves: the sensation, the perception... is all inside your head.

Shafts of honey light drip from the sky-speckled canopy and coat the woodland in an incandescent glow. The air smells sweetly of moss, new shoots sprouting and plants respiring, tinged with the tang of rotting foliage. Passing clouds tweak the dimmer switch to Gaia's numinous living room. Leaves tremble in delight, and tree roots thrum as they drink moist darkness. I feel it as a little tremor beneath my feet, as if the Earth's own belly were rumbling after a hearty meal.

I look at my brother, looking at the tree. Noticing my attention, he turns and says, "What?" "Nothing," I reply.

I'm thinking about how he loves to read, wondering if that's where he indulges his imagination. And whether he gobbles up the author's words to avoid digesting his own thoughts and feelings. And if so, so what? As I look at him now, he's holding my eye contact. That's impressive. My brother, who doesn't like to hug. (My parents think it's because they didn't pick him up when he cried as a child; they'd read a book on parenting saying not to. Two years later, when my other brother was born, they'd read another book saying the opposite. Typical).

Perhaps it'll be me who looks away first, feeling awkward. I can feel that possibility simmering up in me now. Yes, I look back at the spot on the tree briefly, then back again at my brother.

"You feel uncomfortable, don't you," I say.

A moment's silence. "Yes."

He is honest. It's been a long time since I've shared something real and tender with my brother. Maybe this is the first time.

I bite my lip and look away, not really sure how far to take it. She's still there, waiting, whispering—a woodland so alive. He *is* experiencing something; something *different*, but I don't think he's willing to go any further this time. Not that he *needs* to. Because deep down everybody knows, don't they? That it's just a game. That we are indeed players on a stage...

I turn back to my brother. He's still there, and ready with eye contact, warm and stalwart.

"Just for a minute, allow that feeling, ok?" I say. "Just a minute more here?"

He doesn't say anything, but gives an almost imperceptible nod and turns his stare towards the moss-daubed tree trunk I'd trained him on earlier...

But I know we won't be venturing any further this time. I just know. With friends, this would be the point to dive down the leafy rabbit hole and giggle ourselves non-senseless. Where we journey through kaleidoscopic greenery and hear laughter ricocheting through star nurseries on the underbelly of some parallel Universe. Where we talk to the little people. Really.

But I'm here with my brother, bonded by blood, but not much else, it seems. I'm grateful for our exchange, however brief. It was authentic, new, and shared. There's something stopping him, though. Perhaps being 'in control' is too precious for him. Or perhaps he just doesn't need to go there. Whatever the case, I don't want to push it, and having let *his* discomfort become *my* discomfort, it's me that buckles first, a mere ten or so seconds into our 'final minute' there.

"Shall we get going, then?"

"Yes," my brother replies, his relief palpable. Perhaps too, the faintest glimmer of humble acceptance in his eye that he doesn't *know it all*, after all. That there's something 'other' and 'alien' past the leafy veil, incomprehensible to the rational mind.

Or is that only the tart reflection of my arrogance for assuming he'd ever thought he knew it all in the first place? Most likely.

We walk on, my big brother leading the way. Another five minutes and we'll be back in the open, back with the crowds. Although he's just turned down the wrong path. I say nothing. I'm enjoying our scramble over tree roots and between boulders. The woodland is enjoying it too. This is precious time with my dear brother. And I'm high: there are no *wrong* paths.

A few minutes later, looking sheepish, he orders an about-turn.

"No problem," I say, *we've all the time in the world*.

I let out a sigh. It had been a delicate situation to navigate, and I feel slightly disappointed. What had I hoped for? That he'd commune with Mother Nature. (Like, really *speak* to her). Experience the boundless love forming all matter, and the intelligence that imbues it with character. Explore dimensions of subtle being. Scale the parapet of certain defences, and yield to a little...vulnerability. That he'd see how, though he thinks he's rational, he's really quite emotional. That he doesn't need to be in control all the time. That he's loved, unconditionally. That... am I merely projecting my own needs onto him? Was this journey into Gaia's healing heart really all my own yearning? *Fuck*, perhaps.

My brother does pretty well for himself, by all outward, modern markers. He has a high-flying banking job (though one he never likes to talk about it), a house in London, a good wife, and two wonderful children. He must know his capacity *to love* and *be loved* far more than little single and searching me. But when did he last sit still and experience *bliss*, I wonder. And know it as the ground of his *being*. When did he last surrender his *knowledge*, speak to flowers and trees, tumble with chaos and find order there, or journey to the nebulae within? And did it matter? Perhaps I *am* insane, and the glade we'd ventured into was nothing more than carbon atoms, chlorophyll, and creepy crawlies. Perhaps there was nothing more but my own gaping void and yearning to fill it. Perhaps the magic he found in books was just as real, if not more. Yes, perhaps the nice, mild, slow-burning rapture that reading can bring, is far more valuable than the ecstasies I value. Perhaps his courage to live in the *real* world far exceeds mine.

We're moving, just as he'd wished, heading to the festival area where the main stage is. I keep stopping to scribble down my thoughts, as I often do. It holds me together. I'd implode if I didn't.

"What are you writing?" my brother asks, several times. I just smile at first, unsure how to respond. When he asks for the third time, frustration detectable, I say, "Oh, just a story."

"It's bizarre," he says a minute later, as he turns to see me frantically scribbling on the festival guide I had, resting against a most accommodating tree trunk. "It's manic!"

"A story—I told you!" I say when he asks a fourth time. Adding, "Maybe, I'm writing about you, brother," just to tease.

"I don't understand you at all," he says, marching off.

*Aha!* my mind exclaims, somewhat triumphantly. *But, brother, I understand you so much more now.* Seeing the colour of another person's fear does that.

"You're fucking crazy," my brother says smiling when I catch up with him. We both laugh. He doesn't ask me any more what I'm writing.

We're on a gravel path now, not out of the proverbial or actual woods yet, though. Two little dance areas to pass. At the first, a Balkan Gypsy jazz band plays, and it's hard to not smile and hop and skip a little as I pass (not that I'm resisting, for once). At the second, past a long lily-pad covered pond, electronica thumps and sparks: techno, tribal sounding—my favourite.

"Do you mind if we stay here for five minutes?" I ask. "Then it's over to you: moving, crowds, main stage—we're there."

"Sure," he says.

We're standing on a soil slope just back from the main mass of a hundred or so shifting bodies. I want to join them, but first I want to know what my brother meant earlier with his 'black' comment.

"Nothing," he says quickly, but with a gentle diffidence.

"Come on, Stuart, tell me."

He hesitates, then says, “I read somewhere that if you’re ever worried about losing control of your mind, you can draw a black box in your imagination and put part of yourself in it. It keeps you linked to something so you don’t lose yourself. That’s what I did earlier in the main arena.”

I stare at him, trying to fathom what he’s just told me like he’d just spoken in tongues or something. I scramble to think. *The main arena...?* That was just after we’d taken the mushrooms, I realise. Before we came to this forest area.

“I wasn’t sure how strong they would be,” he continues. “The box helps you maintain reason and control.”

*Oh, no!* I think as the metaphorical penny drops. More a paper-weight, really. Dropped from a crane. *That’s the last thing you want to do!*

His “black box” suddenly took on supreme significance. *It’s symbolic of that metaphorical ‘box’ we all keep ourselves in*, I think. But as tends to happen with me, this thought hits a domino stack of others; it sounds like the ratchet-like clack of a güiro in a samba band, though far less jolly. The ‘black box’ is the cause of our sense of separation: from each other and the Earth; therefore the reason for all the wars and violence in the world; it blocks our creativity, our compassion; it kills our forests and...

For once I recognise I’m getting carried away, and take a deep breath.

“Maintain reason and control,” I repeat to myself dumbfounded. *Fuck, why would you want to do that?!* At a festival, of all places. The Mushroom can’t be controlled. And ‘reason’ doesn’t exist where she takes you. She’d baulk at such a thing. Perhaps that’s what happened...

I turn to my brother, really look at him, and say, “I invite you, just for today, to get rid of that black box.”

“No way,” he says, freezing up, his rabbit eyes lit up like my words were oncoming headlamps.

He looks pale. I didn’t just ask him to strip naked and run around the festival, did I?

“Each to their own,” he says. I can’t argue with that. I’ve no right. But it strikes me as rather capitalist, individualist, and selfish, and that saddens me. But isn’t that just the modern way?! And he is a stockbroker, afterall. I move closer to the music, he follows.

We’re in the toss of grooving bodies now. The DJ is spinning his records from within an old flower-power-painted caravan, with a mirror-ball spinning next to him. A girl beside us moves wildly to the music.

“I bet she doesn’t have a black box right now,” I say, teasing.

“She’s not at all like me,” he says. “She’s a totally different person.”

*Is she?* I wonder, and sigh.

“I won’t enjoy it if I don’t have it,” he says, a minute later.

“How do you know?” I enquire, having to raise my voice a little to be heard over the throbbing bass.

“Just leave it,” he says. Yes, perhaps I should. Earlier he’d told me about the only time he’d taken MDMA, in Australia for Mardi Gras; how he had to be carried out of some church he’d run into (presumably not naked.) Perhaps he was more fragile and prone to insanity than I knew, and his ‘black box’ was a wise measure indeed. But he hadn’t given me a good *reason* yet, and like a stubborn child refusing to budge from the TV and go to bed, I wanted one.

“So... just to clarify, the worst that can happen if you erase the black box is you won’t enjoy yourself, correct?”

He says nothing, but nods.

“Well, whilst we’re in these woods, can’t you erase it? It’s just five minutes.”

His face tightens.

“Ok, one minute, even,” I say. “Just one minute of your weekend—of your entire life! And the worst that can happen, you don’t enjoy one minute of it...”

“I said, no,” he says, cutting me off.

*Don’t push it, Dom. Let him enjoy in his own way. Who the fuck am I to judge?*

I look at the girl beside us, still flailing her limbs about wildly, a faint whiff of body odour emanating from her direction. Ok, maybe she *was* a little different.

“Ok. I’m sorry,” I say.

“We’re just different,” he says, again, softer.

I don’t agree, but I bite my lip.

I shuffle through a few people, and find the spot where the sound waves balance perfectly between speakers. My brother follows. He dances facing me, not the DJ or the speakers, slightly awkward in his movements. He’d said earlier he wanted to “move about”; obviously not quite like this. *Is he actually enjoying himself?* I wonder. Techno isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, I remember. *Yes, Dom, not everyone thinks like you. Do you still not get that?* I ignore the question and focus on the music.

I’m facing the speakers, again. The *source*. The sound of God striking an anvil in the Universe’s fiery furnace, moulding matter at 140 beats per minute.

Looking at my brother, I point at the speakers, as if to say, “It’s coming from there,” or, “That’s it.”

Life? Yes. It’s so simple in my mind. Ironical then, that I make life so complicated for myself.

“So what?” he says. I don’t reply. *Isn’t it obvious?* The God-point from which all being and non-being arises and falls away, harmonics on an undulating tapestry of time and space. Sounds waves showing, as Bill Hicks put it, *how all matter is just energy condensed to a slow vibration. And we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. And there is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves.* That kind of thing.

Doesn’t this hard, throbbing, industrial dance tune (or it’s synthesis with our nervous system) say all those things? Isn’t it obvious from how I just stand here, barely moving. Eyes closed. Melting. Merging. There’s plenty of movement here, but it’s all inside. Hard to see, I guess.

I open my eyes. My brother continues to shift and bob awkwardly, and for a moment I feel horribly guilty for dragging him to the festival in the first place.



There's this ripe, throbbing section that builds in the record the DJ's playing that sends shivers down my spine. I smile, sink, and swim deep.

"Oh, I like that!" my brother says, just then. I open my eyes, emerging, filling my lungs. I'm thrilled he 'gets it', and is letting go and starting to *feel*... But I turn round and see him looking at someone on the path dressed as Ali G.

"Ok, let's go," I say, sighing. "Your turn."

Back in the hotel room, I open my eyes, feeling light and tearful. Feeling an immense love for my brother, for life. My cheeks are aglow with the residual heat of the days' sun. The bed supports my body from beneath, but in this moment it feels no different than if it were the entire planet supporting me. The entire Universe, even. *How is it separate?*

I breathe. Or breathing happens. And for my place within the *wholeness* of *all that is*, I am grateful.

## Sanctuary

The karaoke taco guy is standing on the pavement outside his restaurant looking up at something. I say, "Hello," as I pass and he returns the greeting. Several strides later I hear him call after me: "Can you help me with something?" I turn and without hesitation say a full, bright, "Yes." No caveats. It feels novel and liberating to speak the word like that. A smaller, more cautious part of me would want to know what the task *was* before making any firm commitment. This time, that voice was absent. I was throwing myself at fate, and trusting the Universe: as long as it doesn't harm anyone, I will do anything. Anything.

The task I'm assigned isn't too taxing. He has me up a rickety wooden ladder to unhook two signs hanging from the awning he couldn't reach. But it's ok to start small, especially when it comes to generosity.

"Thank you very much," he says, and I glide away, glowing inside like an iron rod pulled from a Blacksmith's forge.

"No problem, dude," I say over my shoulder. Life feels good. Life feels simple.

I find a little bar on a back street near the Internet cafe I'd visited in my earlier, panicked pursuit of the girls. It's the kind of *real, alive* place I like. In this case, that means soft orange lighting; fairy lights wrapped around old tree branches of thin, flaking, silver bark; driftwood, worn and grey like pumice stone; a faded rug tapestry hanging from one wall; and numerous quirky items scavenged or gifted: an old typewriter, candlesticks, lanterns, pretty old glass bottles, even a doll house. Patterns against patterns: all very bohemian. The space gently radiates the love and creativity of whoever's pride and passion it is. Profit *isn't* the prime motivator.

Other than two girls chatting behind the counter, I have the place to myself: an introvert's dream. I approach them, placing myself on one of four wicker-thatched bar stools. One of the girls makes herself busy, while the other beams a smile and hands me a menu.

I order an *infusión de canela* (cinnamon tea), the only tea they have, and not one I'd tried before. "Sin azucar, por favor (without sugar)," I add, then ask for some paper. A pencil I have (sharp); thoughts, too (dull, for the most part, but congealing, needing an outlet all the same.)

I scan the room for a spot to seat myself. I'm spoilt for choice, but for once I'm decisive. Some seats were made of old tyres and painted orange, others wooden and antique looking; *my* one however, is wide, sofa-like, woven from bamboo, and brimming with an eclectic array of plump cushions.

"Here you are," the girl says, handing me a sheet of paper. "I'll bring the tea right over."

I thank her, slip off the bar stool, and go and make myself comfortable.

There's a book case to my right; the Dali Lama is smiling at me, warm and wide, with knowing mischief and pure acceptance. Encouraged and feeling calm, I put pencil to paper and begin capturing various thoughts drifting through the stratosphere of my mellow mind.

The tea arrives in an elegant shot-type glass, delivered with a steady hand and pleasant smile. It sits on a white, porcelain saucer, a ring of small pink flowers around its perimeter. I thank the girl; she nods and returns to the bar.

After several minutes writing, I reach for the tea. I savour the warmth between thumb and forefinger and the delicious aroma, then gently blow across its golden, steaming surface. Tentatively, moving with savouring slowness, I take a tiny sip. It's delicious and not too hot, but it's incredibly sweet.

I catch the girls attention, which isn't hard because she's already looking my way. "Sin azucar?!" I ask, just to double check.

"Si, si—natural," she says. A sweet, soft voice.

One of the unexpected benefits of giving up sugar was my taste buds adapting. Things that didn't taste sweet before, now do. Like nuts, plain yoghurt, sugar-free cereal... and unsweetened cinnamon tea.

When another customer enters and sits down, the other girl behind the bar goes to join him. A friend, perhaps. A lover? He's in his early twenties, has short black hair, and is wearing round, narrow-rimmed glasses, *Harry Potter*-esque. He slips off the brown leather bag he was shouldering, and puts it on the floor beside him. He places his hand on the girls'. I smile, and turn my attention to the girl still behind the bar, who's now reading.

I put down my pencil, and sink back into my technicolor throne. It's so comfy and I'm so relaxed, it might as well be an inflatable sofa, lined with cotton-wool, floating on a shallow pool. I think of the bars and pubs in Calgary for a moment, and how happy I am not to be in one of them. Not to be surrounded by huge plasma screens showing ice hockey.

This orange bar, in contrast, is hushed and tranquil. That suits me, following my journey from my hotel to the prairie house, the forest glade and back again. I look at the clock on the wall: 9:40.

*There's no way I'm rushing anywhere.* I pick up my pencil, tap the empty tea glass with it, raise my hand till one end rests in the corner of my mouth, bite gently on it once in a caricatured *thinking* fashion. Then, like a kamikaze pilot dive-bombing from the sun, finger on the trigger, I strike the page and expunge thought after thought: dagagagagaga.

Ten minutes later I lift up the paper by one corner between two fingers, as if raising a photo from a darkroom stop bath, and inspect both sides. It's riddled with black scribble of ever-diminishing size and legibility. *Victory.*

I get up and return my empty glass and saucer to the bar, a careful guiding hand on each.

"Gracias, *deliciosa!*," I say, to the clink of glass on porcelain on wood.

"De nada."

"I was hoping you might have some more paper for me," I ask with my most charming smile.

"Sure," she says, reaching under the bar. "Here you go." She hands me two more A3 sheets. My ear drums still trembling in delight at her sweet Mexican-tinged English accent.

I stay there at the bar and we chat a while. It's a good conversation—about art, and Shamanism, and traveling—with someone I'm sure is a good, open, honest person. A smile like hers can't lie. *Could I be that person also—good, open, honest?* Of course! Why would I even question it?

"I look forward to the day I can converse in Spanish as well as you do now in English."

"Agh, my English isn't so good." She reaches for something on the bar—a postcard, propped against a jar of dry flowers on the counter.

"Do you know who Frida Kahlo is?" she asks. The name is vaguely familiar, but I curl my lip and shake my head.

"Oh, you must, she's wonderful. Here, take it," she says, "for you." I take the postcard and study it.

It's a picture of a woman. She has a slight moustache, but I let that go, noticing next the thick black eyebrows—boyish, but beautiful, the hummingbird by her chest, looking up at her; the monkey to the left of her, tenderly contemplating its tiny, coupled hands; and to her right, a lemur-like creature. It's delightful. A thin lattice of plant stems grows around her neck, like some organic necklace. Giant green leaves fan out behind her in the in the background. Oh, and two dragonflies, blood-red and gold!

“She’s best known for her self-portraits. Like this one.” She taps the card as I feast upon it. I’m trying not to over analyse the imagery, and just... enjoy it.

“She was ill with polio as a child. It left her deformed. And was in a bus crash as an adult. She was often in pain and couldn’t have children.” She pauses, as if contemplating life in Frida’s shoes. Perhaps she was eager to be a mother, or had children already. “She often put monkeys in her paintings,” she adds.

I smile wide at the thought of it. And at how sweet and contemplative the monkey looked in the portrait—a protective, friendly companion. *I’d like a monkey friend like that.* Not like the macaques in Borneo—vicious things they were.

“I’m Dom, by the way,” I say holding out my hand.

“Mucho gusto,” she says, ignoring my hand, instead leaning over the counter for a kiss on each cheek. “Soy Paola.”

I return to my seat with paper, Frida, and a pleasant feeling. *Oh, how I’ve missed this warmth.*

People warmth.

Paola comes over a minute later, strikes a match, and lights the candle in the painted jam-jar on the little table. She lights six others about the room, then returns and sits down in the seat next to mine. She doesn’t feel the need to ask permission: I like that.

“So, what are you writing,” she asks, coloured light splashing about us. I decide that is something I can’t be ‘open and honest’ about, not entirely, at least. Aside from a diary of the day, I’d been philosophising about love: that perhaps it only ever happens in one person’s mind: a chemical reaction, a hormonal ‘state’. And that if two people happen to be ‘in love’, it isn’t because of some special force binding them (who said it was? Oh, countless Hollywood and Disney films I’d watched as a child), rather just the coincidence of two entirely separate people experiencing a similar attachment-forming emotion at the same time. One they simultaneously project onto *the other*, whilst believing it’s *caused* by the other (or created *between* them). Then again, perhaps most people don’t think that way at all when they’re in love. “No, not everyone thinks like you,” a voice says again.

Anyway, what am I to say to her? That I'm a fool who's never experienced love, writing about love? I opt to keep it vague. "Oh, just a travel diary," I say. Besides, it was a cynical view of love. And in general I'm not a cynic. I'm a dreamer.

I'm saved from further elaboration when another customer enters and Paola returns to the bar.

I consider staying in the cafe all night, where it feels good, calm and nourishing; rather than head off on some flight of fancy, which I suspect the rendezvous with the 19-year-old will be. Deep down I know it won't bring any real fulfilment. Actually, I don't have to dig too deep. So why leave my sanctuary? I've only been here half an hour. If I'm to believe the theory I've just jotted down, then the lovely connection I felt between the blond girl and myself as we lay on the beach, fingers interlacing, delicately tracing patterns on each other's skin, well... it all happened in my head. And for all I know, she was somewhere else entirely. With her boyfriend, most likely. Yes, the right thing to do would be stay here, bathing in the nourishing, orange, bohemian hues.

Or at least not arrive dead on time at the agreed "fat squids, 10pm?". What's the rush? Play it cool, Dom. Play it cool. But no; even though it feels like ripping an old Elastoplast from a particularly hairy bit of skin, I remove myself from my comfy perch at exactly 10:05pm, and walk the two blocks to the club. I'm English: I can't abide tardiness. *That's why I'm leaving*, I think, attempting to fool myself. I stop a few times on the way to the club, leaning against a wall with pencil on paper, jotting down the latest thought-piddle, like a stray dog stopping to mark a lamppost. I write about my folly, observing myself, yet unable to change course, as if it's all inevitable, and I'm merely a puppet to my demons.

## Fat Squids

The girls aren't there. I only wait a few minutes, telling myself, *I'm not desperate*. I think about going back to the cafe, but no; I've made my choice: like a portal closing, that world is closed-off from me now. Moreover, I spot another girl (*here we go again...*). She's stunning (*yawn*). But just as I muster the courage needed to chat to her, she makes for the exit with her friends. I watch her go and... I kind of follow her. No, I *do* follow her, albeit discretely, at a distance, which kind of makes it worse. They walk outside, then the twenty or so meters to the next club, and enter. I hang about

on the pavement for a few minutes, watching the bouncers, wondering if I'm smart enough for this other club that looks a little swanky. This isn't New York, I remind myself, looking at the giant squid on the roof of the club I'd just departed. I suck it up—the fact I feel like a stalker; the fact I'm alone—and venture in.

I'm propping up the bar, taking an awfully long time to choose a drink, whilst keeping one eye out for the girl of course. First there's the decision of whether to go for an alcoholic or non-alcoholic drink. My energy feels good, clear—why do I want to sabotage that by drinking alcohol just because *that's what you do* in a place like this? Once I succumb to the social pressure (which exists solely in my mind), there's the task of choosing which poison. There are many beers to choose from, but none are the pale ales or strong Belgium types I like. Meanwhile, I spot the girl on the dance floor with her friends. I don't really want her to see me yet, just in case she recognises me from the previous club and thinks, da da daa, *stalker*. God, why would she? On the contrary, she might think it sweet.

The music was terrible and far too loud—the commercial club and pop type music they play in spin or aerobics classes, with a few classics thrown in, like Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. To be expected in a touristy place like this, I guess. I'm just about to go and stuff damp toilet tissue in my ears (no, really), when luck drops by: one of the girls' friends comes to the bar and right next to me, orders a drink. Something pink, and strong by the smell of it, cloying vapours wafting my way.

"Hello," I say, seizing my chance.

"Oh, you're British!"

I smile a *yes, indeed; name's Bond, James Bond* type smile.

"Oh, I could listen to you speak all day," she says, swooning, or, as I realise quickly, swaying with obscene drunkenness. "I'm American, forgive me—" *oh good, she has a sense of humour*—"—from Kansas, originally—do you want to dance?" She slurs her words, but I don't notice any dribble yet. Before I have time to answer, she grabs my arm and drags me with her towards the dance floor.

"Come and dance," she coos.

She soon lets go. She has to concentrate on keeping her balance, navigating the maze of gyrating bodies, and not spilling her drink. I hold back, coolly taking a swig of the piss-beer I'd finally

ordered (cheapest one on the menu) as I watch her zig zag precariously across the dance floor towards her flock. And what a pretty flock it is, I think, eying them like a jackal in the rushes, before slinking to join them. *No, alas, I'm tamer than that*, I think, half-way to my prey. I'm a cute, white, bunny rabbit, and they are little yellow chickadees that want to play. I arrive with an imperceptible hop in my step, ears bobbing, teeth grinding in a purr (yes, rabbits do purr).

"This is Dom, he's British," the girl from the bar says, introducing me to her friends. I kiss each on the cheek two times and forget their names almost instantly. Seems to happen all too often. Perhaps I'm too concerned with formulating my next response, or on how I'm coming across, and forget to actually listen. I do remember the name of the one I like, however: she's called Sarah. They all live in Seattle, I learn, and live up to their reputation: Americans as terrible dancers, that is. Their movements are awkward-looking and bizarrely off-beat. I think of my brother at the festival.

The one I'd met at the bar grabs me again. Her lips are suddenly extremely close to mine, and her sweet, rum-infused breath fills my nostrils, but I realise she's just leaning on me for balance. Her friends look on, amused. Sarah holds my gaze a moment; then it's gone. I'd been trying to engage her with my tractor beam for a good few minutes by this point. The eye contact was brief, but it's enough for me to think: *perhaps she likes me*.

"What brings you to America?" the girl still leaning on me asks.

I laugh and remind her we're in Mexico, not America. I notice the lyrics to the song playing at this moment are "we rule the world", fitting for the idea of American imperialism—not that a Brit could comment on such a thing, however long ago our glory days. I'm the fool, though, of course, for not knowing my geography: 'America' refers to the whole continent. Maybe I did know, but judgment comes easily to me, and finding excuses for it, are golden. And so, the girl, in her state of inebriation and mid-south American heritage (no, not Bolivia or thereabouts. Kansas. Confusing, isn't it) clearly meant America, as in USA. I'd prefer it was her ignorance and not mine, we scorn.

"Oh," she says, suddenly releasing her grip and wandering off.

"She's probably gone to chase some girl that's caught her eye," Sarah informs me. "Chatting up girls is what she does when she's drunk."

"Is she a lesbian?" I ask.



“Definitely not,” she says.

“Bi-sexual, then?” No, not that either. *Sure*. I notice the gold cross hanging on a chain around Sarah’s neck, and wonder if this has anything to do with her stolid assurance with regard her friends sexuality.

I ask her my favourite question—the one about where she’s from, bloodlines and suchlike—and discover she’s part Indian, Filipino, Italian, and several other interesting ethnic blends. The result is quite stunning. Unfortunately, she seems a little wooden and uptight.

“I’m a small town gal, and a Christian,” she tells me.

I can discern from her body language that she either isn’t single or isn’t interested, but it’s nice to dance and chat. Nice to be within a few feet of her, to be honest, visually speaking. And these girls are ten times more fun than any Canadians I’d met so far. (Your testosterone spikes 14% just from speaking to a pretty girl, did you know that? It’s good for you.)

“Would you mind rescuing my friend?” Sarah asks. I look across to where she’s pointing and see her friend attempting to pole dance with another girl.

“She looks fine to me,” I say.

Being the only sober one in a crowd is only so much fun and around midnight I decide it’s probably time to leave. Perhaps the girls from the beach have made it to the other club. Not wanting any false assumptions to rob me of an opportunity—as on countless times before they have—first I ask Sarah if she has a boyfriend.

“I do,” she says, smiling kindly, “but I’m flattered.”

Her friend is still grinding on the pole when I leave, now with two other girls. I wonder how the night will end. A naked all-girl wrestle and a puddle of vomit, I decide.

Sure enough, they’re there. The blond one (*Liliana, wasn’t it?*) looks stunning. The way she’s done her hair makes her look like Princess Leia. She seems pleased to see me—puts her arm around me a moment and wants to dance—but I can soon tell from her body language that it’s nothing more than forced pretence. *What, am I the ‘body language expert’ now, or something?!*

I decide I am.

I suggest we get a drink, mainly so I can get her away from the deafening dance floor and we can talk a little: so I can gauge whether it's worth my while sticking around or not. Unfortunately, there's another huge speaker right by the bar, and the only knowledge I glean is my wallet is a leaf lighter. That, and my Spanish really isn't good enough to navigate such topics. My usual charm appears ineffectual. Smiles, eye contact and nods only get you so far. Beach-time caressing likewise, it seems.

I feel a bit like a mug buying her a beer, or a teenager. Teenage boys' willingness to buy girls drinks—thinking that alone will get them somewhere—is something I remember teenage girls gladly taking advantage of. She *is* a teenage girl, I remind myself. *Shit*.

After ten minutes of occasionally close, but mainly distinctly separate dancing, I tell her I'm leaving. I mean it; not in any toys-out-the-pram type way, just because I'm tired and I'm clearly not the Skywalker she seeks. I'm Han Solo. Leia wants a younger man.

She acts disappointed, and urges me to stay, even says, "I like you." I laugh, because I'm unsure who she's trying to convince, me or her. I stay a few minutes more, just in case my good senses are deceiving me, and I do notice her make extra effort to dance a little closer. But it's obvious her attention is elsewhere, and I'm bored. I kiss her on the cheek, ignore her feigned look of surprise as I tell her I'm off, and head upstairs.

I walk over to the person-fringed, oval-shaped banister that frames the downstairs dance floor, finding a space to nestle in. It doesn't seem like a very sensible interior-design choice for a nightclub. Not only could someone fall, but a glass or bottle could easily be knocked off and crash onto someone's head (a young Mexican princess-Leia lookalike, for instance). That scene in *Trainspotting* comes to mind where Bigby chucks his empty glass into a space much like this one, a woman screams and mayhem ensues.

I spot Leia Liliana down there. She's chatting to a younger guy with a ponytail. He leads her to the bar and buys her a drink, which makes me chuckle. Suddenly, she looks really young and they seem a much better match. Her body language is warmer. She's smiling, laughing. *Good for him*, I think: *lucky boy*. I decide to call it a night.

I leave the club reminding myself I'm not as young as I like to think I am, and regretting (my forte, remember) having been so naive and lacking in confidence when I *was* 19 and all the effort wasted pretending otherwise: all the energy expended on *defence*.