



CASTLE DAMIJANA

X OLI JOHNS X

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This is the 2nd edition of a previously published book called 'Ljubljana Witch'. That was around 40,000 words, this one is just over 90,000 and almost completely revised.

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The Witch in this book is loosely based on someone real. Her name is not Damijana though, it's *****. The last time I heard from her she said I was a toxic motherfucker. Can't remember what I called her. Manipulative sociopath probably.

Every other character is also based on someone I know, hopefully just enough for them to recognise themselves, but not enough for them to pick up the crossbow and hunt me down.

The historical figures in the castle paintings are all real people who went missing centuries ago. I've taken their names and what they were famous for and fictionalised the rest.

All Slovene text is grabbed from google translate, so is probably unreadable for anyone Slovene. Sorry. Swahili slang used by the character of Natori is even worse, but only lasts about 15 pages.

Some nasty shit happens in this book, including attempted rape, stabbings, racism and general sleaziness. In my head, they're all justified by context, but my head is often wrong. Beware.

Have you ever read or seen Yuki Onna [Snow woman]?

She's a Japanese demon who comes with the blizzards, freezes you to death with her icy breath then sucks out your soul. The victims are usually men.

There are many versions but one of the most famous ones has a romantic angle. It was from a book called 'Gwaidan', which later became a movie. I think it might've won the 1964 foreign language film Oscar.

In short: a young man is trapped in a cabin with his dad during a snowstorm. During the night, Yuki Onna comes in and kills the Dad and is about to kill the young man, but she decides against it when she sees how young and pretty he is.

Yuki Onna warns the young man that if he tells anyone, she'll come back and kill him. He nods and she leaves. A while later, the young man meets a mysterious young woman called Uki Onna and they fall in love, get married, have ten kids and generally live happily until one night, seeing his wife in the moonlight, the young man tells her the story of his encounter with Yuki Onna and how she looks a lot like her.

'That's because it is me,' she says, and turns back into the demon. 'If it weren't for our small army of children, I'd kill you for this trivial thing. But if you don't treat them well, I'll come back and kill you.'

After saying this, she leaves, and the man is heartbroken and terrified and his ten kids grow up to be spoilt little shits who get away with everything.

Yuki Onna never returns and no one ever finds out what exactly those children meant to her or why she went through a 20-year marriage façade only to give it all up in an instant.

No one ever finds out if she was really a 'she'

though it's pretty clear she wasn't.

but *she* or *he* or *it* doesn't matter cos almost every man who writes fan fiction or draws pictures or makes manga about Yuki Onna online sees her as a woman

a beautiful pale woman who is other and difficult to talk to at first but will, given enough pages, allow herself to be fucked

but only by the hero, and only cos he's not like the other
perverts in the story.

Castle Damijana

Oli Johns

Bermondsey, London

'Lake Mondovista, 247AH

Vikoza stood placidly by the icy lake, looking out towards the looming dragon ships floating triumphantly far in the distance. They seemed so far away yet at the same time so near. Like they were somehow next to her, but also far away on the distant horizon.

It was snowing around us and above us, with the snow coming down slowly in luscious, white flakes, like little daggers of snow sent from a Snowy God.

The falling snow-flakes covered her brown hair, making it seem as if her hair were made of nothing but snowflakes, even though I knew it wasn't. It was made of hair. But it looked like impressive, white snowflakes, like a snow angel of great beauty and snowiness. He couldn't believe how beautiful she was.

'I wish I could walk on water, don't you, Banki?' she said teasingly.

'Be careful you don't fall in, Vikoza,' I warned bravely.

'Don't be such a bore. Where's your sense of adventure, Banki?' She teased playfully. Her face was full of doubt and playfulness. The cheeks were so beautiful, like two shining apples from the timeless annals of Ancient Greek History.

I put my arm around her shoulder and pretended to put my foot daringly onto the surface of the water. Even though I knew I couldn't be Jesusa for her, and I couldn't walk on water like Jesusa could, I also

knew that she would laugh heartily at my joke and love me for being so amusing. And I was correct because she threw her head back and laughed and then kissed me on the cheek playfully. I didn't know if it was only me, but I thought she had never been so happy.

My head fell lollingly into my chest. I moved to the synth of my soul.

'I can hear your heart, Banki,' she said with her hand on my chest. 'I don't think I've ever been so...' She didn't finish, though I could sense the meaning on her warm breath. She picked up a piece of translucent ice from the ground and put it into my trembling hands.

'This ice is so cold...' I said as we walked beneath the moons benevolent gaze.'

This ice is so cold?

Ice?

I looked at the cover of the book again. There was a boy with a ponytail, twelve, thirteen years old maybe, holding some Swedish-looking girl in his arms...two Forbidden Planet style robots firing lasers at them from the background...no, wait, firing lasers from swords, from the tips of their swords.

What...

Sword lasers...

ice is cold...

teenagers...

Johan, where do you find this shit?

I threw the kid, the Swede, and the robots across the living room, not really caring if they went out the window or on the floor. This writer, Solby Wells, what was she doing? What was her endgame here?

Money?

Hollywood?

Super money?

But if all she wanted was cash then why write like that, in that style? You couldn't sit down and know that writing 'the ice is cold' or 'moving to the synth of my soul' would get you published, how could you, it was...

I picked up the Seven of Nine salt shaker on the table, its poorly-drawn enamel eyes glaring at me, and threw it up in the air a few times, dropping it on the third go and apologising as I put her back where she'd come from.

Ah, forget it. Wells was rich, I wasn't. No point wondering why.

I looked at the computer screen. 'Attack of the vampires', my lesson plan for the Mainland Chinese kid the next day. It was our first lesson together, and I had to make sure he didn't have anything to moan about. Would he know the word 'vampire'? They were in Chinese fiction, he probably would. And it wasn't that hard to explain if he didn't. Scary thing that drinks blood from people's necks. He'd surely know 'neck' and 'drink', maybe 'blood' and 'bite', but what about 'transform' or 'sensualist'...

Ah, forget that, too. He'd either know it or he wouldn't. And if he didn't then no problem, just switch 'transform' to 'change' and 'sensualist' to 'Iron Man.'

Or just tell him the word in Cantonese.

What was it again? *Gurng see?* Gurn zee?

I pulled a cigarette out of the pack and searched my pocket for a light. Nothing, just coins. I checked the rest of the room, on the couch, behind the TV, under Johan's gremlin models, but the only thing I saw was that book again, that kid running from the laser swords.

Jesusa...that line...

I moved to the synth of my soul.

What did it even mean? What soul?

I walked to the table and picked up my own thing...my perfect, little zine. The front cover: a green vigilante, not superhero, firing his laser gun. Or about to fire his laser gun...there was no actual beam...but his face, his expression was definitely that of a killer. Wait, a laser gun? Wasn't that just the same as...

No, not the same. Both had lasers, yes, but this was different, there were no parallels. The Solby book had laser swords, this was a laser gun. And it didn't really mean anything anyway.

I went to the kitchen, still looking for a light.

And the writing...it wasn't the same. You could never look at that robot sword book and then look at mine and say it was the same. Mine

had quality. Dignity. Ideas. It had lines that flowed into each other. Not that anyone except me had ever said it. Ha, an icy lake of one, that's what I was. My only fan. Maybe they were right, maybe I was deluded.

Man, where was the light?

I turned on the stove and waited for it to warm up. Only electric, but it might work. I mean, it's still heat.

I lowered my head and put the cigarette on the hob, which was still black, and waited to see what happened.

That fucking book...I can hear your heart...

I waited a couple of minutes, but it still wasn't glowing. What, broken? Still? I turned off the hob just in case and looked at the toaster. Could that work? How would you get the tip of the cig in there and back out? I searched on my phone, and it said, yes, it was possible, but you needed some kind of tool to act as a grip for your cigarette. If you put your face too close, it might get burnt up.

Okay, no toasters, find the lighter. It was there in the morning, must be around somewhere. Maybe Johan took it to his room. I walked out of the kitchen, through the living room and right up to the door of Johan's room. The door was about five inches open, so I nudged it farther and peered in.

There was no sign of the lighter, but there were some magazines on the bed. And a photo album, with Johan and his girlfriend on the cover. I took half a step in, then stopped. If it were my room, and my photo album, I wouldn't want Johan going in. And, besides, I might leave some kind of clue that I'd been in. Should I? I could be very careful, make sure everything's in the right place. He did have my lighter. Maybe. And it was only a photo album. I wouldn't do anything with it.

There was a noise from the apartment below. My brain switched. Okay. If Johan took the lighter, how about the oven, would that work?

I walked back to the kitchen and stared at it.

Maybe it was also broken?

I turned the dial and waited a minute for traces of heat.

Nothing.

Wait, was there some button I hadn't pressed, something that would activate the electricity?

I looked around but didn't see anything except the light switch.

Man, what was I gonna do, stick my head in? Hold the tip of the cigarette against the oven wall?

Suppose it wouldn't be that dangerous, long as I didn't close the door.

Would it?

I stared at the oven around twenty seconds longer before the words 'Sylvia Plath' floated into my brain and said, just go buy a fucking lighter, you clown.

#

On the way to the shop I tried to list all the different ways I was at or near the same level as Sylvia Plath.

1 – You know it.

2 – You're better than Solby Wells.

3 - Plath never made zines.

4 - ?

Nope, that was it.

Two kids on one bike went past, slowing down when they saw me. The kid on the back pulled out what looked like a metal ruler...or a box-cutter...I couldn't tell which...and asked if I had twenty quid on me.

I stared at him, still trying to work out if that was a box cutter or not.

'Twenty quid, mate, come on...'

'Nope,' I said finally, after a bit more staring.

'Go on, give it us, we're homeless.'

'I've got two quid.'

'That'll do.'

'And I need it.'

'For what?'

'Go on, give it us...' added the other one.

'Yeah, we're needy, mate, give it us.'

'And twenty quid, not two.'

'Come on, you're not even getting your wallet out.'

'Speed it up, mate.'

I looked down the road and saw two guys in suits turning the corner, coming this way. Ha, witnesses, about time. I turned back to the kids. 'They look like they've got cash, why don't you ask them?'

'You what?'

I pointed at the two guys. 'Go ask them.'

'Serious?'

'Yup.'

'Fuck, Kaz, let's just go.'

'What?'

'I'm bored, let's go.'

'But chink here's got cash.'

'Don't care.'

'Chink?' said Billy, forgetting the metal ruler. 'What happened to mate?'

'He's caving...'

'Let's just chip.'

'Serious, he likes us...'

'I'm pedalling...'

'He likes us, you deaf?'

'Pedalling...'

'Fuck...'

The kid at the back said, 'next time, robo-twat' then told the front kid to start pedalling properly. Off they went, pretty fast too. I turned to check on the guys in suits, wondering why they hadn't walked past yet, but they'd gone, disappeared, probably into one of the houses. Or did they see the kids and pivot back to the main road?

I spun back the other way to see if the little shits would notice my aloneness and pedal back...they had a ruler or a knife, I had a set of keys and two quid...but they kept going, laughing...riding to the synth of their shitty souls.

'Fuck...'

I breathed out, no sound, and put my hands in my pockets to stop them shaking. Jesus, it wasn't even dark yet, and they couldn't have

been more than fifteen...what was this? Okay, they probably wouldn't have done anything...they backed down pretty fast when I pointed out those guys, but they still had enough balls to mouth off. How? Don't they know I'm bigger than them?

I remembered the week before when that primary schooler had swung for me, saying I looked at him funny. Didn't matter that he was a foot and a half shorter, he still did it. Man, even nine-year olds...

A woman with a pram was walking towards me, so I started moving again, towards the shop.

Fucking thugs. Fucking Bermondsey. I used to live in decent places...Sai Kung...Shatin...Liverpool...and none of them were like this. Not the primary schoolers at least. In fact, the only other places I'd had trouble from kids were Kiev and Romania, and those were deep in Eastern Europe, not here.

How was this possible?

I looked at the things around me, the shit that sold itself as scenery. The huge building site, the blocks of flats, all in the same shade of brick. The church that wasn't a church but a makeshift doctor's surgery. All that grass around it that looked ill. Trees you could say were brown, but the palest possible shade. Man, it was like living in a Ken Loach film, only without the two per cent of optimism.

I had to get out of here. The list...what else?

- 1 – You know it.
- 2 – Plath never made zines
- 3 -- You're better than Solby Wells.
- 4 – Am I though?

The list was faltering. And it was managed by me. What kind of chance did I have if I didn't even believe in myself?

A drunk walked past, mumbled something, couldn't hear what, then dropped his pants and pissed on the ill grass.

I took out my keys and put them between my knuckles, just in case.

#

The shop was deserted. Literally deserted, there were no other customers and no one behind the counter either. Huh?

Forget it, I thought, the guy's probably just gone to the toilet. He'll be back soon enough. Though it was pretty brave to leave an open shop in the middle of Bermondsey...

I went to where I thought the lighters should be, or where I thought I'd seen them before, but there weren't any. There was the little rack where they usually stood, but all the little holes were empty.

It didn't seem possible for a shop to have zero lighters, so I bent down and checked behind the batteries and the medicine and the condoms, but there was nothing.

I stood up and looked around. Still no server. I tapped my keys on the side of the counter, trying not to look at the till.

'Hello...' I said, not too loud.

No answer.

'Hey...customer here...'

Still nothing.

'This place is wide open, guys...what are you doing?' I mumbled. And right next to the station too. Surely there'd be guys coming in and taking advantage of this...those two kids on the bike for starters. Or maybe that was why it was deserted. Maybe they'd already been in...

'Hello...' I said, louder.

Still no answer.

I did what I warned myself not to do and looked at the till. It wasn't open, and was probably locked anyway, so that was out. But...this place was a shop, it was full of stuff. And the guy wasn't around so...

I thought about taking something and running, a Yorkie or a Twirl maybe, but...no, I wasn't a thief. Well, except that one time, but that was different, I was eight years old. No, I wasn't a thief, never. Primary school fuck ups didn't count. I launched a different fantasy, a redemptive one...me going behind the counter and running the shop, saving the job of the clown who'd left his post. Some customers would come in, I'd serve them, take their cash, put it in the till, not my pocket and then...

I blinked and realised I was still staring at the till.

Jesus...what was I doing? All I wanted was a lighter.

I looked at the little shelf in front of the counter again. Nothing. I looked around the rest of the shop. Nothing. Was that everywhere?

Maybe they weren't unpacked yet...maybe there was a new batch that had just come in, and it was sitting in the back somewhere?

I saw a door at the back of the shop and went over. It was unlocked.

'Hello...you in here?'

No answer.

I thought about going back to the counter and waiting however long it took until someone appeared, but...if I just did a quick scan through the storeroom, found a lighter and then took it back to the counter...wouldn't that make just as much sense?

In fact, wouldn't it make more sense?

I didn't know if it did or not, not with any kind of truth, so I started scanning anyway. There were lots of boxes stacked up on one side of the room, and they were all pretty big, so I figured if I were a lighter, I wouldn't be in there. I went to the desolate side of the storeroom and started lifting up smaller boxes, and...

'Hey! You!'

Someone behind me.

'What are you doing? You can't go in here...'

I dropped the box I was holding and edged back to the door. 'Yeah, sorry, man. There was no one in there...over there, through there, whatever...behind the counter.'

'I am behind the counter.'

'Yeah, but...you weren't a minute ago.'

'I am.'

'No, but before...you...'

'I am always behind the counter. What are you talking about?'

What was that accent? Russian? Polish? I didn't want to ask, so I held up my hands as apology and walked back into the main shop, the shop man following close behind.

'Hey, you can't walk away now. Show the jacket.'

'Huh?'

'The jacket, I want to see.'

'My jacket?' I pulled my pockets outwards. 'Nothing in here, man.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Look, I only went back there because...'

'*Nu, rahat.* You walk too fast, I don't believe you.'

'No...yeah, fast because there was no one behind the counter. Seriously, your whole shop was empty. No one here, nothing.'

'Show the trousers.'

'What?'

He picked up a mop still in its plastic wrapping. 'Show the trousers.'

'Man, put the mop down.'

'Show.'

'All I wanted was a lighter.'

'Show the trousers.'

'I have money.'

'Show or I call the police.'

'For what?'

'You are stealing from me.'

'Stealing...I just wanna smoke, that's it. I'm not nicking anything.'

'*Mincinos*. You're a thief, you take something.'

He took out his phone and pressed buttons.

'Seriously, man, there was no one in the shop, I was just looking around.'

'*Da, da*, tell this to the police.'

'Jesus. You're really calling?'

'Hello police, I would like to report a thief. Thief. What? No. I don't know. What? Yes. What? What? Speak slowly, I don't understand. Yes. He is standing in front of me now. No. What? No. I have a mop. No, why? But, I told you, he's a thief...not fleece, thief...thief...hey, stop, where are you...'

But it was too late, I was already gone.

#

On the way home, I put the cigarette back in my mouth and asked strangers if they had a light. No one did. I must've asked, what...fourteen, fifteen people, and no one smoked. What was this? LA? Where were the wretches in this place?

I remembered the kids on the bike. The metal ruler. Give us twenty quid, mate.

Yeah.

Bet they had a light.

I put the cigarette back in the pack and walked slower so I could slot in behind the three normal-looking people walking in front of me.

Safety in numbers, I thought, taking out my keys again just in case.

#

I got back home, locked the door, closed all the windows and sat down in front of the computer.

'Johan...' I shouted.

No answer.

Good, I still had the apartment to myself. I could still stand around in different areas of the living room doing nothing. Or talk to myself. Or sit in front of the computer googling 'Hailee Steinfeld tits'.

I didn't do any of these. Instead, I took out another cigarette and threw it up and down.

I sang what I thought were the words from a Chinese Odyssey, the Stephen Chow version.

I stared at the wall.

I stared at the keyboard and the computer screen.

I read through the lesson plan again, wondering if it was okay to teach a fifteen-year old kid about Vlad the Impaler sticking spikes up people's asses.

I decided it was and pressed print.

The paper came out on the shelf nearby, but I didn't bother to get up.

I clicked back to e-mail and read the message Tyrone had sent me the day before. Or the message the prisoner-exchange website had sent me. For all I knew, there was no Tyrone, and I was just talking to some bored part-time student who'd watched a lot of 'Oz' re-runs.

'Hey Billy, got your reply three weeks ago, sorry for writing back late.

You're right, four more months then out. Don't take this wrong, but I ain't going near another library for the next hundred years. Had my fill in here. I don't even read most of them anymore. I've had this one

book for two months and every time I open it up, I can't get anywhere, just end up staring at the wall. Some guy recommended it, said it was black sci-fi, I should like it. But I just can't get into it. It ain't bad, it's just got nothing I recognise, none of my life or anything. And the style's not that accessible either, too lyrical. I read on the back the author's a poet from the 60's, NYC too, maybe that's it. Same skin, different world. I don't know, maybe I'm just tired of American. Ellison was good, Mosley, Jimmy Ellroy, Flannery O Connor, but all the modern shit just loses me soon as I pick it up. Too familiar, too generic? Gonna look for more translations, see if things get better. You're half Chinese, right? Anything good you know about, sci fi, history, anything genre like that? Don't know if I told you but I read a Chinese kung fu thing last month and it was great. Can't remember the name, sword and the book maybe, but it was brutal. Half the heroes just went around killing, serious, two of them gave this guy spiked wine and stabbed him when he was out, fucking merciless. Made me look up some Chinese history too. You heard of a guy called Mozi? Cool guy, could've been the first socialist. He said the same things in 400BC that that French guy said 200 years ago. They never teach that at school, not my one anyway.

My plans? Not sure, not sure where I'm gonna go or what I'm gonna do. I've got a cousin in Baltimore, might head there, if there's any work going. Yeah, don't worry, your friend Jay is paranoid, I won't be coming to Rain land. Haven't got the cash to even get the flight ha. Be cool if we could still write each other, if I can get enough time. Gotta go now, time's up. Don't worry about job, you'll be okay. Stay safe.

Ty[balt]

I thought about how to reply.

Hey Tyrone, forget Baltimore, come to London. Hang out with me.

If you need any cash, let me know.

Write a zine, say you were in prison, guaranteed sales, try it, man, why not?

I stared at the screen.

It was no good, being sentimental.

Besides, I didn't have enough cash to share, not even close.

I stood up and stretched.

What else?

The lesson material was still on the printer tray, but I ignored it.

Ah, Johan's toys...

I picked up one of the gremlins from the shelf and made it say, 'mogwai.'

I moved its arms about a bit.

I put it back on the shelf.

I sat down again.

There was another e-mail. From the tattoo zine reviewer in Oakland. I opened it up and read the two words she'd written. Zine received. No sign of a thank you. Ah well. I guess it was her doing me the favour not the other way round.

I clicked off e-mail and stared at the desktop.

I stared at some of the folders.

I stared at the dust at the side of the screen.

I thought of Tyrone.

I thought of being in prison.

I pictured an empty cell and bare walls.

I looked at the screen again.

I bit my nail then googled 'Hailee Steinfeld tits'.

Nothing.

Just a seventeen-year old girl in dresses too big for her.

Man, I was bored.

I went to the window, kept the cigarette in my mouth and stared down onto the grass below.

While looking at the grass, I started thinking about the future...about getting a job, about getting out of London, about women. About getting picked up by aliens and flying to their planet and finding out I was physically stronger than them and it just so happened they had an enemy that was bigger than them but smaller than me, and, shit, I was the only thing capable of stopping it...or giving it a bit of a kicking at least.

Then reality again. The job, escape...how?

I wasn't really doing anything about either of them. I had two students a week, and that was nowhere near enough cash to live off. I could try and get more, but it would be tough. London was tough. Most of the foreign kids who came here spoke better English than me. Cantonese was out of the question, I was lower intermediate at best. What else? Not much. I didn't have other revenue, only my savings, and they were starting to thin a little. I didn't have any great scheme to go after. There was no endgame or mountain top to strive for.

Man, what did I have then?

I looked back into the apartment and saw the green man on the zine shooting a laser gun. Then, in the corner, four large boxes with three hundred more of him.

My beautiful zines. Without them, I'd...

Shit...

I almost fell backwards, thinking I'd seen something by my foot. Something rectangular-shaped...

I looked down and saw that piece of shit book on the floor. Ha, scared by a book. One of the pages was face up, so I bent down and had a closer look. God, it was still bad. Very, very bad. Yet this thing was published and mine was...

There was a noise from the hallway.

Johan?

I left the book on the floor and stood up, grabbing Johan's Watchmen figurine from the windowsill.

Burglars?

The living room door opened and the big Swede walked in. Well, not that big. Six-two or six-one, but a little bigger than me. Actually, if he was barefoot, and I had shoes on then...

'You're playing with my action figures?'

I looked at the little Comedian, said 'no' and put it back by the window.

'It's okay, that's why I put it there. I can play, you can play, it's a public object.'

'Thanks, man. I'll keep that in mind.'

'What have you been up to?'

'Not much. Almost got mugged by a couple of kids.'

'Mug what?'

'Or half kids. They were about fifteen, I think.'

'They mugged you?'

'No, tried to. They asked me for twenty quid, I said no and...ah, never mind.'

'I don't understand. They asked you for money?'

'Nah, forget it man. It was just kids. They were probably bored or...'

'Hey, what happened there?'

'Huh? Where?'

He was pointing at the book...at Solby Wells and her incredible laser swords.

'My book...it's on the floor.'

'Oh yeah, so it is.' I bent down again and picked it up. 'Not sure how it got there...'

He came over and took it off me. 'I haven't finished it yet.' He looked at the cover and smiled. 'Did you read any?'

'Some.'

'Which part?'

'The bit where the ice is cold.'

'Ah. I don't know this part. You mean the icy lake?'

'Yeah, that bit.'

'Vikoza goes swimming and dies? Argh, that part is quite slow. It gets way better later on. There's this other planet and this drug...boondatzi...it makes people like psychos and...no, not like psychos, the other thing...they don't care about killing, like the robots...I don't know the word for this.'

'Sociopath?'

'Social path. Maybe. And there's this real robot who's trying to stop everything and take over...it's pretty cool. You should read more...'

'No, you're alright, man.'

'You sure?'

'Very.'

He walked over to the corner, to my lovely zines. 'You'll change your mind later...I'll put it here, you can take when you like.'

He looked at the cover again, nodded then dropped it on one of the boxes.

#

The last week or so I'd been delivering my zines.

Here were the figures:

Total – 800

Delivered so far – 375

Still to go – 325?

My math was probably wrong on that, but I didn't really have time to mess about with numbers. I simply had to get out there and spread the thing around. And it was always the same routine. I'd pack my rucksack full of zines, tell Johan I was going out and by the time I got back everyone in this city would know my name, and he'd laugh and say, 'sure, I'll handle the media,' and then I'd be gone, on the train, looking like a nut, looking like a tramp, and I'd end up in Soho or Dalston or other places I'd found online and I'd show them one of the zines and they'd look at it and say, 'cover's nice,' then open it up and say the inevitable line, 'what's it for?'

'It's for nothing.'

'No, I mean...what is it for?'

'I don't get the question.'

'What is it for?'

'It's for nothing. There is no reason for it at all.'

'But...why are you doing it?'

'Vanity?'

Then they'd flick through a few more pages and it'd be done. 'No, sorry, we're not allowed to put independents in here.' And I'd walk out and mutter something about denying the spirit of the independents and there'd be a day of reckoning, just like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, where I'd walk back into their piece of shit shop and peruse whatever shit they had on their shelves before going to that counter, getting right up in their faces and saying, what do you think of independents now, you snobby cunts? And then two minutes later I'd forget all this and start thinking about the next place. Sometimes they were nicer and

would take twenty or so, but not often. Sometimes they'd tell me to put one or two in the corner, where no one would ever look. Sometimes they'd just laugh.

Oh, and one more figure.

Reaction so far to all the zines: One e-mail:

'You are a genius. Come to Ljubljana. Live with me forever.

D'

D? Who was this D? No details, no name. Was it a guy or a woman? A nut? And how did anyone in Slovenia know anything about me?

Whatever it was, I never replied.

Somewhere near Ljubljana...

The room had nothing but a table, an old book [strangely un-dusty], a stone floor and a pale woman in a black cloak who looked a little like Natalie Wood.

There was a window space, too, but no glass.

Outside, it was snowing.

The pale woman stood still in front of the stone wall next to the window, one hand raised as if she were facing an orchestra.

'Poglejmo, kaj je ustvaril jagnje...'

Her finger traced out words in the air and, on the wall, they appeared:

I never considered Metallica to be friends...just because we ran in different circles, y'know?

The last star added, the pale woman rose up into the air and moved closer. She ran her finger over whatever the text was made of, pulling none of it off.

Metallica to be friends...Metallica...friends...

She looked at each word on its own, twenty, thirty seconds for each one, then floated back and viewed them as a collection again.

'Nikoli menil, metallica, za prijatelje...'

Her head tilted to the left.

'Ja vem, to...'

She straightened and stared at the stone ahead, doing absolutely nothing with her hands yet still managing to check the history of the

wall. Other sentences flitted on and off at startling speed...then stopped. Yes, there it was, last month. *I never considered Metallica to be friends.*

'To ne more biti res. On naj bi trajala dlje kot to.'

She turned, bringing herself down from her invisible ledge and landing softly on the castle floor. Behind her, the words on the wall disappeared, leaving not even the slightest mark.

'Ja vem. Je že v redu.'

She moved out of the room, closing the door behind her, walked down the stone steps [glided almost] and stopped at the bottom.

'Preprosto se ga zabodel z nožem velik in pripavo na naslednjega.'

There was a painting on the wall, a young man with a pale face. She raised her hand and stroked his cheek, muttering something. Then, pulling her hand back down to her side, she left him and walked along the corridor until she reached a window. Outside...snow, snow, and more snow. It was endless, a whole planet full if you lived nowhere but the castle grounds.

In the distance, at the very bottom of the hill, a bear came stumbling out of the woods.

She raised her finger and pointed it at the animal.

Cut. Spare. Cut. Spare. Cut. Spare.

The bear climbed up the slope and went past the castle, not looking up or noticing any of the walls. It sniffed at the grass sticking out of the snow and then moved back down the slope and into another part of the woods.

She lowered her finger.

Spare.

#

The man was sitting in the library, in front of a typewriter, pretending to write. Apart from his purple jeans, 'Thai-tanic' t-shirt and Ernie Hudson hair, he looked completely normal.

There was a fireplace near the other end of the table, and a real, live fire, but it wasn't burning too hard. Behind him, a book collection

about the same size as the one in his local community centre back in Bandari. Not that he read books anymore.

The floor was pure stone, no ridges or cracks.

'Story, story, story...' the man said, staring at the blank page in front of him. '*Haya...robots...poverty...revolution...go.*'

He typed out a few keys then leaned back, staring at the words. He pulled his arms inside the sleeves of his t-shirt. It was too cold to write today, he told himself. And exhausting too. Too cold and too exhausting, and what did she expect of him when she couldn't even keep a decent fire?

He got up and put some more logs onto the tiny fire. No matter how many logs he put on, it never seemed to get any bigger. Was that her doing? Maybe it was. Maybe she was still mad about that thing last week...a few days ago...whenever it was.

He sat back down and stared at the typewriter. And a fucking typewriter! What was it, the 50s? How could she expect him to produce anything on this thing? Every time he made a mistake, he couldn't delete it, he had to write the whole damn thing over. What could she possibly expect him to produce with this junk?

One of the books dropped off the shelf somewhere behind him. He didn't turn. Why bother? For some reason, they were always falling off, and he could never figure out why.

He started typing again.

The Dagger robot took the cigar out of its mouth and asked the engineer if he liked metal. Some, said the engineer. Long as it don't speak.

The words were difficult at first, there was no rhythm or flow, but then, slowly, carefully, he started to craft some kind of narrative. It was always this way, difficult at first, but after a few lines...

'Fucking *kuma nina...*'

He smacked the typewriter so hard it almost fell off the table.

'You shouldn't do that, dear.'

The voice came from behind him. Her voice, who else?

'Nah, I know. I was just...it's frustration.' He looked at the typewriter, adding in a mumble, 'the struggle...'

Damijana glided around him and sat down opposite, the chair seeming to move almost of its own volition.

'That was the same typewriter used by Henry Miller.'

'*Ndiyo*, you said.'

'You should treat it with a little more respect, don't you think?'

'More respect, yeah.' He stared at the page in front of him, half of it full. 'Though Miller...he wasn't exactly the superstar everyone said he was. I mean, he did what? Rant about his sex life and then get some *sonko*...guy to put it in print. Fuck knows how he did that, but...there you go. That's Henry Miller for you.'

Damijana stared right at him. He looked away, over at the fire.

'You look tired...'

'More cold than tired, but, okay...'

'You look thin...'

'Thin? Come on...!' He put out his arm, showing what he thought was muscle. Or more than just bone at least. 'That's thin?'

Damijana looked at it, blank as a scientist.

'What have you written today?'

He put his arm back down.

'Some...not much.'

'Show me.'

'*Hapa*...I don't think it's...'

'Show me.'

'...really, it's not ready to...have eyes on it.'

She stretched out her hand.

He looked at the words on the page, his words, words straight from his brain or his subconscious or wherever this shit came from.

'I don't think you'll like me much after you see it...'

Her arm stayed raised. He shrugged, muttered, 'ah well, brain yourself,' and threw the page across the table. Damijana lowered her hand and picked it up, scanning the words. Some time passed. Minutes. Too many minutes. There were only seven or eight lines, he'd counted them a million times. What was she looking for exactly? Genius in seven lines? Fuck, he knew he was good, but even a good writer needed time.

'Well...how bad?'

She didn't answer.

'Silence bad, hey? I did warn you...'

The fire in the corner flickered in some kind of breeze he couldn't feel. He looked around the room. There were no windows open. No open doors. No cracks that he knew of...and he knew this place pretty damn well. And so he should after all this time...how long was it? He tried to recall a figure, but...there was nothing. Months? Years? Nothing.

'You went out of your room last night.'

'Huh?'

Damijana stood up and walked over to the fireplace, where there was no longer a fire.

'I said, quite clearly, you went out of your room last night.'

'Did not.' He laughed but didn't look her in the eye.

'Yes, you did.'

He paused. Another 'did not' probably wasn't a good idea. It really didn't feel like that kind of conversation. He leaned back in his chair and said nothing.

'When you first came here, what did I tell you?'

'When I first came?'

'Yes. What did I say?'

'I'm not gonna sleep with you.'

Her face didn't move.

'What else did I say?' she asked.

'*Ndiyo*...I know. You said, here's a map of the castle.' He laid out an imaginary map on the table and pointed at different parts. 'Here's your room, you can go here, but you can't go here or here or here. Or here. That's what you said, hey?'

'Correct, dear.'

'Never anything about going out of my room at night though...not that I did that, but...you never told me I couldn't.'

'Also correct.'

'Right, so...why the big deal?'

'This...!' She held up the page, with its seven lines of shit. 'This is not good enough.'

'Yeah, well...'

'It hasn't been good enough for several weeks.'

'Huh? What hasn't?'

'I invited you here, Natori, because I saw talent in you. I saw a capable writer ready to come out.'

'You said I was a genius actually.'

'I said genius but meant talent. This is unimportant. What is important is that you have regressed in your talent. You are no longer what you were.'

'What...'

'Not even close to it.'

'Come on...'

'You've become weak, dried up, like an abandoned mine...a pit of rocks and dirt that no one wants to look at or think about...something that is just there.'

'Wait...that,' he pointed at the page, 'I'm not claiming that's anything good...you do know that, right?'

'Yet you have been working on it for weeks.'

'More like days...'

'Weeks.'

He looked at his wrist, forgetting that he'd lost his watch. Which was strange as he'd lost it ages ago, the first day he'd come...

'Well, maybe. I don't know. See, there aren't any clocks in this place. How am I supposed to know how long it's been?'

Damijana dropped the paper onto the logs and out of nowhere, but, logically, out of somewhere, flames rose up again.

'What...'

'Not only are you an abandoned mine, but you have disobeyed me, too.'

'Listen, I didn't go out of my room, I told you that already.'

'I was watching.'

'But I didn't go anywhere. Seriously, I didn't.'

'I saw you, dear.'

'But...how? From where?'

'I'm always watching.'

'Always? What are you...?' He looked around the room, searching for...what? Cameras? 'I mean, fuck's sake, how could you always be watching me?'

'I just am. There's no mystery.'

He almost laughed. 'Sure. No mystery at all.'

The page burnt on the fire. He watched it curl up and die and become nothing. Not that he cared, it was a piece of shit, but...wait, where did she go?

Damijana was no longer by the fire. He spun round and searched the rest of the room, but she wasn't there either.

'Dami, you still here?'

No answer.

It was possible she was behind the shelves. But if she was, she was doing a damn good job of keeping her breath quiet.

He bent down and checked under the shelves anyway. No shoes, nothing. He stretched back up and walked quickly over, looking in all eight aisles. There were a few books sticking out, one of them he knew, Ray Chandler, the High Window, but it didn't seem to mean anything. He pushed it back in and wiped his hand on his jeans, even though there was no dust. Where was she? The shelves were the only place she could hide and they were blank. Which meant...somehow, she'd run out of the room without him even noticing.

But why?

He walked back to the table and looked down at the typewriter.

Maybe she was going to get a shotgun, threaten him a little. Or something more connected to the castle theme...a mace, perhaps? A throwing axe?

Was she really that mad?

For what?

He'd done worse the week before, and the other time before that, out in the courtyard, and she'd never run off on him. Was that worse? He didn't know. She'd never warned him not to do that, apart from the 'I won't sleep with you' line, but he hadn't gone that far, and he wouldn't, despite what she said, he would never do that even though there were only the two of them here and he could if he really wanted. If he really was that kind of man, he could do that, not that he ever

would, but it was possible, objectively, and, objectively, comparing body size, she wouldn't really be able to do a thing to...

A noise came from the hallway. No, a whistling sound...

He stood still for a moment, pausing his fantasy, waiting for something dramatic to happen. It was no good faking it, she was definitely angry. He'd been out of the room, she was right, and he had gone to one of the rooms she'd warned him not to enter, but it was empty, there was absolutely nothing there. And shit, all that Bluebeard stuff was just her messing around, right? I mean, she must've known he'd read Bluebeard. And he couldn't remember it exactly, but it's not like she'd actually...

The door at the end of the room opened, accompanied by another whistle.

'Dami?'

There was no one in the doorway, not even an outline. The fire flickered and vanquished itself, again.

'*Popobawa?*' he said, raising volume, but also pitch, and quickly feeling like a four-year old. 'Dami, you there?'

No answer.

Shit.

He knew the door was open because she wanted him to go through it, but he also knew he really didn't want to go through it. The Spanish Inquisition used to open doors like that and nothing good ever happened to anyone who went through those. Fuck that. Fuck her little mysteries. No, I won't go, he told himself.

He stood there, in the same spot, watching the door, watching the shelves, watching the place where the fire used to be. There was no set time limit he'd give himself, but he knew he wasn't going to move. Not until she showed herself again. And apologised. Apologised and showed herself, not until then.

He watched the door, watched and watched and briefly glanced at the shelves, the fire then came right back and watched and watched and waited for that fucking apology.

Back in London

'Is it okay if I leave some free zines here?'

The guy looked at me, cold. He was dressed like a chef but didn't seem to be doing any cooking. I looked around. There wasn't even a kitchen.

'What's a zine?'

'A zine?'

'Yes, zine.'

'Like a DIY magazine type thing...handmade, or hand printed...but there's no advertising and it's kind of stapled together, looks quite cheap, rough, black and white usually cos colour ink's expensive and...'

He was pulling that same 'I don't know where Pakistan is' face Mark Wahlberg did in *Oleanna*, so I simplified.

'It's basically a magazine.' I pulled one of the zines out of the rucksack and handed it to him. 'Here.'

He looked at the cover.

'Who is this...green man?'

'Just a random guy. Or girl.'

'Superhero?'

'Kind of.'

He opened the zine and flicked through. Some of the pages confused him, I could tell, and others he was just looking at the pictures. What does Don Cheadle have to do with your magazine?

That's what he wanted to ask, I knew it. Same in every place. And today, fuck, today it was worse. Five places I'd been to already, and all of them had told me no. Two of them had threatened to set dogs on me, even though I could see they didn't have any. Was that what the industry was now? Who are you and how dare you try and ask me anything?

'You make this?'

'Most of it, yeah.'

He looked at the cover again.

'You draw the green man?'

'No, not me. That was someone else, a guy I know.'

'What guy?'

'You want his name?'

'If you want...'

I looked at him and his chef uniform. What was the point? Soren, that's him. Soren from Fresno. You know him? No? Okay then.

'Doesn't matter. He's very far away anyway,' I said.

'Hmm...'

'Yeah. Very far.'

He was flicking through the pages again.

'Is it...' I started to speak, but he cut me off.

'Let me ask...' He called over to someone else, a waitress also dressed like a chef, also without a kitchen. She looked at the cover, smirked a little then said, 'sure, put it over there...on the piano'.

'You sure?'

She was saying yes? No dogs?

'Yes, over there. On the piano.'

'Okay, cool. Piano. Thanks.'

I took the sample zine back, smiled at her, and looked for the piano. It was in the corner and had a whole load of flyers spread out on the top, so I went over, took out ten of my babies and dumped them on top. Take that, trash. Something worthy has arrived and it's time you...

'Excuse me, what is that for?'

Another voice, this one accented. I turned back to the floor and saw a guy sitting at a nearby table, not dressed like a chef.

'This?' I held up a zine.

'Yes, what is it?'

'The woman said I could put it here.'

'No, I want to know what it is.'

I handed it over and he looked at the cover.

'It's a free zine...like a magazine, but...'

He threw the zine back across the table. 'I'm sorry, we're not interested.'

'What?'

'We don't put DIY material on the piano.'

'Sorry, but that girl said...' I pointed at the waitress who wasn't there anymore. 'Okay, she's gone, but she said it was fine.'

'Sorry, not interested.'

'Huh, who's not?'

'We don't put DIY stuff here, it clutters up the place. Try Starbucks.'

Try Starbucks? Who was this motherfucker?

'Look, the waitress just said it was okay, so I'm gonna go with what she said.'

The guy stood up, full height. He looked like a taller, skinnier Stanley Tucci, with a 'I'm the prince, you're just a vending machine repairman' expression on his face.

'She...is a waitress. I'm the manager.'

'What, you?'

'I decide what goes on the piano.'

'You're the manager of this whole place?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, wait...hang on...maybe I was a bit abrupt...a bit vague about the...okay, five seconds...just give me five seconds, I'll show you the zine, the good bits...the movie stuff in the middle...'

I picked up the zine he'd just thrown back at me, and opened it up in front of him. I didn't know why, but it seemed like a good idea to show him the inside of the zine. If he saw the text, the bowels, then how could he say no?

The pages opened up before him.

'Like I said, I'm not interested...'

'If you just look at it...read a few lines...' I looked for the part other people seemed to like, the Don Cheadle part. 'See, you know him? It's Don Cheadle...'

'You seem to be deaf. I said we don't stock DIY things on the piano, it clutters up the...no, stop showing me Don Cheadle, I don't care. I've got an interview soon, I don't have time for this...*jebana suki*, are you deaf, stop showing me, I'm not interested.' He swatted the zine harder than he'd probably intended and it flew out of my hand. It landed on the far end of the table before skidding off the edge and onto the floor. Good shot, Tucci.

'You gonna pick that up?'

'Excuse me?'

'Are you going to pick up my zine?'

He stared at me, probably mistaking 'zine' for 'twat' in some language he didn't know. 'Okay, get out. No more talking. Get out of my restaurant, go.'

'No.'

'It was not a question.' He pointed towards the door. 'Get out and take your photocopy thing with you.'

'Photocopy? It's a zine, not a...'

'I do not care. Leave.'

'...fucking photocopy. Good. I don't want you to care. Cunt.'

His eyes went nova.

'Zine...' I added under my breath.

'What did you say?'

'Zine.'

He put his finger against my chest and jabbed. Twice. 'You call me a cunt?'

'Don't jab me.'

'You call me a cunt in my own restaurant...'

He tried to grab my collar, but I swatted his hand away and pushed him back towards his chair.

'Little shit...' He put his hand out to the edge of the table to steady himself. 'You broke my hand.'

'Fuck off...'

He held up his hand. No bruises, no fingers at weird angles.

'That's not broken.'

'Jebana suki...'

'Jabana what?'

'Mrowka smutna...'

'Is that Czech?'

'W Polsce mamy zabić mrówek jak ty...'

'Man, you're literally talking to yourself. I have no idea what...'

He pushed off the table, dropped his right arm and moved towards me.

'...you're saying.'

#

The police interview room looked just like some marketing guy's office. There was a window and a computer and a pie chart on the wall, but no tape recorder. And no police.

They'd kept me waiting here for...what? Hours? Four hours? I didn't have a watch, and their clock was stuck on eleven twenty-seven, so I wasn't sure. I guessed they were getting Tucci's side of things first. Not that I gave a shit. I mean, yeah, I half punched him on the neck and cheek one or two times and tried to kick him in the shin, but he half punched me too. And he half punched first. It wasn't one-way punching. And besides, I had my defence. He called my zine 'trash'.

The door opened and what I guessed was a policeman walked in. You couldn't tell as he was dressed in an Adidas jacket and jeans. Was I not important enough for a suit? Or come to think of it, a tape recorder?

'You're the guy who assaulted...!' He looked at the file in his hand. '...Mr Kudesnic?'

'Not assaulted. Half punched.'

'Uh-huh.'

'He assaulted me first.'

'Right.'

He sat down and told me my lawyer had just arrived and was sorting a few things out on the front desk.

Man, Jay was here already? That was fast.

'Okay.'

We sat there for a few minutes in silence. Me looking at his Adidas jacket, him playing with his phone.

'There's no tape recorder in here.'

'What's that?'

'No recording device. ' I pointed at the empty table. 'Is that normal?'

'You got something to record?'

'No.'

We sat there in silence for another minute. He carried on playing with his phone and I counted cracks on the floor.

'I already talked to the other guy...'

I jumped a little at the sudden noise, looked up and saw he was talking to me, only now his accent was different. Like council estate different.

'...what's his name, Kudesnik? Yeah, I was just in with him a minute ago. Bit of a cunt, actually. Head up to here, mate.' He gestured something like a balloon.

'Yeah.'

'Called you a chink too.'

I dry coughed.

'Said the chink started it, the chink hit first. Chink came in trying to force his magazine on me. His exact words.'

'Can't you charge him for that?'

'Nah, I don't blame you for hitting him. If someone said that shit to me, I'd smack him too. The guy deserves it.'

'I told him not to jab me.'

'Probably provoked you, right?'

I didn't answer.

'Nah, there's no shame in it, mate. If that'd been me...I would've swung first, definitely...no shame in it, at all.'

There was a knock at the door. Jay walked in and sat down next to me, mouthing 'what the...' while putting his briefcase on the table.

'I didn't do anything.'

He leaned over to my ear. 'What have you said?'

'Nothing. Just 'I didn't assault him', ' I whispered back.

'Good.' He went back to the desk and looked at the case file next to the policeman. 'Okay, I'm gonna need to have a minute with my client. Maybe two. Can I get the file?'

The Adidas jacket tossed the file over then went back to his phone. 'Couldn't give a shit, mate.'

'You did a second ago,' I said. 'You said the other guy was a cunt.'

Jay knocked me on the elbow.

'What?'

#

Outside the police station the sky was already grey. Jesus. I'd gone out delivering at nine, and now the day was done. Thanks a lot, Tucci...Kudesnic...whatever your name was.

Jay walked alongside, typing on his phone.

'Everyone's doing it now...'

'Yeah...!' He looked up from his phone. 'What?'

'The phone...'

'Never mind phones, bats. What's all this Robocop shit you been pulling? I know I said I'd help you out if you ever got in a mess, but...'

'It was his fault. He called my zine trash.'

'Jesus...'

'What?'

'He called your zine trash...that's why you hit him?'

'He hit me too.' I pointed at the parts of my face that felt rough. 'See.'

'Yeah, good job you got some marks otherwise you'd be in real shit. I'm not messing, bats, you got pretty fucking lucky today.'

'Huh, which part was lucky?'

'If that guy wasn't such a twat to his staff, they probably would've taken his side, said you smacked him first.'

'Man, he swung first, not me. And it wasn't really a fight, we just scuffled a bit...grappled...'

'Nah, doesn't matter. If they liked him, they could've lied and said you hit first. All they said was, 'argh, we didn't see anything, two of

them were wrestling on the table, trying to punch each other, that's all of it.'

'That's what the police told you?'

He nodded. 'The guy had cameras too, but he never turned them on during the day.'

'Ha...cheapskate.'

'Yeah, and if the staff had pinned it on you, that would've been it, no video evidence to get you off. It would've been your word against his and half his kitchen.'

'Good job he's a twat then.'

Jay looked at his phone, shaking his head. 'I'm serious, bats, you dodged a bullet today. You could've got eighteen months for that.'

'You don't sound very serious...'

'Eighteen months, twelve months served...'

'You're staring at your phone again.'

'Wait a sec...'

'Better not be one of your Ukrainian girls.'

'Sorry, mate. Client. Nah, I am serious, I'm painting it out for you, how lucky you were.' He put his phone back in his pocket. 'Okay, bats. Legal summary. You fucked up, you got lucky. Long as you don't do it again, I absolve you of your sins. You're not still Sean Penn, are you?'

I shrugged.

'That a yes?'

'It was hours ago. I'm not mad.'

'Right. Bom dia. No more hitting strangers.' Jay stopped by one of the parked cars and checked his pockets. 'Wanna get a drink?'

'Are we done with all this then?'

'Pretty much.'

'You're sure I won't have to pay any damages?'

'Nah, you hit each other, remember?'

'Yeah, but you said...'

'No video, no property damage. Give it two weeks and it'll all be buried, trust me.'

'You sure?'

'Robert Shaw, bats. Long as you muzzle yourself.'

I nodded.

'Drink?' he asked again, holding up an imaginary glass.

#

We sat outside a half-bar, half bicycle repair shop somewhere near Old Street, him staring at the two women on the next table, me talking at his hair.

'I went to Brixton the other day.'

'Yeah...'

'There's not much there.'

'Yeah...'

'And Surrey Quays. I went to Surrey Quays yesterday.'

'Surrey...'

'Not much there either. Shopping mall and...yeah, that's about it.'

'What you going to Surrey Quays for?'

'I don't know.'

'There's nothing there.'

'I didn't stay long. An hour maybe. Then I went down to the river. Nothing much there either.'

'River Tam...'

'Didn't cross it. Just sat on a bench and read that book again...remember, the one I told you about...Heinlein, the guy who did Starship Troopers.'

'Yeah...'

'The one with all the giant bugs and the propaganda stuff...'

'Don't know...'

'Would you like to know more? And then they show those scientists torturing the giant bugs and blood flying at the screen...remember?'

'Yeah...what's that?'

Jay left the women and looked at me for the first time in ten minutes. Maybe more, I wasn't counting.

'I said, have you seen Starship Troopers?'

'The one with Denise Richards? Yeah, I know it. She gets them out, they're bigger than everyone expected...'

'No, that was something else. This one...it's the one with Doogie Howser and the guy from...what was he from...'

Jay picked his drink off the table, glanced at the girls, then back at me.

'You wanna hear my plan?'

'About Doogie Howser?'

'I've got it all sketched out. Nah, not Howser, my plan.'

'Do I have a choice?'

'Okay, I'll replay. Step one, I finish up all this legal aid shit, see out my training contract...I told you about that, right? Hey, this way...'

'I'm listening.'

'Okay. So, I finish that and then...then it's level up time, bats. I can scale up to the big leagues, high salary work. All I gotta do is see it out, another nine months maybe, then cut myself off from the shit pit I'm in now...keep it polite though, maybe, thanks for the leg up and all that, but I need to grow, something like that...then...once I'm out, I can go and flog myself to one of the big comps...big salary, better cases, less work etcetera...then, another year, maybe two years down the road, I come in four hours a day, maybe less...and the rest of the time, freedom...and...this is the good bit...when I've got all this career shit sorted, we can start writing that screenplay...you and me, money in the bank, no need to worry about that side of it...we can just sit down, write out something decent and bam...we're in. Hollywood Boulevard, no looking back.' He clapped his hands once. 'What you think?'

'Hollywood Boulevard is where the nuts hang out...'

'What...no, it's the star pavement, the movie stuff.'

'And the crazy people in Jesus robes on the other side of the road. I've been there, man, I've seen them. They're not violent, but it's pretty weird.'

'Forget that...what about the plan?'

I drank some of my beer, hoping he'd change the subject. He didn't. He looked at the girls on the other table again, for a second, then came right back.

'Well?'

'I don't know.'

'That's it?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Something positive. The screenplay thing, it's our way in...all we gotta do is write something with a freaky concept and we're there.'

'I'm writing now, man.'

'What? The screenplay?'

'No.'

'The zine?'

I took more of the beer.

'Mate, come on...not having a go, but...come on. No one ever got anywhere doing a zine.'

'Not just the zine...other stuff too.'

'What other stuff?'

'I don't know yet...stuff.'

The girls on the other table got up and left. Jay followed them for a second, probably their asses, then mumbled something and came back to me.

'In all honesty, bats...where is this zine getting you?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, what's the point of it? Where's it getting you?'

'It's not...that's not the right question.'

'Seriously, just tell me straight...where is it getting you?'

'Why does it have to get me anywhere?'

'What, so you wanna write for no one?'

'I'm not...'

'Really? Okay then. What's the reaction been?'

'From who...which one?'

'Anyone, the last one...has anyone messaged you?'

'What? Like e-mail? Or snail mail?'

'You're dodging.'

'Am not. I'm...'

'Has anyone messaged you about the zine?'

'Some...'

'Who?'

I looked at a guy outside fixing his bike chain, trying to buy myself some time. Who did like the zine? Anyone? I thought about the guy a few months back who'd picked up issue six and sent me an e-mail to say he'd found me, but had I found him? Then there was the girl who'd sent me a picture of her muff. Would they do?

'Come on...who?'

'There was one...okay, it was kinda weird, but...there was one person who sent me an e-mail from Ljubljana.'

'Where? Who?'

'Ljubljana. It's in Slovenia.'

'Yeah...'

'Near Italy and Croatia.'

'I know Slovenia, bats. Who sent the e-mail?'

'I don't know exactly, but they said I was a genius.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. They said I was a genius and I should come to Ljubljana.'

'What? That's it?'

'There was a little more...'

'Spill.'

I picked up my drink and took some, and then a little more. I knew what he was gonna say about this.

'They said I should come to Ljubljana and stay with them...'

'What...'

'Stay with them forever.'

'Bildo...!' Jay put his hand over his mouth, but I could tell he was laughing. He knew I could tell he was laughing. Fucker.

'What? It's still a fan.'

'Yeah, a fan that wants your cock. You got a pic? It is a girl, right?'

'I don't know...'

'Could be George Michael...'

'What?'

'Or Pee Wee Herman.'

'Fuck off.'

Jay picked up his drink but couldn't take any. It was all just too fucking funny. 'Jesus. Come and stay with me forever...how do you find these people?'

'Yeah, well, I'm not gonna go. I don't know why you're laughing so hard.'

'Can't disappoint the fan-base...'

'You're a prick.'

'Sorry, bats. I'm not knocking what you've done...really. It's cool, you've done your own zine...but it is funny. You gotta nod your head, it is some funny fucking shit.'

I picked my jacket up off the bench and started walking.

'Hey...where you going?'

'Ljubljana.'

#

I didn't really go to Ljubljana. I went home. Past the fake church. Past the ill-looking grass. Past the huge building site with the long pink board saying 'see the future, Bermondsey Spa'. Fucking Bermondsey. All I saw was a load of dirt and concrete and five inactive cranes pointing the wrong way. Man, maybe Ljubljana wouldn't be so bad. I mean, the e-mail sender was clearly a nut, but the city itself...could it really look any worse than this place?

I walked through Prospect Estate, past all the windows and doors and hedges that looked exactly the same, and then around the corner and into the...

Shit, the tunnel. I'd forgotten all about it. Five muggings, all in the last month, all late night. What time was it now?

I lifted up my wrist then remembered I didn't have a watch.

'Eyes open, old man,' I muttered to myself.

The tunnel was only around fifty metres and well lit, but it never felt good once you were inside. I checked in front and then behind. No one about. No teens or hoodies or dodgy looking faces hanging out on their own. I walked a little faster anyway, just in case one of them was hiding in the tunnel wall or behind one of those blue pillars.

But there was no one.

Nothing.

I got to the end and checked behind the last pillar...still no one around. I looked at the road ahead. Nothing there either. I didn't know

if that was a good or bad thing...muggers would surely prefer quiet streets...but I also knew that muggers weren't invisible either. If they wanted me, they'd have to show themselves, and if they did [and looked like a mugshot] I'd just reach in my pocket and take my keys out.

I walked a little further, seeing no more people, so I went back to my previous thoughts. Wait, what was I thinking? Okay, Ljubljana, the nut...maybe that person wasn't a nut, maybe they were normal, only a little more exuberant than other people.

Maybe going there wasn't such a bad idea...

Shit. Who were they?

I crossed the road to avoid the two guys on bikes who had come out of nowhere. Or not nowhere, maybe just the side road over there, but it was fast wherever it was. They were talking, but went quiet as I got closer...no, they wouldn't be muggers if they're on bikes, would they? I thought about it between the anxiety. What kind of hours did muggers keep anyway? Did they wait at a certain spot, for a certain amount of time? Like, nine to two in the morning at one end of the tunnel, then go home. Some nights they're lucky, some nights they're just waiting in a tunnel. Or was it more spontaneous? Did they just walk down a street and get lucky? Should I be spontaneous too? I did it with the zine, now I could do it with travel. Couldn't I?

The two guys passed by without saying a word. I breathed out, but not so loud they could hear me do it.

#

The next morning, I had to work.

Not real work, just teaching.

It wasn't the best job in the world...in fact, it wasn't even a job. I had two students: a Japanese business graduate who also had her own business back in Japan, and a Mainland Chinese kid who was staying in a hotel in London for two weeks and needed me to babysit him.

The two of them together gave me about a thousand quid; the Japanese one on her own, about a hundred a month. Truth was, I'd

I stared at him wondering if staring at him for long enough would make him stop lying, but it didn't. He just repeated, 'she likes it, she likes it,' a few more times then stopped talking.

'Fine. Lunch, lesson and 'Moon Prison'. Again.'

#

We went to a coffee shop halfway between the cinema on Tottenham Court Road and King's Cross and tried doing the lesson.

Today, I'd made something based on the TV show 'Unfound'. I had a feeling he wouldn't know what it was, but I had a slightly stronger feeling that neither of us really gave a shit.

'I don't know,' he said, sucking up his kiwi juice.

'It was a TV show...I never really watched it, but...it's about some people who crash on an island and it's really weird...like, there's a monster made of smoke and...'

'I don't know.'

'It's just like 'Moon Prison', man. There's a Korean couple in it...'Moon Prison' has the Japanese guy...it's very similar. Well, kind of. They're different countries, different nationalities, yeah, but...'

'I'm sleepy.'

'...it's not that different when...hey, are you listening?'

'I don't like Japan. They're very evil...they killed many of us...I hate them.'

'Err...yeah. Shall we do the lesson then?'

'I want to sleep.'

'Now?'

'I'm sleepy.'

'But...what are we gonna tell your parents? You sleep every time we start doing a lesson...it's not good, man.'

It was no use, the kid already had his eyes closed. Jesus, what was wrong with him? I knew he didn't like English, and I knew he wasn't dumb [the kid was a computer genius, apparently], but did he have to be so fucking lazy? None of the other Chinese students I'd taught had been this bad.

'What about 'Moon Prison'?'

He opened his eyes. 'Watch in one hour. I wake up later, sleep now.'

'Okay, man. Fine. It's your time.'

I sat back in the chair and pretended to mark the sheet of paper in front of me. I didn't know if anyone was watching me, but better to look busy than sit opposite a Chinese kid sleeping with his mouth wide open in the middle of the day.

Or maybe it wasn't so bad.

Maybe they'd think we were brothers.

#

Turned out 'Moon Prison' wasn't any better the third time.

The kid seemed to like it just the same...he shook his legs when he got excited and started making noises like an ostrich when something blew up...but for me it was still shit.

The problem was: the story. The acting. The noise.

The concept wasn't great either.

But it did give me two and a half hours to a] get paid and, b] dream of making zines in Ljubljana.

Strangely, I couldn't seem to dwell much on either. The only thing that kept coming back was the idea of introducing the kid to my Japanese student and forcing both of them to talk about the invasion of Manchuria.

I'd lose cash, sure, and it was pretty morbid, but it would be fun.

Probably.

Or maybe not fun, but weird.

A seventeen-year old kid and the Japanese Shannon Tweed...

Maybe they'd end up fucking...arguing then fucking...like Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy in 48 Extra Hours.

Maybe the kid would get nervous and I'd have to take over...

'Show soon?'

I blinked, realising the kid was staring at me. 'Huh?'

'Moon Prison 2 show soon?'

'Nah, no.' I looked around and saw everyone else had left the cinema. 'I don't know. I hope not.'

'I want to see it now.'

'Yeah, well, they have to make it first.'

'I give them money, they make it.'

'Okay, man.'

'In China, they make movie for two months. Making and showing, everything.'

'Efficient.'

'E-Fishing?'

'What?'

'You go fishing?'

'No, efficient. Hard working.' The kid was putting his earphones in.
'Never mind.'

'We go eat now.'

'Yeah.'

#

By the time the babysitting was done and the kid had wandered off into the streets of London, going God knows where, it was nearly dark.

I'd packed a hundred and twenty zines in my rucksack before I left that morning...if I was lucky, I could get rid of them all before ten.

If I was unlucky, the kid would call me and say he was lost. It had happened twice already, in the first week.

Maybe I should turn my phone off, I thought, walking towards a couple of places I knew in Soho.

I didn't.

No matter how annoying that kid was, he didn't deserve to be left wandering King's Cross alone at night.

#

Ultimately, it didn't matter.

The kid didn't call and the zines were delivered.

It wasn't as bad as the day before, either. No one challenged me, and I didn't half-punch anyone in the neck. Some places took the zines, some didn't. But there were no assholes.

#

I got home and checked the website.

Nothing new.

Then the e-mail account. This did have something:

'I repeat, you are a genius. I don't say this to many people, and I really do know what I am talking about. It would be great if you could come to Ljubljana. It is where all the beautiful art is. Trust me. Start at Metelkova. It's an art commune near the train station. From there you can find me.

D.'

I checked the account and it was the same person. D.

I re-read the message and thought it out. More information, but who was this person? I googled 'Metelkova' and it was true, there was an art commune in Ljubljana. I read some more. A former military barracks turned into an art commune in the late 80s by artist squatters.

The government has constantly challenged its legitimacy and has made attempts at selling the site, and evicting the artists, but with limited success. Now most people embrace the place and its community. Art conquers all.'

I looked at the message for a long time. Should I? Shouldn't I? I could do it, I couldn't do it. What about London? What about art?

My eyes closed somewhere between art and responsibility.

#

The next day there was a letter in the post.

'Billy,

I did some digging and got your address. I know it seems strange, but you really must come. To Ljubljana, I mean. You can make your name here and write some great stuff. If it's money you're worried about then don't. I have taken care of it.

D.'

'What's that, mate?'

Johan walked in carrying his bike. I shrugged and said, 'nothing,' then checked inside the envelope.

Impossible. I pulled out the notes, lots of notes.

'Jesus fucking Christ...' said Johan, looking over my shoulder.

'I know, man.'

Johan put his bike in the corner and came back to the table, still muttering 'Jesus fucking Christ.'

'You could go to the moon with all that,' he said.

'Yeah...'

He moved closer, his nose almost sniffing the notes.

'Or...you could come to the casino with me tonight. Change that money into...more money!'

'I don't think so, man.'

'We can play roulette...really, I know how to play like the expert.' He tapped a finger against his head. 'All you have to do is pick one colour and just stay with it all the time.'

'That can't be true...'

'It is. Really true.' He sat down, eyes on the cash again. 'Except last time...it was very bad, it landed on the black fourteen times in a row. Good if you have black, but, no, all I have is red.'

I counted out the cash while he talked. Even holding it in my hands, it didn't seem real. Was there any way this could be the Slovene version of monopoly money?

'Who sent you all this? Your mother?'

'I doubt it.' I gestured towards the ceiling.

'Oh...'

'Yeah.'

He patted the table with his hand for a few seconds.

'I don't know what to say.'

'It's okay, man.'

'My mother's still alive.'

'That's good.'

'Or maybe she's dead now. I don't know. I haven't spoken to her for six years.'

'That's...not so good.'

'It's okay, man, she's a bitch.'

'Oh.'

'Even if she's in hell, and I can get her out, I won't go there.'

'Okay, man.'

'Even if I'm in hell too...I won't speak to her. She can go fuck herself, I don't care.'

'I'm gonna go sit in my room and...'

'Stay in Hell, bitch.'

'...count the money again.'

#

I sat on my bed with Ken Foree on the wall opposite, glaring down from his shopping mall movie and watching me count out the money. Sorry, Ken, this ain't for you. I'm not even sure it's for me either, but...

I finished counting.

Four-thousand, one-hundred and twenty pounds. All from my number one fan.

I looked at my phone and saw it was half one already. Today was supposed to be my last day with the Chinese kid, but...now I had all this cash...fuck it.

I'd just call his minder and say I was sick. I'd still done nine days, they'd have to pay me for that. And even if they didn't...who cares?

Some nut had just sent me four grand in an envelope.

#

'Do what?'

Jay sat down on the step, the bottle of Thai beer almost spilling out of his hand.

'Four thousand quid. Give or take.'

'Fuck...me.' He looked around, but there was nothing much to see. It wasn't Friday night, it was Tuesday, and it wasn't the prime part of London, it was a back alley in Dalston. 'What, all from that nut?'

'Yup.'

I sat down on the step next to him and drank some of my beer. Tsing Tao, just like the old days in Hong Kong. Very old days. Ancestral days. Well, four years ago.

'The one who wants you to go to Slovenia?'

'Ljubljana, yeah.'

'Looby, what?'

'Ljubljana. In Slovenia.'

'Right, yeah. I knew that, bats. I was just pushing your buttons.' He looked up at two girls walking past at the end of the alley, one of them wearing a Scooby Doo t-shirt, and drank some Tsing Tao. 'So, what you gonna do?'

'I don't know. Go there?'

'Go to Loobylana?'

'Is it a bad idea?'

'Not if there's a money tree there. I say go.'

I leaned back against the wall behind me. The buildings around us seemed abandoned, with posters covering their walls and most of the windows smashed. Down the left side of the alley there was a tunnel with train tracks running above. The other side, a guy pissing against the wall.

'Yeah, maybe I should go.'

'No, wrong pronoun. We should go.'

'Two of us?' I looked at his face, his eyes ballooning out. 'I don't know. What if the nut...what if D only wants to see me?'

'Bats...of course she only wants to see you. Have you never seen any of those nut movies? You're gonna get there, she'll get you on your own, she'll tie you up and then she'll do shit to you, man. Cut off your dick and put it in your ear, some weird shit like that.' He put his finger in his ear. 'But see, if I come too, she can't do that then, can she? It's safety in numbers.'

'Good point.'

'Unless she's got numbers too. I mean, she sent you four grand in an envelope, maybe she's got security or something. Big Slovene gym monkeys to pin you down so she can...'

'Or maybe she's just lonely?'

He shook his head and his bottle. 'Or maybe she's got gym monkeys?'

'Fuck off.'

'Nah, I'm just toying with you, Cotton Weary. I still say go...both of us.'

'When?'

Jay looked at his watch.

'Not now...' I said.

'Don't be dumb. We'll go next week. No, wait, I've got court next week. We'll go the week after. Fly to Venice, get the train to Loobs, simple.'

He held up his bottle and told me to toast to it, so I did. 'To Loobylana...' he said to the street, to the buildings, to the man doing up his flies, 'may it be nothing like this shithole.'

#

When I got home there was another letter for me.

'Billy the genius, I forgot to include spending money.

Damijana'

So that's what the D was for...Damijana. Dami-yana. Wait, was that female? Or was whoever it was just telling me to fuck off? I checked it online and found out it was genuine. Damijana = Female Slovene name meaning 'to have power'.

Damijana...

It wasn't the most beautiful name I'd ever heard...in fact, it sounded like the demon from those 'Wishmaster' films...but at least it wasn't Dieter. Or David. Or Dot Cotton. At least she was a woman.

I put the letter on the table and picked up the envelope. Inside was another four grand. I took it out and put it on the table and thought,

Jesus, how much cash does this nut have? Is she Slovene royalty or something? And she's pretty fucking trusting to just pop it in an envelope and send it in the post. What if some guy in the post office had opened it?

And a further thought...if I just sat here, would she send more?

No, she wouldn't. She'd get mad. She'd come here. Find me and tie me up and cut my dick off and put it in my ear.

I put one hand up to my ear then changed my mind and dropped it right back down. Fuck you, Jay. You and your pervert imagination.

The door opened and Johan cycled into the living room, saying 'beep, beep'.

'You okay, man?'

He stopped the bike by the table and looked down at the cash.

'Money, money, money...I love money...in a money world...'

'Not the same money as before, man.'

'What?'

'New money. Came this morning.'

He stared at the new notes. 'I don't understand.'

'Me neither, man.'

'Me neither, man,' he repeated. 'You know...you have to go here...go to Loobylana and marry this money.'

'I am, I'm going.'

'To marry money?'

'To Ljubljana. Next week. What the hell, right?'

'What the hell...what the hell...money, money, money...I love money...'

Five minutes later and he was asleep.

I sat there for a while longer, thinking of the journey ahead, of Slovenia and Ljubljana and what kind of place it would be. What was it? Communist Bloc? I wasn't sure so I got up and checked online, and, shit, I was wrong, it was free, it'd been free for a long time. The first new state that'd come crawling out of old Yugoslavia, in fact.

So what kind of building did Damijana live in? A palace? Man, she had the money for it. Unless...unless she'd just mailed me her life savings? But that's insane...no one would do that, it was...it was insane. No, she was rich. Had to be.

I took a cigarette out of the pack and put it in my mouth and reached down on the table for a light. But there was nothing there. Fuck, eight grand in hand and still no fire.

I got up, walked outside the flats and waited for someone to go past with a cigarette.

Fifteen minutes later, I got one.

The guy shook a little as he gave it to me, probably thinking it was strange for a man to be standing in the street at one in the morning.

'Thanks, man.'

'No problem,' he said, with an accent.

'Hey, are you Slovene?'

'Sorry?'

'Your accent...where are you from?'

'Romania.'

'Oh, sorry. I thought you might be Slovene.'

'I don't know,' he said, giving shoulders and then walking over to the other side of the street.

'Thanks for the light, man,' I shouted.

He didn't look back.

#

The next day, I stood outside Foyle's, the fake indie bookshop that wouldn't take my zines [I had to sneak them in to the stairwell leading to the café and leave them next to the flyers], waiting for the Japanese student.

Despite being eight grand healthier, I'd decided to do another lesson with her. It wasn't fun exactly, but I'd run out of places to put zines and there was nothing much else to do, not until the trip to Ljubljana.

Besides, I'd never liked staying at home in the afternoon. It made me feel like a wretch, even if I did close the curtains and block out the rest of the world.

As usual, the woman was late.

When she did arrive, she walked straight past me, shouting back that we should hurry up as her essay was due in the next day.

'Huh?'

#

'John Lewis business model...,' she said inside, sitting opposite, only occasionally looking me in the eye. 'I need to write about it.'

I leaned forward, scanning the pieces of paper she'd laid out on the table.

'You want me to check the grammar for you?'

'No, I need you to write.'

'Write what?'

'You write this essay, I check this essay. Maybe it is take three hours...then we can go to my house and eat dinner. A reward for you.'

'Wait...'

'It is okay. It is about John Lewis business model. I have some notes for you, but I do not know my argument. You can think of this, can you?'

'Tomoko, wait...you want me to write your essay for you?'

'Yes, you write, I check.'

'All of it?'

'Yes.'

'How many words?'

'It is not bad, only 2000. I think you can do this fast.' She took off her leather jacket, leaned forward and showed most of her chest. She'd done this for the last four lessons too. The third lesson, she'd disagreed with every word I'd said then invited me to drink with her at a nearby hotel. 'Then we eat dinner at my house.'

'But...I don't know anything about economics.'

'This does not important. I have notes, you can look and write...'

I picked up the notes from the table and flicked through. There were six pages in total, all of them from the John Lewis Wikipedia page. What the fuck?

'Tomoko, look...!' I put the notes back down and focused on her forehead. 'I can't do this. I'm not a business student, I don't know about any of this stuff. If you write it, sure, I can check it for you...but I can't write the actual content...the essay.'

'No, you write it, it is no problem for me. I only need the passing mark, not a great mark.'

'I don't know if I can get a passing mark...'

'You write it, I help if you need...then you can have the prize...I make dinner for us.'

'Tomoko, stop...'

'I have the 1982 bottle of wine...it is a good vintage. I open it for us, we can eat dinner and drink the wine.'

'But...seriously, I literally don't know anything about economics. If I write this, it could be bad, very bad.'

'It will not. You are a good writer, I believe you.'

'Good writers can still write rubbish...'

'No, this is wrong. You can write it very well, I can check.' She pushed the notes towards my side of the table and leaned forward again. 'We can do it fast then eat dinner.'

I looked at the paper in front of me. Pretty soon it was shoved aside and replaced with her computer.

'You start now, okay?'

#

Four and a half hours later and it was done.

I checked through the first two pages, decided it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, then gave it over to her.

She read through quickly and nodded.

'You make many mistakes, but it is okay.'

'What mistakes?'

'Many. It is no problem. I can fix it tomorrow morning.'

'I was following your notes, Tomoko. I thought the arguments I wrote were actually quite decent?'

'Nani?'

'Decent...good. I thought the arguments were good.'

'Yes. It is no problem. I can fix it.' She turned off the computer and put it back in her bag. 'Okay, quite late, now we go for dinner, ne?'

'Actually, Tomoko...I'm pretty tired.'

'No, we just go to the supermarket now, buy things then go to my place for dinner. I can do the cooking, it is okay.'

'I think I'm just gonna head home.'

'You go home now?'

'Yeah.'

'No need, you can have dinner with me, it's better. You can stay at my house, too, it is okay.'

'Sorry?'

'If it is too late, you can stay. I have many free spaces.'

'You want me to stay at your place?'

'It is more warm than outside too. Yes, you stay with me, it's better.'

'The whole night?'

'If it is too late, is okay, no problem. You can sleep on the sofa.'

I stared up at her, trying to figure out if a) she was serious, and b) I wanted to do this or not. She was in her forties, looked quite decent, disagreed with me a lot, had an implacable face, wasn't boring...almost like a Japanese Anne Archer. And it had been a while since...

'But no playing, I don't like this.'

'Sorry?'

'I mean, we don't have sex or something like this.'

'Ah.'

'Only dinner, no playing. Maybe we can watch a movie too after if there is time.'

I stood up, putting my bag on my shoulders. 'Nah, I better head off. I've got some things to do anyway. Let me know how the essay goes.'

'You not come for dinner?'

She touched my hand and tried to hold it, but I shrugged her off. 'No, I can't. Too much stuff to do. I'll e-mail you later this week, let you know how much you owe for the lessons.'

'Yes, okay.'

We walked out of the café and down the stairwell, passing my zines on the way. I stopped her and said, hey, I did these, they're mine.

She picked one up and nodded. 'What is it?'

'It's a zine. Like a magazine, but DIY. I told you about them...remember?'

'Okay.'

She put it down and continued down the stairwell, shouting back up that we should get a taxi to her place, it was faster.

I walked slowly down after her, catching up outside. I told her I had to run, and she nodded, hailing a taxi and asking me again if I was coming.

'Goodbye, Tomoko.'

'Bye bye. Mata ne.'

The taxi door closed and Tomoko - her apathy, her chest and her warm house - coasted away. For some reason, I thought of the nut in Ljubljana. Damijana. Was she pretty? Would she also have free spaces? Did it matter?

I turned and looked at the books in the window of Foyles [Martin Amis, Dave Eggers, Derrida], but they were all shit so I worked out which way Bermondsey was and started walking.

#

It was two or three in the morning, the computer was on my lap and the apartment was dark, but I didn't really care.

'Buck Rodgers...Buck Rodgers...'

In an alternate reality, I was probably sleeping with my back towards Tomoko, not sitting here looking for something nostalgic to wank over, but that was that reality and this was mine. Besides, there was nothing to wake up early for tomorrow, so why not?

I typed 'has Erin Gray ever been naked?' into the box and pressed search.

A bunch of images came back of a woman in a jumpsuit, standing next to a man dressed like a hawk. No naked pics. Fuck.

I cleared the box and tried again.

'Has Jolene Blalock ever been naked?'

I waited a few seconds then clicked on videos when the new images started to appear. One of the screenshots had the caption 'STAR TREK BLALOCK RIDES GUY HARD, SHOWS TITS' so I bit down on the sudden self-loathing that had come up, the idea that I

was in any way, on any level the same as the fucker who'd written that caption, and clicked onto the site.

The screenshot was dark...what looked like Jolene lying on a bed with a man's arm covering most of her chest...it was not promising, but better than tugging over Shannon Tweed for the fifty thousandth time so I pressed play.

The video loaded slowly, buffering ten seconds at a time. I clicked further along the bar until it got to the scene from the screenshot.

I kept it paused until it was fully loaded then resumed.

Jazz was playing. Soulless jazz. A little bit of flute too. They were on the bed, in partial darkness. The man ran his hands up her leg, kissed her neck, dry humped her knickers...only a minute left on the bar, where was the sex? Why did she still have that vest on? I thought about clicking ahead but it was nearly done so I let it run, struggling through a few more dry-humps and then a shot of their feet entwined, then finally the vest came off and so did the knickers and...the man pushed forward, Jolene tilted her head, the camera panned back and...and the lighting guy cast a moon-sized shadow over both of them...no, over the whole fucking bed...what were they doing? Where were the tits?

I waited out the final ten or so seconds, hoping the moon shadow would pull back, but it didn't, if anything it got darker...what? What was this?

I clicked back to the search page, muttering at whoever wrote that caption. What were they thinking? She didn't ride anything hard, she was...it was barely discernible that she was even having sex...

I thought of Tomoko and her dinner invitation/sex offer then typed another name.

'Has Jeri Ryan ever been naked?'

The results came up fast.

All negative, with the exception of a few doctored pics of Seven of Nine sucking off the Vulcan security officer.

I stopped, looked at the window and tried to think of others. For some reason I thought backwards, all the way to Hong Kong.

'Has Kitty Zhang ever been naked?'

Yes.

I clicked on the link and an amateur sex video came up. It was strange, I'd always kept tabs on Kitty Zhang, but I'd never heard of this.

The footage played.

Michael from 'Ghost Friend' lay back on a green couch and let Kitty Zhang sit on him. She moved a little then flipped round so the camera could see her front.

I sat there and watched, half-aroused, half-depressed. This was the real Kitty, my crush from six years ago. This was her. This was how she had sex. This was who she chose to have sex with. This was how she spent her free time. Fucking the DJ from 'Ghost Friend.' Fucking the exact same way porn stars fucked. Fucking a rich white cunt who was nowhere near good enough for her. Fucking him for longer than five minutes. Not fucking me. Not meeting me. Not reading my zine. Not even knowing who I was. Fuck you, Kitty. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck...

#

Eight minutes later, I sat back down on the couch and tried not to look at Kitty Zhang wiping jizz off her stomach.

I didn't know why it was still running...didn't they know how to turn the camera off? Did they forget? Probably. Neither of them was looking at it. Not even close. In fact, Michael from 'Ghost Friend' was sat on the edge of the bed, checking his phone.

Man, he was cold. If that were me, I'd...what? What would I be doing? Talking to her like a human being? Would I? If I couldn't speak Mandarin and she couldn't speak English then...okay, I could try speaking Cantonese, she might know some of that, but...would she? And if she could, she'd probably be a few levels above me...would definitely be a few levels above me...I could barely make a sentence, how could she not be? But even if we could talk, what would we say? I either liked her or lusted after her...and if it was only lust then I'd be sat there, on the edge of the bed, doing the exact same thing Michael from 'Ghost Friend' was doing...

'Pathetic...'

Kitty leaned over and kissed Michael from 'Ghost Friend' on the lips.

He didn't look up.

Motherfucker...

I half-wanted to punch the screen but didn't.

There was a '1' on the far-left tab at the top of my screen so I switched to that instead. It was a message, the zinester from Oakland with the Cometbus tattoo.

'Review is up on my site. Hope it's good for you.'

Great, a girl-eye view of the zine. Finally.

I clicked on the link to her site and started reading, trying to remember what this reviewer actually looked like then deciding I didn't really care either way.

'Gupter Puncher #16: review

"This is a zine from London.

It's good and made me uncomfortable. I didn't like the violence, but I liked the video game nostalgia. I initially flipped through it and felt worried about all the words - there are pictures too, of course, but so many words. But they go down easily.

I missed a lot of the pop culture references, but I got a lot of them too.

I like the tone and humor and readability. But these people would never in a million years be friends with me.

Overall, it's very unbalanced - almost entirely boy - a total fail on the Bechdel Test, but it's fun to read and super well done. It totally does what it sets out to do.'

I stopped and muttered 'Bechdel Test' back to myself. I knew that name...at least I thought I did.

Bechdel Test...Bechdel...

It was either the 'are you a simulant' one from Blade Runner or the thing about women in movies, I couldn't remember which, so I searched the name and clicked on the first result that wasn't an ad.

'Bechdel Test has the following three criteria when analysing movies:

- i] it has to have at least two women in it
- ii] these women must talk to each other

iii] they must talk about something besides a man'

Ah, the women in movies test. I remembered Sarah writing about this in one of her e-mails, though I couldn't think what it was she said. Most movies fail the Bechdel Test? Maybe.

I went back to the zine review and checked the context.

'Overall, it's very unbalanced - almost entirely boy - a definite fail on the Bechdel Test, but it's fun to read and super well done.'

Almost entirely boy...

Man, I wanted to argue, but she was right. There was one woman in the whole zine, Tomomi the Hollywood whore, and she was written by me.

At least she didn't mention that...which meant I could write a convincing woman...didn't it?

I switched back to the Bechdel criteria and stared at the third point.

Okay, maybe not convincing, but at least Tomomi wasn't just talking about men. Wasn't that what equality was?

I stood up and walked to the kitchen, stopping next to the stove for a few seconds, forgetting why I came in there and then walking back to the couch.

Man, this Bechdel Test, it was right. What the hell did women ever do in movies? What did they ever do in my zines? Not much. Wait around for men to talk to them? Wipe jizz from their stomachs? Man, no wonder they were angry. They're completely fucking right.

For some reason, Damijana popped into my head...or what I thought Damijana might look like...and told me that I could write the best women if I really wanted to...

Yeah, maybe I could...I'd never really told anyone, but I'd thought it...women weren't difficult, they were just men with longer hair...I could write about a psychopath, a gambler, anything, make it a man then just change the pronouns when it's done...would there really be any real difference?

I clicked onto the list of films under the Bechdel spotlight and chose one at random.

'Iron Man'

I didn't bother reading the text, I could guess what it said. Pepper Potts gets promoted, but it's on Tony Stark's terms, it's not real

independent progress. And she's only promoted because he's fucking her on the side. Then there's Black thingy. Black Widow. She's good at fighting and that's about it. No, wait, she works as the secretary...was that the first or the second movie? Fuck it, doesn't matter. Point is she's an object for Stark to leer at. She's only strong in the same way a man is strong. Physical power, physical strength...this is not a strong female character, it's a woman written by a man who thinks being able to kick people in the balls is progress. What else?

I stared at the words 'Iron Man' and tried to picture myself in Ljubljana, me and Damijana in a giant room, on a giant bed, sprawled out half-naked with candles and no Jay, and...and me telling her that Iron Man could never be Iron Woman because Hollywood was sexist and women could never be playboys or drunks because...

'Put it in your mouth, baby...put it in...round two, baby...'

I stared at the list, trying to work out why it was making sounds, before realising the video was still playing in the background.

'Suck it hard, baby...more teeth...chew it...'

I tried to block it out, but it was no good...Michael from 'Ghost Friend' had a strong voice and the volume bar was high anyway...man, would he at least try a different line? She's sucking already, you think she doesn't know that?

I enlarged the video and hovered over the 'x', telling myself it was cheap to watch it again, cheap to watch it in the first place, but something over-rode the rational side of my brain, the real me, and let the video run.

I sat back and folded my arms.

Fuck it, I wouldn't do anything. Just watch a little then go back to the Bechdel thing...the Bechdel test.

It's not like it meant anything.

#

A few days later, Jay called, telling me one, the assault charge was out, and two, Ljubljana was on. The flight and the train tickets were booked and as a bonus he'd also been chatting to people online and getting some numbers. And by people, he was talking about women.

'You sure you wanna do this again?' I asked.

'Why not, bats? New city, new horizons.'

'But what about last time?'

'Time is an illusion...Alain Prost said so.'

'The French girl...'

'Oh, that.'

'She wasn't an illusion, was she?' He didn't answer, so I went on. 'Or if she was, she was a pretty real-looking one. You did touch her and...'

'Ljubljana. That's where my mind is.'

'Your mind, right.'

'You start looking into the past and the past starts becoming the landscape. You can't do that, bats. Gotta peer into the future, see what's coming up, not what's dragging you back...dragging you down.'

I looked down at the floor. 'You can't ever go back.'

'Exactly.'

I told him I'd see him at Liverpool Street next week then hung up. Never look back, huh? That's what psychopaths said, wasn't it?

#

Two days before the flight to Venice and train ride to Damijana town, Tomoko called and told me she didn't need my help anymore.

'Okay.'

'Your essay did not get a good mark.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'I think maybe it is good if I go to a new teacher and see what he can help me to do.'

'Okay, good luck then.'

'I want to say thank you for your help, Billy. I am happy to meet you, but I think you do not know much about economics. Maybe you should learn some time.'

'I did say I didn't know much...'

'It is no matter now. I have find the new teacher, he can help me I'm sure.'

'Great.'

'He knows about economics, he studied this at Cambridge.'

'Okay, well...did he show you a certificate?'

'What certificate?'

'For Cambridge.'

'No. Why would he need to do this?'

'I don't know, Tomoko. There're a lot of colleges and poly U's in Cambridge. I don't want you to get screwed over.'

'I don't understand. You think he want sex?'

'No...screw over...cheat you out of money...'

'It cannot happen, he is a good teacher, I think. Anyway, he's English and speaks like *Room with a View*.'

'I'm English.'

'Okay, I have to go now.'

'Tomoko, I'm English too. You know that, right?'

'If you want to eat dinner sometimes, send me a message. Yes, I know you are English. It is no problem. Mata ne. Bye bye.'

'Wait, I'm confused...Tomoko...'

She hung up before I could say anything else.

I stared at the Seven of Nine salt shaker on the table. My last source of income...gone. Without Tomoko, I was living off savings...along with the eight grand sent from the nut.

It wasn't that bad, was it?

I went to the kitchen, picked up my brand new 'Dead Ant' lighter and lit a victory cigarette. I blew smoke out of the window and told myself it didn't really matter about the students, not really. It's not like the lesson fees kept me afloat.

Besides, I had new horizons now, Ljubljanan horizons...where the money was plenty and the creative spirit was high.

At least, that was my experience of it so far.

I stubbed out the cigarette and lit another.

'Fuck students,' I said to the kitchen.

I didn't need any of them, not as long as I had Damijana and her endless envelopes of magical money.

Metelkova

'Yeah, that's like the best part. I mean, I've been to, like, twenty-three countries since I came here and...no, wait, twenty-four. Twenty-four countries, Portugal too...and, you know, what I've learnt is...like, the most valuable thing I've learnt...you've really gotta try and make the most of each place, because each country is, like, so different. I mean, in the States it's different too, like each state is different and whatever, but here, it's like you've got all these different countries right next to each other. Seriously, it's really weird, but really cool at the same time, you know? And you've really gotta make the most of them too, I mean, explore and stuff, see stuff, museums and stuff like that, you know? Like, yesterday I was in Genoa for two hours or three hours and I was looking at the station and...I just stood there thinking, you know what, I'm not staying here for three hours, I'm just gonna get out there and see the city, you know? And I only saw maybe two or three hours' worth, but it's cool because now I can say I've seen Genoa, right? I mean, it's not like I went there and just stayed at the station, because that's crazy, and what's the point in even doing that? Vacations should be an adventure, you know? Like an Indiana Jones adventure or something...like, really cool and stuff. That's what I think anyway...that's what I've been...that's like the philosophy I've been following this whole trip, since I got here. And, I mean, it's cool so far...it's been really cool up till now. Yeah, really cool.'

The woman down the other end of the carriage took a breath and then started telling the poor Slovene guy next to her about her forty-five minutes in Sevilla.

I shifted in my seat.

'You listening to this, man?'

Jay was slouched in the seat next to me, playing on his phone. 'Yeah...'

'Yeah?'

No second answer. I looked at what I figured must be the invisible chain between his eyeballs and that fucking machine, and I thought, should I even try to break it? What's he got to say that's so good anyway? I looked at the American woman further down the carriage, her thin head poking out over the top of the seat. What have any of them got to say?

I looked out the window, hoping to see something that would make me a little less annoyed...a Slovene castle, a mountain, a pretty milkmaid, anything...but the only thing distinctive was a sad-looking cottage in the middle of a field. No, at the edge of a field. Next to a stone wall that had been half-kicked down. And two cows ignoring each other. No sign of any pretty milkmaids. Not that I really wanted to see any. I knew they didn't really look like Diane Kruger or whoever the Slovene equivalent was. They probably didn't even exist. Why would they? It didn't make sense. How often could you milk two cows? It couldn't be your only job, that would be impossible. The cows would be exhausted or drained, so you'd have to do other things, like planting crops, feeding chickens, general farm stuff. Ah, farmers, that's what they were. Not milkmaids, farmers. Men and women farmers. Man, why did I not know that?

I put my head against the glass, remembering that feminist thing...the Bechnel test. Each film should have two women talking to each other about something besides men. Would two milkmaids chatting about cows qualify? Or two farmers...two female farmers...two female farmers who happened to be pretty...were they allowed to be pretty?

I pulled my head away from the glass, trying to think of farm films. Witness? That had a farm...kind of...

The tannoy clicked on and played three sharp tones, making Jay shake a little and detach from his phone. The announcer spoke the first few words in static then paused and tried again in Slovene, German

and then English. Her accent was quite strong but I managed to catch something about Ljubljana in three more stops. I stood up, pulled my rucksack from the rack onto the seat and fished inside for a couple of zines. I sat back down and started reading.

'Reading your own work, bats?'

'Just checking...'

'Checking what? It's printed already. They're done. If you see a mistake, what are you gonna do? Kick yourself?'

'Maybe.'

I turned another page, trying to block him out.

'I'm not having a go...'

'Sure.'

'I'm just saying...'

'Uh-huh.'

'The only thing you're gonna get by re-reading is typos. And then you'll get annoyed and start staring out windows again.'

'I won't.'

'Or if there's no window, just pretend to look at your magazine.'

'I don't do that.'

'Yeah, you do.' He stretched out. 'Mate, I still don't understand why you didn't bring your phone.'

'I don't need it.'

'Not yet. But when you're trying to find places to drop your mag...'

'I'll use my eyes.'

'Sure, that'll work.'

'And they're called zines by the way.'

'Zine, magazine, same thing.'

I flicked through some more pages, pretending to read the story about the making of the Green Hornet. Halfway down the third page, there were two typos. One of them a misspelling of Dan Aykroyd, the other a missing word. I didn't tell Jay.

'You gonna drop some in Looby-lana?'

'Might do.'

'Where?'

'Don't know.'

'Come on, bats...you must've done some research. You always do.'

'Nope.'

'You want me to do some?'

'Nope.'

'You sure?'

I turned another page and stared at a shitty picture of Michel Gondry dressed as an astronaut.

'Okay, fine...!' Jay looked over my shoulder for a few more seconds then put his earphones back in. 'Prod me when we get to Loobs.'

#

A few minutes later we hit the first stop. No one got off. I checked on the American woman, but she was still there, still talking.

'You know, the thing about Belgrade is, they had this war, and that was, like, really bad, you know? I mean, you walk around and you see everyone's got this kinda...I don't know, like war face still on, and you think, wow, they've known war. They've actually, like, seen war or whatever. It's like insane, but really cool at the same time, you know?'

I turned my head towards the window and noticed the two guys on the right side of me had the same idea.

'Dude, I don't know about you...!' It was another American voice from the seat behind. Not New Yorkian, something else...Southern maybe? '...but she's annoying the living shit out of me.'

I turned and saw the face. Blonde mop of hair on his head, small eyes, ridiculously big arms...he looked like a pre-feast Gary Busey...or one of those guys who went to an outdoor gym so people could watch him bench.

'Yeah, she's been everywhere...'

'And seen nothing, dude.'

I turned completely and rested my knee on the seat so I could hear him better. 'I know...'

'Two minutes in Spain and she thinks she's Spanish. What's with that?'

'And the war faces of Belgrade,' I mumbled.

'Yeah, I don't know much, but I sure as hell know it takes more than that to be Spanish. Takes more than that to be any country, Belgrade too.'

I nodded.

'You're not Spanish, are you?' he asked.

'Real Spanish or her Spanish?'

'Ha, normal Spanish, dude.' He knocked me on the shoulder. 'Or Spanish Chinese, I guess. Actually, are you Chinese or...'

'British.'

'Yeah, I thought so. That's what you sound like, kinda London British. Your parents are Chinese though, right?'

'Also British. My grandparents came from Hong Kong.'

'Cool, that's cool. I had a girlfriend in the US, same thing. Didn't speak a word of Chinese. Kinda weird actually. Like, when did it get ditched exactly?'

'I can speak some Cantonese.'

'I guess it just gets phased out over time. Like thirty years or something.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'Hey, you're getting off at Ljubljana, right? That's where you're going?'

'All the way.'

'That's two of us then. Good times. I'm Chad, by the way.'

'Billy.'

He knocked me on the shoulder again.

'Is the Indian dude with you?'

'This guy?' I pointed at Jay, who had his eyes closed. What, was he fake sleeping? 'Yeah. That's Jay.'

'Cool, man. That's cool. I like Indian people.'

'Yeah...'

'The ones I've met anyway. I guess I always figure the rest of them are the same. I don't know if that's a bad way to think or not, kinda generalised but...dude, it's not like I'm saying anything against them, right?'

'I guess not.'

He knocked me on the shoulder again. 'Hey, you're going to Ljubljana, right?'

'You just asked that.'

'Did I? Shit, dude, sorry...'

'No worries.'

'What was your answer? You're going, right?' He stretched back into his seat. 'Yeah, you gotta be...unless you're going through to Zagreb. You're not going there, right?'

'Nope.'

'Nah...Zagreb, it's a cool place. Looks kinda the same as Russia...'

I turned back around and he carried on, saying how Russia wasn't as crazy as everyone said it was, and how Zagreb had this hostel where the staff would double as whores, but whores who only gave hand-jobs.

'See, you gotta pay more for their pussy...like eighty dollars or something...and I was like, dude, eighty dollars extra...no offense, you got a cute face and a sweet pair of titties but...yeah, hand-job only, thanks.'

Luckily, his voice didn't carry that far, so only me and possibly Jay got to hear about his version of Zagreb.

'Yeah, that hostel was pretty sweet,' he said, staring past me and out the window. 'Churches are pretty cool, too...if you ever go.'

#

The train stopped at another station.

The annoying American woman got off, the pervy American behind us stayed on, people stopped looking out of the windows, and the tannoy lady said, 'next stop, Ljubljana terminal.'

I looked at Jay to see if he was still fake-sleeping.

'You alive?' I whispered.

He opened one eye.

'Nice addition to the family, bats.'

'Who, that guy?' I moved my head back slightly, trying to gesture towards the American guy without him realising. 'His name's Chad.'

Jay nodded and went back to fake sleep.

#

We walked out of the station and straight into the Arctic Circle.

The station, the roof, the people, the cars and the trucks of Ljubljana were all covered in snow. No one seemed to care too much about wiping any of it off. Maybe they liked it this way. Maybe they were fans of The Thing or that snow planet from Star Trek VI.

Or maybe they just didn't have the technology to do anything about it...

'This way...' said Jay, suitcase still in hand. 'Too cold to stop.'

'Where you going?'

'Come on...'

'Where?'

'I just said, this way.'

There were too many people on the station side of the street, so we walked across to the other side and stopped in front of two, three...no, more...seven kebab shops, all lined up next to each other.

'It's like the East End, bats...what go on?'

I didn't know. Seven shops selling the same thing, on the same street. It was business suicide. Unless they were all owned by the same guy.

'Fuck it, just get a cab...'

Jay walked down the road and put his arm out. Nothing stopped for him.

'Stand in front of them, man,' I said.

'Fuck off...'

I watched him try a few more cabs before figuring it was time to tell him we didn't actually need to take a cab. Not when the commune was....

'Dude, there you are...'

Chad was behind me, I didn't even have to look.

'Hey man...'

'These Ljubljans...it's weird, they look kinda the same as Croatians...same faces, dude, seriously...and the Croatians, those guys look kinda like the Russians.'

'Everyone's got the same face...'

'Exactly. Weird fucking place...'

He looked up and down the street and I tried to figure out if he was talking about Ljubljana, Slovenia or the whole of Eastern Europe.

'Bats...'

It was Jay, standing by a cab. I waved at him and gestured for him to come back, but he was already getting in.

'Where you guys going?' Chad asked.

'Place called Metelkova...just over there.' I pointed down the road, then back at Jay. 'I don't know what he's doing.'

'Mind if I tag along?'

'You haven't got a hostel or anything?'

'Nah, dude. I fly open, never book anywhere.'

I shrugged. 'Okay then, tag along.'

A few seconds later and Jay was back.

'You didn't tell me it was just down there...' He pointed in the same direction I had a few seconds earlier. 'Communicado, yeah? Let me know what the fuck's going on.'

#

From the outside Metelkova looked like a council estate. A pretty decent council estate, with snow falling here, there and everywhere, and a weird manga-like alien painted on the wall, but still a council estate. At the front of the complex was a map of the place and a sign that said, in English, 'Freedom.'

'Freedom, dudes,' said Chad, with no added information.

We walked in and across the car park which was deserted and into the first building we saw. There was a poster on the wall outside, it said: 'Coming soon – 'The Night of The Hunter' – Religion! Civil Rights! Psychopathic preacher man!'

Chad went inside to ask where the hostel was and came back out ten minutes later, telling us it was a prison we were staying in, not a hostel.

'What prison?' asked Jay, picking up his suitcase handle.

'A prison, dude...they've got bars for windows and the doors...what are they called?'

'You mean it *was* a prison, right?' I asked.

He shrugged, and I continued anyway.

'Yeah, I read about it. They converted it to a hostel a few years back. And it's not a prison, or it wasn't...it was a military barracks.'

'Full metal jacket, bats.'

'And now it's a hostel.'

'Whatever it is, dude, it's this way.'

Chad walked down the steps and led us past a whole batch of new buildings, most of them with some kind of design or art on the outside walls. We stopped next to a few of them and looked at the detail. One of them had tiles the same colour as the Croatian flag, with the same checked pattern. Another had little goblins crawling across its walls. And a statue of that guy...David something...he was dug into a little alcove on the second floor. And there was a theatre, with more posters pinned up, some for gigs, others for performances. *Night of the Hunter* again. *Ghostbusters*. *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. Most of them were remakes of films. Weird films. I knew *Ghostbusters*, but the rest of them... the cabinet of doctor what?

#

We found the hostel that used to be a prison and checked in without much trouble. The guy behind the desk seemed to flinch a little when he heard Chad speak, but if he was pissed off, he didn't act on it. We went up to the room and put our stuff on the beds. Chad took off his shirt, grabbed a towel and went straight back out the door. Jay played with his phone for a while then turned to me and said he had to be somewhere else by seven.

'Where?' I asked.

'Triple Bridge, bats. Remember I told you...I've got fingers in some pies.'

'Huh?'

'And one of the pies responded, so...green light.' He held up his phone. 'She sent a pic too...this one.'

I looked at the screen. She wasn't bad. Pale face, not too different from that actress...what was her name...Naomi something...the one who tap-danced in front of King Kong? Naomi Klein?

'Man...' I sat down on the bed next to him. 'You can't go now. What about Damijana?'

'That's tomorrow's work. Tonight, it's triple bridge.'

'Come on...'

'What? I told you I was spreading my tentacles...'

'Yeah, but...'

'...and we're only here eight days, bats. Eight days to make a mark, it's not easy.'

'Tomorrow, man. Please...'

Jay put his phone on the bed. 'And tonight?'

'I don't know...we'll go to the bar. See if anyone knows anything...'

'And?'

'...and if they do, we investigate. If they don't...'

'Yeah?'

'...you can talk to whatever's there at the bar. Poets or artists or...they'll be loads of women.'

'Can't you just e-mail her again?'

'No, I told you, man, I've e-mailed her twice and she's ignored me.'

'Well, maybe she's trying to...'

I cut him off, knowing what he was going to say. 'The last thing she said was...go to Metelkova, and from there you'll find me. She didn't say anything about triple bridges so...there it is, man. I'm staying here.'

'Hear no evil...'

'If you really wanna go and meet your internet woman, fine, I'll wait on my own. I'd prefer to not split up, but if that's what you wanna do, okay.'

He picked up the phone again and looked at his piece of pie.

'Fine, bats...we'll follow your lead.'

Chad walked back in, towel around his waist, hair still dry. 'Dudes...'

'But they better be Jay friendly.'

'They will be...'

'And they better not look like Virginia Woolf or Ezra Pound or some fucking lizard...'

'Ezra Pound's a guy,' Chad said from the other side of the room.

'Nah, it's a lady,' Jay said. 'Ezra...it's a woman's name.' He looked at me. 'Right?'

'I don't know.'

'Dude, it's a guy...I used to read that shit when I was a kid.'

We both stared at Chad.

'Definitely a guy...' he repeated then walked back out of the room.

Jay shook his head. 'Woman.'

#

We walked into the bar and saw a woman with a shaved head behind the taps, and not much else. There were more posters and flyers and shit on the wall, but none of us were bothered enough to look at the details. Why was no one here? Where were the poets? Why was the music so quiet?

I put the twenty or so zines I'd brought with me on some of the tables and a couple on a little shelf by the door. The bar woman didn't seem to mind. Or she didn't notice. One or the other.

We each took a stool at the bar, and I looked at the wall. This one didn't have any flyers or posters, it had photographs instead. They were all in colour, but the clothes looked old, maybe twenty years back. The people in the picture seemed happy. I looked closer, checking faces. Maybe...would she be there?

Jay started talking to the bar woman.

'This place...when do people come here?'

She looked at the door and straight away it opened and a tall man walked in and sat down next to us. He was wearing a Russian military jacket and looked depressed. Was he an artist? Hard to tell. His face looked more working class, a dock worker or builder maybe.

'Okay, that's one. But when do more people come?'

'Later, they come. Maybe...' She looked at the man and said something in Slovene. The man laughed and turned to us.

'It gets busier around midnight. That's when the music starts.'

Jay moved closer to the guy.

'And the women too? They come here?'

'Sure, and the men too.' He laughed and said something else to the woman. She laughed back, turned and starting making something.

'Okay...but the women...they're cool, right?'

'Cool? What do you mean?'

'I mean...do they...' Jay looked around the bar then at me. 'Are they artists?'

'Ahh...'

'He means are they free, dude...' Chad leaned closer, almost hitting the side of my face.

'Free...'

'And do they like American?'

'Ha, sure...they like all kinds...American, Indian, Chinese, men, women...'

The man turned away from us as the woman brought him a cup of something. I'm pretty sure it was coffee, but it smelt a lot different.

Chad got up and walked around the man, putting an arm on his shoulder.

'We're looking for ass, dude. I'll be straight with you. We're looking for ass, and we don't care much what it looks like.'

Jay turned to me and mouthed 'what the...!' and I shrugged. I told him before this guy was a bit weird, what did he want me to do about it?

#

Five hours later and the music got louder.

I was still at the bar, Chad was on the stool next to me talking to some Slovene poet on the other side, and Jay was in the corner talking to two women. I didn't know what they were talking about, but they weren't moving away from him so I figured he was doing okay.

And me...I was thinking of Damijana. Where was she? She had to know I was here by now, but nothing. No sign of her. No mysterious smoke or letters, nothing.

I picked up the bottle of Slovene brand beer, my seventh of the night, and listened in on Chad.

'Dude, I don't have a problem with the government...what I have a problem with is my country...the United States...being run by a n***er president...'

The tip of the bottle froze on my lips.

'...and I don't mean he's not done good, he has, he's at the top of the tree, dude, but he's still a n***er socialist. You know, most people don't know this, but where I come from, there's two types of black...a n***er and a n***ar...it's a New Orleans thing, dude...see, a n***er isn't a bad thing. It means the guy is kinda responsible and works kinda hard...some of my best friends are n***ers actually...the president's a n***er too...a dirty socialist n***er, but still a n***er...'

I knocked the tip of the bottle against my teeth, testing pain responses.

'...but a n***ar, that's different. What you've basically got with a n***ar, is a guy who's lazy...he's violent...he thinks the whole world owes him something even though he's done nothing to earn it...that's a n***ar, dude.'

I looked at the confused expression of the Slovene poet. He hadn't said anything for a long time and he wasn't saying anything now.

'Maybe you heard different about this stuff, I don't know,' concluded Chad, finally taking some of his beer, 'but that's what it's really like. White flag, dude, constant surrender. We've turned into a nation of pussies, and that kind of shit...that starts from the very top, president level. Just need to look at the guy to know it. Seriously, dude, you take him in a car park or somewhere, him and whoever, Hulk Hogan, John Ritter, one of those guys...you put the two together and say, okay, fight, fuck each other up, then, dude, he's dead, two seconds. He wouldn't stand a chance. Right?'

I thought about sliding over and helping the Slovene out, but the truth was...I didn't know what to say either. N word? Dirty Socialist?

What the fuck was this guy?

An hour later, the white nationalist had wandered to the other side of the bar and Jay was back at my side.

'Bats, they were in then bam, they were out.'

'Rejection?'

'Yeah, complete and total.'

'What happened?'

The way he told it, the two women had left to talk to some Slovene guys outside. Jay had tried to go with them, but it was no good, all they did was talk Slovene.

'Frozen out...they saw me coming and they exiled me...threw me to the wolves, bats. It was speak wolf or die.'

He went silent for a while, drinking his beer. I didn't really wanna talk to him anyway, but Damijana hadn't come, or I couldn't see her around the bar, and we couldn't just sit there saying nothing, so I started up.

'You know Damijana called me a genius?'

'Yeah...'

'I wonder if she really means it. Or...what does she see that's genius?'

'Yeah...'

'I mean, I don't want to sound like a twat, but what was it...what part of the zine is genius?'

'Genius babies...'

'Or more than that...what is genius? Is it different in Slovene? Is it in your subconscious?'

'Yup...'

'But if it's in your subconscious, what does that even mean? And how do other people recognise it?' I shifted on my stool. Was he listening? 'I don't know, maybe there's a league or a special group of people who just know what genius is, and it isn't even explained why...'

'Yeah...'

'But then...everyone thinks they're a genius on some level, right? Even if everyone says they're not, they still think it...and they look at the stuff they do and they think it's...they think it's amazing, right?'

And there's no...what's the word? No limit, or top level...there's no gauge to say if they're right or not...you know?'

Jay was looking at someone in the corner, a woman with a knitted hat playing the triangle.

'Man, are you even listening?'

The woman struck the triangle and seemed to hypnotise Jay.

'Hey...' I tried again.

'What?'

'Are you listening?'

'What, yeah. Course I am.'

The woman struck the triangle again, and I could see his eyes briefly move towards her, but he controlled it and came back to me.

'Genius, right?'

I looked him dead in the eyes.

'You weren't listening...you were looking at that triangle woman.'

'Her? Yeah, okay, I was, but...'

'Why do I bother, man?'

'What are you talking about? I was listening...I'm always listening.'

I stood up and put my jacket on.

'I'm going outside.'

'Going where? Why?'

'Because...I stay here, I'm stuck between a fucking racist...' I jabbed my finger at Chad, who saw it and said, 'dude, freedom' for no reason at all. '...and a guy who doesn't listen to a word I say.'

I walked.

'What? Who's racist, what are you...' said Jay, but that's all I heard, as the music got louder and the door got closer and that non-listening so-called best friend of mine got further and further away.

#

Outside the bar, I saw the two women Jay had been talking to earlier and the Slovene guys who had frozen him out. I smiled at them. Good job, Slovenes. Defend your women from the sleaze.

I went down the steps and looked at the snow on the ground. There were shoe marks all over it, and tyre marks too. No interesting patterns.

'What am I doing?' I mumbled under my breath.

I started to feel a little dizzy, probably from the nine beers I'd had, so I pulled a cigarette out of my mouth and tried to light up. The lighter spouted a tiny flame then died. I shook it a bit, tried a few more times then threw it on the ground and asked the Slovene guys behind me if they had one. They said yeah, but they'd left it inside.

'Inside?'

'Yeah. Very far.'

'Forget it then. Thanks anyway.'

I listened to them talk. I couldn't understand it, but I bet they were talking about something interesting. And I bet they were all listening to each other too.

I looked back down at the snow.

Somehow, it had changed.

Instead of tyre marks and shoe prints, there were words. English words.

'GO TO CASTLE IM WAITING'

I turned around to see if someone had come down, written the thing then ran back up. But there was nothing, no one. And how could they have? I was right here the whole time. But...how then?

The rest of the car park was empty. The buildings around the corner were unknowable...unless I walked round? But it was cold, and...

I looked back at the ground.

Huh? Where did it go?

I was looking at the exact same piece of ground and the message...the words...it was all gone.

What?

But it was. And more than that, the snow was mark-less, completely untouched. I put my shoe on top of it and prodded, to see if the message was somehow underneath...maybe a sudden gust of wind

I was too smashed to feel had covered it up...but the snow wasn't that deep.

Jesus.

Was I seeing things?

#

The next morning, I got up early for the free breakfast the hostel was dishing out. If you weren't down there by ten then it was done. Before leaving the room, I pushed Jay on the arm once, but he didn't respond. I didn't bother a second time.

#

I sat at one of the tables in the breakfast room, studying the map I'd just got from the guy in reception. I knew that thing the night before, the whole message in the snow deal...I knew that was probably a load of shit. I mean, it was there, it was gone, but...there was still my subconscious...and it still said castle, so...fuck it, what could it hurt?

The racist and the selfish prick walked in around eleven, sitting down and putting their heads on the table.

'Dude...did you sleep?' asked Chad.

'Got up early.'

Jay raised his head, asking where all the breakfast had gone. I told him it'd finished an hour ago.

'You still angry, bats?' he asked.

'No.'

'A short 'no' seems kinda like you are.'

'I'm not angry.'

I went back to the map on the table. I'd already found the castle, and was now trying to find the best way to get there.

'Where we going today?' Chad was leaning over my shoulder, scanning the map. 'City centre?'

'I'm going to the castle.'

'Dude, I fucking love castles.'

Shit.

'Why we going there?' Jay again, still looking around for...what? Breakfast? 'You got any new data you wanna share?'

I kept my eyes on the map. 'No sharing. I'm going to the castle. You guys can find something else to do.' I looked at Chad. 'Maybe check out the African Cultural Centre nearby.'

'Huh?' Jay asked, rubbing his eyes. 'You high?'

'Chad?'

'I'm not going into no n***er centre, dude. Leave them to their own shit.'

Jay dropped his hands and looked around the room.

'Mate...' he started.

'Dude...'

'You can't say that shit. What are you doing?'

'What's up?'

'The 'N' word...it's really, really not good.' He double-checked the room. There were only a few others sitting there and no one seemed to give us any special attention. 'Why are you saying that?'

Chad laughed, and one or two of the others in the room looked over.

'Dude...it's cool. I'm not talking about you, you're okay.'

'No, it's...what? I'm not talking about that. I'm saying it's not good full stop. It's not cool to say shit like that. What the fuck's wrong with you?'

'Where I'm from, it's cool. New Orleans, dude...we say that shit all the time. See, there's n***er, and there's n***ar, and I think you're getting confused...'

I could feel Jay's elbow nudging my side. Yeah, fuck you, man, now you start listening.

'See, you've got a n***er, right, which is a black person who's...'

'Mate...'

'...willing to work hard and...what?'

#

The castle was on the hill overlooking Ljubljana. It was quite beautiful looking at it from the triple bridge, but the path leading up

there was a death trap. You had to crush your shoes into the ice to get any kind of hold, and if you didn't then you'd be sliding all the way down on your ass.

We made it to the top in forty minutes.

Me, Jay and D W Griffith Jr.

Only the castle wasn't what I thought it'd be. First of all, there was no one living there. No lord or duke or millionaire or anything. Second, there was too much going on, too many shops and tourists and...shit, there was even a themed restaurant. What was this place, Damijana?

I walked everywhere, with the other two either by my side or a little behind. Chad had been silent for a while now. Maybe it had finally dawned on him we weren't from New Orleans. And Jay...I guess he just didn't like castles much.

But forget them, where was she? This was a castle, the right city too, and no sign of her anywhere. Nothing in the basement except really well furnished public toilets. Nothing in the chapel. Nothing in the weapons room. And we must've climbed a hundred, two hundred wooden steps to get to the top of the highest tower but there was nothing there either. Was this definitely the only castle in town? Or did she mean castle as in...as in a very big house that looked like a castle? That would've made more sense. No one actually lived in castles anymore...did they? Nah, they didn't, not even rich people. It had to be a large house...a chateau maybe.

'Dude, it's Loobylana.' Chad spread his arms out wide. 'LOOBYLANA!'

'Mate, not so loud...'

'What's up? It's just speaking, no big deal. You English are so shy...'

'Yeah. Do you see anyone else shouting?'

'No.'

'There you go.'

'Because they're shy too, dude.'

I stood there, looking at the snow-covered mountains and the snow-covered town, and tried to spot other castles or chateaus or large

houses with castle turrets in the distance, but there was nothing. Only snow and faraway mountains.

'Hey, is that the hostel?'

Chad was pointing at something that looked like a bridge.

'No, that's the river.'

'Not that...the one over a little...see?'

'Yeah, that's a bridge.'

He shook his head and muttered, 'no way, dude. Bridges don't look like that.'

'It's the triple bridge.'

'Is it?'

'That one?'

'Yup.'

Chad climbed up on one of the ledges and squinted. 'Oh yeah. There are three bits to it...triple bridge.'

'See.'

'It's weird, dude...I thought triple bridge was just the name for it. Didn't know it was actually triple-pieced.'

#

On the way back through the castle grounds, Jay pulled me back a little and let Chad walk ahead.

'We gotta detach from this one, Bildo.'

'Get rid of him?'

'Himbo...yeah, we gotta go our separate way. Seriously, he says any of that Klux shit in a crowd, we are gonna get slaughtered.'

I nodded and said, 'if you say so.'

'Slaughtered, bats. I'm not joking.'

#

That night I wanted to stay in the hostel and sit by their computer in the reception area. The idea was: it was easier for Damijana to send me an e-mail than a message in the snow. But Jay didn't see it that way.

'The only way through this, bats...' He was pacing up and down the room, while I sat on the bunk. 'The only way is to keep going out, talk to people, and see what they say...'

He stopped pacing and went over to the window, his hand holding the bars.

'...that's it, nothing else. You ask people here. You go out tonight and you ask them if there's a...I don't know, if there's a rich weird girl living in the commune.'

'She said go to the castle.'

'Yeah, a message you thought you saw in the snow...you can't go by that, bats. You can't.'

'There were words...'

'And we went to the castle anyway. There was nothing there.'

'Wrong castle.'

'Yeah? Well, where's the right one? Any more on the map there? No? And who the hell's gonna be living in a castle anyway?'

'It could be outside the city somewhere.'

'Or outside of nowhere...trust me, it's better to ask around. Seriously.'

He sat down on the bed, putting his arm on my shoulder. I knew he was right, but...what was taking her so long? I was right here.

#

Back in the same bar as the night before, we sat listening to two Slovene girls and two Slovene guys tell us about the history of the commune.

Jay sat close to the woman, which just seemed to drive her closer to her friend. I sat with my back against the wall, on the floor.

'So, this place used to be a prison?'

'This is military barracks, not prison. Was military for...long time then we come in and change it. Now...you can see, it is freedom.'

'You're very beautiful when you talk about freedom...' Jay said to her.

She ignored him.

'Gay, lesbian, trans, political refugee, they all can come here and work. We have no... *kako se reče*...no barrier.'

'Are you gay?'

She turned her face away from Jay, and spoke almost directly to me.

'I went to many countries in the world, and you know how many place I see something like this? Answer. Two place. Berlin. Copenhagen. Only two place in all of world.'

I nodded and looked around the bar. The only other customers were a couple of tourists, and the guy from the night before, wearing the same military jacket.

'Do the same people come here every night?' I asked.

'Same? No, we have different. Many foreigner, they come all time. Like you.'

Yeah, yeah, but what about nuts? What about Damijana?

'This is a weird question but...' I looked around the bar. 'Is there a rich, weird woman who comes here sometimes?'

'Rich, weird woman?' She looked at her friends. 'Is she have a name?'

'Damijana.'

'Only this? Damijana?'

'That's all I know, yeah.'

One of her friends leaned over and said something to her in Slovene. The other friends overheard and they all laughed.

'What is it?'

'Ah, nothing. Only old fairy story.'

'About someone called Damijana?'

'Yes...maybe.' She leaned in closer, looking back at her friends and putting her finger to her mouth. 'In this story there is witch, her name is Damijana. She live near Ljubljana, you know, in big castle and...actually, this is silly story...'

'She lives in a castle?'

'Yes, yes, castle, but...this is long time before, and this castle, you cannot find now. You can go to this place and see where is it before, but only this.'

I looked at Jay, who was looking at the other girl. Fuck, did he even have ears? This was it, the castle. This was where she was, I knew it.

'But...what happened to the castle?'

The girl was about to answer when the door opened and a man walked in. For some reason, he was wearing a bear costume, but no one else seemed bothered by this. They all said hey, and he came over and sat down on the floor next to me.

The girl telling the story spoke to him in Slovene and he laughed, then turned and slapped me on the shoulder.

'You want to know about old castle, huh?'

'Sure. Doesn't everyone?'

'Ha, sure, no, they don't. But I tell you something...not typical story, but meaning behind this thing...you see?'

'Not really.'

'Ah, you can. See, this place here, this commune, this is pretty good, right? I mean, you can drink, you can hear music, you can be gay, lesbian, whatever, nobody care.'

'Yeah, just like Berlin and Copenhagen.'

'Sure, like them too. Cluj, Zagreb, Lisboa, this is many place now. And all same principle, you see? Ultimate freedom of art and individual, this is what everybody want here. And in some way, we get this...I mean, before we came and build this place, we get idea from story of Damijana the witch.'

'She was an artist?'

The others laughed, and the bear costume said something to the girl and they laughed more.

'What?' I asked.

'No, no...this remind us of old artist here...long time before, when we first come and build this place. Her name is Damijana also, but everybody say it is because of old witch story. Here, she is on that photograph on wall, you see?'

He pointed far away at one of the photos on the wall behind the bar.

'Anyway...this other Damijana...Damijana the witch...in this old story she live in big castle, and outside castle is nothing, only snow. And inside castle, she have her world. People think she live in world

here, this world we see now, but no...is not like this. She live in her world. No compromise, you see?'

'What does she do all day, Yogi?' Jay asked.

The guy in the bear costume ignored him.

'But this is only story...now, is no castle, no Damijana the witch. But idea of this is important thing. This is thing everybody can follow.'

I thought about asking him again if he was hundred per cent sure on there being no castle, but he was dressed like a bear, and what if he didn't like persistent questioning? Fuck it, no point getting thrown out, not if there were other people who knew about this castle. If I could just find out where it had been before it was destroyed or ruined or whatever happened to make it go away...

The bear costume guy smiled at me. Fuck it, why not?

'You don't know where the castle was before...do you?'

He nodded. 'Everybody know.'

I took out my map of the city and asked if he could draw it on there for me, or point it out at least.

'No, not on map. It is outside of city.'

'Far?'

'No far, but outside.' He waved a paw at the woman behind the bar, the same woman who'd been there making the shitty coffee the night before. 'Maybe tomorrow, we can take you to there. Show you.'

'Please. If it's not...'

'Excuse me...'

He got up, shook my hand and told me to come look for him tomorrow. I was about to ask him his name or where about he'd be tomorrow, but he was already gone, back out the door he came in.

Jay leaned over to me.

'I need to get me a bear costume, bats.'

#

It was around two in the morning and the bar was still going.

I was on the same stool as the night before, drinking the same brand of Slovene beer. And that guy in the military jacket was still

sitting there, three stools down. Jesus, he'd been sitting there for...what? Eight, nine hours? Didn't he have a home?

On the wall was the photograph, the one the bear guy had pointed at. Twelve people - eleven of them happy, the other one not so much. I couldn't remember exactly which woman he'd picked out, but looking at it now, I figured I knew which one it was. I mean, if he was making fun of her, and then you've got a picture of eleven people smiling, and one girl looking to the side, you could figure out the victim. And it was weird, even looking at her, I could tell she was not like the rest of them. The way she was looking sideways, yes, but also her face. It was...what was it? I wasn't sure of the word, but it was almost like the others were at a party whereas she was at a funeral.

I called the bar woman over and asked her who the glum-looking woman in the photograph was. She told me that name, Damijana, but didn't laugh about it.

'Was she an artist here?'

'Yes, long time ago. Very good at painting, Žižek think. He tell her she use a kind of...how to say...wax? When she paint, she use like this...'

'Žižek told you?'

'Yes, Žižek. He put on bear costume before, you know?'

I nodded. His name was Žižek? I knew that name from somewhere...Žižek...

'She was a clever girl, Damijana.' The guy in the military jacket was sitting next to me. When did that happen? 'She never shows much art here, but her spirit...it is incredible. Always encouraging to others...all other artists, writers, poets...she even told me to paint something once.'

'You knew her?'

'Ha, sure, I knew her.'

'You built this place too?'

'No, not build, but I was here. I knew Damijana. Dami.' He took some of his beer. 'I miss her.'

I drank some of my own beer, figuring he'd keep speaking without me.

'You know, ten months she stays here. Ten months. Then, after ten months, the next morning, she is gone. Without any word to anybody, not even me.'

'She left?'

'Sure, she has to. You know, this place...' He jabbed a finger at the bar around him. 'It is still something...still a good thing. I come here and I drink every day, it is still good, but...it is not what it is before.'

'It sold out?'

'Sold out...I don't know, what does this mean?'

'Sold out...it's like, you make art, but you take money...or you take money and you want to be famous.'

'Ah...'

He lifted his bottle to his mouth but didn't drink.

'You talk about Žižek before...he wears the bear costume, he talks about democracy and art and no compromise and all this kind of thing. He always do this, even twenty years ago. You know, every day, media, media, media, interview, magazine, he likes to do this, always...'

'You don't think it's good?'

He drank from the bottle.

'Damijana didn't think it was good?' I rephrased.

'Dami? No, never...'

'Why not?'

He drank some more then pulled out a cigarette and lit up. 'Actually, it wasn't my plan to tell you, but there is one thing to know. A thing I don't like very much.'

'About Damijana?'

'Ja, Damijana.' He took a drag and then glanced at the group I'd been talking to earlier. 'Them, those people over there, I hear them laughing about her before. You don't speak Slovene so you don't know, but they were saying very bad things about her. They think she's not sane, you know? Of course, they never say this to her face, they do not dare. Damijana had influence on people like that. Okay if you're her friend, no problem, but very scary if you're not.'

'Why do they think she was not sane?'

'Ah, that is easy. She carried a book, when she lives here. All the time, every place she goes, carrying the same book. I admit, even I sometimes think, this woman is not working right. But that was not often.'

'She carried a book? That's it?'

'Not only this, it's more. This book wasn't special, we all know the author, we all read it before. The painters...I forget the movement...surrealism? I don't know. But some famous painters, they talked about this book like it is the bible. They said this is true art and after they say this, everyone gets this book. Maldoror, you know? The Songs of Maldoror.'

'Never heard of it.'

'Damijana had it from day one, all the time carrying it. And everyone asked about it, and she just say, this book, this book is the only book I need. This book is the only genius. And we all read it so we know it's not bad, but at the same time we also know it's not the genius book she said it is. Me? I leave her alone about this. I said, yes, it is a good book, everyone has their favourite. Maybe everyone doesn't carry it with them everywhere, but it's not hurting people. It doesn't make me annoyed like it make other people annoyed. No, not annoyed. It is more like bullying. They started to talk about her behind the back. They made jokes about her. Okay, not those people, not that group. They are children then, but they learn it from the older ones. They learn from Žižek and...other people, I think you don't know their name. And that's why now they laugh still about her. And it's true, I don't like it. If you don't want to say it to her face then don't say it ever, okay?'

I nod, watching the smoke drift upwards over his eyes.

'But this is not the worst of the thing. They bullied her about the book, not at her face but I think she knows about it. And still she helped them. Still she went to look at their art and their dramas and say nice things, encouraging things. Kind of disgraceful behaviour if you ask me, but this is what they are like here before. Maybe now too, I don't know. Anyway, maybe one week, two weeks before she leaves, I remember she came in here, carrying the book as always and...one man, I don't know who he is, but one man lighted a cigarette and the

fire, I do not know how, but it was going on the book by accident. Okay, there is no fire, but the paper of the book is burning a little, like a black mark, and Damijana...I looked over to her and she is almost crying, like it is her dog just died or something.'

'You were there?'

'And then, she finished crying and she is staring at the man, like a devil...yes, I was here. Same place, at this seat smoking my cigarette, drinking my beer. Ha, yes, my life is very different now.'

'Was she okay?'

'Damijana? Yes, she was okay, later, but it is strange, she doesn't shout at the cigarette man. I don't know why, but she never says anything to him. When the black mark is cleaned, she stands up and looks at the cigarette man, then walks out. A week, ten days later, something like this, she is gone. Everyone never seen her again.'

'That is weird.'

'And the cigarette man...he is also gone, one month later. No one knows where he goes, and no one ever see him again. Yes, it is very strange. But I think it still is not enough to be a bully and laugh about it. Not when she is not here to listen to it.'

'Yeah, you're right.'

He stubbed out his cigarette. 'Anyway...where she is now, I don't know, but I hope she is okay. I hope she will come back here someday too. Maybe not talk to those people, they don't deserve it, but I know she had some friends. They would like to see her again.'

'Friends like you.'

'Ha, yes. You are right.'

'You never know...maybe she will come back some day.'

'*Ja, ne vem.* Maybe she will.'

He drank some more beer then put the bottle on the counter and stood up.

'Until the next bottle, my friend...'

'You're going already?'

'Ja.'

'But it's only...' I looked at the clock behind the bar then turned back to see he was already at the door.

'Wait...!' I said, nowhere near loud enough to ride over the bar's sound system. 'Was she...!' The door closed and he was gone.

I sat there for a while longer, staring at the woman in the photograph. Damijana. It had to be her. But, where was she? That guy, he didn't say if anyone ever went looking for her. But he did say she'd disappeared. Where? Out of Ljubljana? And why would she tell me to come here if she was somewhere else? It didn't make any sense. None of it did.

#

After another bottle of Slovene brand beer, I put my jacket on and ducked outside. There were a few people out there, probably the same ones as the night before, but it was hard to tell for sure.

I stood by the steps, staring at the snow on the ground. If I stared long enough...

Nothing came.

I put a cigarette in my mouth and looked for a smoker, but there were none. The whole place, an art commune for fuck's sake, and no one smoked. I kept the cigarette in my mouth and walked round the side of the bar and into the main square of the commune. Well, not quite a square, more like a rectangle, with a side road at the end that went to the hostel. I walked past the theatre and its posters, pulling up next to the building with the little goblins on it. Or aliens? I still wasn't sure. No, they weren't aliens. They were...man, I couldn't remember the name for them. Not goblins either, but more like...gremlins?

I didn't have a camera so I stood and stared and tried to take it all in and keep it there. It didn't stick. I walked a bit further on then stopped and came back and stared again. Still no good. There wasn't any way to keep it in my head permanently...but then maybe what I had to do was stay longer, give it more of a shot.

There was a sound from nearby.

What was that...a scream?

The lights were out in the building in front of me, but the scream had come from inside. Was someone hurt in there?

I walked forward and pushed open the door. Inside it was mostly shadows, and one large room with two or three candles in one corner. And a man, his back turned away from me.

'Hey...'

No answer. I walked a few more yards and saw an easel set up in front of him. There was something in his hand. A paintbrush?

'Man, I was just walking outside and...'

He half turned, his hand turning also. It wasn't a paintbrush, it was a knife.

'Shit...are you okay?'

'Ne počutim se dobro...glava me boli.'

'Sorry man, I don't...'

'Get out,' he said, almost whispering.

I thought fast. A knife, a guy in the dark...what was I doing? And the guy...what was he doing? Painting in blood?

'Okay. I was just...'

'Fucking foreigner...'

'Yeah, I'm gonna go.'

He turned and faced me. Some of the light from the candles flashed over his arm and I could see he'd been cutting himself.

'Everybody come...come, come, come...join us...freedom! Come, come, come...into my studio, into my home...with your stupid fucking mind and your stupid fucking friend and their stupid fucking mind...fucking American, Australian, English, American, American, American, always fucking American...lecture me about art, my own fucking country.'

He held his left arm out in front of him and placed the knife against the skin. Fuck, did I really wanna stick around for this?

I turned and started walking to the exit.

'You Chinese too...I don't give a fuck...you foreigner, you are all disease...stupid fucking mind...you destroy everything here...everything.'

I made it outside just in time to hear another scream, this one loud enough for the whole complex to hear. I stopped and looked around at the other buildings. There were lights, but no one came out.

'Shock fucking Corridor,' I muttered to no one.

#

The next day I got up early, took a shower, cleaned myself twice with soap and then went to wake up Jay.

'I'm asleep, go away.'

'Get up.'

'Fuck off.'

'It's one in the afternoon.'

His head came up and he felt around under the pillow for his phone.

'What, already?'

He got his phone, lit up the screen then threw it at me.

'Fucker...'

'You're not getting up?' I asked, taking his pillow from under him.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the room. 'Where's Klux?'

'I don't know. His bed's empty.'

He reached over and took the pillow back.

'I think he's mad at you, bats...'

'Me?'

'Sure. You're the one who told me to tell him we'd meet him at triple bridge last night...'

'What...you said it was me?'

'It's unclear, bats.' He rubbed his eyes again. 'Honestly, I can't remember what I said. But it's cool. I told him we'd hang out today if he's around.'

'I'm not.'

'You serious?'

'Yup.'

'You're deserting me?'

'Well, you wanted to go meet your internet women anyway...'

'Fuck off, that's a double date...'

I picked up his pillow again and held it like a weapon.

'You and him go. I'm busy.'

'What, me and Klux? Are you nuts?'

'Man, he's the one who's nuts.'

'I can't go with him solo. He's erratic...'

'Don't go with him then.'

'He might even turn on me. Or get me into a fight with some Slovene college kids or...'

'I don't care, I'm still busy.'

'Bats...'

'No.'

I dropped the pillow on his face and he went quiet. I waited for him to take the pillow off and start moaning again, but he didn't move.

'Dead, huh?'

No answer.

'Okay then...God or not, remember the deal, man.'

'Go away,' he mumbled.

#

I put on some jeans, a jumper and a jacket and headed out into the main rectangle of the commune. It was before nine in the morning and there weren't many people around, but I had a feeling the bear guy would be up and about somewhere.

As I walked I noticed it was more snowy than sludgy, so I looked down for more messages.

Nothing there.

Man, checking the ground instead of e-mail...what was wrong with me?

#

I searched the whole day for the guy in the bear costume, but he was nowhere to be found. I asked a guy putting up more posters on the theatre wall if the bear guy was well known in the commune and he said, 'sure, everyone know Žižek.'

Žižek ...that was it. I knew I'd heard the name. He was famous, the Croatian...the theory philosophy guy. He looked at all the popular movies and told us what they meant.

'So...is he here today?'

'It is hard to say. He talk a lot of media, many interview, every day.'

He put up another poster. 'Ghostbusters – they're not really ghosts!' I waited until he was done.

'He does the interviews here or...'

'Here...everywhere.' He pointed at the other buildings with his free hand. 'But is not easy. Usually, if you looking for Žižek, is difficult to find. But he is looking for you, is easy to find.'

'Oh.'

'He is looking for you?'

I shrugged.

'Then maybe you not see him today.'

I said thanks and walked around some more and asked a few more people if they knew where Žižek was, but they all said the same thing. Media. Interview. He want to find you, it is easy.

Fuck.

#

The next few days, it was pretty much the same routine.

I got up, showered, washed myself twice with soap, did the 'it's one in the afternoon' comedy with Jay, got dressed, went out into the commune and tried to find out where Žižek and his bear costume had got to.

And for three days, the guy was nowhere to be seen. It was like he'd disappeared off the face of the Earth. Or the face of the commune. For all I knew the slippery little bastard was in a cafe just around the corner, outside the commune, and I wouldn't have known a thing about it.

#

The three nights that followed each of those three days were a little different. I stayed in the bar and wasted more time on drink. Jay wasted more time trying to pick up Slovene poets. And Chad...well, I didn't see much of him, but he'd somehow got Jay back on side.

'He's not so bad, bats...' Jay said on the porch outside the hostel. 'If you keep away from the whole race fandango, he's okay.'

'Race fandango? He's probably the most racist person I've ever met.'

'Yeah, true, he's racist as fuck, but you can steer him away from that shit, if he starts heading that way, which he doesn't even do that much if you hang out with him long enough.'

I flicked some snow off the rails, not even half-convinced.

'And he comes out with some pretty non-dumb shit too. Like yesterday, what was it...about the poor and the class system...how with public education you've got no choices anymore.' He went back over his words. 'No, wait...public education, you've got no excuses, not choices. So, the poor can only moan if they're from an abusive family or...they've got mental disorders or something...that's what he said. And you think about it, he's right. Bit right wing maybe, but... '

'The poor have no excuses...man, are you serious?'

He jabbed a finger at me.

'That's an emotional reaction, bats. That's not real. He was talking about that too...said there were certain topics you couldn't really talk about, because people emotionally react and then you've got...'

'But he's talking shit. That's not a...'

'Emotional reaction. Every time. See?'

'What?'

'You're not listening, you're reacting.' He tapped his finger against his temple. 'Emotionally.'

'That's bullshit. It's inarguable...unarguable...man, you're a lawyer, how are you falling for this shit?'

'I'm not, I'm just saying...'

'He's talking like a rich guy, like Murdoch...'

'Nah, come on, Murdoch? Bats, you should talk to him more. He's not that bad.'

'If you're white.'

'What, white like me and you?'

'That's different. He likes Indians...kind of.'

'Ha, you're picking and choosing, bats.'

'No, I'm not...'

'Are too.'

'Am...' I tried to think of a better word, but couldn't. '...not.'

'Ha, you're a funny fucker.'

I nodded, mumbled 'whatever' and went back to flicking snow. Jay called me a 'funny fucker' one more time then looked at his phone and said it was time for John Belushi face.

I didn't bother asking him what he meant.

#

Inside the bar things were getting worse. I didn't know why but more and more Americans seemed to be coming to the commune, and it was really starting to eat at me. Was that right? Eat at me? Gnaw at me? Fuck it, the point was...what? I didn't like Americans? No, they were okay. But...no, not okay, not when they came here. It wasn't right, they weren't...I wasn't sure what it was, but they just didn't fit. Maybe it was because they all said the same things when they came in. Maybe it was the word 'awesome'. I did hate that word. But it wasn't just Americans. I mean, British and French and Australians and all these other places. It wasn't the country, it was the type. Man, that was it. They just weren't artists. They were normal. They were un-insightful. They were...

They kept using my zine as a fucking ashtray.

#

On the fifth night of the trip, with Jay on the other side of the bar listening to what I guessed was poetry in Slovene, I turned to the bar woman and asked her if she ever got tired of all this shit.

'What you mean?'

I pointed my head at the three American backpackers on the couch behind me, and her expression changed slightly. I mean, the side of her mouth went up a little. Did that mean she understood?

'We are become use to this kind of thing.'

'Yeah?'

'Sure, first time this happen, we think, cool, people is come to share with us and...we can have music and drink and talk about art and thing like this...'

'And now?'

'Now? I don't know...this is democracy of art, I think.'

'You don't think it's selling out?'

'Sell out?'

'Sell out...it means...you take money for the art.'

'We have to take money. It is job...business...'

'No, I mean...' I looked behind the bar but the words weren't there. 'I don't know what I mean...I don't know how to say.'

'Art is important for us...always number one thing.'

'But you think it's number one to them?' I nudged her towards the Americans again.

'I cannot say...'

'Democracy of art...maybe it brings people you don't like so much, right?'

A man at the end of the bar said something in Slovene and she went over. I waited with my Slovene beer, wondering if I really meant any of the stuff I'd just been arguing. Probably not. I wasn't a snob. I didn't care who liked my zine, as long as someone liked it. But here, was it the same? My thing was just a zine, pretty general stuff...this place was more like a community, with art as the foundation stone, or the walls and doors, or...I didn't know what art was exactly, but it was pretty fucking important to Žižek the bear and whoever else had set this place up. And even this bar-woman, was she so sure what she was saying? I saw the way she looked at the Americans. The way she looked at me too. Having to defend herself against someone like me, in English, when we're in the heart of Slovenia, and all because I was a cynic and couldn't believe someone could be an artist and live in a place where...where what?

What was I trying to say here?

I played with a cigarette in my hand, killing the thoughts.

The bar woman came near me again, so I asked her another question, the same question I'd asked her each of the last three nights.

'Do you know where the Damijana castle is?'

And she gave the same answer.

'Ask Žižek.'

But where the hell was...

'Dude...'

Oh no.

'You still hiding in this place?'

I turned on my stool and saw Chad grinning in front of me.

'Where you been?' I asked.

'Out and around, dude. Me and Jay and a couple of girls. Good times.'

He sat down next to me and shouted over at the bar woman to bring him one of those Slovene beers.

'You met some girls?'

'Yup, last night. Or the day before, I forget. I've been trashed four days straight, dude. Ever since you went Silas Marner on us.' The bartender put a beer in front of him. Chad picked it up and bit off the lid with his teeth. 'Today was fucking weird too. One of your clan heard me talking and gave me her number. All I said was, like, a few lines, not even to her, and she gets up and writes her number down on this tissue.'

'Her phone number?'

He rummaged in his jeans and brought out the tissue, laying it out like a treasure map on the bar.

'This is her real number?'

'I guess.'

'Have you tried calling it?'

'Not yet. Do it tomorrow, maybe. If there's no other pussy on the slab.'

'It can't be real.'

'I don't know. Looks kinda real. Oh yeah, that reminds me. I got something for you.' He fished in his jacket pocket again and brought out a piece of paper. 'Some guy in a bear costume gave it to me, said to give it to you.'

He handed me the note and I opened it.

'...said it was a map to the castle, with all the turns and shit...'

I half-listened and looked at the note. He was right, it was a map. Žižek had scribbled the route from the commune to the castle.

'...he also said, don't try it at night, it's too hard to see shit. Go during the day...'

'He's outside now?'

'What? Yeah, just now, on the balcony.'

I sprang up and ran to the door and leaped outside onto the balcony. It was probably way too dramatic, but I didn't care. I'd been looking for this guy for three days.

But there was no one there.

Or there were people there, but they weren't wearing bear costumes.

I asked one of them if Žižek had just left, and they said, sure, he's always leaving, every time you see him. And they laughed.

'Is he coming back?'

'To here?' The guy pointed at the balcony floor. 'Only if they have camera.'

More laughing.

I went back inside and sat down on my stool. Chad was still there, shouting something over the music to the bar woman, and Jay was leaning against the counter.

'You smoking without me, bats?'

'What? No.'

'Then why the stampede...?'

'Doesn't matter...'

'Fine, if you don't wanna share.' He nudged Chad and told him to get a beer, Croatian brand then came back to me. 'You've been missing some bizarro shit, bats. Klux here is a fucking machine.'

'I know, he told me.'

'Told you? Which part?'

'A random British girl gave him her number.'

'Yeah, no, not British, Chinese. It was fucking weird, bats. Even for Loobs.' He shifted on his stool, gesturing to another part of the bar. 'Basically, right, we were sitting over there earlier, hungover, and Klux here starts up with his racist shit again. I try to shut him down, but he keeps going, mostly just to me and an empty bar, but...but then

I look over and there's a guy and some Chinese girl sitting nearby, few tables over, and I think, okay, maybe they're local, maybe they don't understand, but then Klux goes on a bit more and the girl gets this look on her, face of stone type thing. I think, fuck, she's mad, she's gonna get up and smack him, but she doesn't. Instead, she gets up, comes over, writes her number out on a tissue, hands it to Klux then tells him to meet her on that hill tomorrow night. That fucking hill with the castle we went to, at midnight.'

'Weird.'

'I still think it's a wind up, but...I can't get why. It doesn't make any sense. Why would anyone even have that reaction in the first place? It's like a mirror universe thing going on here, bats. The whole commune's spinning on a vortex or something...like, an underground vortex that's invisible but all its energy is coming up top and...hey, bats, you listening?'

'No.'

'You fuck. Not even half?'

I looked at the door, checking to see if Žižek was coming in.

'Okay, Pat Butcher. You got any cigs?'

'What?'

Jay looked at my pockets and repeated 'cigarettes'. Chad knocked me on the elbow and said, 'dude, you find the bear?'

I shook my head.

'His ass is fast. He was right there, dude. Like two minutes ago.'

'I know...'

Jay leaned across and took one of the bottles which had just landed in front of Chad.

'Ah, that's why you're in a daze. You're still chasing Dami Duck, aren't you?'

I pulled at the label on my beer.

'Fucking hell. Not gonna lecture or anything, but...you can't do that anymore, bats. You can't.' He drank some beer. 'It's a pipe dream. You crawl in and you can't get back out. And sometimes the pipe's only got one side, the way you got in. And other times you think it's got two sides but you're deluding yourself, and the delusion, it's got its mitts all over you. It's a delusion suit, bats.'

'Dude, what are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about pipes, Klux.'

'He's talking about nothing,' I added.

'Sounded like some weird shit, dude...'

'Yeah, well,' Jay mumbled then shrugged.

We all sat there for a while longer and Jay tried to give me more advice, telling me how it was good to dream about things, but not good to always dream about things, and at some point, you had to sail in the waters of reality instead of floating around in a puddle, pretending it was deep.

And all the talk he gave, I ignored, which meant he was forced to talk to Chad, and I half listened to some of that, and it was weird, Jay talked about India and Chad said back that he loved India and one day he wanted to start a business there because it was gonna go sky high pretty damn soon, and Jay, with two more beers down him, said, 'bonza, let's start it together, me and you, you put in the cash, I put in the brainpower', and after sorting out some of the details they shook on it and ordered another round, and I carried on sitting there, looking at the clock on the wall, thinking of the map, thinking of the castle, wondering if it really was so crazy to just get up and start walking...

#

An hour or so later and another guy joined us at the bar, a German guy. At first he didn't say much, but Chad started talking to him and seemed to somehow open him up a little, and it turned out he was an engineer who came to the commune almost every night, and he loved the place, he loved the people, he loved them because they were so democratic towards art and the sharing of it, and that was something he'd rarely seen before, even in Berlin, and Jay said, yeah, I love this place too, there are poets everywhere, and the German guy asked Jay if he wrote poetry and Jay said no, but he liked the idea of it and liked to listen to it, and Chad said, yeah, he liked the idea of it too, and he had so much respect for anyone who wrote that shit and put themselves out there like that, and the German guy coughed a little, and said under his breath that now and then, he wrote down a few

words, and Jay and Chad both said, great, is it in English, can we hear some?

'My words? No, no...it is all private.'

'Dude, come on...'

'Yeah, poetry needs an audience,' said Jay, edging closer to the guy's elbow. 'It's the way of the art.'

'No, no...it is only for me.'

'No, please...I'd love to hear it...we'd love to hear it, seriously, hand on heart.' Jay put his hand high up on his chest. 'Or close to heart.'

'I don't want an audience.'

'Sure you do, that's why you're writing it.'

'No, no...'

'Dude, come on, speak...let it out...'

'Yeah, let it all hang out,' said Jay. 'If it's good, we'll buy you a drink. If it's shit, we'll lie and buy you a drink anyway.'

I looked at Jay, searching for the bullshit. He didn't like art, he liked money. Why was he doing this?

'You don't understand...' the German said.

'Nah, you've gotta do it. This is your moment. If you don't stand up and take it then what's the point? All art needs someone to gaze at it, someone to listen to it. Am I wrong?'

'You don't understand...' the German repeated.

'Am I wrong? No, I'm right. Of course, I'm right. You just need more encouragement that's all, someone feeding you nice words...and we're your guys, right, Bildo?'

I coughed and muttered, 'encouragement.'

'What's that?'

'What's what?' I asked back.

'The mumble you just did. What, you don't think I like art?'

'I didn't say anything.'

'I can't appreciate the...poems and art and stuff like that. You think it's beyond me?'

I looked at the clock. Fuck this, it was time. Get out of here and find a castle time. Jay could argue with the stool for all I cared.

'I'm going.'

'Dude...'

'You're leaving again, bats?'

'Yeah.'

'Why?'

'Nothing. There is no why. I'm going.'

'Go where? To see who?'

'No one.'

I put my jacket on and walked away, part of me thinking of turning back and just telling him what I really thought and how full of shit he really was and how he never listened to a word I said...

I turned back.

'And by the way...thanks for all the encouragement, *bats*.'

'What?'

'Seriously, without you...I don't think I could have ever done anything. Really. It's you, man. The zine. This. It's all because of you, my best friend. Thanks a fucking lot.'

And then I went for the door.

'Bats, what you talking about? Was that irony?'

'You work it out.' I was at the door and I was fucking going.

'I liked your zine, I told you it was...' were the last words I heard.

#

The car park outside was empty.

Or almost empty.

There were a couple of tourists taking pictures of one of the buildings, the one with the white gremlin on the wall. Or it looked like a gremlin, with a really wide body and a knife in its hand.

I walked past them.

Maybe it was painted by that guy who cut himself the other night?

At the entrance there were two more tourists, looking in from the sidewalk, unsure what it was they were about to walk into. I stopped near them and waited a few seconds.

'Excuse me...is this...?' they asked.

'Yeah.'

They didn't go in. And I didn't care. They were scared, I wasn't. I'd been in and sat in that fucking place for five days straight and where had it got me?

I pulled out the map and made sure that left was the direction I was supposed to go. Along the main road, across the river, right, another main road, smaller road, straight for...how long?

'This is the art place?'

The tourists again. I folded up the map.

'Yes, in there.' They didn't move. 'Really, it looks scary, but it's not. It's a democracy, apparently.'

They nodded and walked in, slow steps until I guess they saw the other tourists taking pictures.

Fucking tourists.

Wait, wasn't I...

No, that was different. I wasn't like them. I walked without fear, I debated people, I didn't stand for this democratic shit. If a place was too crowded then, fuck it, walk out. Go, find somewhere with a little more peace. And integrity? Yeah, with a little more fucking integrity.

I pulled a cigarette out of the pack and held it in my hand. The same pack I'd had since London. I looked around, both sides of the road. No one else around with a light, as usual. It was like the whole world wanted me to quit.

I turned left down the main road. The train station was nearby. Maybe there was a train going near the castle place...

I put the cigarette in my mouth. I didn't know why, there was no fire, but I was sick of holding it in my hand. Was I still angry? Fuck, I didn't care. Where was that bitch?

The end of the cigarette grew colour.

Huh?

It was alive, burning...

Was this real? I took the cigarette out of my mouth and watched the red line crawl down the white. No, it was happening. I put it back in my mouth and took a drag. Fuck it, however it happened, the thing was lit.

Right, now for the castle. I looked across the road and saw the train station. All the lights were out and the tracks were empty. Shit, no trains anywhere. No taxis either. How was I gonna get there? Bus?

'Bicycle.'

What?

I turned and checked behind me for the owner of the voice. No one there. No one on the pavement right the way down the entire road. But...

'Bicycle.'

There it was again...that voice.

I turned back and checked the other side of the road, just in case they'd run across after saying 'bicycle', but there was no one on that side either.

Aha. Wait.

About twenty yards down the sidewalk, there was a whole line of bicycles. They didn't look new exactly but, walking over and putting my hands on one of them, I didn't think they'd break down on me either. But, wait...the lock was still wrapped around it.

I got down on my knees and inspected it, but almost as soon as I touched it, the whole thing started to unravel. Then it was gone. Completely gone. As if it had never...

Jesus, how many had I had?

I counted back about four or five bottles of that Slovene stuff, and...wait, did it matter? There was a free bike in front of me. Take the damn thing.

I shook my head for no one and got on the bike.

'Let's see then...' I pulled out the map and spread it across the handlebars. 'Here, here, and here. Not too far.'

I put the map back in my pocket, got on the bike, patted it on the handlebars and started to pedal.

#

I rode for what must've been an hour, maybe even an hour and a half, and as I rode the scenery started to change. The buildings started to separate and put more distance between each other, and the roofs

went from square to triangular, and then finally to decrepit. And the road went from three lanes, to two lanes, to one narrow path. And the street-lights, Jesus, they were gone too, and the only reason I didn't fall off this thing was down to the lights from the windows of the shacks I was riding past. And all the while, the feeling was right there...the feeling that this was completely the right thing to do, and what did Žižek know about navigation, really? Go during the day? Why? It was only a couple of roads and a path through a bit of forest. Nothing my eyes couldn't cope with.

I rode on, barely tired at all. When the buildings faded out, the map told me to turn right.

'But there's nothing there,' I said to the air around me.

I stopped and looked for the path that Žižek had clearly drawn on the map. There really was nothing there...or nothing visible anyway. Go during the day...fuck. I looked again at the map, and followed the path all the way to its end. That was where the castle was...and it didn't seem too far, if you could find the path...

Wait...a noise...

I looked both ways trying to figure out where it was coming from. It sounded like an animal...a bear?

Fuck, a bear.

I grabbed my bike and dived into the snow at the side of the road. The noise came closer...it was coming from the road...it was...hang on...

The bicycle went past, with the American racist singing, 'In the year 6265...if humans still alive...'

I got up quickly, jumped on my bike and gave chase.

'Man, stop...'

I didn't know what he was doing there, but I was pretty fucking relieved to see him.

'Dude...what the...!' He stopped and let me catch up to him. 'I thought I'd gone past you...back there...didn't see you for ages.'

'You followed me from the commune?'

'Sure, the Indian guy told me to.'

'Jay?'

'Said you wouldn't like it if he chased you.' He looked around at the road and the forest. 'Dude, we're crazy far out here.'

'Yeah, I know...' I pulled out the map and showed him the path I was looking for. 'See, it should be around here somewhere but...'

'Like there?'

He was pointing towards the forest and...aha, the path. It was right there. How had I not seen it?

'We're not going down there, right?'

'We are.'

I started pushing my bicycle towards the path.

'Dude, not being weird but...this thing might lead to Croatia or something.'

'No, it won't. Come on.'

'Or worse...Bulgaria. Seriously, dude, that's where they cut up tourists...I read about it on that site, the one with all the...'

'Chad...'

'...Japanese sluts and...what?'

'This way.'

'Yeah, I know, I'm coming. Wheels turning.' He pushed his bike towards the path, catching up to me pretty fast. 'But dude, if I hear any Bulgarian...'

#

The two of us rode slowly along the path, dodging trees as they materialised in front of us, pushing hard on the pedals to get through the snow, praying to whoever had any kind of power up there or down below to make sure this path didn't suddenly get bored and abandon us.

It didn't. I didn't know how long we were riding through that forest, maybe forty, fifty minutes, but eventually the trees grew further and further apart and then they stopped.

In front of us was a hill covered in snow. I couldn't see the whole surface, but the snow closest to us, it was completely untouched. No marks, human or animal.

'Dude, is that...'

I looked where he was looking, near the top of the hill. And there it was, in full dress, as if it'd just been made yesterday.

#

We abandoned the bikes and walked up the hill, each step bringing the snow up to our knees. I didn't know why it was deeper here than it was in the forest...maybe something to do with the angle of the slope...but it made it a lot harder to make any progress.

'We'll go back for the bikes later...'

'Yeah...'

'Just have a look around the castle then head back down.'

'Spaseebo minski.'

'What?'

'Spaseebo, dude, minski...spaseebo minski...it's Russian. Forget what it means, but it's Russian. Russbo.'

'You speak Russian?'

'I speak Russbo, sure...'

'Really?'

'Ja, really.'

'Okay, say something else.'

'I knew you were gonna say that.'

'And not some basic stuff...like hello or how are you...it has to be a whole sentence...'

'Okay...whole sentence...' He coughed and spat on the snow.

'Genegen priviet da ninski ga rotsvka...ah gocknen van doosinski.'

'Doosinski?'

'Ja. You know what it means?'

'Nope.'

'It means...fuck, this hill is cold, I'm freezing my dick off.'

'What...that can't be right...which word was 'dick'?'

'Ha, relax, dude. I'm just fucking around, I don't speak Russbo. I don't speak anything. That whole sentence was bullshit.'

'All of it? It was pretty long...'

'I saw Das Boot once...that's why I know some...that word I said. Yeah, the whole thing, all made up.'

'Das Boot is German, isn't it?'

'Nah, the Russian one. Das Boot. The Boat. It's Russian, dude.'

'Okay, man. If you say so.'

'It is...the main guy's Russian...he looks Russian.'

'How are you walking so fast?'

'Nah, he's definitely Russian. He had one of those hats...'

'Man, wait up...'

'The winter hats...Doctor Vago...I'm not, I'm going normal speed.'

'Drunk speed.'

'We're nearly there anyway...fucking castle, dude...fucking medieval Slovenia...'

I took longer steps and caught up to him just as we reached the wall of the castle. The snow had come up a few feet on the side, almost touching the first window...like a little slide for young Slovenes...but further along the wall it was ground level. Man, I couldn't believe there was actually a castle...that she might live in a place like this...

'It's real...'

'Huh?'

'Real stone. Look...'

Chad was tapping the wall with his knuckles.

'A lot of it too.'

'Yeah.'

I looked higher and saw three windows next to the snow slide, one every two or three metres up the tower wall, none of them showing any light and none of them even a little bit open.

'There's gotta be a front door...'

'Yeah, where?'

'Round the other side...'

said Chad, pointing.

We followed the wall around the edge of the castle, looking for anything resembling a door. Or a front gate. Or a drawbridge even.

'Dude, it's freaking huge...'

I looked at Chad and remembered something. Damijana...if she really was inside...she was waiting for me, not us. What would she say if I brought him in? Jesus, what would she say if he started talking race?

'There she blows...'

Chad nudged me in the side, pointing at a door up ahead. It was big and wooden and not too intimidating.

'Yeah...'

'Let's go in...'

'You think?'

'Damn right. Stay the night in a fucking castle...'

We walked up to the door and knocked.

No answer.

'Just push it...' said Chad, already putting out a hand.

'Wait...'

He ignored me and pushed the door open, without making a sound.

'That's kinda weird...'

'What?'

'Not even a creak or anything...doors don't usually do that, right?'

'I guess not... you wanna knock again?' I asked.

'Fuck that. I was just odserbing, that's all. Observing. I wanna see inside Duckula's castle.'

'Yeah...'

We walked through the doorway and into a hall a lot darker than I was expecting. I looked towards where the ceiling should be and tried to work out how high up it was but it was too dark to tell. Was there a light switch somewhere?

'Dude...' Chad hit me on the shoulder. 'I can't see a thing.'

'Me neither.'

'Try to find the switch.'

'Where?'

'I don't know...the side, the wall...'

'Okay.'

I couldn't see what he was doing but I assumed it was the same thing as me. Walking forward, arms out in front, fumbling for brick wall, or wooden wall, or foam wall. I reached something, but it felt like metal, and was rounded, so I adjusted left and shuffled another half metre before hitting something cold and hard.

'You got it?' Chad asked, his voice coming from the other side of the hall.

'The switch?'

'I've got a wall, but...'

'No light?'

'Where are you, dude? You see me?'

'No, You?'

'Just shadow.'

'I can see the floor...'

'No, wait...I can kinda see you...yeah, you're getting clearer...'

'Where?'

'Opposite. Can you see me?'

'A little. I think.'

'Yeah, what am I doing now?'

'Hang on...'

'What am I doing?'

I waited a few more seconds, squinting at the human shape across the hall. It sharpened. Limbs appeared, hair, movement. It wasn't crystal, but it looked like he was trying to do the crane kick from Karate Mum 2.

'Well?'

'You're about to fall over.'

'Ha, close enough, dude.'

There was a noise behind us. I turned fast and the main door...it was shut.

'Nice trick,' said Chad, straightening himself up. 'My door does that back home.'

I shook my head.

'This isn't your home, man.'

'Nah, this ain't no one's home, dude.'

'Then why is it here?'

'I don't know. Heritage?'

'Heritage...'

'Or we've gone back in time...15th century Slovenia...'

'I don't think it's either.'

I moved back to the centre of the hall, followed by Chad. There seemed to be stairs ahead, but it was still too faint to be sure.

'You got a better idea...answer...'

'About what?'

'Whose it is?'

'I think it's her home.'

'Whose?'

His voice hung in the air for a second...until it was replaced by another, softer tone.

'Mine.'

We both turned at the same time, Chad with his hands raised in fists. I couldn't see much beyond the two of us, but it looked like there was something there...a shape...someone. No, not one...two *someones*.

'Damijana...?'

'Billy.'

'Damijana...is that you?'

'Yes, it is me.'

Chad knocked me in the back and leaned into my ear.

'Dude...'

I didn't look at him.

'Sounds like a lady...'

'Maybe.'

'With a Russian accent.'

'Not Russian.'

'A strong Russian accent.'

'Shut up.' I looked back at the shape, squinting for a second then giving up. 'I can't see you very well, Damijana, is there any way you could...'

The candles on the walls grew flames and the hallway lit up. Now we could see everything. The ceiling was higher than I thought, and there was a grand staircase in front of us, leading up then branching off in two different directions...to the left and right, there were more doorways...and paintings on the wall, paintings of people I didn't know...old people...or young people painted a long time ago...and there was a statue, in the corner, one of the *someones* I thought I'd seen...it was bizarre, like some kind of ancient god figure, with a beast's head and a guy's body and a long stick in its hand.

And next to the statue, there was a woman, the owner of the other, slightly accented voice.

'You're Damijana?' I asked again, my mind seemingly incapable of coming up with any other question.

'Yes, dear.'

'The Damijana?'

'Yes.'

'This is...this place...you...this is all real?'

'You may touch if you believe me to be a fake.'

'Sorry?'

'Touch me and see if I'm real. I do not mind.'

I walked a little closer and stared at her, not touching [obviously], but not hiding my study either.

'Take your time, dear. I know this must be quite overwhelming.'

'Yeah...'

'I am glad you have finally arrived.'

'Uh-huh...'

I could hear her speaking, of course, but it was impossible to respond at any normal length. She was just...not what I was expecting at all. Or not what reality had taught me to expect, at least.

I mean...she was pretty...weirdly pretty...her legs, her body...the black cloak or dress or whatever it was she had on, the way it stretched tight all the way down to her ankles. The paleness of her face...impossibly pale...as white as the snow outside, only without all the dirt and shit trod into it. And her voice...ignoring the accent, her English was basically flawless, yet weird too. It was hard to pin down...the words, they were partially eighteenth century...a mix of governess and modern...but the accent...fuck, if only I knew anything about poetry...if only I knew more than one word to positively describe accents...then I could tell her about it, how great it was, how...wait, what was I doing?

I snapped out of it and looked around for Chad.

'Man, what are you...'

He was standing on the other side of the hall, staring at the statue of the red and black beast-man.

'Dude, what's this?'

I walked over to the statue, my eyes checking back on Damijana. She took a few steps, following me, then stopped and folded her arms.

'What are you doing?'

Chad was prodding the head of the statue with his finger.

'It's a devil, right? A devil man.'

'Stop poking it so much.' I walked over and tried to pull his finger away. 'Come on.'

'It's Yama.' Damijana was standing next to us. 'A God.'

'Egyptian, right? Ha, those guys were funny.'

'Indian.'

Chad laughed, slapping the statue on the hip.

'Okay, but he's not from a real religion, is he? I mean, people don't still follow this dude.'

'Actually, he's my husband.'

Chad looked at me then the beast-man then Damijana. His face was like one of those Peruvian tribesmen standing next to a microwave.

'You married a statue?'

I nudged him in the side.

'Man, shut up.'

'I married Yama, the God of death.'

Chad said nothing.

'Follow me,' she said, and turned without waiting for a response.

#

She led us out of the hallway and into another large room full of shelves, each one covered in books. Maybe a thousand, two-thousand, or more, I didn't know. All I knew was I'd been to real libraries and what I was seeing was pretty much on the same level.

Apart from the shelves there was a long table, and a fireplace dug into the wall at the end. Damijana sat down on the chair furthest away from us, and Chad disappeared behind one of the shelves, saying 'dude' now and then so we knew he was still around.

I walked to where Damijana was and sat on the chair next to her. I waited for her to say something.

Welcome to my castle or this is the library or who the fuck is that guy and why'd you bring him into my home? But she said nothing.

'This place...' I started.

'Do you like it?'

'Me?'

She didn't say anything, just stared.

'Yeah, it's...it's good. Old-looking. But not dusty...I mean, it's old-looking, the style part of it, but clean too.' I ran my finger along the side of the table as if inspecting for dust. 'Very clean.'

What the hell was I saying? Forget the dust, focus...say something smart...no, something true...honest...

'Damijana...'

'Yes, dear?'

'All this...the castle...'

She turned to me, smoke rising from the coal in the fireplace behind her. 'Yes?'

'I don't get it,' I said, distracted by the sudden fire. 'Any of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean...the money...the e-mails, all that stuff. What did...how did you do that?'

She picked up a poker and stoked the fire before answering.

'It's not important.'

'But...'

'What's important is that you have come. I've been waiting a long time.'

'Yeah, but the money and all that...it wasn't just small change, it was eight thousand pounds...'

'Eight thousand one hundred and seventy-two pounds.'

'Exactly. It's insane. How can you afford that kind of...outlay? How did you even know my address?'

'You think I'm insane, dear?'

I stuttered a 'no'. Jesus, that was direct.

'The people at Metelkova have been telling you things. You don't need to explain, I heard everything.'

'Yeah, that's what I mean. How? How did you hear what they...'

'I was there.'

'You were there?'

'Yes. I flew there and disguised myself as a chair.'

'Huh?'

'Didn't you see me?'

Another 'dude' came from behind one of the shelves. Damijana turned and traced the noise, her eyes narrowing a little.

'You flew?'

'Yes.'

'In a helicopter?'

She smirked. 'No.'

'But you flew there?' Her arm reached across the table, stopping an inch from mine. 'I mean, you're joking, right?'

'Am I?'

'Err...yeah. Aren't you?'

She stared at me.

'Sorry, I'm a little confused here,' I said. 'I'm not sure what we're saying...'

The arm withdrew.

'Anyone can go to Metelkova. It is free, democratic.' She smiled. 'There's no need to fly anywhere.'

'So, you were joking...'

She half nodded.

'But what about the other stuff...the money.'

'I'm rich, dear. Money is not something I need to worry about.'

I looked at the room around me. It was bigger than my whole apartment. The fireplace took up more space than my old place in Hong Kong. 'Okay, you're rich. But still...'

'It is not important.'

'Yeah, maybe not the money, but...there was another thing you did...with the snow.'

'I do not understand.'

I took a breath. It was probably stupid, what I was about to say, and I wasn't even sure if I believed it or not, but I had to know for sure. 'You know...the snow thing...I was outside the bar in Metelkova and...there were words in the snow...come to the castle...okay, I was pretty drunk, but...'

She smiled. 'Ah. The bar.'

'Huh?'

'The bar in Metelkova. It's no mystery, dear. They laced your drink with *Grey Vasic*.'

I shook my head.

'Perhaps you don't know it. *Grey Vasic* is a drug. Someone must've dropped it into your drink, and it caused you to hallucinate.'

'My drink...who...'

'It is common in Metelkova, to experiment in this way. Maybe you saw others doing it while you were there. Personally, I do not believe in such additions, not for creative work...but it does make some people happy. A side effect, I suppose.'

She smiled again, possibly the same way date rapists smiled before handing someone a drink laced with *Grey Vazic*. No, that was too harsh. This was Damijana. Those others had drugged me, possibly drugged me, not her. She would never do that. She'd given me eight grand. She'd said my zine was great. She liked me.

'Are you okay, dear?'

'What? Yeah...yeah, I'm okay. Just trying to remember back...'

'You seem distracted...'

I tried to smile. 'Just thinking about stuff...sorry.'

'Ah, I see.' She turned to the fire, stoking it again. 'Anything you want to tell me about?'

'Err...' I looked at the flames. 'Maybe later.'

'As you wish. Though I should warn you...delaying things ultimately leads to self-censorship.'

'Sorry?'

'Dude...' Chad came out from behind one of the shelves holding a book. 'What's this? *Invisible Man*...'

Damijana didn't answer either of us. Instead, she looked back into the fire.

Chad walked on regardless, sitting down at the other end of the table. He flicked through the book for a few seconds then looked over at Damijana, saying something about how it seemed like sci-fi, but wasn't reading like sci-fi, so what exactly was it?

I knew that title. Ellison, wasn't it? Seventy odd years ago...he wrote about...

Oh fuck.

'It's not sci-fi,' Damijana said, still with the fire. 'It's about a black man who feels as if he is invisible within society.'

'A black dude? And he's invisible?'

I played table piano with my fingers, hoping it would be loud enough to drown him out. Please don't say it, Chad. Please...

'He feels invisible because he has no civil rights where he lives. He feels like he is worthless and this makes him mad.'

'Sounds boring,' I said, quickly. 'What else is over there?'

Chad dropped the book on the table, and shook his head.

'See, this is what I don't get...they get civil rights, and they're still complaining...'

'Chad...'

He looked at me, patted me down with one hand, and went on:

'...and it's not against all black people. It's not like I'm racist. I mean, dude, some of my best friends are n***ers and they work hard and they're responsible, you know? They're good people.'

I looked across at Damijana to try and gauge her thoughts, but it was impossible. That face...it was like sitting across from a robot.

'...but what I'm talking about is the other ones...the n***ars. See, they're always complaining about slavery this and slavery that, and dude, I ain't got no rights, you gotta give me more respect...and people get all frightened to say anything back cos they're scared of being racist and all that shit. But that's bullshit, dude...it's fucking bullshit...like this guy.' He held up the book like a piece of evidence. 'He sits there and writes a whole damn book complaining about shit, and, dude, I'm invisible, they don't respect me...well, stand up and do some work and earn my respect, n***er. Stop complaining about shit that never even happened to you anyway...'

I stopped my fingers and waited. Damijana said nothing.

'You know what I mean?'

No response.

Chad shrugged and looked at the book again. 'I don't know. I haven't read it...maybe it's different.'

No one said anything. The whole room was as quiet as a...something. An Ingmar Bergman film? I didn't know, but the only thing I could hear was the fire.

'Any other books over there?' I asked again.

He pushed 'Invisible Man' to the side and looked back at the shelves.

'You know...it's all kind of old stuff.'

'I think they're called classics, man.' I looked at Damijana for confirmation, but she was still cryogenic. Man, she was mad, had to be. She was mad at me for bringing him. She'd never speak to me again. She'd kick us out any second now and this whole trip would be wasted. She'd...Jesus, I could only see the side of her face but she was beautiful when she was mad. Kind of like a young Mia Sara, but with more mystery. I wanted to stand up and go sit on her knee and just kiss every part of her face. Even if that made me the queen and her the king, I didn't give a shit. I just wanted to...

'But I was wondering...there aren't many new books. Like all those how to get rich and be successful kind of books.' Chad turned around and looked at Damijana. 'You got any of those?'

'Those books are worthless,' said Damijana, her mouth hardly bothering to open.

'That's true, man,' I added.

'Nah, come on.' He walked back to the chair and sat down. 'How is it worthless to make money? Tell me that. How is it worthless to be successful?'

'I do not need money,' said Damijana. 'I do not need success,'

Chad looked at the bookshelves and the fire and the huge windows. 'Yeah, maybe. But the rest of us...'

'I do not care about the rest of you.'

'Yeah, but...'

'Your questions are feeble. And your mind is small.'

'What?'

'You may stay one night, but tomorrow you will leave.' She turned to me, again touching my arm. 'Of course, you may stay as long as you wish.'

'I can?'

'Yes, dear.'

'My mind isn't small?'

She smiled. 'Your mind is beautiful.'

I moved closer to the table, putting out my other arm but not really trying to touch her...just, I wasn't sure...giving her the chance to touch me more?

She stood up and moved to the fire. I didn't see what she did, but the fire flickered and died. She turned back to me, ignoring Chad completely, not that I could blame her. He'd started two topics, and already he was two strikes down.

'I will take you to your room, dear.'

'Hey...what about me?' asked Chad.

She walked out of the room, her black cloak or dress or whatever it was trailing behind her.

'Hi, over here...do I get a room?'

I got up and walked to the door via Chad, and told him to shut the fuck up.

'About what?'

'Everything.'

#

Back in the hallway, Damijana told us to stay close behind as the rooms were far and it was easy to get lost in the darkness of the corridors.

'Dude,...' said Chad, standing next to the beast-man statue. 'It's dark as shit up there. I can see it from here.'

'Man, don't...' I tried, but he wasn't looking at me.

'Not a dig or anything...Damijana...but it's pretty hard to get lost when you've got lightbulbs.'

'Lightbulbs are unreliable.'

'You serious?'

'They blow out sometimes.'

'And candles don't?'

'Candles are reliable.'

'Yeah, super reliable, long as there's no wind...long as you've got everlasting wax.' Chad folded his arms, looking up at the balcony. 'Seriously, it looks like a cave up there.'

'It is not a cave.'

'Nah, it is, it's exactly like a cave. You need light bulbs.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I do not need to give reasons.'

'Come on...they're pretty cheap. And they're not that hard to install.'

She turned to me, her face like stone. 'Shall we, Billy?'

I didn't think it was really a question, but I nodded anyway.

'Hey...what about my light bulb question?' asked Chad, staying next to the beast-man statue.

'No.'

'No what?'

'Stay down here or come, I do not care which.'

'Serious?'

Damijana moved a step closer to me. 'Billy...'

'Coming,' I said, turning quickly to Chad and mouthing again for him to shut up.

He didn't move.

Damijana and I got halfway up the staircase before Chad stopped us with another 'dude.'

I turned, Damijana didn't. 'What?'

'We can't go yet...'

'Yes, we can.'

'I'm starving, dude. I need to eat something or I'll pass out...'

'We're going to sleep, what are you talking about?'

'Yeah, but...never go to sleep on an empty stomach. My gran always said that. It messes up your system, seriously.'

'I thought it was bad to eat before bed...'

'Who said that?'

'I don't know. Loads of people. Scientists...'

'Who? Which scientists?'

'I don't know. Just regular scientists.'

'Forget them, dude, they don't know anything. Seriously...they think evolution actually happened, it's crazy...can't trust them on anything.'

'Man, can't you wait until breakfast?'

'No, I'm starving.' He looked past me, at Damijana. 'There must be some food around here, right?'

Damijana looked at me.

'Hey, not him...me,' said Chad, waving his arms.

'Are you hungry, dear?'

'Me?'

She nodded.

I thought it through. I was a little bit...the drink was starting to wear off and it had been a long bike ride to get there...but I didn't wanna piss her off any more than Chad had already.

'There is a kitchen,' she added. 'It is okay if you wish to eat...'

'What about you?'

'I am not hungry.'

'Dude, just say yes already. Two versus one, she can't say no...'

Damijana stared past me, towards Chad, her lips sealed tight and...and her eyes...Jesus, her eyes were bright purple.

Chad raised his hands. 'Joking...relax. I know it's your place...your kitchen. All I'm saying is...I'm hungry.'

'Damijana...' I mumbled. 'Your eyes...'

The purple faded back to brown and she faced me again, asking if I wanted to eat or not. It wasn't a sharp tone, but it did warrant an answer.

'I guess...I could eat a little.'

'Very well then.'

'I mean, if you don't mind...'

Damijana nodded and walked back down the staircase, her cloak brushing against Chad's leg as she walked towards the door on the far-left side.

'Fuck...my leg...'

I walked down the stairs and shook my head at Chad rubbing his shin. 'Man...'

'What...it hurts...feels like it's been cut or something...what the hell she just do?'

'It was a cloak...'

'Yeah, a sharp fucking cloak...must be a pin on it or something.'

I went close to his ear and pulled his collar a little. 'She's getting you your food, so stop fucking around, okay?'

'What? I'm hungry...'

'We're guests, man. This isn't a hotel.'

'She called me feeble...'

'Yeah, and you deserved it.'

'Did I fuck...'

'You did, man. You were being rude...you still are.'

'Am not. Was not. Anyway, you're hungry too, I know you are.'

'Maybe. A little, but...'

'But what?'

I didn't know what else to say so I let go of his collar and told him to stop ordering her around like a servant.

'Okay, dude, fine. I wasn't doing that, but okay, whatever.'

#

The kitchen was surprisingly modern compared to the rest of the castle. It still had the stone floor and high ceiling, but everything else was pretty hi-tech. There was a microwave, a fridge, a freezer, a waffle machine, a toaster, no lightbulbs...I could've gone on, but I was more concerned with whether or not I could get Chad to sleep before he said anything worse. I'd known him for less than a week, but I'd already experienced enough of him to know that around 92% of everything he said was inflammatory.

So, while Damijana opened the fridge and listed all the things she had which were still edible, I took the opportunity to whisper another 'don't say anything stupid' in Chad's ear.

'I'm not...'

'Just let me do the talking, okay?'

'Why?'

'Please...'

'Dude, I always talk. I'm good at it.'

'Chad...'

'Okay, fine. You talk. But only because she's a dick.'

'Thanks.'

'And because I'm starving...'

'Good. You can focus on eating.'

'Yeah, I will.' He drummed his fingers on the edge of the table, looking over at the fridge. 'Hey, how long's this talking embargo gonna be?'

'You can talk again tomorrow,' I whispered back.

'What?'

'If you're good...'

'Dude...'

'Man, you'll be asleep for most of it, what's the problem?'

'Too long.'

Damijana stopped speaking and closed the fridge door. She moved to the side and folded her arms, watching us.

'Hey...' I said. 'Nice kitchen.'

She didn't answer.

'Very modern.'

No answer.

'Still no lightbulbs though...' added Chad quickly, before my foot could reach his leg.

'Yeah...very modern,' I repeated. 'You really wouldn't think this was inside a castle...'

I thought it was a good line, but again, no response.

Not even Slovene hay bales.

I looked at Chad and he looked at me. Was this a test? Did she want us to get the food ourselves? Was that allowed?

I tried to think of a way of asking her all three questions in one, without making it sound misogynistic, but before I could string any words together, Chad had opened his mouth again.

'Dude, I'm confused. Is this self-service or...'

'I am not a dude,' said Damijana.

'Yeah, okay...I know that, Damijana. I'm just asking...should we do this ourselves or...'

'How else do you plan to get your food?'

'I don't know. You're the host, I thought you were gonna...'

I kicked him in the leg before he could finish.

'Dude...what the fuck?'

'You're being rude.'

'How? Where I come from, the host brings all the food, not me.'

I glared at him the best I could and mouthed 'not a hotel'. It seemed to work. Chad turned to Damijana and pulled an unconvincing surrender pose with his hands. 'Fine. We'll get it ourselves...even though it's kinda weird and...'

She stared at him.

'Yeah. Well, I guess I'll just...'. Chad stood up and walked over to the fridge, opening it and poking his head inside. A few seconds later, he came back out holding a loaf of bread and some cheese. 'This should take care of it. You got a knife?'

Damijana turned to the sink and picked up a kitchen knife.

'Yeah, that'll do.

She handed it to him, blade first, but he didn't seem to notice. He took it, went back to the fridge, grabbed some butter and started making his sandwich.

I was still stuck next to the table, hoping my face wasn't red.

'You not eating, dude?'

'Yeah...in a second.'

'Better hurry...food might be all gone by the time you get over here.'

'I can see that.'

I stood up and went over to the fridge. There were some bananas that weren't black and a yoghurt with a month left on its expiry date, so I grabbed both.

'Are these okay?' I asked Damijana, holding up both things.

'Anything you like, dear.'

Chad finished his sandwich and stuffed half of it in his mouth. I nudged him in the side and gestured towards the knife, but he didn't seem to understand.

'You should wash up, man.'

'Uh-huh...I will. Later.'

He took his sandwich over to Damijana and floated it in front of her face. 'The Chad special. An apology for my possible rudeness...'. He pointed at me, smiling. '...according to him. You want a bite?'

'I do not.'

'Fair enough.' He looked around the kitchen. 'Actually, this is a really cool place you got here. The kitchen part...'

'I don't come in here often.'

'That's why it's so clean, huh?'

'No.'

'Actually, I was wondering...where do you get your food from? This castle's like miles from anywhere...is there a 7-11 we don't know about or something?'

'There are no 7-11's in Slovenia.'

'Where?'

She stared at him.

'Oh, Slovenia, right. This country. I get it.'

'Man...you wanna sit down? Focus on your sandwich maybe...'

'You said it funny, that's what it was. You said Slo -vay - nee - yuh. But I say it Slu - vE - nE - uh. Kinda weird your way...'

Damijana walked away from the sink and took up a position by the door. She looked at me again. 'Perhaps you'd like to finish your food on the way to your room...'

'What about me?' asked Chad.

'You are irrelevant.'

'Thanks.'

'Billy...' She gestured with her hands towards the hallway. 'If you're ready...'

'Err...'

'Hang on, you didn't answer my question.' Chad stuffed the remaining piece of the sandwich into his mouth and walked over to the table. 'Actually, that's kinda your thing, isn't it? Don't talk to the American, he's irrelevant, he's small-minded or whatever. Even though he's asking you genuine questions and trying to be polite.' He turned to me. 'Dude, it's just like talking to a Frenchie...'

'Chad...'

'Relax, she's knows I'm joking. Right, Damijahana burger?'

She looked at him the same way the KKK might look at Spike Lee if he were trafficking one of their daughters. I figured Chad had about two more lines before he got a smack in the face...or worse.

'I get my food from the market,' she said, her face returned to its normal calm state.

'Huh?'

'That is the answer you requested.'

'Oh yeah, right...the market. Cool.'

'Now...it is time to sleep.'

I hadn't started my banana or yoghurt yet, but I stood up anyway and said, 'yeah, sure, lead the way.'

'Another thing...this castle...I'm not being sexist or anything, but how the hell can one woman own this whole place? It's huge...'

'Enough questions.'

'What? It's true...this place must've cost a bomb.'

'You are confused.'

'Why? You mean it was a present?'

'I did not buy it, I built it. It is mine. It will always be mine.'

'No fucking way...you built this? You?'

'I do not need presents from anyone.'

'Like, with your bare hands?'

'No.'

'With a JCB?'

'Ste me draži.'

'With a what?'

'Bo zmanjšal, grlo in možganov, ki se jo posuši.'

'Dude, you've switched channels...'

'Kasneje.'

'Kaznee what?'

Damijana turned quickly and walked out of the kitchen, her cloak rising up into the air and pretty close to the skin on Chad's neck.

'Hey, watch it...'

He looked at me for confirmation, but I picked up my banana and yoghurt and told him he was a fucking liability.

'What...for being curious...'

I didn't respond. I walked out into the corridor, looking for the trail of her cloak, hoping Chad would accidentally get stuck in the fridge or under the table...anywhere as long as he wasn't in the same room as me and her.

My hope was short-lived.

Chad caught up to me in the hallway, just as I caught up to her. Well, almost. She was already halfway up the main staircase.

'Dude...I'm sorry, but you were thinking the same thing...or the same things...this whole thing is weird, you know it is...'

'I don't care.'

'Yeah, but I'm just saying now...this thing is weird...'

'Seriously, stop talking.'

I kept my voice low, but it didn't matter, Damijana still picked it up. She stopped at the top of the stairs and told Chad to either be quiet or leave.

'Okay...whatever,' mumbled Chad. 'I'm tired of talking anyway...'

'Good,' said Damijana, turning away from both of us and disappearing behind the first-floor balcony.

'Yeah, good,' I added, hurrying after her.

#

We got to the top of the stairs and followed the trail of her cloak along the balcony. She slowed down a little at first to let us catch up [even Chad], then quickly resumed her previous speed. The walls were bare, except for the paintings we'd seen from downstairs. Now I was close up I could see they were pictures of young men and women, all dressed up like it was two hundred years ago. Damijana's ancestors, perhaps. Or friends of hers who liked the way things were back in the old days...Slovene hipsters, with lots of time on their hands...

'Hey...dude on the left looks like Billy Bob Thornton,' said Chad, nudging me in the side.

'Shut up.'

'He does...look...'

I looked, not telling Chad that I'd already thought the same thing.

'Okay, he does a little.'

When we reached the end of the hallway, there was a choice of an indoor corridor and an outdoor one; we took the second option, heading past another wooden door and into the cold night air. As we walked Damijana said nothing to us and didn't even turn, which in my

mind was all to do with Chad, and as soon as he was gone the next morning, she'd move a lot closer to me and say a lot more and then...I didn't know what, but she'd given me eight grand to come here so it had to be a little more than friendship.

To the side of the outdoor corridor and a floor below was a courtyard covered in a duvet of snow with no footmarks or dirt or anything that might've changed its colour, and at the end of it was a set of stone steps fading down into darkness. Chad looked over the wall as we walked, whispering that it looked pretty cool down there, like a mini-field of cocaine, and he wouldn't mind checking it out before he left, but I hushed him and said to just focus on getting through the night without any more opinions on race or money.

We got to the end of the corridor, passed through a door-less arch that led back inside then walked along a narrow passage with more paintings on the wall. The majority of these were women, though none of them looked anything like Damijana, and the men...well, some of them had the same colour hair, but that was about it. I asked Chad if he thought they were her ancestors, but he said, no, he recognised one of them from somewhere, only he couldn't remember the dude's name.

'You mean they're famous?'

'Yeah...the dude with the blonde hair...he wrote something about the bible...Abraham and his kid...'

'You read it?'

'Nah. Just the stuff on the back...the plot thingy...synopsis?'

'Synopsis.'

'Yeah, there was a picture of him, he looked like that guy. Can't remember the name of it, the book...begins with a 'K', I think.'

'Kafka?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Kelly Brook?'

'Who?'

'Nothing.'

At the end of the narrow corridor, there were some spiral stairs, the kind that reminded me of a dozen movies I couldn't remember the names of...no, wait, that Polanski one...with the count vampire in the castle who...actually, he had a courtyard too, and kinda like that other

one, the one we just walked past...Jesus, Polanski didn't come here, did he? No, he couldn't have, it was impossible. He would've needed permission from Damijana, or Damijana's ancestors, and I knew enough to know that she didn't like outsiders, apart from me...she liked me...at least I thought she did...but then Polanski was a creative too...and way better than me, even if he was a rapist...why would she not want him to come here? Unless he was too famous...too established to make anything good anymore...was he? The Pianist was okay...not the greatest thing ever made, but it was about something...wasn't it? I didn't know, I'd never seen it...all I knew was some guy runs around Warsaw hiding from Nazis and playing a piano...was that good?

'This is your room.'

We were standing in a decent-sized room with a huge double bed taking up most of the space. I looked behind me to see how far back those spiral stairs were, as I couldn't remember reaching the top or walking through any more corridors, but I figured we must've as there we were, in a room.

'Is this for two or...?' Chad began to ask.

'You will sleep on the floor.'

'What?'

'Or you can sleep outside if you wish?'

Chad looked at the floor. There was no carpet, and it was made of the same stone as the castle walls. Damijana moved towards the small desk at the side of the bed and patted a book. 'This can help you learn some of my language.'

I walked over to her and read the cover. 'This is a dictionary or...'

'It is a complete learning guide to the Slovene language, with extra notes at the back.'

'Sounds good.'

'You can read it when you have time.'

'And you'll practise with me?'

'If you like.'

I didn't smile, too obvious, instead I picked up the book and flicked through. It wasn't written like a typical study guide. The sample sentences were in English and Slovene, but the English version

was...weird. Lines like 'At least we never lost Bled' and 'for the sake of a salt rifle.'

'Come on...' said Chad, still stroking the floor. 'I'm not sleeping here...it's stone.'

'Are you still complaining?' asked Dami, back in the doorway.

'No...' He knelt down and touched the floor, his hand shooting back up. 'Dude, it's like ice.'

He stood back up. 'Can I get a mattress or something?'

But she was gone.

I walked out of the room, checked the corridor and saw the top half of a figure disappearing down the spiral stairs.

I went back into the room, put my banana and yoghurt combo on the windowsill and fell onto the bed. It was soft, almost soft enough to suck me in.

'Dude, I'm not going on the floor...'

'That's what she wants.'

Chad lay down on the floor and tried different positions. On his back, on his front, on both sides, curled up like a baby, but none of it worked. He stood back up.

'Move over...'

'I don't think that's a great idea.'

'She won't know...'

'She might.'

'How? Are there cameras in here or something?' He looked up at the ceiling. 'No. Wait a minute, it's a medieval castle.'

'Are you being caustic?'

'Cord stick?'

'Cau-stic.'

'Dude, I barely finished high school. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about.'

I sat up on the bed. 'I thought you said you went to college?'

'Did I? When?'

'The other night...in the commune.'

'Dude, I don't remember shit...'

'Seriously?'

He put his hands in the air. 'Okay, if I'm drunk, yeah, sometimes I brag about college or something. Guess it's a lie, but it just kinda comes out...which is kinda weird as I don't really feel embarrassed about it or anything. I mean, I fucking hated high school, dude. I couldn't wait to get out of there.'

I moved over to one side of the bed and gestured for him to take the other.

'That's more like it. Share the wealth.'

He lay down and it was silent for a minute or two. There were a couple of things I thought about asking him, the stuff about high school and maybe one or two more words about the racism, but it all faded out as soon as I came back to her.

'Dude, that zine thing you did...'

'Yeah?'

'I read some of it...the part with Ed Norton, all the movies he's done...that part was pretty cool.'

'Thanks.'

'It's fake though, right? I mean, you didn't really interview Norton...did you?'

'What do you think?'

'Nah, you didn't. He's too high profile for that kind of thing. No offence, dude.'

'You're right, he is.'

'It's still pretty cool though. Kinda cheap-looking, but definitely cool.'

'It doesn't make any money.'

'Yeah, I was gonna talk about that.'

I laughed.

'I'm a capitalist, dude, I can't help it.'

'I noticed.'

'See, I know you don't like it but, to me, money is an equaliser, it's beautiful...it's only lazy people who say it isn't. They just think it's this big evil, but that's just because they don't have any. Seriously, I've studied this shit, dude. I know what I'm saying.'

'At college?'

'Ha, I knew you'd say that. No, self-study. I learned everything I know from the library and the internet. That's what makes me different from the lazy...they've got everything they need, but they don't use it.'

'I don't know, man...'

'It's true...call me heartless, I don't care, it's true. You wanna learn something, learn it. You wanna make cash, get off your fucking ass.'

'It's half true...'

'And anyway, I do have a heart. Give them a hand up, not a hand out, that's what capitalism's all about. It's not evil or anything...it's still like a kind of charity, they just have to work a little to...y'know, get somewhere.'

'And you give hand ups?'

'Sure. Kinda. I mean, I will when I get somewhere.'

'Ha.'

'When I'm in my fifties, I'll give back, no problem. To people who deserve it...not to lazy people though. They can go fuck themselves.'

I didn't know what to say so I just stared at the painting on the wall. It was a woman, kind of similar-looking to Damijana, wearing a costume from...a hundred years ago maybe.

'What are you anyway, communist?'

I turned my head a little to half look at him. 'Socialist.'

'Same thing, dude.'

'It really isn't.'

'Seriously?'

'Yup.'

'Nah, it is, I read about it. Babysitting everyone, giving hand-outs, equal wages, free hospitals, shit like that, that's communism, socialism, same thing.'

'You say it all like it's a bad thing?'

'It is, it's evil...makes everyone lazy, dude. You can't function a society like that...have it function that way...it doesn't work.'

'Man...' I didn't know where to start. I was in bed with a capitalist who thought free hospitals were evil. It was like talking to The Daily Mail.

'That all you got?'

'I'm thinking.'

'Sure, dude. If you can't keep up...'

'Man...'

'Joking...relax. Politics is boring anyway. Always ends in arguments.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Sometimes wars...'

'Yeah.'

I turned and faced the ceiling, trying to recall all the tenets of socialism. It'd been a while since I'd checked...I knew it was the welfare state and unions and rehabilitation of criminals over punishment...but what else?

I couldn't remember. All I knew was, every time Chad talked about money and hand ups, I wanted to smack him in the face.

'You sleeping, dude?'

'Not yet.'

'Good. I'm kinda wired...feel like I could talk the whole rest of the year.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Longer even...'

'Great.'

#

He wasn't lying. It had to have been around half two in the morning and the guy was non-stop. He talked about Damijana and the castle and Europe and the economy and art and how that guy in the bar wouldn't read his poems out, and what Jay was doing right now...and I was mostly there, mostly listening and asking the odd question...but another part was elsewhere.

Damijana, Damijahana burger...where are you now?

What are you doing?

Which room are you in?

#

Chad opened his eyes then closed them straight away.

He tried to return to his dream of playing guitar in a band and walking across the stage to fight the black people who'd just crashed in and threatened to tear him limb from limb...no, wait...some of the black people were good, they liked his music and Southern culture and Louisiana, and two of them were about to be lynched in the nightclub, and he was there to cut them down and tell them things would be better now, he was there to help, and they said he played guitar real good and he said, yeah, pretty good, I practised loads, and they all shook hands and half-hugged and went to Mexico and sat by the beach and talked about setting up a record label with songs sung by black people sounding kinda like white people and he got the guitar out and played Leonard Cohen while the tide came in and...it came in...the tide came in, but...it wasn't...it didn't feel...

The mattress, it was freezing...like a rock of ice.

He opened his eyes again and put his hand under his back.

'Dude...'

No answer.

He didn't know how he'd done it but he was on the floor. Damn. Had the British guy pushed him off? Or was it her? But why hadn't he felt anything before?

'Hey, dude...I'm on the floor.'

Still no answer. What was he, in a coma?

The darkness of the room around him cleared a little, and he realised the mistake. This wasn't the same room. He stood up and saw the same huge door where they'd come into the castle, the same stairs leading up to the two corridors. The same Indian god of death in the corner.

'Fuck...'

He looked at the stairs and tried to work out a way in which he could've fallen out of the bed and rolled down two corridors and another set of stairs and ended up here. But he couldn't. It made no sense at all. Not any kind. But now that I'm up, he thought. There's that cool little set of stairs by the courtyard.

He stood for a minute, thinking over the drawbacks. It'd be cold out there. But only for a second. It'd be bad if the rude bitch caught up with him. But she was asleep, wasn't she?

What else?

There was nothing else. It was a total green light, no barricades.

Cool.

He looked at the top of the stairs and to the corridor on the right and worked out which way he'd have to go to get out into the courtyard. Then, with what he thought was the best answer, he turned and walked right and found a door that was unlocked and, yes, he was right, it led right where he guessed it would, under the corridor above.

Outside it was freezing. Even colder than earlier. Minus ten or twenty he reckoned. He ran quickly across the courtyard, looking up at both sides to check if any lights were still on, or if Damijana the bitch was standing up there, watching in case he tried something like the thing he was trying. No sign of her. Unless she was hiding behind one of the walls? Would she do that? Maybe she'd set all this up, the whole thing. Rolled him out of bed somehow, dragged him back into the hallway next to that stupid beast-man statue, waited for him to wake up and...then what?

He reached the top of the steps and looked back up at the first-floor balcony again. For a second, he thought he saw a figure behind one of the pillars, but he blinked and looked again and it was gone.

Was she really up there? In this weather? If she really hated him as much as he thought she did, she might be...

He stared up at the pillar, looking for any weird flickering shadows.

Nothing...just tiny specks of snow.

He waited another minute or so, watching the same spot until his nipples got hard and his skin started to feel like it wasn't there.

Lines from earlier came back to him.

Your mind is small and your questions are feeble.

You are irrelevant.

You will sleep on the floor.

He stopped looking at the pillar and spat on the snow.

Fuck her, bitch put me on the floor like a dog, he thought, and started down the set of steps two at a time. There were more than he'd thought, but it wasn't endless...probably something like thirty or forty, which was quite a lot really, when he thought about how many steps it took to get to the top of the castle. And that meant, this basement

place, it was pretty fucking far down. Better be careful, he thought, unsure exactly what it was he should be careful about.

He pushed open the door and it let him through. In front of him was an implacably dark space, so dark he couldn't see more than two metres ahead. But every room had to have two sides, so he looked around for a candle or some kind of light-switch to help him out, but it was too dark to see, even if he left the door open and let some of the outside light fight its way in.

He shrugged and started into the space anyway.

Ten yards in and he couldn't see a damn thing. But he kept on going. Why not? There were movies and shit where this would be a bad idea, but this wasn't a movie, and in real life stuff like that never happened. Not really.

Another ten yards and he was wondering if that was right or not. He counted the real stories he'd heard. The guy the Texas Chainsaw Massacre was based on, he was real. And that guy from Germany or Poland or somewhere, the guy who locked his daughter in the basement and kept her there twenty or thirty years...that guy was real.

He stopped. It was a little wet by his feet and he started thinking of rats.

Damn, rats. They were real. No reason they couldn't be down there too. It was a castle, and it was old, and rats liked castles, didn't they?

He lifted his left foot off the floor and then his right and then his left and then his right again. He did this for a few minutes then stopped. You pussy, he thought. There ain't any rats. There ain't anything. And even if there were...wasn't he a man? It's not like there was anything here that could do him any real damage, not unless they had a gun or an axe or something...and even in the dark, that worked both ways too. He couldn't see, but then neither could the axeman or the gunman or whoever it was.

But it wasn't anything. There was no one else there. This was real life, not a horror flick. And real life was infamous for being totally different from anything any horror dude ever came up with.

He walked forward again, ten yards, twenty yards, thirty...

For some reason, that movie came into his head, the one he'd seen in Zagreb. The woman on the webcam, the psycho pretending to be a

woman, sending her weird messages. That was creepy...until she let the psycho in. Guy was sweating like a cloud and wasn't even that strong anyway. That's what real killers looked like, not the Texas chainsaw dude.

He took another few steps, the confidence that had brought him down here flowing back into his blood, and then put out his hands.

Still no wall or door or anything.

He tried to peer forward through the darkness, but it was too much. Was it worth going on? Maybe there just wasn't anything that interesting along...

A noise.

Where?

He stopped and listened.

There it was again. Someone moving...someone's feet moving on the floor.

'Hello?' he said, a lower tone than usual.

The footsteps stopped.

'Dami Duck?'

No answer.

'I heard you walking...'

The footsteps started up again, along with a cold breeze. Chad told himself not to shiver, but it was too cold, too fast, he couldn't help it.

'Hey, drama queen...you might as well say something, I know it's you.'

The corridor did not reply.

'No?'

He rubbed his upper arms, still cold.

'Damijana?'

The footsteps grew louder, nearer, and he couldn't see a damn thing.

'Fuck this...'

He turned and started walking quickly the way he'd come, trying not to listen to the feet behind him even though he could still hear them, and trying not to think what or who it was.

'You,' whispered a voice.

He froze. It was behind him, whoever it was.

'You...'

It was louder this time, but still a whisper.

He started walking again. His math wasn't great, but he knew he couldn't be more than another thirty or forty yards from where he came in, and if he could just get there and out the door and into the courtyard and...

'Chad...'

He stopped again. Impossible. It wasn't behind him, it was...it was in front of him...near him...ten yards...closer. It knew his name.

Shit...shit...

His heart banged on the inside of his chest, telling him he was a dead man. Or a seriously injured man. He put his hands in his pockets and searched for something, anything, a weapon, keys, a pen, anything, but the only thing there was the tissue with the Chinese girl's phone number on it.

Shit Jesus, where are my fucking keys?

He took his hands out and balled his fists, trying to forget the keys and focus on keeping his cool.

Okay, he thought, breathing in, breathing out, slow. Okay.

Silence.

Okay.

The whole corridor, its never-ending walls, the too-far-away door out of there...it was all silent.

Okay.

He stood there for about a minute, breathing in and out, in and out, and nothing happened.

Okay.

He took a few more, deep breaths and told himself again to pull his shit together. If there was something in there with him, there wasn't much he could do about it. That's what his Dad would've said anyway. *If you ever find yourself speeding towards a brick wall, don't panic, son, just let it flow. Whatever you could've done, you didn't, so let it flow.*

Let it flow, let it flow, let it flow, he repeated over and over as he started walking back down the corridor.

And the occasional, why the hell did I come to this fucking castle?

But things didn't seem to be so bad now. The voice had stopped. Maybe he'd outrun it. Maybe it was just a recording made by that dumb bitch upstairs to scare people away. Maybe he'd triggered it by accident around the forty-yard mark.

He stopped and squinted. A few metres ahead, there was the door he'd come from. At least he thought it was. The outline was quite pale, but it definitely looked door-shaped.

He took another step forward and...there was light. Everywhere. The walls on both sides had come to life...or come to light...purple bars of light, on both sides, one bar every metre and a half along.

'Jesus...' he mumbled, looking behind him straight away and letting out a few quick breaths when he saw the corridor was empty. 'Fucking neon...'

He turned back around and said 'back to bed, motherfucker.'

Then he noticed the writing on the wall...it hadn't been there before, he was sure of it, but it was there now, in huge red letters:

YOU WERE NOT INVITED

'What...'

He walked closer and touched the letters with his finger, checking to see if it was paint and if the paint was fresh. It wasn't. It was bone dry, flaky even.

'Huh...'

The two bars of neon purple on either side of the door flickered and went out. He turned around and checked the other bars and it was the same thing. Each light was getting dimmer and dimmer...

'Shit...'

He turned back and reached for the door handle, not bothering to wipe the sweat off his hand. It wouldn't open. He pulled again, harder, and then even harder, but it wouldn't budge.

'Okay,' he said, turning to face the corridor.

He looked for his keys again, remembered they weren't there and balled his fists instead.

'Okay.'

The last few bars flickered ten, twenty yards away, but didn't blow out. If he squinted hard, he could still see almost half of the corridor ahead.

Wait, there was something there...

A figure...

He squinted, but didn't move any closer. If it was a dude, he was in trouble. If it was a girl...if it was that rude bitch upstairs...he'd be okay.

It was hard to tell.

The outline of the figure was thin...and it wasn't super tall...maybe a little smaller than him. That meant it was either a girl or...a really skinny dude.

'Okay...'

Keeping his fists raised, he walked forward, towards the figure, whatever it was.

'Okay...' he muttered to himself. 'Okay.'

The figure matched his movements, coming forward, almost gliding it seemed.

It got taller.

The neon purple got fainter.

Chad got to within ten metres of it and stopped. He thought about turning around, but where was there to go? The corridor was almost pitch black again.

Maybe if I try talking to it...

He opened his mouth to speak, but it was too late.

The figure was gone.

And so was the purple light.

Pitch black.

The corridor was there and it wasn't.

Something told him to run, somewhere, anywhere, but another part of him said, quite calmly, whatever it was you could've done, you didn't.

Let it flow, son.

'Okay...'

He dropped both hands to his side and waited.

'Okay.'

There was a whistling noise...far away...then again, closer...and again, closer...and again, closer...someone was walking towards him, whistling...

'Or not...' he said, raising his hands back up.

The whistling got closer.

'Woman...Dami...whatever your name is...'

Closer.

'Let's end this, okay?'

Closer.

'Yeah?'

Closer.

'I'm not scared...'

Closer.

'You're not scaring me...'

Closer.

'Whistling is not gonna scare me, okay?'

The whistling stopped.

'Dude, are you fucking mute? Come on...'

He could hear someone breathing.

'Say something.'

The breathing stopped.

'I'll start swinging if you don't...'

The darkness lightened...in a circle directly in front of him. The rest of the corridor remained exactly the same.

'What...'

In the circle was a face.

'I knew it was you,' Chad said, letting the words out with all the breath he'd built up. 'You weird bitch, I fucking knew it.'

Damijana's floating face stared at him, her eyes changing from brown to lilac, and said in a soft, delicate voice, '*govedo umrl prvi.*'

'You what?'

'*Umrl krava.*'

'I don't get it. Speak English...'

'*Umrl krava.*'

'Dude, seriously, are you dumb?'

'*Umrl krava.*'

'I do not speak Slovene, why are you even...what are you even doing down here? It's like four in the morning, dude, and you're doing this whole light circle face thing...speaking bullshit I don't even understand...seriously, what the...'

The knife went straight through his throat and out the other side, spraying out blood, but not killing the last word.

'...fuck?'

The Castle in the Snow

I woke to a lonely bed.

No Damijana. No Japanese Anne Archer. Man, not even Chad.

The candles were still burning in the corner, with most of the wax dribbling down the side of the holder.

I pulled up the blanket and checked to see if Chad hadn't somehow worked his way down the other end of the bed. There was nothing there except my legs. My eyes went left, catching the Slovene study guide on the desk. Urgh, later. Or tomorrow maybe. I got up and looked out of the window. The courtyard was down below and there were footmarks in the snow leading up to the steps in the corner. No sign of Damijana.

I went back into the room and looked for my clothes. They weren't there, not even my jacket. Fuck. I looked around and saw a t-shirt and a pair of jeans hanging on the chair in the other corner. The t-shirt had a picture of a boat and the slogan 'Thai-tanic' printed across it and the jeans...man, the jeans were purple.

There was a post-it note on the back of the chair - 'I put your clothes in the machine, hope the new things fit'. I tried the jeans on first [despite the purpleness] and they were an inch too short. The t-shirt was better size-wise but looked dirty - there was a huge stain running down the front of it that was either red wine or fake blood. Man, whose was this stuff? Didn't they know about washing machines?

I made a note in my head to ask Damijana about getting my luggage from the hostel then left the room and headed for the spiral stairs.

Around fifteen corridors and one freezing cold courtyard later, I found my way back down to the library and walked in. I couldn't see her at first, but a few more steps and there was her head by the fire. It almost looked like she was in the fire, but...

'Dobro Jutro...'

'Hey, morning...or is it afternoon?' I looked around for a clock to tell the difference, but there were none.

'I was just reading one of my old books.'

'One of your classics?'

'Yes. Do you know Lermontov?'

'I don't know, maybe. Is he Hungarian?'

She shook her head, which was still quite far away from me. It was weird, it looked a bit like a floating head shaking itself. I walked closer to break the image.

'Russian?'

She nodded. 'Come and sit next to me.'

I did as I was told. The fire was a lot bigger than the night before, and she was smiling too, which meant...what did it mean?

'I found the clothes...'

'Yes, I can see that.'

'Right.' I looked at the boat image on the t-shirt. 'Whose is this stuff?'

'An old friend's.'

'He doesn't need them anymore?'

'No.'

'He went away somewhere?'

'He did.'

'And he's really okay about me wearing all this?'

'Billy, please...it's fine.'

'Okay. Well, thanks. I guess it'll do until I get the rest of my stuff...'

'There's no need, dear. I have many clothes for you to wear.'

'You do?'

'But if you like, I can get your bags from the hostel.'

'Err...no thanks. I mean, that's really kind, but it's probably easier if I go and get them. I need to get my phone too.' I paused, remembering that I hadn't brought my phone to Slovenia. 'Ah, forget the phone, it's not there. But the rest of it, I can go myself.'

'No, dear. You should stay here and relax.'

'But...'

'I still know some people from the hostel who can bring your bags here. It's really no problem at all.'

'All the way here?'

'They are good friends. Yes, all the way here. It'll be done tomorrow, first thing.'

'My phone too?'

'Yes, dear.'

I looked at the stain on the 'Thai-tanic' t-shirt. 'What about when they're...'

'There's a washing machine in the back room near the kitchen. A spin dryer too. I've put your clothes in there already. You may use either one whenever you wish.'

'Oh. Okay. Are you sure?'

She nodded. 'Let's get back to Lermontov, shall we?'

'Who?'

She pointed to the book.

'Oh, that guy. Sorry, I guess I'm still a bit tired.'

She pulled out two cigarettes and handed one to me. Then a lighter. I lit up and pulled what I thought was a 'curious psychologist' face.

'He was a true artist, very much ahead of his time. An honest writer, very blunt, brilliant perhaps. Though obviously not quite as clever as he thought he was.'

'Sounds good.'

'Mikhail...Lermontov...he had many things to write about, dear, which is the secret of any true creative. He was an adventurer, a soldier in the old Russian army, he fought in Chechnya...his greatest work was about a sociopath incapable of love. Autobiographical, I believe.'

'Sounds quite modern...'

'The important thing is...the thing that set him apart from all the others...he was aware of, and honest about, his flaw. In my experience, this is a rare thing.'

I nodded, looking at the other end of the table, at the chair pulled out waiting for someone to sit down. It seemed emptier without an American guy spouting nonsense racism.

'Hang on...where's Chad?'

She lit her cigarette but didn't smoke.

'You do not want to learn about Lermontov?'

'No, I do. It's just...I haven't seen him this morning. And he wasn't there when I got up...'

She looked at the tip of her cigarette.

'It is a strange choice to make. Your friend over Mikhail Lermontov.'

'Is it?' I was stuck. I didn't think it was strange. He was my...what? I wouldn't call him a friend...he spouted all that shit about black people, and loved money way too much but, really, if you forgot all that stuff, he wasn't that bad. And he wasn't there, so...

Damijana put her cigarette, still burning, on the carpet. I waited for her to pick it back up again, but instead she picked up the book, got to her feet and walked over to the shelves. A moment later I heard her voice.

'Your friend left.'

'What, already?'

'He went very early.'

'Man...'

The cigarette seemed to be okay by itself, so I stood up, smoked some of my own, and walked over to the shelves.

She wasn't there. I checked all the rows but she was gone.

'Damijana?'

'Yes?'

I turned back to the main space of the room and she was standing by the fire, the cigarette back in her hand.

'How did you do that?'

'Do what, dear?'

'Get over there so fast...'

'I went to the shelf to take an ashtray.' She pointed at the little dish sitting on the table. 'Was it fast?'

'Quite fast, yeah.'

'I shall try to walk more slowly in future.'

'No, it's not bad...I was just surprised, a little.' I walked back over to her, taking another drag then placing the cigarette in the ashtray. 'Did Chad say where he was going?'

'He did. Yes.'

'Where? Back to the commune?'

'Africa.' She laughed a little, not enough to show her teeth, but there was sound behind it. 'Deep into the heart of the Congo.'

I laughed too, couldn't help it. 'To find Gurtz?'

'Kurtz.'

'Yeah, that guy. Goes nuts in the jungle. Joseph Conrad, right?'

'Correct, dear.'

'Yeah, I read that in high school. Or the spark notes for it. I wasn't the best student in the world.'

'Not many are. Did you know Rimbaud was expelled when he was fourteen years old?'

'Err...no. What did he do?'

'He wrote a poem with a slang word for 'vagina'.'

'Oh.'

I stared at the fire, not sure what to say. I'd never read any Rimbaud. I didn't even know when he was alive. Hang on...Chad.

'You were saying, about Chad...he went back to the commune, right?'

'Him again...'

'Yeah.'

'It is a waste of your time, dear, to think about people like that.'

'I know, he was a bit rude last night, but he's not that bad...well, he is quite bad, but there are good things about him to balance it out.'

'Balance is irrelevant if there is no spark.'

'Okay, maybe...but he's still a friend. Kind of. Could you just tell me...did he say if he was going back to the commune or not?'

'That is what he said.'

'Okay, thanks. Do you know what time he left?'

She smiled and took my cigarette from the ashtray.

'You're finished, aren't you?'

I wasn't, but it was pretty much down to the quick so I nodded.

She put it out on the table and then did the same with hers.

'Enough about your racist friend. He is gone, you are still here, and so am I.' She took my arm. 'Why don't we explore your new environment a little?'

I looked back at the empty chair. My racist friend? Yeah, I guess he was, both descriptions. Ah well, forget it. She said he'd gone back to the commune, what did it matter what time he left? I guess it didn't...not much anyway.

'Okay, Dami,' I said, facing her. 'Lead the way.'

#

She walked me out of the room and into the courtyard, telling me not to keep worrying about my friend, as I had other things to concern myself with now. I didn't want to argue with her, and I was a little relieved Chad had gone before he fucked anything else up between me and her, but still...it was kind of weird that he left without saying 'dude, goodbye'.

We stopped by the steps leading down to the basement. There were more than I thought there would be, maybe twenty or thirty of them, the last one placed before a door that looked like it had come from more than ten or twenty trees.

'That's a big door.'

She smiled. 'It is locked, most of the time.' Un-smile. 'I must warn you, Billy. It is very important for you never to go through that door.'

'That door?'

'No matter how curious you feel...never try to open it. Do you understand?'

'Sounds kinda like that Blackbeard guy.'

'Bluebeard.'

'Yeah, that guy.'

'Have you read the story?'

'Bits of it. I think.'

Actually, I'd heard of it more than read it. Didn't he keep old paintings in a secret room? And the wife goes in there and he gets mad, tries to kill her but she kills him...was that it?

'Did you read it to the end?'

'Yes. Probably. I think so.'

'Are you frightened of me, Billy?' She ran her hands up my arm as she said it. They were cold. But it was snowing, it was winter. It didn't mean anything.

'No. Nervous maybe...'

'You shouldn't be.'

'I shouldn't?'

'No.'

'Okay then. I won't be.' I shivered, the cold of the air finally getting to me. 'That was just the cold.'

'We shall find you a jacket.'

'You have one spare?'

'I have several.'

'That'd be great, thanks.' I shivered again. 'It's not that bad really...'

She smiled. 'There's another place I need to show you.'

She led me back across the courtyard, past the library and into the hallway. Her husband, the beast-man, was standing upright in the corner, his expression manic.

'This way.'

'Where are we going?'

'Upwards.'

'To my room?'

'No.'

'To your room?'

She stared at me for a second or two, not an approving stare then guided me up the first few stairs.

I smiled, letting her take me and mentally caning myself at the same time. Man, that was a stupid thing to say. What the hell was I thinking? But she still had a hold of my arm, she was still touching me, so it wasn't that bad. And she'd given me eight grand to come here. Yeah, stay with that one. Eight grand. She'd given me eight

grand. But...man, she owned a castle...or she built it with her bare hands...what was eight grand when you had a castle?

'Okay, upwards then.'

#

We walked up the stairs and turned left, heading through an arch and into another corridor with more paintings of young men and women dressed like Victorian aristocrats on the walls and burning candles next to them and then at the end of the corridor, more spiral stairs. I didn't ask her to confirm, but I figured both sides of the castles, either side of the courtyard, were of the same design.

We walked to the top of the spiral stairs and into a narrow corridor with more paintings.

She killed time by asking me about the commune. Did I like it? What didn't I like about it? Wasn't it too crowded?

It seemed like she was loading it a little one way, but I didn't call her on it. Man, I didn't wanna disagree with her in any way about anything. She was the most beautiful girl who'd ever talked to me. Prettier than Oggy even. Ah Oggy...I'd almost forgotten about her. When was that? Four years ago? God, Oggy. She was so sweet. That time I'd had the broken arm and couldn't move and she'd still washed me and undressed me and...

'Did you like the people there?'

'Huh?'

'Did you like the people at the commune?'

I blinked, pulling away from the image of Oggy riding me like a clockwork toy. 'Err, yeah. It was okay...they were pretty cool.'

'But?'

'I don't know....the whole democracy thing, or anarchy thing maybe, that seemed like a good idea...a noble idea. I liked that part of it.'

'But?'

'I'm not sure there's a 'but'.'

'But?'

'Okay, I guess there is a 'but'.'

'Tell me.'

She didn't seem too bothered about my answer, but I didn't want to complain about something no one should really complain about. However...

'It seemed like...I mean, there were a lot of tourists there. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but...'

'But...'

'Yeah...but it just seems like...you know, there's no spirit in the place anymore.'

'That's all?'

'There's more?'

'Yes, dear, I'm sure there is more.'

It was amazing, she was telling me my own thoughts. I wasn't even angry either...because she was right. There *was* more.

'Okay, another thing is, there're too many people...no one was talking about art or poetry when I was there, and even the ones who were, they weren't talking about it in any great or perceptive way, you know?'

She smiled. 'I know.'

'Okay, they were mostly speaking Slovene, it's true, but still...it didn't seem like they were deep in thought or anything. Most of them were just trying to hit on each other...same as most bars. Which is okay, but...I guess I just...I wasn't really expecting it to be like that. I mean, it's supposed to be an art commune, right?'

'I know.'

'That's all?' I asked, using her words back at her, hoping it meant something. Maybe that I was on a level of perception she didn't know about?

She turned to me, gripping my arm tighter.

'They are not like you, Billy. Those people and all who come to join them...they are insects. They don't make art, they make things. There is no art in that place, how can there be? Art is not numbers, it is solitude, and peace, locking yourself away from the world and then taking what you want and crafting your own world out of its entrails. And there can be no insects allowed into this world, or it is finished, dead, eviscerated.'

She let go of my arm. I didn't know if I should tell her, but her grip was really strong, and...man, her eyes...they were purple again, like the night before...or lighter than purple...lilac maybe?

'What I say has passion, I know, perhaps too much...but it is true.'

'No, it's...I like it.'

She took my arm again and we carried on down the corridor until we came to more spiral stairs at the end. On the wall opposite was another painting, this one pretty far apart from all the others. It was a young man, dressed like another Victorian, very pale...it looked almost like he'd been painted in wax.

'Who's that guy?'

She didn't look at the painting. 'It's not important.'

'Really? He looks ill. Or looked ill...' I looked for a date on the painting. 'I guess he's dead now.'

She ignored me and pointed towards the top of the spiral stairs.

'You must never go up these stairs. Understand?'

'None of them?'

'You must never go to the door at the top. But for your own good, it is better if you don't step on any of them at all.'

'Okay.'

'I don't want to seem too Bluebeard again...' She laughed, teeth showing. Beautiful white teeth, carved of snow. '...but it is important to me.'

'I'm glad you added the laugh or I might've been a bit...'

'You promise me you won't go up there?'

'There? Sure, no way. Never. I swear on...' Not mine, someone else's...who did I only half-like? '...on Chad's life.'

She wasn't laughing anymore. 'You should never swear on any life except your own.'

'I know, I was just...it was a joke.'

She stared at me, not smiling. 'Come. It is time for you to write.'

'What, now?'

She grabbed my arm again and led me back down the corridor. 'Do you have something else you need to do?'

I thought it over while being led back down the castle floors and into the hallway. I wasn't hungry, and there was no real need to rush

anywhere. In fact, the more I thought about it, there was no real need to leave even in the next week. No, longer...even in the next month. I mean, what did I have to go back to?

There wasn't anyone waiting for...

Fuck.

'Actually...do you have internet here?'

'No. I do not.'

'Really?'

'No, again. I do not have internet.'

'Oh.'

I suppose it made sense. There were no light bulbs or TVs or radios, why would there be any...wait, hang on...

'But, how did you send me those e-mails?'

'From the city, dear.'

'What? All of them?'

We got to the bottom of the stairs in the hallway and she took me over to the window next to the beast-man. Outside was the usual snowy stuff. The hill, the forest at the bottom, no bears.

'Do you think it would be easy to install internet here?'

'I don't know. I'm not really sure how it works. Can't they just stick a pole up somewhere and a, what's it called, antenna?'

'No, they can't.'

'But...that doesn't make sense. I mean, they have internet in the Antarctic, right?'

'It is not the same.'

She let go of my arm and walked towards the library.

'But I need to let my friend know that I'm...you know, okay.'

She stopped but didn't turn. 'Are you referring to the racist?'

'No, another one. A non-racist. Mostly.'

'Where is he?'

'I'm not sure. Last time I saw him he was in the commune, drinking.'

She didn't reply. Or the back of her head didn't reply. I wasn't sure what her face was doing.

'Actually, we had a bit of a fight...before I came here.'

'Is that so?'

'Yeah. It was quite bad.'

'Then why should he care about you?'

'Okay, it wasn't a real fight...more like a word fight. I shouted at him, he didn't know why, and then I walked out. It's kind of a long-term thing, the fighting, but he never holds onto it long...which I guess is a good character point.'

'I will let him know you are well.'

'By e-mail?'

'No. I will go and see him myself and tell him you are staying here with me.'

'Cool. Thanks.' Hang on...what exactly was she going to tell him? 'Wait...are you gonna tell him you live in a castle?'

She turned around. 'Does he know I live in a castle?'

'Yeah, kind of. Actually, he thought it was a joke, the castle thing...to be honest, we both did. Sorry.'

'He knows about me already?'

'Yeah, some.'

'He knows my name?'

I half-nodded.

'What else did you tell him?'

'About you? Nothing much. The money...the e-mails...the message in the snow thing.'

'I see.'

'Was it supposed to be a secret? Should I not have said anything?'

'It is no secret.'

She turned and walked back into the library, closing the door behind her.

Man, what did that mean? Should I follow? I took a few steps forward, but the door was still closed and I didn't wanna overstep any more marks. I mean, I was pretty sure I'd fucked up just a second ago, though I didn't know how exactly.

I stepped back again and stood next to the beast-man statue. The door opened and she was standing there. Behind her, in the library, I could see the fire burning.

'I'm sorry. I forgot that you wanted to write.'

'Huh?'

'You may write in here.'

'Err...okay. If you have paper...I guess I can write a little.' I moved forward and joined her by the door. 'Will you sit with me?'

'No.'

'Just for a while?'

'You must write alone,' she added.

'Alone in the dark.'

'Time will go quickly when you write. It is the best way.'

'Is it?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know...'

'If you write during the day, we can spend time with each other in the evening.' She walked past me, put her hand on my back and pretty much shoved me into the room. 'But first, you must write.'

'Wait...what am I writing on?'

'Until the evening, dear.'

'Okay, but...do you have a computer? Paper?'

The door closed, an inch away from my face.

#

The Mia Sara lookalike was right. Time did go quickly.

She had set up a typewriter on the long table in the library and a note which said, 'this used to be the property of Henry Miller.' I took off the note and wrote for what must've been the whole afternoon, typing like a dervish, or better, a secretary, and I didn't stop to look at the clock, I just kept on writing and writing and writing and all the right words, somehow, from somewhere, came right to me in exactly the way I wanted them to.

Then a book fell off the shelf behind me and I stopped.

I looked around for the clock, but...huh, there wasn't one. I got up and walked over to the window and it was black outside. Already? I sat back down and went over what I'd written, and when I was done fixing what I thought was no good, I put a title on it.

'The castle is a lonely hunter.'

And then I took it out of the typewriter, put everything in order, sat back in my chair and waited for her to come.

Damijana stood before the wall, her finger raised.

Outside the room it was dark, but she didn't seem interested in the colour of the sky. She didn't seem interested in anything except the stones on the wall.

For a second, she did glance over at the only other thing in the room, and muttered in Slovene, 'it's not you, dear, but...it'll do.'

The other thing could not answer.

She stared at the wall.

'Kaj imamo danes?'

She closed her eyes and her finger started to move. More than movement, it was like a spasm. And as the spasm became more and more pronounced, the face began to change. Not physical change, not exactly, more like...a kind of expression of cold ecstasy.

The finger continued to spasm.

The room continued to be dark.

The walls continued to be bare.

If a bear somehow managed to climb up the castle walls and look in on this space then all he would see was a woman flailing.

A flailing woman with lilac eyes.

But there was no bear.

And now the woman was still.

She opened her eyes, breathing slightly heavier than usual, and read the message left on the wall.

**1357: PEDRO OF PORTUGAL DUG UP HIS DEAD
MISTRESS, MADE HER QUEEN, AND FORCED LOYAL
SUBJECTS TO KISS HER HAND**

'Čudovito,' she said, smiling.

I woke up with the typewriter in my face.

The fire was still burning and I figured it was...what? Eleven? Midnight? Nah, it couldn't be that late. I'd only been asleep for an hour, maybe two. I sat up and felt something slip off my shoulders onto the floor. Ah, the jacket. One of those chequered lumberjack things that e-chapbook writers in Berlin wore...she must've put it over me while I was asleep.

I bent down and picked it up, noticing a red stain on the fleece collar. Whichever sheep died for this, it couldn't have been clean. That or some guy had a nosebleed while wearing it. I put it on, rolling up the sleeves and then pulling them back down. Ah fuck it, at least it was warm

'I read your pages.'

The voice came from behind, from the shelves?

I turned and saw her, standing as straight as the beast-man statue in the doorway. The pages were in her hand, not a single part of them out of place. It almost looked like a book, only with paper as a cover.

'It's very good.'

She walked over to the table and put the pages in front of me.

'Is it? I can't remember...'

'Yes, it is.'

I picked up the first page. 'The Castle is a lonely hunter.' Yup, I remembered this...I wrote it last night...didn't I?

'I told you before. You are a genius.'

'Yeah?'

'No one else could write this.' She looked at the pages. 'Every word, every structure you use, it's perfect.'

'Don't know about perfect...'

'I do.'

She moved over to the window and pulled the curtains. Daylight. Kind of. The light wasn't blinding, it was more like that misty stuff they pumped out in Dracula films.

'Hang on...it's morning?'

'Of course.'

'But...' I looked around for a clock to prove it, but there were none. 'I slept all this time?'

'Yes.'

'And we didn't hang out last night?'

'I sat with you for a while, but you did not say anything.'

'I didn't?'

'Your face was lying on the typewriter.'

'Oh.'

She moved across to the next window and pulled the curtains, letting in more subdued light.

'Are you ready to write again?'

'What, now?'

'It is daytime.'

'I guess. But can I just...'

'Of course.' She opened the last set of curtains and the whole library was filled with another five or ten per cent of light. 'Walk around the castle, explore.'

'You wanna join me?'

'I'm afraid I have work to do.'

'Work...'

'Yes, dear. Work.'

'Oh. Okay then.'

She disappeared behind one of the shelves without adding any further information.

Hang on...what work?

I mean, why?

She had a castle, she was rich...why would she need to work?

I looked around the room, at the typewriter, the fireplace, the books and the shelves. Then the typewriter again. *It belonged to Henry Miller, dear.* Ha, Henry Miller...that was it. Everything in this room was old. Bought a long time ago, or collected, or...given as a gift even.

There was a noise behind one of the shelves. I turned, opening my mouth to ask her what kind of work she had to do, but she wasn't there.

'Damijana?'

No answer.

I turned back to Henry Miller's typewriter, put my finger over the 'e' but didn't type.

Maybe it wasn't so strange for her to have a job. Antiques were pretty, that was true, but the more you had, the less money you were making from selling them. And the castle...it was massive, sure, but, as far as I knew, there was no way to make money from property alone, not unless you rented it out. But she didn't do that. How could she? No one even knew it was here, so...no way to rent the thing. And she hadn't asked me for any cash either. Not for rent or food or anything. Which meant...the only way she could afford all of this was if she had a job on the side. Where though? She didn't seem to go anywhere in the daytime...well, she hadn't the day before at least, or today for that matter...so she must've been working from home. But what could it be? What kind of work could you feasibly do in a castle, miles from anywhere? I ran through all the careers in the creative industry. The first one on the list: artist. It was possible, why not? All you needed was an internet connection and a bank account for the royalties, and I knew she could send e-mails. But did artists even make that much? I had no idea. The only artists I knew were dirt poor and selling zines on Etsy. What else could she be though? Architect? Musician? Blogger?

Hang on...she didn't have an internet connection...she said it the day before, she had to send e-mails from the city. Didn't she?

I sat up and stretched my arms and...felt a sharp pain in my back.

'Jesus...'

'Relax, dear.'

I shook a little, confused.

'You've been slouched on the typewriter all night...'

I tried to turn, but something held my head still.

'Let me draw out the pain...soothe it...'

'Err...okay. Sure.'

She was behind me, her hand on my back, rubbing the exact point which was killing me with two of her knuckles.

'Better?'

I nodded. 'You have magic knuckles.'

'God knuckles.' She laughed a little and stopped the medical. 'Smoke?'

She held out another cigarette, exactly the kind I always bought. I took it, put it in my mouth and was about to ask for a...

'Light?'

'Thanks.'

She put the lighter to my cigarette and flamed up.

'So...are we gonna hang out later?'

'Tonight.'

'Tonight...!' I put my fist against my back and pressed hard, checking to see if the pain was gonna come back. It seemed okay for now. 'Seems like such a long...'

I turned and the library was empty again.

'...time.'

#

I did as she said and walked around the castle.

The front door was locked, or too heavy to open, so exploring outside was out of the question. Then again, if I really wanted fresh Slovene air, there was always the courtyard. It wasn't as cold now I had my tree-killer's jacket on, so...

I walked along the corridor next to the courtyard and thought it out, the whole Damijana situation. The basics: she'd called me a genius. She kept on disappearing. She'd given me eight grand. She didn't wanna walk with me around the castle. She'd told me to come here. She went to bed alone. But what did I expect? For her to jump on me the first night? Fuck, no. And Chad was here. That was it...she was coy because he was here. Or had been here. Clever fucker had left early...he knew what was on the cards, and he knew it couldn't happen unless he got himself out of the way...

I walked out into the courtyard, sinking further than expected into the snow.

But...it was kinda weird how he didn't say goodbye. I was right there last night. Or the night before. He could've said, 'hey Billy, I see

what's happening here, and, dude, I'm just gonna leave early and get out of your hair.' Why didn't he?

I stopped at the stone steps. The forbidden steps. Or not the steps, the door. The steps were okay. I just wasn't allowed to walk down to the bottom and open the forbidden door.

I stayed there looking down the twenty or thirty pieces of stone it wasn't a good idea to walk on, and at the huge door I wasn't supposed to open. A few minutes passed. Or more than a few. I played the mystery in my head. There was a door and it was forbidden. What could be behind it? Dead bodies? Gold? A portal to another world?

I kicked some of the snow from the top step.

Or was it Damijana just fucking around? I didn't know for sure, but maybe...maybe she'd looked around and seen she was in a castle, and maybe she'd been reading that Blackbeard or Bluebeard book, and she'd thought...why not? I mean, it's not like it was dead bodies. She wasn't a killer, she was too thin. And too nice. And too pretty. Man, she was pretty. So fucking pretty...like Natalie Wood when she was nineteen and unspoilt by LA.

I looked away from the door and steps, having a weird, sudden sense that I was being watched. Was she out here somewhere?

The courtyard was clear. The windows above, in the towers, in the corridors, they were all empty.

I looked at the snow on the ground, at my tracks leading up to the steps.

Must've been my imagination.

A hundred horror films flash-flooded my brain and told me that line was bullshit. It was never just your imagination.

I picked up some snow and shaped it into an odd-shaped ball.

Ha, it was a bad line...*must've been my imagination*...yeah, when the lights are dead and the killer's waving a knife behind you...but this time it was probably true.

I threw the ball at one of the pillars on the first floor and missed.

Or maybe true.

I went back inside, behind the main stairs, past her beast-man husband, and into the library again. I'd been walking for too long, not sure how long exactly, but at least an hour. Maybe two. But again...no clocks, no watch, no phone. No way to be sure.

The library was clear apart from the fire, the table, and the typewriter. It was sitting there, a blank page already tucked in, waiting for me. But I didn't know if I could today. It was too cold. Too cold, and too tiring. And there was nothing inspiring. If I was gonna write then there had to be something to make...something inspirational.

I walked behind the first shelf and looked at some of the book spines.

I mean, I had some ideas. I always had at least some, but...two days in a row of writing? It was too much. And the room, it was too cold. Didn't that fire produce any heat?

I walked alongside the shelf and then onto the next one. More book spines. More writers I didn't know. I pulled out a couple and read the first few pages. Most of them seemed okay, a bit wordy for me, but not the worst things in the world. I kept one of them and went back to the table to read some more.

'Most people avoided the beach that summer, in case bits of marine washed up. The ship was sunk, the sand bored, and the sun left to entertain something that didn't have hands to clap. Then in the autumn, they returned. In their hundreds, and then their thousands. 'Don't go in the water,' they told each other. But they ignored their own lines and went in anyway.'

It wasn't bad. Maybe better than mine. It was in Damijana's collection, so it must've been up to some kind of standard, but...was it better than mine? Was I in competition here?

I put the book down and looked at the typewriter.

Right.

Work.

Type something.

I put my hands by both sides of the machine, waiting for the first idea to come close enough for me to catch it.

A few drifted in and out.

Two Hitlers from different universes, one of them remorseful, the other hell bent.

A wolf and an anaconda spliced together, on the run, lonely.

Vampires making zines in Hong Kong.

My finger hovered over the 'v' key.

Vampires in Hong Kong...

I didn't type anything.

I stared at the paper.

I stared at the paper for a long time.

I got bored.

I stood back up and walked around the table. I sat down. I stood up and did it again. I looked at the fire.

I looked at the window. Still murky daylight. Still snowing.

I sat back down.

I looked at the typewriter.

I hit the table with my hand and told myself to stop fucking around and type something.

I looked at the paper. I looked at the windows. I thought about the daylight and when it would fade, and then the dark...

Damijana.

Meu beautiful Damijana.

Damijana Wood.

Dami.

I turned back to the page and started to type.

#

She led me out of the library and up the main stairs and down the same corridor which led to the spiral stairs and the second forbidden door. This time she was silent, so I entertained myself by looking more closely at the other paintings on the walls. It was weird...the first thing I noticed was...they were all guys. No women at all. But that didn't make sense. The other night...and the day before...there had been female faces, lots of them...but now there were none. Had she taken them all down? But...why would she do that?

I stopped at a painting near the middle of the corridor, an older man with one of those posh white wigs on his head.

'Who's this guy?' I asked, convincing myself that the 'disappearance of all the women' issue might be a little too confrontational this early in our relationship.

'An old friend.'

'He lived here too?'

'They all did.' She pointed at other paintings within range. 'For some time.'

'But...the guy looks about a hundred years old.'

Damijana looked at the man in the painting. 'This man?'

'No, I mean...he's young, but it looks like he's from two hundred years ago...the hair and the clothes, all that stuff.'

'Yes...'

'Huh? You mean he was?'

'Of course. Why else would he be wearing such things?'

'I thought maybe you'd dressed him up...one of your friends.'

'Why would I do that?'

'I don't know.'

She looked at the painting. 'This painting was done...let's see...almost one hundred and ninety years ago.'

'And he was your friend?'

'Yes.'

'You actually knew him...talked to him...'

'This is what friends do, is it not?'

'If you've got a time machine, sure.'

I laughed, she didn't.

'I do not have a time machine.'

'Yeah, I know, I was just...' I looked at Damijana's face. It was almost completely unmarked, as if she'd lived in a fridge her whole life. 'Okay, never mind.'

'You don't believe he was my friend?'

'Err...I don't know. Not really, no. I mean...really?'

'If I told you I'd been alive for the last four hundred years, would you believe me?'

'What? No. That's...no. I wouldn't, of course not.'

'Then what more is there to say.'

'I don't know.' I nodded, I didn't know why. I waited for her to say something else, but she just stared at the guy in the painting. 'Wait, are you serious?'

'I am.'

'Really?'

'Should I repeat myself?'

'No, but...!' I looked at the painting guy again, wondering if I should really continue this trail. She was my host, she'd let me stay here free of charge...man, she was the potential love of my life...why was I challenging her on this?

I took a breath, deciding to drop it.

Then I took another breath and changed my mind. 'Dami, I don't wanna be rude, but you're clearly not four hundred years old. No one is, that's impossible.' The face of Kirk Douglas popped into my head. 'Okay, maybe one or two aren't that far off, but...you're young. Your face, your body...it doesn't make sense.'

'I have given my answer, dear.'

'But...you can't be four hundred years old. No one can.'

Damijana looked at the ceiling, the windows and then the walls.

'Ah, I get it. You mean it's the castle, don't you? The castle is four hundred years old. Is that it?'

'There are things you cannot explain in this world, dear.' She smiled and put her hand on mine. 'Perhaps we should leave this topic...'

'But...'

'I hate to see you struggling in this way.'

'I can't. I'm not struggling, I'm just...confused.'

She pressed her hand harder into my palm and whispered that some things were beyond understanding unless you possessed the equipment for such things.

I stared, mostly at her smile.

'Dami...'

'Yes?'

'You are taking the piss here...aren't you?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, you're joking, right?' I looked at the guy in the painting again. 'You didn't know him, did you?'

'Of course, dear.'

'No, you couldn't have, that's insane. You're playing with me...'

'Am I?'

'Aren't you?'

She let go of my hand and took a step back, looking annoyed for a few seconds then slipping into a half-smile.

'You are.'

'If you say so...'

'I can't believe I just stood here and...!' I closed my eyes and smacked my head, quite dramatically. I didn't really feel like that much of an idiot, but for some reason, either in the subconscious or another level beneath it, the affectation of being a gullible fuck was playing out on stage. 'God, you must think I'm a soft touch.'

'No, dear. I think you're a genius, remember?'

I opened my eyes again. 'Oh yeah. I forgot about that.'

'So, there's no need to feel bad.'

'I guess not.'

'Shall we continue?' She gestured to the rest of the corridor, candles burning on each side.

'Yeah...'

'It's not far.'

I looked at the painting one last time. The guy was probably not even real...it was just an elaborate joke set up by Damijana. Why not? She lived alone in a huge castle...what else was there to do with her time? She'd probably just...wait, was that...was that writing?

'Dami...hang on...'

'Yes, dear?'

'There's some writing here...I just wanna check.'

It was some kind of inscription. I was sure it hadn't been there before...it was too big, too noticeable, but it must've been. It's not like Damijana just scribbled it down...it must've been there all this time.

I leaned closer and read the cursive lettering at the bottom. There was a name...

'Wait...this guy was Voltaire?'

'Yes.'

'This guy here? He was really...'

'Edward Voltaire. Celebrated card player.' She smiled. 'He took a lot of money from a lot of wealthy, unscrupulous people. But that was a long time ago now. Come.'

I looked again at the inscription. There was no 'Edward'.

'Edward Voltaire...' I mumbled. 'Hey, did he...'

I stopped when I realised she was already near the end of the corridor. Did that mean she didn't wanna talk about it? Or was I mumbling too much?

She turned the corner, not looking back to see if I was following. Shit, maybe she was pissed off? I had asked a lot of questions. But she'd done the 'four hundred years old' thing...if anyone should've been mad, it was me. But I wasn't. Not even a little bit. In fact, seeing she had a sense of humour made me want her more. She was funny and beautiful. Well, funny once. But I'd only been there a few days, so it wasn't a bad average. Had I been funny? I didn't know. I guess respectful was a more accurate word. Until just now when I'd hassled her about Voltaire. That was pretty bad. Was she mad about it? Maybe. It was hard to tell. If she was, I guess I could see her point. Kind of. I was annoying, but...no, it wasn't that bad. It was just a few questions, and she'd walked off. That was worse than anything I'd said. Much worse. I never did that to her. Why would I? Children do things like that, not me. She was like a child. Or an adult who didn't know how to cope with younger people. Either way, the result was the same. She'd walked off on me. Hadn't she? No, wait, that wasn't right. She said 'come' before she went. Maybe she didn't hear me mumble. That made sense. She wasn't mad at all, she just hadn't heard me. And she was kind of beautiful even when she walked off like that. Like a pale Natalie Wood, even though I couldn't see her face. Or a pale Maggie Cheung...only not so Chinese. God, she was beautiful. And I was alone with her, in a huge castle. Standing in a corridor. Not moving.

I blinked, realising I was in exactly the same place as before. Edward Voltaire was looking just past me, probably calling me a

clown from inside his two-hundred-year old wax head. He was right. What the hell was I doing?

'Hey, wait up...' I ran down the corridor, guessing she was probably on the other side of the castle by now.

She wasn't.

I turned the corner and she was walking back towards me, asking if I'd finished with the painting.

'Yeah, I'm done. Sorry.'

She smiled and took my hand. 'Come, dear.'

'Where are we going?'

'You shall see.'

'Any clues?'

'No.'

I didn't say any more. No more questions, no more challenges. I just put myself in the pet role and let her lead.

We walked past the spiral stairs and the young, pale-looking guy painted in wax on the wall, turned the corner, went down another corridor...and then another one...man, this castle was bigger than I'd thought...and all the way along to another set of spiral stairs.

'These stairs are okay to use,' she told me.

'Where do they go?'

'They lead to my second favourite room.'

'Which is?'

'It is not a good thing to pre-empt surprises, dear.' She let go of my hand. 'This way.'

#

The games room was all stone except for a window, a table, two chairs and a chessboard.

She sat down on one of the chairs and told me to take a look outside. I nodded and went over to the window. Or not a window, more like an arch. One of those things you would see in a castle where the archer could poke his bow and arrow out and fire at the poor motherfuckers below.

It was weird, there was no glass, no window, but it wasn't cold either.

'The wind doesn't come inside, dear,' she said, seeming to read my mind.

'Huh?'

'It's a quirk of the design. The wind breaks to the side naturally.'

'Oh.'

'I cannot explain the science behind it, but that's what happens.'

'It's okay, I probably wouldn't understand it anyway. Science was never my best subject at school.'

'Science is for people with no imagination, dear.'

'Err...yeah, I guess.'

'Not for people like you.'

'Right. Definitely not for people like me.'

I looked outside, seeing clearly that we were exactly where I thought we'd be. In the tower at the back, three floors up, with the courtyard to the left and the slope leading to the forest on the right. I wasn't the best when it came to heights...in fact, I usually got really anxious whenever I went near the edge of anything more than fifty feet up, but this time things didn't seem so bad. Maybe because the arch space wasn't so big, and maybe because it had walls around it too. I mean, it would be pretty fucking improbable for me to fall out of this thing.

'On a clear day, you can see Ljubljana...' she said, setting up pieces on the chessboard.

I looked out of the window again and noticed the dark mist hanging over the forest in the distance, obscuring everything lying beyond.

'It's like we're surrounded by mist...'

'Does that scare you?'

'No, not really.' I looked at the mist. 'I actually kinda like it...'

'Some people find it foreboding.'

'Not me.'

'I'm glad, dear.'

I stared at the mist a while longer then turned my attention to the ground below. It wasn't that far. I pushed a bit of snow off the outside ledge and watched it fall. If someone did manage to somehow squeeze

out and drop from up here, they probably wouldn't die. Maybe a broken leg or...

'Do you want to play?'

'Huh?'

'Chess. Would you like to play a game with me?'

I turned back and looked at the chessboard.

'Oh that. Sure.' I sat down, looking at the different pieces, trying to remember what they did. 'You go first.'

She picked up one of the pawns and moved it two squares forward.

'Interesting move.'

'The first move is never interesting, dear.'

'Isn't it? I guess I'm a bit rusty. Sorry.'

'No need to be sorry or rusty. Your turn.'

'Right. My turn.'

I picked up the horse and put it three squares forward and two squares to the side.

Damijana stared at my horse and then the square it'd come from.

'Bad move?' I asked.

'Are you sure you know how to play this game?'

I nodded, and stroked what I thought was the queen. Actually, the last time I'd played was in primary school, but I remembered being quite good at it.

'You don't have to lie to me.'

I stopped stroking.

'I know who you are, Billy.' She put out her hand and rested it on my elbow. 'And I adore you...even with the flaws.'

My arm didn't move an inch.

I fucking love you, a little man inside my head screamed.

But I didn't say it.

'Here...let me tell you the rules.' She let go of my elbow and put her hand on the king. 'This is the queen...the most important piece on the board.'

'That's the queen?'

She nodded. 'If you lose her, you lose the game.'

'I thought the king was the most important?'

'No.'

'But...are you sure?'

'It is a myth. The aim of the game is to take the king, but the piece itself has little power.' She picked up the queen and used it to tap the head of the king. 'The queen is where the real power lies.'

'Okay.' I picked up the horse. 'What about this guy?'

'A novelty piece, nothing more.'

'That's it?'

'Yes.' She took the horse from me and put it back on its starting square. 'Shall I continue?'

'Yeah, sorry. Go ahead.'

'Good.'

I woke up in my room with the candles still burning from the night before and the snow still...snowing.

It was the sixth day...or maybe the seventh day...I'd been there, I couldn't remember which. Or was it the eighth?

I got out of bed, put on her old friend's 'Naruto' t-shirt, his green jeans, thought briefly about making a plan for when I should leave and head back to the city and...

I thought of London.

Bermondsey.

The building site that never built anything, the cranes just standing there, doing nothing except showing their lack of colour...their lack of energy...

I killed the thought. You're in the right place, I told myself.

Stay a little longer.

See where it goes.

#

I walked down the stairs in the hallway and looked out of the window again, hoping that the snow would be a little lighter so I could go outside and walk around. It wasn't urgent or anything, but these walls...they were starting to feel more like barriers than protection. But not ultimate barriers. I mean, I could just ask her to open the front door and walk out if I really wanted.

Damijana came out of the library and told me the typewriter was all set up.

I asked her if she wanted to go outside for a while, play in the snow maybe.

'Not today.'

'It's not snowing that heavy,' I said, pointing to the window.

'It's very cold out there.'

'We could hug each other...keep warm.'

She looked back towards the library door.

'You think I should write instead?'

'The typewriter's ready.'

'Right.' I didn't move. 'Okay then.'

'It's all set up, dear...waiting for your next work of genius.'

'It is?'

'Yes.'

She walked over towards me and took my hand, leading me into the library. It was a cheap trick on her part, but I didn't care.

'Come.'

#

I sat in front of the typewriter, writing and writing and writing and...

'The cop who liked to know why leaned back in his chair, in the open plan office space that was supposedly a police station, next to the cop who liked to slap, near to the other cops who also liked to slap.

'Next,' he said.

The next arrestee was brought across the office floor, past the water cooler and the computer terminals and fugitive pictures on the wall, and told to sit down.

He sat down.

'Why?' the cop who liked to know why asked.

'Why what?'

'Why? Why'd you do it?'

The arrestee understood and tried to think of a clever answer, something about that French guy way back who philosophised about this kind of thing, the thing about people and why they did bad things, the life and stuff around them, but he couldn't make it clear in his head, not clear enough to say, so he opened his mouth and said:

'Got no money, man.'

I didn't know where these words were coming from, but I couldn't stop...not until it was done, not until I had enough for her to see and know I was still a genius...no, more than a genius...more than that...a genius beyond genius, more genius than the day before...the geniusest genius she'd ever seen...

And then maybe she'd let me fuck her.

I stopped typing.

Jesus...

Hug her. Maybe she'd let me hug her.

That was better.

I resumed typing.

Hugging first...other things later.

#

We sat in the games room at the back of the castle, her chair in the same place as the night before, mine a little closer.

The chessboard had been put in the corner and replaced by something else.

The Enchanted Forest.

I'd never played it before, but Damijana had told me it was popular in the 80's, when I was a kid. It was weird that I'd never heard of it, but not weird enough to dwell on...no kid could know every single board game out there, it was impossible.

The aim of the game, far as I could see, was to move your little knight around the board and through the enchanted forest until you reached the castle.

She threw the dice. Six.

'How do you do that?'

'Sorry, dear?'

'You get a six every time.'

'*Ja*. Every side is a six when I throw,' she said, moving her piece almost to the gates of the castle. 'Unless I need a different number.'

'And when I throw it?'

She smiled.

I picked the dice up and wished for a six then threw it.

'One,' she said.

The dice stopped. It was a one.

'You've magicked the dice...' I moved my little horse one square forward, but it was pretty fucking hopeless. I was stuck in the lake and had thrown a 'one' the last five times. 'I don't know how, but you've magicked it.'

'I like magic as a verb.'

She picked up the dice, blew on it then let it fall.

The dice landed on a four.

'How the...'

She moved her piece onto the castle and looked at me.

'Do you want to know why I always win?'

'Magic? Rigged dice?'

'Ja.' She smiled. 'The first one.'

'Ha.'

I took my piece out of the lake and thought about putting it away in the box, but...then she'd go to bed and it would be over.

I put it back at the start.

'Another game?'

'Not tonight, dear.'

'You sure? I'll let you win again...'

'I'm very tired.'

She put her piece back in the box and started to pack up the rest of the stuff. She couldn't go to bed, not yet. Jesus, think of something...something interesting...

'Dami...?'

'Ja?'

'You know the commune...'

'Metelkova?'

'Yeah, that one. You know...did you ever...' I looked around the room, out the window. How could I phrase this?

'Did I ever stay there?'

'Yeah.' She'd read my mind. 'How did you know?'

'I magicked the thought out of your head.' She laughed. A weird kind of laugh I hadn't heard before. 'Yes, I stayed there when it was first set up.'

Wait...the photo.

'I know,' I said, my arms going back behind my head. 'I know that.'

'You do?'

'Yup.'

'I see. You must've seen the photo, I suppose.'

'What?'

'The photo on the wall behind the bar.'

My arms dropped back down to the table. Damn, she knew everything. 'On the wall of the bar, yeah.'

She folded the board and put it in the box. 'How do I look nowadays?'

'In the photo?'

She nodded.

'I don't know. You're looking to the side at something. I guess, from the side of your face, you look unhappy...or looked unhappy. I guess it was a long time...'

'Twenty-three years ago.'

'Yeah, something like that.'

She finished packing up the game and stood, leaving the box on the table.

'Despite what I've said before, it wasn't so bad. When it was set up, before the photograph was taken, there were ten of us. It was a nice time.' She smiled. 'I was happy then.'

'But...?'

'I think you can guess the answer.'

She walked to the window and looked outside. I stood and walked up behind her, making sure I wasn't close enough to freak her out.

'Okay, ten people.' I searched for options. Overcrowding? Art democracy? 'I guess...ten people became eleven people, and eleven became twelve...'

'Ten was a good number.' Her head came back and settled by the side of my face. Man, this was it. 'Fifty was a horrible number. And a hundred, two hundred, more. And then the tourists came.'

I put my hand on her side, pretty sure she could feel me shaking.

'And you left?'

'Ja. Yes.'

But shaking was natural when there was this much on the line. And she wasn't moving my hand either.

'Do you still write or paint or...do anything?'

'Painting? No, not anymore.'

Her head moved forward, away from me.

'Writing?'

'Now and then. A line or two.'

'Can I see?'

She pulled her waist away and walked over to the door, not waiting for my hands to catch up.

'*Zelo sem utrujen,*' she said. 'Goodnight, Billy.'

'Wait...!' I looked at the other games stacked in the corner. 'We could try the other one, the one with the...'

I turned back to the door but she was no longer there.

I walked quickly after her, down the spiral stairs and into the corridor with Eddie Voltaire on the wall, but it was empty. Huh? I checked back under the stairs and opened a couple of the doors, hoping maybe to see her bedroom, but there was nothing but empty rooms.

I didn't know how, but she'd gone.

#

I stood outside what I figured had to be her bedroom door and waited for it to open. It had taken me most of the night to work out which one was hers, mainly by opening all the other doors and checking for beds. Not the most complicated method known to man. But most of the other rooms were empty...apart from one on the second floor, a room I hadn't been in before. It was bizarre, there were these little dolls...they looked almost like an octopus, but the body was human-like and it had wings so it was like a mix of different things...and on the wall, there were some letters...Cthulhu...in red. Cthulhu, what did that mean? I couldn't even say it. 'Cth'...what was the first sound?

'Ka...thoo...loo...' I muttered.

The room in front of me was quiet. There was no light from underneath, and no light in the corridor. Maybe she was already asleep. I didn't know.

I waited.

And waited.

I stared at the surface of the door, and the cracks, picking one out and following it to its end. Then I abandoned it and found another and did the same thing.

She knew I was out here, didn't she?

Fuck.

I put my hand forward, over the cracks.

She called me a genius.

She adores me.

She gave me eight grand.

She wants me here.

She put her head against my face.

But none of it seemed to matter. The door...her door, didn't move.

I woke up with my face buried in the mattress and the candles burning.

Outside it was snowing again.

I lifted my head and searched for a clock or some kind of time reading machine, but as always, there was nothing. And it wasn't just numbers I needed, it was names.

I had no idea what day it was.

#

The fire was burning in the library, but it was cold.

Outside the blizzard forced itself against the windows. 'You can't come in,' I mumbled. And I couldn't get out.

The typewriter was waiting.

My fingers were laid flat on the table, reluctant as ever.

Man, what was I doing here? I'd already done five stories in...what? How long had I been here? I figured it was around three weeks, but it was too hard to count without any clocks. All I knew was night and day, but even that was confusing. If I could go online...or read a newspaper...then I'd have a number. But she wouldn't allow it. My beautiful Damijana. My keeper. My jailor. Or my warden. Was there a difference?

I put my finger on the 'T' key.

Fuck, she wasn't my jailor, or my warden. She liked me. She adored me. She wanted me to stay with her forever. If she were my jailor, she wouldn't give a shit what I felt.

I started typing.

I woke up in bed, the candles were burning, and for the smallest moment I thought her head was right there on the pillow next to me.

But I turned over and checked and realised it was the Metallica t-shirt I'd been wearing the day before.

Damn.

Actually, it was the Metallica t-shirt I'd been wearing for the last few days. It didn't smell too bad, but...maybe my nose was so used to things that didn't get washed much that it didn't pick up bad smells anymore?

I put my nose against the armpit part of the t-shirt.

No, fuck it...even if I couldn't notice it, she might.

Time to do some more washing.

I got out of bed and walked over to the window.

Outside it was snowing.

I sat in the library alone, the fire burning, the curtains drawn.

I typed words into or onto Henry Miller's machine:

It was the future or a different reality or a videogame in his head and somewhere along the way he'd changed his name to Xolo. There were kids and sultans and space-folk running from his knife. He was tough. They died easy. Killing did and didn't matter. That's the way it was written. Xolo the author. Chapter seven. It was deep space and the Genocide hole was losing integrity. Ninety-six pages, all done. How? Descriptions were tighter. Actions faster. The bad guys plotted four chapters ahead of the narrator. Xolo had to improvise. Try to remember where and what he was before. It was important to know that. He sat down, ignored the slaughter and thought back to the 20's...

I woke up and the candles were burning.

Outside it had stopped snowing.

I rubbed my eyes, looked at the dent I'd left in the pillow then turned back to the window.

It was snowing again.

Huh?

Is she flicking a switch?

I looked at the desk, at the Slovene Study Guide.

It was open.

That wasn't me...was it?

I couldn't remember doing it. Maybe it happened when I was asleep. Maybe she did it, came into my room and opened it.

Learn my language and I might consider you.

Was that it?

I got out of bed and looked at the open page.

Want to, have to, should.

'Dobro Judo...'

'*Dobro Jutro.*'

I walked over to her chair by the fireplace and stood with my hand on the table. 'Ali hoses iti nuzaj?'

'*Kaj si rekel?*'

'What?'

‘What did you say?’

I gripped the table edge and tried again. ‘Ali hoses...iti...nuzaj?’

‘Do I want to go somewhere?’

‘Outside. Nuzaj.’

‘*Zunaj.*’

‘Zunai.’ I let go of the table. ‘You want to...go outside?’

She looked at the fire.

‘It doesn’t look that herladno today.’

‘*Ne želim.*’

‘Yes?’

‘Not today, dear.’

I looked at the top of her head.

‘Tomorrow perhaps.’

I woke up and the candles were burning.

The Slovene Study Guide was on the pillow next to me, open on the pronunciation list.

I tried a few words then gave up.

Outside it was snowing.

I sat on the rug by the fire and typed as much random stuff onto the page as possible.

For some reason, I was writing about an old game I used to play. Mega Man 2.

I'd had a dream about it the night before.

I was Mega Man and I had to jump into the sea to fight Bubble Man. But there were some black sea urchins on the ceiling that would kill me if I touched them. Or nearly touched them. It was a computer game so there was no actual contact, it was just a matter of getting close enough to whatever dimensions the programmers had coded into the level. At least I thought it was.

For a long time, I didn't jump into the sea.

But then Natalie Wood came to the surface and told me to jump in, so I did, I listened to her because she was beautiful and I jumped in and walked along the seabed and the first time I had to jump to reach a platform my head went straight into one of the sea urchins.

I didn't die, but I didn't wake up either. I just walked around the sea level with a sea urchin sticking out of my head.

I stopped typing and looked at what I'd just written. I read it three times and wondered if it was worth showing to Damijana.

Maybe she wouldn't know Mega Man.

Probably wouldn't.

Maybe she knew him and didn't care.

Maybe.

Maybe the whole thing was meaningless and the worst thing I could ever do was write something out of my dreams.

I took the paper out of the typewriter, put it with the other two sheets I'd done and then threw them on the fire.

'Write better...' I said to the flames.

I woke up in bed but didn't look at the candles.
They'd been burning every other morning, no reason to think it'd
be any different today.

I sat by the fire, staring at the covers of about twelve different books I'd taken from Damijana's collection.

My own work was still in the typewriter, unfinished.

Not that I really cared.

I'd already done an hour's work, no need to push myself when I had the whole day to add more.

I picked up a book with a grey dinosaur skeleton on the front, read a few pages from the middle of the book then closed it and looked at the cover again.

Drive Thru Zoo by some guy or girl I'd never heard of called Tyson Bley. No bio inside, just a one-line quote saying the story was like 'Lynch crossed with Lynch and Lynch, reverse-engineered by Lynch.'

Was that David Lynch or Kelly Lynch?

I opened to a new page and read some more.

Beach fear in the parking lot. End of life. The Force flesh clown foot-operated bloody. Operatic titty cumshot suicide photocopy glisten hate pony filament heart attack snake suck mermaid tube.

It didn't make much sense to me, but that didn't matter because I was taking a break and there was something strangely soothing about reading things that didn't make any sense when taking a break.

It's not like I was just lying here doing nothing.
I was reading.
Writers needed to read so they could write.
Heinlein leads to Tanith leads to Dick.
She'd understand.

I woke up and the candles were burning.

Outside it was snowing.

I sat up and looked around, at all the non-things in the room.

For a moment, I was confused.

This wasn't Bermondsey.

Where was I?

Then it all came back.

I put on the Riddick t-shirt Damijana had given me the previous
today, a present from the city, she said, and lit a cigarette.

How long had it been now?

A month?

Two months?

Shit, what about my rent? If it really had been two months then...that meant I owed Johan about eleven hundred quid. Fuck. Why had I only thought about this now?

I stubbed out the cigarette, forgot my jeans, ran straight down to the library and told Damijana I had to go to a bank or the internet a.s.a.p.

'There's no need, dear.'

'No, there is...I gotta pay rent...my rent back in London. It's been nearly...'

'It's paid.'

'...two months, maybe more...what? Paid, how?'

'I sent your friend some money and told him you wouldn't be coming back for a while.'

'You did?'

'Yes.'

'Wait...you sent it to the same address you sent the...the other money.'

'I did.'

'Shit. Dami...I don't know what to say.'

'I do not require gratitude, dear.'

'How much do I owe you?'

'Nothing.'

'No, seriously...I need to pay you...'

'No, you don't.'

'You just paid two months of rent...I have to.'

'Billy...!' She stood up, took my hand and guided me to the typewriter. 'All I ask of you is to write beautiful stories for me. Nothing else.'

'It doesn't seem right.'

'Sit...relax...write.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'This is all you want?'

'Yes, dear.'

I let her push me onto the chair and rub my shoulders. *She pays my rent, I sit here and do this.* I looked at the keys on the typewriter. I didn't want to write anything, I was too hyper...but I did owe her, and, ah well, if this was what she really wanted then...

'Okay.'

I woke up and the candles were burning.

It was snowing outside.

I stretched out my arms, realised I had nothing to do that required me to get up when I didn't feel like it, turned over and went back to sleep.

I woke up and the candles were out.

'Wha...'

I sat up, rubbing my eyes.

No, they were burning. The flames were smaller than usual, but they were definitely still burning.

Outside it was snowing.

On the typewriter, I typed:

He chased her outside and around the corridor of the eighth floor.

She didn't stop.

Just like the witch, she was faster than him.

He saw the rope disappear down the stairwell to the seventh floor and followed it down.

She wasn't there.

He looked over the balcony wall and saw her on the fifth floor.

She was pulling herself over the edge.

He ran back up the stairs and into the corridor.

She was almost over.

He sprinted with his feet not seeming to even touch the ground, and leapt over the side and swung towards her using some rope he didn't know he had.

He caught her in time.

She tried to bite his hand and told him to let go, but he didn't.

He pulled her back over the side and put both arms around her.

"There's a way past this," he said.

"I'm okay now," she said back.

"I understand why...really."

"I'm sorry."

She stood up and he kept his hand close in case she tried it again.

"Really, I'm okay."

No, you're not, he thought.

You'll do it again.

I woke up and the candles were burning.
It was snowing outside

I typed, zombie-like into the machine that Henry Miller had once
tugged off on:

To the sub space aliens, 'observed time' was a very real, very dense strip that could be watched from a distance. The past, the present and the future meant nothing to them as observers [unless they landed 'undercover' on a part of the strip and had a reference point for their actions]. From their many bases, they could watch any part of human history, in as much detail as they saw fit. There was a zoom button, and there was audio too. They even had a vending machine in the hallway outside, but no one ever used it because it was empty.

I woke up with Kitty Zhang on top of me.
In the background, the candles were burning.
I blinked.
Kitty Zhang turned invisible.
I blinked again.
Kitty Zhang was gone.
Outside it was snowing.

I typed and typed and typed...

The fifth victim was a schoolgirl.

The sub space alien who knew the most about science sat in the viewing room for the ninetieth straight hour, smoking a nine-inch cigarette he'd made himself. He watched the girl walk down the lane for the twenty-second time, past the older woman and onwards, thirty-seven minutes away from her death.

The alien pressed a button, switching to the Korean hiding in the trees.

He looked at the girl then the older woman then the girl again.

The alien blew out smoke.

He studied the Korean's frame, his arms, his shoulders, his chest muscles.

He wasn't a strong human, he was quite lean...

If someone were to...

The Korean ran down the bank and threw his arms around the girl's neck, dragging her up into the forest.

The girl tried to scream, but the Korean's hand stopped her.

The alien stubbed out his cigarette.

The murder scene was only two minutes further, so he let it run.

The Korean stopped in the middle of a clearing.

The girl breathed heavy.

The Korean told the girl to be quiet, everything would be okay.

The girl nodded.

The Korean laid her down and prepared things.

The girl didn't scream.

The alien sat forward, his face an inch from the screen.

He leaned in to the girl's ear and told her everything would be fine as long as she didn't resist.

He pressed a button.

The Korean woke up in the factory four days later, still erect.

I woke up and the candles were burning.
Outside it was snowing.

I stood on the balcony above the courtyard, smoking one of the cigarettes Damijana had given me the day before.

It was snowing, as always, but it wasn't that cold. I couldn't think why. Maybe it was one of those wind breaks she'd talked of...

I took a drag and looked up at the window high on the left, the one I suspected might be her room. More than suspected...it was the only room I hadn't been inside, except for the two forbidden ones, so it had to be hers.

Maybe I should try knocking...

I blew out smoke.

No, too risky.

Better to wait...wait until she gets used to me...not sure how long that would take...probably another week in normal time, but that was the problem. I only saw her once a day and that was when she came into the library to collect my day's writing. The rest of the time, no matter how long I looked, she was nowhere to be seen.

I took another drag. Wasn't that strange? How could one woman hide so well in...

'Aren't you cold, dear?'

I turned, coughing out smoke. 'What?'

'Down here.'

I looked down and saw her standing at the top of the steps, her cloak the only thing protecting her against the wind that had blown in from god knows where.

'Dami...no, I'm okay.'

'It would be unfortunate if you caught a cold...'

'Yeah, it would.' I dropped the cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with my shoe. 'What are you doing down there?'

'You should finish your cigarettes, dear.'

'Sorry?'

'Some of the best writers smoked their cigarettes down to the quick. It wouldn't hurt to emulate them, don't you think?'

'I suppose...'

'You can light another.'

'Now?'

'It will keep you warm.'

'Err...okay.' I pulled out another cigarette from the pack and lit up. 'Look good?'

'Better.'

'Cool.' I took a drag. 'So, what are you doing down there anyway?'

She stared up at me.

'Checking on your prisoner?'

She didn't laugh.

'A joke. Sorry.' I took another drag, losing the smile. 'You know, Dami...now that we're here...if you're not too tired maybe we could go to the library or...I don't know, talk for a little while?'

'It is late.'

'Yeah, a bit, but...'

'I don't have time to have a real conversation.'

'Really? Not even five minutes?'

'No.'

'We can share a cigarette...'

'I don't smoke.'

'Or eat something...'

'It's still late. I have to sleep.'

'Right now?'

'Goodnight, dear.'

She turned and walked across the snow blanket covering the courtyard, not adding another word.

'Night, Dami,' I muttered, stubbing out the cigarette and throwing it over the side.

I woke up and the candles were burning.
It may have been snowing, I didn't care.

I typed the only words in my head:

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

Can't write, need a break.

I woke up and the candles were burning.

Outside it was snowing.

I stayed exactly where I was and stared at the ceiling for a while.

The washing machine spun like a planet on coke, soundless. I sat by the door, half looking at the timer, half listening for sounds of Damijana fiddling around in the kitchen.

There was an idea in my head, a potential story. A planetary outpost, two soldiers messing around in the snow, the only humans in their base. The only humans on the planet. One of them fires his gun and causes an avalanche. The other guy is killed. The killer is left alone.

I looked around the room for a pen even though I knew there wasn't one. Why would there be? You didn't need a pen to do your washing.

Fuck it. The story wasn't that great anyway.

Stories needed people, not wilderness.

I stared at the timer again.

Didn't want to, but there wasn't much else to look at in this room. Only that weird red writing on the wall...whatever language it was...

În cazul în care oricine citește acest lucru și înțelege,
 știu că am fost aici împotriva voinței mele și a încercat
 să plece, dar el nu ar lasa-ma
 El este o vrajitoare

Polish? Croatian?

I still suspected Dami had done it, even though she'd said she didn't even know what language it was...or maybe one of her friends did it...or it could've been...what was it she said? One of those made up science fiction languages, like Bajoran or Klingon.

Well, possibly.

Though the alphabet was still Roman, so...

I looked up and read it again, not that it would make a difference. I'd already looked at it long enough the first time I'd come in here, and there hadn't been any Polish-English dictionaries floating around since then so...whatever it said, it was forever in the mind of whichever disrespectful prick wrote it.

#

Her door was closed and the corridor was quiet and the candles were out and I was pretending to look at the painting to the left of her room.

I'd already pretended to look at the painting to the right, for at least half an hour...not that I had a watch or any concrete concept of time...so now I was putting in the minutes on this side.

If she came out, I'd ask her the question I came up with an hour ago.

If she didn't, I'd wait longer.

An hour tops.

Any longer and it might start to get creepy.

I stared at the angry face in the painting.

More time passed.

A lot of time.

Gum dor time.

She didn't come out.

I woke up and the candles were burning.

I woke up and the candles were burning and I was tired of getting up.

Outside it was snowing.

I got up and put on the same t-shirt and the same jeans as the day before, and the week before that, and put a cigarette in my mouth.

Light, light...

I grabbed one of the candles and lit it.

What to do today?

Wash my clothes? Build a snowman? Learn Slovene? Write a story? Ha, I knew which one she'd chose. But write about what? What ideas were left when all you did was eat and sleep in a deserted castle in the middle of nowhere?

I smoked half of the cigarette before I decided, fuck it, no, I wouldn't write today.

Not a word.

#

I walked into the library and told Damijana my decision.

She was sitting by the fire, reading something. I moved closer and saw it was one of my things.

'Okay.'

I walked closer and stood over her.

'Is that the last one I did?'

'Yes.'

'Any good?'

She put the pages on the rug.

'I've read it three times. It's wonderful.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

I pretended to clap myself, but stopped when I realised she wasn't smiling. In fact, she wasn't smiling when she said it was wonderful either. 'Yeah, I guess it's okay. Not the worst thing I've ever written.'

'It is flawless, dear.'

'It is?'

She nodded.

'You wouldn't change anything?'

'Not a word. It is perfect.'

I put my hand on her shoulders and tried to massage them a little. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right, but she didn't pull away.

'You know...it's not snowing so heavy today.'

#

Outside it looked like Narnia.

We walked around the castle and she showed me all the rooms and where they were from the outside. There was the tower, where we played board games. There was the library. There was my room.

'That's my room.' She pointed at a window above the library. 'But you know that already.'

'What?'

'I said that is my room and you know it already.'

'Do I? When...'

'You stand outside my room sometimes.'

'Huh? What?'

'When you think I'm asleep.'

She knew? But I'd been quiet, it was dark, I didn't...how did she know?

'Dami, come on...I don't do that.'

'You do.'

'Really, I don't.'

'Yes, dear, you do.'

I looked at her and she wasn't blinking. Now was not the time for lies, that's what those eyes were saying.

'I don't. I swear. That's literally the first time I've known where your room is.'

She laughed and picked up some snow. 'Never mind, dear. It is not something I am concerned about.'

'Good.'

'I may even invite you in one day.'

'You don't have to...sorry?'

'If I cannot sleep.'

'You'd invite me in?'

'Of course, dear. Would that be a problem?'

'No, no problem. I mean, if you can't sleep...sure. We can talk and smoke...talk about stuff, anything you like.'

She picked up more snow and added it to the clump already in her hand.

'You know, this whole area...' I gestured at the hill and the forest a few hundred yards away. 'It's...'

'It is a beautiful place,' she finished, the snow in her hand now a snowball.

'It's the same in London too. Well, kind of...I mean, we get snow sometimes, but the landscape, it's different. Here, you've got a castle, the forest. Where I live, you've got a building site. The snow, it kind of mixes with all the mud and gravel and...'

The snowball hit me in the face.

'Hey...'

I wiped it off and looked around for her. But she was...Jesus, she was miles away. Or thirty yards at least. And her arm was raised...was she waving at me?

Another snowball hit me in the face.

'Fuck...'

I wiped it off, faster this time. How was that even possible...she was halfway down the hill.

I fell to the ground and scooped up some snow of my own. Forget her ridiculous pitching skills, this could be a good thing. She hits me, I hit her, she hits me, we get close, we fall down...

I stood up and raised my arm, ready to target.

Huh?

Where did she go?

Snow hit me on the back of the head. I turned and there she was, right in front of me.

'How did you...'

She raised her hand and shoved more snow in my face.

'Hey...'

I fell to the ground and rolled around a bit, faking some kind of wound.

'You hurt easily,' I heard her say.

I faced the sky and raised my hand. 'Please...'

She took the hand and I pulled. And pulled. And pulled.

'Down you...go...'

But it was impossible. She wouldn't...I couldn't get her down.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

I stopped pulling. 'Nothing.'

She let go of my hand.

'How did you do that?'

'Do what?'

'Move so fast.'

'I have always lived around snow.'

'That's your answer?'

'It is.'

'You've always lived in snow. Okay. It doesn't make much sense, but, okay.'

I stayed on the ground, hoping she might just fall down next to me instead.

'It is getting dark,' she said.

'Is it?'

She turned and walked back towards the castle without another word. I stayed in the snow, watching her black cloak flutter about in the wind. Man, that cloak...now I thought about it, I'd never seen her wear anything else. Did she ever wash the thing?

I got up, made another snowball and threw it at the castle wall, falling short of my target by more than a few metres.

Maybe she had a whole wardrobe full of them...the same colour cloak for each day...

The Sun drifted away into Croatia or Italy or whatever was nearby and I walked slowly back towards the castle entrance, forgetting about cloaks. I glanced briefly to the forest at the bottom of the hill, but it didn't look very appealing.

I thought back to the commune.

I wondered what Jay was doing, if he was still in Ljubljana or if he'd gone back home. I figured Chad would've told him about me, even if Damijana hadn't...and it had been months since I'd come here so...yeah, he was back in London, definitely.

Good, I thought. If he did come here, he'd only fuck things up. Or worse, she might like him more than she liked me.

Would she?

It was hard to gauge. He wasn't an artist, but he was probably more charming. Women generally wanted to be around him more than they wanted to be around me. Well, most of the time. Unless they were Slovene poets. Unless they had a brain.

I bent down and made another snowball.

Damijana had a brain. A big brain. She wouldn't fall for someone like him. How could she? She liked creative people...the only thing creative about Jay was the shit that came out of his mouth. And even that was nicked from online.

I threw the snowball at one of the higher windows and hit the ledge.

She wouldn't give Jay a day in this place, let alone weeks...months...however long I'd been here. I was creative, a genius even. Not my words, hers. Okay, she didn't seem to like hanging around with me much, but that was probably just habit...being alone for so long had made her incompatible with people...that was it.

She did like me, she just needed time. If I gave her that...if I stayed with her long enough...then she'd melt a little and let me give her a hug...then after hugging a while, she'd melt a little more and maybe, maybe she'd let me stay in her bed...maybe she'd let me touch her...maybe she'd take me by the hand and let me go down on her...then ride me like Oggy used to...then let me fuck her, fuck her at long

fucking last, in her bed, off her bed, on the floor, in the corridor...against the washing machine and the book shelves and that fucking beast-man statue and...

A hundred plus images of all the sex I'd ever had or seen flashed inside my head. I tried to stop it...I tried to think of nicer things, like the enchanted forest and dinner in the kitchen and Paul Giamatti but it was no good, it wouldn't leave, and worse, it turned on me...more sex, more sleaze...Damijana lying on the enchanted forest board, pinned down, legs in the air while I fucked her and then in the kitchen, against the table, against the fridge, against Paul Giamatti...

I knelt down and put both my hands in the snow. I thought about pulling down my jeans and putting my cock in there too, but vetoed it when I thought of the potential long-term damage.

'Keep a fucking lid on it...' I muttered to myself, the images slowly drying up and giving way to faces and things and objects.

After a minute of this, I pulled my hands out of the snow and stood up. I checked the windows to see if she'd seen anything, but they were empty.

I started walking again, going back to the old thoughts. Jay. Writing. Damijana as a partner, not a sex dummy. I looked at the trees to help keep my mind focused.

It seemed to work.

'She likes you for your mind,' I coached myself. 'She likes you for your mind. She likes you for your mind. She likes you for your mind. Don't fuck it up.'

I made one last snowball and threw it at the wall. The coaching switched from out loud back to the inside of my head.

Don't fuck it up, and she'll love you. And if she loves you, she'll sleep with you eventually anyway. She might even sleep with you this week. Or tomorrow. Man, if you put in the time and the charm, she might even sleep with you tonight.

I reached the castle door, relieved to see it was half open.

I woke up thinking I was in the middle of a lesson back in Hong Kong.

'What's the verb for chicken?' I said to the room.

The lesson disappeared. As did the students.

I looked around. The candles were burning, snow was hitting the window, and there was no way in Slovene Hell I was in Hong Kong.

I woke up, still in my Naruto t-shirt. Or someone else's Naruto t-shirt.
The candles were burning.
Outside it was snowing.

I woke up and looked around, hyper-alert.

The candles were burning, outside it was snowing, etcetera, etcetera...and right now I was pretty sure I had a good idea for a story.

A guy. A woman. A castle. A ridiculously long wait before the woman lets the guy into her bed.

It was perfect. Write about what I knew, and put her in it. And the end: guy gives up on woman, walks outside and gets eaten by a bear. Woman cries and regrets not fucking the guy.

#

I sat in the library writing out my story.

Damijana sat by the fire, reading the book Chad had picked out that time. The one about the black guy who was invisible, but only in his head. Who wrote it again? I tried to look at the cover, but she had it pointing at the floor. Was it Edison? Ellison? Man, I couldn't remember. The whole Chad thing seemed like a century ago. Where was he now? Still travelling? Back in Zagreb? Wherever it was, he didn't seem interested in coming back here. Not surprising really, the abuse he took off Dami...not that he didn't deserve most of it, but still...

I stopped typing and stared at her. That beautiful cropped hair, the Elvira black clothes, those beautiful brown eyes.

'Dami...'

She looked up.

'Did I ever tell you how pretty you are?'

She looked back down at the book as if I'd said nothing.

Jesus, bad line. Cheap line. What was I thinking?

I looked at the typewriter.

But what was I supposed to say? Everything else got the cold look, so why not try the 'you're pretty' line?

I typed out two lines then stopped.

'Dami...'

'Yes?' This time she didn't look up.

Don't say it. Don't.

'Nothing.'

I went back to the page in front of me and stared at what I'd just written:

'Damijana, I love you so fucking much, I never want to be in a room without you. I want this castle to be our castle forever ever ever and ever and I want to fuck you every day every week every hour and minute and not just fuck but kiss and stroke and...mostly fuck...God, I wanna fuck you so much I think my dick's gonna explode.'

I tore out the page and scrunched it up.

Damijana looked up but didn't say anything.

'It's rubbish,' I said.

She nodded.

'I don't know what to write...' I threw the paper ball towards the fire and missed. 'I don't wanna say 'writers' block' but...I am struggling.'

'Why don't you try something longer?'

'What, like a novel?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know if I've got the discipline for that...it's a big ask.'

'A novella then.'

'Maybe. I don't know.' I thought it out in my head. I knew the word, it was like a novel, only shorter...but what was it exactly? 'How long are novellas...usually?'

'Anything under 40,000 words, dear. I think that's not beyond you. Why don't you try?'

'Yeah...I guess.'

I sat there staring at the typewriter, wondering how you were supposed to start something 40,000 words long. One day? Or something snappier. He never knew he would die this way. It was the last day of the punishment and he was looking forward to being dead again. Would that work? Or was stuff like that only for genre trash?

'Are you stuck?'

'No, no...I'm thinking how to start it.'

She put her book on the table and looked at the wall opposite. I looked too. There was nothing, except a painting of men being impaled by other men.

'I'm not a writer, but I've heard others say, if you can't start your work, make notes. It might be relevant for you. What do you think?'

'Notes...I guess it would be easier.'

'I think so too.'

She picked up her book again and resumed reading. I went back to the typewriter and wrote the word 'notes'.

#

An hour later, I was done. I picked up all the pages and showed them to her.

She read through it all, silent as usual. I figured her first question would be, hey, were you born in Hong Kong or, hang on, are you Chinese or British, but I wasn't a hundred per cent sure. One of the few things I knew about Damijana so far, she wasn't one for the regular questions. In fact, it was a little weird, she hadn't mentioned the Chinese thing at all, not once. Come to think of it, neither had anyone at Metelkova. Maybe it was a Slovene cultural trait? Don't assume, don't be blunt, don't say *Ni hau* to anyone with an Asian-looking face. It did make sense, judging from all my experiences.

When she was done, or bored, she handed the notes back and said 'number two'.

'The socialist one?'

'I don't like the other three. They're glib and uninteresting.'

'Err...all three?'

'The first one is nonsense. The third one is typical. The fourth one has been done a thousand times before and reduces you to a stereotype.'

'It did seem a bit Amy Tan when I was writing it.'

'I don't see anything of you in any of them...no soul, not truth. Whereas number two, the socialist one, this seems closer to something you might know.'

'It's set on Mars.'

'Setting is irrelevant. The point is that I can feel you in this idea. It seems like something lived, experienced.'

'Yeah, I suppose so...the main character is pretty much me five or six years ago.'

'You see, I'm right.'

I nodded and said 'yeah, I guess.'

'I think this Benny Platonov can be your longest and greatest work. And you can write it all here, with me.'

I looked at her, hoping to see a smile, but there was something different. I didn't even know if there was a word for it...not joy, not confusion, not anger...more like...determination.

'Hopefully it won't take that long...'

'You do not need to worry about time, dear.'

'And I can come up with some good ideas to flesh it out a bit more...get a good flow to the writing...'

'My castle is yours. As long as it takes.'

'I don't know. You might finally get sick of me...'

'No, dear.'

'You sure? I can be a bit annoying sometimes...if you stay around me too long. Jay always said four days was the limit...but he was pretty annoying too. Or maybe we annoyed each other. I guess that happens with some people. Right?'

She wasn't looking at me, she was lost in the fire. 'It will be beautiful. You can start writing immediately.'

'What, now?'

'Yes, the sooner the better.'

'But I just did three pages...'

'Which is why you should keep going. When the idea is fresh, you must jump on it and not let go.'

'Err...okay. I guess.'

I stared at the typewriter, all energy draining out of me.

'Begin by pressing keys, dear, and the words will follow.'

'Right.' I stared at the 'o' key, begging myself not to type 'One day on Mars.' But that was the only thing in my head. I looked towards the fire, at her chair. 'Do you have any ideas how to...'

The chair was empty.

'Dami?'

I woke up in an empty bed, the candles still burning.

Outside it was snowing.

I lit a cigarette from the candle and remembered the two and a half pages of shit I'd written the day before.

My brilliant story about homeless people on Mars.

Give the people some air, Cohagen...

Jesus...

I smoked some more, staring out the window, trying to see past the forest and into the city beyond. It was weird...far as I could remember, the ride here hadn't taken that long...and there was no dark mist hanging over the forest today...some of the buildings of Ljubljana should've been visible...yet they weren't. It was just endless stretches of canopy followed by fields and fields of snow.

On a clear day, you can see all the way to Ljubljana.

Yeah, right.

It was a clear day, and the only thing I could see was Antarctica.

I stubbed out the cigarette and thought about Jay.

#

In the games room, we sat playing hungry hippos.

The aim of the game was to put some white balls on the board and get your hippo to try and eat them. Damijana had won the last eleven games. I'd won nothing. The last white ball rolled towards her hippo and before she could eat it I stood up and walked over to the window.

'You don't want to play?'

'Dami...'

'Yes?'

'You know when I first came here...you told me you sent that message to Jay...'

'Your friend, Jay? Yes, I remember.'

'Did he...was there a message back?'

'No, dear.'

I walked back over to the hungry hippo board, noticing that the last white ball was gone.

'He didn't say anything?'

'Of course, he replied, but it wasn't what I would refer to as a message.'

'What did he say?'

'He said, 'okay'.'

'That's it?'

'He said, 'okay, I understand. Tell him I said good luck'.'

'Oh.' I looked at the green hippo, its mouth closed tight. I had to admit, it did sound like Jay. He was infamous for his 'okay' messages and nothing else. 'I guess he was busy.' Busy looking for Slovene ass...

Damijana stood up and put her hand on my shoulder, rubbing it gently. 'I was meaning to tell you earlier, but it must've slipped my mind.'

'Huh? The message?'

'No, dear. I went to Metelkova last week. They told me about him.'

'Yeah?'

'They told me he'd gone back home four months ago.' She moved her hand down my arm and then back up to my shoulder. 'You shouldn't worry about him. He is okay on his own.'

'Yeah, he usually is.' Her hand left my shoulder and snaked down my back, stopping near the bottom of my spine. God, it was good. 'Man, four months. Is that how long I've been here?'

'Four and a half...'

'Feels like longer.'

'Time moves more slowly without people, dear.'

'I guess.'

She dug her knuckles into my back, pushing me forward a little.

'Does it hurt?'

'No, no, it's good.

She did it again.

'You know, it's weird, thinking about Jay again. It makes me remember how much of a...how much he liked women. Man, I probably shouldn't tell you this, it's too...it's quite personal stuff.'

'It is your choice, dear.'

'Or kind of personal...'

'Personal is not a word I use often.'

'Actually, it doesn't matter that much. You don't even know him, who cares...right?'

'You can say whatever you like here...'

'Yeah, it's probably not that bad. And it's not like I'm saying he's a paedophile or anything, it's nothing that fucked up...he just...he likes women a lot, that's all...internet women mostly. And not just likes them...I mean, he really, really likes them.'

I paused, remembering the girl in Paris...the shy one who liked him so much she let him finger her the first time they met.

'Go on,' she said, running back up my spine.

'Okay, it's not really a personal thing, but there's this little trick he does, when he likes someone. It's pretty cheap, even he says that much, pretty common too, probably...I think there was a book about a guy doing it too, explaining how to do it, and...I'm probably explaining too much, I know. You sure you wanna hear this? It might be quite boring...'

'I live alone in a castle, dear.'

'Yeah, I guess. Okay, basically, what it is, the thing he does is, he finds these women online, in Ukraine, Germany, Holland, places like that...he talks to them a little, e-mail, skype, makes himself seem like a fun guy, which he is, to be fair...he's pretty charming when you talk to him long enough...a bit materialistic, but funny too...'

'Charm comes from a dishonest place, dear.' She ground her knuckles into the bottom of my spine, making me straighten a little. 'It is a stronghold for liars.'

'Yeah, you're probably right, he's not the most honest guy you'll ever meet...not to women anyway...'

'He is what he is. Carry on, dear...'

'Unchangeable, I guess...' I picked up a ball and rolled it into the nearest hippo's mouth. 'So, yeah, anyway, these girls he writes to, they usually end up liking him. Or some of them do, the ones who've got nothing better to do I guess, and so, yeah, he talks to them, keeps them stable, that's what he used to call it...then every month or so, whenever he's bored or not working, he'll go over there, Germany, Ukraine, wherever and meet up with them and...you know, stay at their house and...sleep with them, usually. I think he stays the whole week, if their parents aren't around or if they're pretty enough and...then he comes back here...back to London, I mean, and...soon as he's back, he basically forgets about the girl he just had...or keeps her stable if he likes her, messaging her once a month or few weeks, saying he misses her, stuff like that...but at the same time he's keeping them stable, he's also back on that site again, talking to the next one...the next girl...and, yeah, after that, it just goes on and on, on loop, same thing, same style, like this...whenever he gets bored enough, or if he's got no cases to work on, he'll just book another flight and go over there and...basically do the same thing again and again.'

'I see.'

'Yeah, it's not that bad, I guess, but it's a bit...sleazy maybe. Well, sometimes sleazy, if the girl's a bit shy and he has to push things a bit. Then it gets quite bad, quite creepy...'

'It is the nature of man, to be sleazy.'

'Yeah, maybe. I suppose. If you give them enough rope.'

'Rope is irrelevant, dear.'

'Is it? I don't know. Jay always needs rope, I'll give him that much.'

'If you say so.'

'He does. He always needs rope.'

'Long rope perhaps.'

'Pretty long, yeah...'

'It is not a new thing, this kind of person.'

'Or quite long. Longer than most other men anyway.'

'They have always been among you.'

'Yeah, probably.'

'Mostly nobles, the privileged, but not always.'

'The privileged, right.' For some reason, my tongue grated saying that word, but it didn't grate long as Dami's knuckles were digging into my back, possibly reshaping my spine. 'I remember one time, there was a girl in Paris...I was actually with him for this one, last year, that's how I know it so well...and he knew her already from online, he'd talked to her, and we were in Paris and she was like his third or fourth choice, but the others weren't replying, so, this was the one he calls. Sounds pretty bad, I know, but that's how he said it, so...we met her, both of us did, we met this girl in some random café in Paris and...she was really shy, really softly spoken...didn't say much at all the whole coffee so...Jay gets bored after about a minute of talking to her and...basically, I'm the one left entertaining her for the rest of the day. Which is weird because I've never met her or typed to her or anything, but...anyway, we go to Montmartre and Notre Dame and, it's odd too cos I'm doing all the suggesting of places even though she lives there...and I'm asking her about Joan of Arc and Louis the Sun King and any other French history I can dredge up and Jay's just lurking there, saying nothing...the whole day, he just stands there and ignores her, which is really fucking annoying actually cos he's basically passing her off onto me, letting me do all the work...but then, later, soon as it gets to eleven or midnight, and we're back at our hostel, and somehow the girl's come back with us...I don't know how, I think it was Jay's idea...and somehow, despite him saying nothing all day, she still goes on the bed with him and...you know, does stuff...and I'm on the bed above pretending I'm asleep along with the others in the room and...the worst part is, the girl was actually a virgin...that's what Jay said, what he told me after and, it was pretty bad, the stuff he said. I mean, it was really cruel cos she seemed so shy and trusting and, basically, he said to me after, it was like being with a mannequin. She just lay there and let him do things to her because...I don't really know why...because she was charmed by him, I guess. Even though he'd ignored her almost the whole day, she let him do that to her, in a hostel.' I paused, remembering Jay's confused face

when I told him to walk her back to the train station at least. 'Yeah, that was pretty bad. Not that he's always like that, but that one...it was pretty bad. I don't think he needed rope that time.'

Her knuckles stopped digging.

'I shouldn't have told you that, should I?'

'Why's that, dear?'

'It was quite personal...he'd kill me if he knew I'd said anything.'

'There is no need to feel guilty.'

'There isn't?'

She pushed her knuckles into the tops of my shoulders, ploughing along the edge of the muscles. 'It is his fault, not yours.'

'It is?'

'Of course, it is, dear. If he didn't want to be embarrassed then he shouldn't do embarrassing things.'

'But...'

'If there were a lack of control on his part, it would be forgivable. But this is his hobby, clearly. It is of his own volition that he seeks to humiliate himself, and others.'

'I guess...'

She ran her fingers onto my neck, switching from knuckles to finger tips. 'People like this, dear...they do not care about anyone but themselves. It is better that he is away from you now. Much better.'

'Yeah, maybe you're right.'

She took her hands away and pointed at the hippo board.

'Another game?'

I was awake and the candles were burning but it wasn't morning, it was night.

Damijana, Damijana, Damijana...

I sat in the library with the typewriter in front of me.

The fire was burning, the curtains were drawn, and the page was waiting. I stared at the part of the table to the side of the typewriter. There was no way I could look it in the eye. It was laughing at me.

Damijana came in later and sat by the fire. She asked if I'd written anything today.

'No,' I said.

'What about your Mars novel?'

'Too long. Too difficult.'

'I see.'

'I think it's better if I stick to shorter stuff.'

'As you wish, dear.'

She got up and went to the shelves and then came back with another book. I didn't see which one it was and didn't care enough to ask.

She sat down again and started to read.

I stared at the typewriter. Maybe a novel wasn't beyond me. Or not a novel, a novella. Twenty-thousand words. I could manage that, as long as I had enough ideas. Ha. I didn't have any ideas. Mars was just fiction, I didn't have a fucking clue. Forget novellas. Shorter stuff was better. But what?

I thought a little longer then typed out a line.

'You feel like writing now?' she asked, not looking up from her book.

I took the page out, looked at what I'd written, and then ripped it up.

'No.'

I put my arms on the table and buried my head in them, not really tired or at my wits end, just pretending to be that way so she wouldn't ask any more questions.

What did she expect of me anyway? I wasn't a writing machine. Ideas needed some outside input to form them, not weeks...months of

solitude in a snowy castle. Or a castle with lots of snow outside. Fuck. I couldn't even make simple sentences anymore.

'This is not good.'

I looked up and around, seeing her by the fire, holding a piece of paper. 'What's that?'

'It is smug and clever and worthless. You are capable of more.'

'Wait...that's not...'

She made the paper into a little rocket ship and threw it towards me. It landed on the table next to the typewriter. I unfolded it, read the line I'd written a few minutes earlier and mumbled, 'how?'

'Perhaps it would be best if you read some other books from my collection.'

'Dami, how did you...I ripped this up. How did you get this?'

'Why don't you choose one? Take the afternoon off, read, learn. Or pick up the Slovene study book I left in your room. Have you looked at it recently?'

'Damijana, how did you put this paper back together?'

'You should look at it.'

'It's impossible. I ripped it up...'

'Learning a foreign language can re-order your mental paths, aid your writing, offer new ideas.'

'Yeah, I studied Cantonese, I know all that. What I'm saying is this paper...I ripped it up. It was dead. Why is it in my hand now?'

'I do not understand.'

'What?'

'You gave it to me, dear. You told me to read it. Don't you remember?'

'No, it's in my...I didn't give it to you, I ripped it up.'

'That is not what happened.' She picked up the stoker and poked the fire. The flame turned green for a moment then...what was I saying?

'If you're resistant to learning my language, there are other methods to provoke. The books here, as I said.' She gestured with three fingers to the nearest shelf. 'Reading other authors can spark something...even if the resulting work is not at all similar to that which provoked it. For example, you could read 'To the Lighthouse' and then write a novel about space stations.'

'Huh?'

'Are you okay, dear? You look confused.'

'I don't know. I thought I was...there was something I was saying, but...I've forgotten.'

'You were telling me that your last work was not good enough and that you wished to be inspired. It is true...you did not say how you would achieve this, but the desire was there.'

'That's what I said?'

'Yes.'

'I can't remember any of it...'

'Look at the paper, dear.' She gestured to the thing on the table in front of me. 'Perhaps that will help.'

I picked up the paper and read the only line on it. Yes, I knew this. It was mine. I wrote this and...she was right, it was terrible.

I put down the paper and looked at her. She didn't look disappointed, but how could she not be? I'd written some good stuff, I'd raised myself onto a higher platform, and now I'd written this shit.

'Dami...this isn't...'

'It is a blip, nothing more. I know what you are capable of.'

'I can do much, much better, I swear. I just need...' I looked at the shelves behind me but vetoed as soon as I saw the name 'Cortazar' stamped on one of the spines. No, not books. Not Cortazar. That wasn't inspiring, it was...I didn't know what it was. I just knew I despised that invisible tennis game at the end of 'Blow Up'.

'You may take any one you like, dear. Not all of them are as good as they think they are, but there are some honest ones.'

'No, not books.'

'Perhaps you should check first before deciding.'

'No...thank you.' I stood up and walked to the fire, not really knowing what I was doing. Books definitely weren't the right way to go, I knew that, but what else was there in this place? In the olden days, or the days before I'd come here, I used to go to the modern art museums or the zine shops in different cities...it wasn't always successful, but I usually came away with some ideas. Art equals ideas for writers. Words equal ideas for artists. It made sense in its own biannual little way...binary way.

'You wish to go somewhere?' Damijana asked, not moving from near the fire.

'No...I don't know.' I brought up the layout of the castle in my head, going through all the rooms. Ah, of course. There was art here, loads of it. 'Yes.'

'You have an idea?'

'I do.'

'Well?'

I bent down next to her and put my hand on her shoulder. She didn't pull away. 'You might not like it.'

'Why is that?'

'It requires a lot of talking on your part.'

'Ah.' She took my hand, gripped it and used the weight to pull herself up. 'You wish to know about the paintings.'

'Yeah...how did you know?'

She smiled. 'If it's not the books then what else is there?'

'Good point.'

She kept my hand tight in her own. 'Come...we shall start on the first floor.'

'You don't mind?'

'Of course not, dear. As long as it leads to ideas...I could talk until the shepherds come home.'

#

The painting tour was longer than I could've hoped for.

The last time I'd tried talking about one of the paintings, she'd walked off on me, but this time I was the one who had to tell her it was time to move on.

It was weird...it wasn't just talking either. She didn't get lost in her descriptions. It was more like...as soon as she started talking about each painting a kind of bubble would surround her and cut her off from the rest of the corridor.

Her eyes would turn lilac again, too.

I didn't want to ask her about that as I figured it might cause another walk off...but it was still weird. I knew people could put in

coloured contacts, but I didn't know they had ones that could change between different colours when it was already in your eye.

Or maybe I just didn't know that much...maybe Slovene eye technology was light years ahead of the UK or Hong Kong or China...

Maybe she'd developed her own contacts?

#

'Khachatur Abovian...1848...that's the first year he lived here. I remember it quite clearly. He was very good, dear. An Armenian writer, a poet too...a brilliant man. It's a strange thing, that small countries can produce such genius. I do not know why...perhaps there's a focus that cannot exist in the larger states, or a greater sense of community perhaps.'

'He looks very serious...'

'Yes. Extremely serious, and diligent, too. Probably the most diligent I've ever had...he never stopped holding a pen, was never short of ideas or energy. They say, back in his own country, that he only wrote ten books in his whole life.' She laughed. 'He was the only man who ever refused to go outside. The snow is for children, he said. Children and man-children. There was time only for words and ideas and philosophy, and if that wasn't enough then God help you. Yes, he was very impressive. A great man.'

'You talk like you know him...'

'I did.'

'When? In 1848?'

'Around that time, yes.'

'Dami...'

'Shall we move on?'

'Err...yeah, I guess.'

She tapped the painting on the wall with her finger. 'Don't worry, dear, only one more to go.'

'Already? Man, that was quick.' I looked back at the four other paintings in the corridor then the one still in front. 'No, wait...there's another one. The pale guy at the bottom of the stairs...remember?'

'Which one?'

'The spiral stairs going up to the games room...I asked you about him once and you said you'd tell me some other time.'

'Oh, him.'

'So, we've got this one over here and then that guy...'

'My previous answer still stands.'

'What...we're not gonna do him?'

'No.' She walked on to the next painting, the one that was only a few metres from her bedroom. I'd seen this guy more than once already, and didn't really care to know anything about him. Unless he was the closest one to her room for a reason...a lover perhaps?

'Louis...Louis de Prince. I do not remember the years precisely, but I suppose it was sometime around the turn of the century...'

'You mean 1900?'

'Yes, dear.'

'Sorry, just checking.' I looked at the guy in the painting and then the inscription at the bottom. 'He was French?'

'His medium was film, one of the first of his kind. It took me over a year to get the materials before he could do his work...a trying time for both of us. Yes, he was French, you are right, dear. Perhaps you know about them...'

'French people?'

'Yes.'

'That's pretty general...'

'I don't think so.'

'Isn't it?'

'I have known many, dear. Though, I admit, none since Louis. Perhaps they are no longer the same way.'

'Well...I guess I know a few stereotypes. They're arrogant, good at sex, maybe a little bit obsessed with it. I don't know if that covers all of them. I doubt it.'

'It seems accurate enough. It was no secret back then that all Frenchmen had trouble keeping their internal struggles to themselves. Especially the creative ones...'

'He tried to...seduce you?'

'You may call it that. Or worse, perhaps. Honestly, dear, it is not a distinction I know how to make.'

I almost laughed. She was a pretty good actress...as long as she didn't actually believe any of this stuff, it seemed harmless enough to play along. 'What do you mean?'

'It is unimportant. The point is: the first year was difficult...I had to take certain measures to subdue him, but after that, when he received his materials, he was quite different. In fact, I would say he became almost asexual. Like one of those orange men in the mountains.'

'Buddhist monks?'

'And he made some of the most wonderful films...years ahead of the rest of them. It was unfortunate that it had to end...so early, too.'

'He went away?'

'No.'

'He died?'

She stared at the painting...Louis...then the same mist that had come over her during the other paintings descended again. It didn't matter, I was used to it now. I waited a few minutes, staring at her cloak and the body that was lurking underneath then asked her again if he'd died.

'Kas?'

'Who?'

'Sorry, dear. What did you say?'

'Nothing. I was just asking if he died or...'

'Yes. Yes, of course he died. You all do.'

'Huh? We all do?'

'I mean people, dear. You all die eventually.'

'But not you?' I asked, laughing a little.

She looked at the painting again. 'I do miss that side of him, if not the other.'

'You mean his sleazy side?'

'So much energy wasted on such a trivial thing...'

'I wouldn't call it trivial.'

She turned to me. 'Really?'

'Not if we're talking about the same thing.'

She studied me for a moment. Well, studied or stared, I wasn't sure of the distinction. Then she looked at the painting again. 'I suppose there is a lot written on the subject.'

'Yeah, but they call it love, usually.' A sudden thought came into my head. It didn't seem too ridiculous so I went with it. 'Actually, when you think about it...everything, every work of art is about sex, isn't it?'

'It is?'

'Deep down, yeah. It must be. If it's written by a man, it must be. A woman, maybe not. Unless it's a protest about it...but really, what are the classics about? Dostoevsky...Crime and Punishment...all about sex. Okay, it's got crime in it too, but the core of it is sex...about sex. He calls it intellectual pursuit, the killing thing, but really...it comes from sex.'

'I am not so certain about that.'

'Yeah, it must be. Think about it. He kills two women, a woman redeems him...it's the worst of sex and the best of sex...he kills the women...the debt women...he kills them because he's sexually frustrated, but he's redeemed because he thinks longer term...he gets to know the other girl, he wants to sleep with her, but he can't because of what he did in the first ten...twenty pages...the killing of those women...he's humiliated by it, by his past...his emotional past...and the only way out of it is...it's to go to prison and sit on a tree stump and feel guilty about it all...so then it's a rational future, with a girl he loves but can also cuddle and have sex with sometimes...maybe...what else?'

I tried to think of other books, but all I could think of was Animal Farm and there was no way I could pin sex on that. Napoleon wanted to fuck the farmer? It wouldn't stick. What else?

'Are you hungry, dear?'

'Sorry?'

'It has been a while since lunch. Are you hungry?'

'Yeah, a little...'

'Good. We can talk more about this idea of yours over a bowl of stew...my own special recipe.'

'You're going to eat with me?'

'Yes, dear. If you don't mind?'

I shook my head, too surprised to say the word 'no.' She never ate meals with me, not even once. In fact, I'd started to have suspicions that she never ate any food at all.

'Shall we then?'

She smiled and linked arms with me.

'Sure,' I said. 'Stew sounds good.'

We walked down the corridor, away from the paintings of men she'd pretended to know for the last four or five hours or however long it had been, and headed to the first meal we'd ever had together. Or the first meal we might have together...there was still time for everything to go wrong and I didn't wanna jinx it.

'You know, dear...' she said, as we walked past the first painting she'd talked about, an Iranian poet who'd come here after deserting from the army during World War One [she'd said he was charming, so I automatically hated him], 'I should thank you for this little tour.'

'Thank me...why? You can look at them whenever you want.'

'Yes, but it has been a long time since I have. A very long time.'

'Oh.'

'Louis used to say to me...Damijana, you are a cold creature, touching you is like touching the snow outside.'

'He said that?'

'I admit, it is not a subtle comparison, but I do think of it sometimes. It is not the first time it has been said.'

I didn't want to agree with a Frenchman she'd probably invented in her head, but he was right. I couldn't tell her that though, it might spoil things.

'That's weird...you're quite warm with me.'

'You are a poor liar, dear.' She looked at me, and was so close I had to break away and look at the beast-man statue. 'I have been cold to you, too.'

'Maybe a little...'

'Perhaps you are right, there is something to be gained from intimacy.'

I stared at the beast-man statue, nodding. Don't speak, don't fuck it up, don't say a fucking word.

'I think so.'

#

Our first meal together was a type of Slovene stew I'd never heard of along with a bottle of Romanian wine, vintage 1989.

'That was the year the tyrant fell...' she told me, going on to say something unpronounceable that must've been the guy's name. 'A good year.'

'Have you been to Romania before?' I asked, trying to open the bottle.

'No.'

'How did you get the wine?'

'A gift from an old friend.'

I put the corkscrew into the top of the bottle and tried to figure out which way I had to turn the thing. 'You seem to have a lot of those.'

'Yes, dear. This old friend came to visit me here...ten years ago, perhaps. He was a science fiction writer...very political.'

'Science fiction is good...'

'He gave me this wine, but we never found time to drink it. A shame. Yes, science fiction does have its merits...though it can be a little vague.'

'I guess...' I twisted the screw again then pulled. Half the cork came out...then somehow cut itself in half. Fuck.

'Are you okay, dear?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Do you need me to...'

'No. I've got it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yup.'

It took me another ten minutes before I threw the corkscrew down and said the damn thing was stuck.

'Let me try...there's a special trick to it...'

She took the screw, put it in the cork and pulled the rest of it out almost immediately. I wanted to say I'd just loosened it up for her, but didn't want to sound sour so I said, 'strong girl' instead.

She repeated the word 'girl', smiled then went back to the chopping board.

'Dami...'

'Yes?'

'There was something I wanted to ask you...about the paintings.'

'You may ask me anything, dear. Do not be coy.'

'Well...it's just, when we were looking at all the paintings, I remembered something...the first night I was here, there were...'

The knife hit the chopping board hard and a piece of carrot flew onto the floor.

'You okay?'

She resumed chopping. 'Yes, dear.'

'Okay...well, the first night I was here...I remember there were other paintings too. I don't know, it might've been a hallucination...I was pretty tired that night...but I'm sure there were women on the wall, up there.'

'You are correct.'

'I am?'

'Yes.'

'So, you took them down?'

'I did.'

'Why?'

'It is unimportant.' She stopped chopping and put the carrots into the boiling pot of water on the stove. 'If you do not mind, I must concentrate.'

'On looking at stew?' I asked, smiling.

She didn't answer.

#

Twenty minutes and two glasses of wine later she was done concentrating and was instead asking me to elaborate on my theory.

'Huh?'

'The theory you talked of earlier...about intimacy.'

'Oh, that one...' I poured some more wine, giving myself time to drag back all the bullshit I'd said before.

'You were talking about the classics...their relation to sex.'

'All literature is about sex. Yeah, I remember. Where was I up to?'

'You were making a list.'

'Right. Yeah. You want me to keep going?'

'I do.'

'Okay, well...first ones that come to mind...apart from Crime and Punishment and the Russians, the first ones in my head are probably...it's probably something like Cortazar...the Cortazar books, Hopscotch and...man, I don't know the names of the others, but all those weird experimental ones he did and...they were about sex...the mixed up nature of it and...the memory of it too... and then you've got Borges...yeah, Borges and Cortazar, both Argentinian, both all about sex...a huge library covering the history of the whole world, gotta be sexual frustration...the Cortazar stuff...abstract, surreal, all about women and how he wants to...what he wants to do to them...and all the sex he dreams about but never had...that's why his structure's all messed up all the time...it's the mixing of real sex and dream sex, that's what Cortazar is, basically...yeah, then you've got Norman Mailer and Vonnegut...Mailer's a pervert, everyone knows that, but Vonnegut, he's different, more subtle...he seems almost like a gentle uncle kind of guy but really, when you think about it, he's writing about sex too, he's just good at hiding it...I mean, Sirens of Titan...the out of flux time travelling guy, whatever he was...he engineers it so that rich kid can sleep with his wife...why would he do that? There's no reason for it, he's got all the knowledge of the galaxy...or some of the knowledge and the first thing he does is whore out his wife to some guy he's never met...it doesn't make any sense, until you realise it's all about sex...and then the other stuff he does, the serious stuff...that thing on Mars, the revolution, it's...what? Why does he do that? He says it's already happened, it's the fate of the galaxy or something, but...that's just Vonnegut hiding. Think about it. Revolution means change, right? Revolution means new power and new rules and...new kinds of sex. So, the whole point of it is...it's a way of winning power and changing things so, basically, the revolutionaries can have more sex...and when you add this to the whole turning his wife into a whore for some other guy thing then...it

basically means Vonnegut was, deep down, just a guy who wanted to...wanted to hold power and have sex with other men's wives...but he didn't have the balls to actually do it, so he writes about it and...yeah, that's it, all about sex. Who else? Mailer...Vonnegut...you sure you don't need a hand?'

'Keep going, dear. I'm fine.'

I nodded, a little bit tired, a little bit amazed. Surely, she couldn't be buying all this? Surely my brain would reach breaking point soon and blow up the whole fucking kitchen.

I drank more wine and went on...

'Okay, well...after Mailer, Vonnegut, you've got those other guys...the science fiction guys...Clarke, Aldiss, Asimov...everyone thinks they were prudes but, really, they were so intellectual and sexless that they had to be writing about sex...seriously, they had to be...Asimov, psycho-history, the robot stories...you think about it, they weren't really about robots, or they were, but they were also about sex and...the thing was...the thing Asimov was trying to say was...or he wasn't saying it, but he meant it, in the subtext...he was saying that all those robot rules were just...they were just rules that society put up in general and if you followed rules all your life then where did that get you? That's what he was saying...that the rules stopped people doing things that were okay, like having sex...divorcing your wife or husband...Asimov was from the 50's, I guess that's where it came from...the whole repression of that period and the way you had to start a family and be a good wife or husband when really all you wanted to do was have more sex with other people...even Asimov knew this...that's why the robots aren't that much different from the humans either...they don't want sex, neither do the humans, they're too busy...which just shows that Asimov was so distracted by sex during his writing that he had to write about intellectual stuff just to snuff it out...just like taking a cold shower or putting your hands in the snow...things like that, just to get you to stop thinking about it and...what else? Can't think of many more...maybe Orwell and Evelyn Waugh and that other guy...Hubert Selby Jr, he was all about sex, literally...and Dos Passos and Nakagami and...'

'I don't like Selby Jr.'

'Huh? How come?'

'He's dishonest. I don't believe a word he writes.'

'He was pretty brutal...'

'It is false. Even his thoughts, I do not believe them.'

'Err...okay. I haven't actually read much of his stuff. I don't know if...'

'Dinner's ready.'

'So soon?'

'Yes.' She carried two plates of stew to the table, but didn't put them down. 'I think it would be better if we ate in your room.'

'My bedroom?'

She nodded. 'What do you think?'

#

After finishing the stew, which was way too salty, we sat on my bed talking about books.

The candles were burning, it was snowing outside, but I didn't really care about either. Why would I? She was in my room...on my bed.

I sat on the pillows with a glass of wine in my hand. She sat near the tail end of the bed with her legs crossed, her hands empty. I'd asked her about twenty times if she wanted some wine and each time she'd refused. It has no effect on me, she said. I didn't believe her. Ah well, as long as she didn't mind being alone with a drunk.

'Did you ever read Heinlein?' she asked.

'A couple. Cat who walked through walls. Moon is a harsh mistress. Some others.'

'I liked Heinlein. His politics were primitive, but he had great conviction.'

'You knew him too?'

'In fact, I think he may fit your theory. His characters often have sex.'

'Yeah, I remember some of that. I always thought his male characters were too smart though...the dialogue was so smooth.'

'It is not a realist work.'

'No, I guess not.'

She uncrossed her legs and put them out straight. I drank more wine, almost finishing the glass and then yawned.

'Are you sleepy?'

'No, no...just need more wine.'

'The bottle is empty.'

'Yeah.' I finished the glass and put it on the floor. 'I'll just go to Romania, get some more...ask the tyrant guy...Chess-ku...'

'Ceausescu.'

'See if he's got some 1989 for me...'

'He's dead, dear.'

'Dead...is he? Yeah. I guess tyrants usually make up dying, don't they? End up. Yeah, makes sense. Did they shoot at him? Hang him? Ah, never mind, forget Romania. I don't really care. I'll just...stay here on your bed...chill on the ottoman bed a bit.'

She looked at the walls of the room and the candles in the corner, which always seemed to be lit.

'Your room is very bare,' she said, finally.

'The bariest...barest...most bare walls in all Slovenia.'

'Perhaps we could get some posters for you to put up.'

'We could?'

'Yes.'

'You have them here...in the castle?'

'I can get them.'

'Cool. Posters.' I looked at the stone walls. 'Not sure how we'll put them up though...can you stick paper on stone?'

'Of course, dear. If it inspires you, they'll stick.'

'Yeah...Romanian posters. Like Russian ones, Lenin time maybe.'

She nudged her left leg against mine. 'Tell me, are you inspired now?'

'What?'

'You said a tour of the paintings would inspire you.'

'I did...'

'You said it would give you new ideas.'

'Uh. I remember saying that.'

'So...do you have any new ideas?'

'Yes. Maybe. Don't know yet.' I put my hand on her knee. 'Can you think of any?'

She didn't move.

I lifted my hand and, shaking a little, put it against her hair, running down one thick strand even though her hair wasn't that long, and kept going until I was touching her cheek.

Jesus, what was my hand doing? What was I doing?

Nothing, the Romanian wine told me. You're just having a good time. No need to freak out. Besides, she wants you, remember?

'Dami...'

'Yes?'

I didn't know what to say. The only thing I could think of was, 'I need to fuck you right now and every day for the rest of my life.' That was no good. Action was better. Besides, I'd said all my best lines in the kitchen earlier.

'Heinlein would not have hesitated. Dick neither.' She paused, putting her palm flat on the mattress. 'It is strange, all the best writers of science fiction were male.'

'Err...Butler? LeGuin?'

'Women write in a patronising way. Always trying to tell you something.'

'Tanith Lee, D C Fontana, Ugresic...others...'

'Have you finished?'

'There are more...'

'A list of five. And all of them exactly as I have said, lecturing, listen to me. They are tedious people writing tedious things. Don't pretend that you like them, dear. You cite their work but you have not read it. Nor do you need to. Page one of *The Dispossessed* would put you to sleep in a second. Possibly sooner. It is not their genre, science fiction. Weird fiction. It is a place for the darkness of men. Brilliant, creative, traumatised men. Do you have any ideas, dear?'

'Ideas...'

She nodded.

'One. Maybe.'

'Tell me.'

'Not Mars related...'

‘Speak. What is it?’

‘Not speaking related either...’

‘Faster, dear, please.’

I leaned forward slowly and kissed her on the cheek. One second, two seconds, two and a half. I drew back and checked her reaction. Nothing. I mean, she was looking at me, but there was no negative or positive.

Fuck it. If that was a warning, it was her fault for not making it brighter. If it was a green light then, no problem.

I leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. Or touched her lips with my lips. No real movement.

She matched my stasis with her own.

No little up down movements, no rotation.

Was this technically a kiss?

I moved up to her ear, and whispered, 'ears are my real target, long as you don't...'

The ear vanished.

The room turned to black.

I wasn't on the bed, I wasn't on anything, I was...I was falling. I was in space and I was falling.

I waited until things felt steady again...until I could feel ground beneath me...then opened my eyes.

Huh...

The bed was like a mountain in front of me. My hands were touching carpet. Jesus, I was on the floor. What was...how did I get down here?

I pulled myself onto my knees and looked over the top of the bed and she was there, sitting with her legs crossed again, completely still.

'Dami...'

Her eyes...they were lilac.

'I'm tired,' she said.

I got up and put a knee on the edge of the bed. 'Fucking duck hunt...did I just fly?'

'I threw you off the bed.'

'Threw where?' I looked at the floor, tried again. 'What?'

'You heard me, dear.'

'You threw me off the bed?'

'I did.'

'Why?'

'You were becoming adventurous.'

'Coming...I wasn't adventurer...I didn't do anything. Just your ear. Half of it.' I stopped, rubbing the delayed pain that had just hit the back of my head. 'Hang on, wait...you threw me off the bed? With hands?'

'Yes.'

'Off the bed?'

'Yes.'

I looked from the bed to the floor. It was at least two metres.

'You're taking the piss, right?'

'No, dear.'

'But...you're like forty kilos. Junior Ric Flair, no arms. How the fuck could you throw me? It's not even...' I stopped, hearing my own words bounce back off the walls, not liking the rage factor. I dropped the volume a little and tried a half smile. 'I'm still a little dazed. I mean, how did you do that...the throwing thing?'

'I told you.'

'Huh, when?'

'Many times.'

'I don't...I can't remember any of that.'

'Jaz sem čarovnica.'

'Jazz what?'

She smiled. Well, half a smile. 'I'm a witch, dear.'

'Do what?'

'A witch.'

'A witch?'

She nodded.

I looked at her black cloak, her pale skin, her lilac eyes. I thought of all the weird things she'd done...the weird thing she'd just done thirty seconds ago. 'You're a witch?'

'Yes.'

'A magic witch?'

She nodded.

'Witch of...natural magic or...' I rubbed my head again. This was too much to process, especially when I was both drunk and concussed. 'I mean, it comes to you naturally or...there's a machine that...some kind of...'

'A source, yes. Machine, no. Actually, it is both natural and not. The source is merely an object used as a vessel of both transference and storage...like a book in a library, for instance...however, the actual power, the essence of the thing comes from me.'

'From you?'

'It is difficult for you to comprehend. Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything.'

'No...I comprehend. I get it.' I moved across the bed towards her, aiming for her shoulders. If I could hug her, she'd know I was sincere...even if I did think she was a little bit nuts. 'I knew another girl who was a witch, back in London...she cursed me once...a real curse, serious...she said I was a toxic motherfucker...her words...and put a curse on me. It was pretty weird. I didn't go outside for a week. Thought if I did, something would drop on my head or I'd get hit by a runaway truck or...something triangular.'

'Your friend was not a witch.'

'No, she was...really. Satanist too.' I reached out for her arm. 'It's okay though, I get it. I like witches, they're cool. You do cool things. I mean, I know you're not evil or Satan. My friend was...maybe...but I know you're not. You're beautiful.'

She got off the bed as soon as I got close and walked to the door, not looking back.

'Where you going?'

She stopped, eyes on the door or maybe the portrait hanging on the wall next to it.

'Hey, I was joking about the evil. Serious, it was a joke. I don't care what you are...witch, monster...whatever, it doesn't matter. You're great. You pay my rent. Give me this room, the corridors...castle...'

'It is time to sleep, dear...'

'No, no sleep, we're not tired. We can drink more, talk about chess-ku again.' I stopped, trying to think of something better to say, but the

only thing that came into my head was Troi with a spoon, saying ‘me have a wooden face.’ How did that get there?

‘It’s really very late, dear.’

‘Wait, there’s something...there’s a word I was gonna...it’s blank. I’ve gone blank. Going blank. One word. Fuck. What was it?’

She looked at the door, opened her mouth.

‘Wait, don’t say late again. It’s not...’

‘Dear...’

‘...you don’t care about late, you’re gliding around in the hall every night. I don’t know how. You don’t even look tired. All the other Slovene women do...Metelkova women. They’re all miserable...most of them...bartender was okay, if you talked slowly...but you’re better...way better.’

No reaction.

I got my knee off the bed and went towards her, stopping when I saw her head tilt to the side.

‘Living in a castle...in Slovenia...even though you’re always pissing about somewhere else, still a castle...I see you sometimes...we talk about stuff...in an empty castle, and it’s just...fuck.’

‘*Kaj?*’

‘Not fuck, full stop, didn’t know what was in my head or...wait, kaj? That means what, right? Or why?’

She looked at the door again.

‘Ah, forget kaj, this castle is great, two-person castle...if Chad comes back, not great...but he’s back in Zagreb hand-job place now, probably...two person only is the way forward, me and you...hopefully in the same room...same bed...’

I let the last two words hang a little, but it didn’t matter; she didn’t turn. I kept talking anyway.

‘Same room. I’ll take the floor, floor is okay, I don’t really care. Long as the castle’s still here. Prospero’s castle. Shit, you’re paying my rent. That’s something. Not even Natalie Wood did that...would do that. Not even Kitty Zhang. Ah, maybe Kitty Zhang, if I had a film for her. She’s not as pure as you think. Those yoga photos, the swimming pool pics, it wasn’t an accident. But I don’t care, she’s just a walking

pair of...walking body. Your black cloak is way better. Lifting up when you walk, that draught in the library...'

I closed my mouth and waited for something, any kind of gesture, but half a minute passed and there was nothing.

'Dami?'

No movement at all.

'It's your turn now.'

Not even a hair.

'Dami?'

It was like talking to a stick with a wig on top.

'You still on or...'

A fucking beautiful wig-stick that I wanted to wrap my legs around and...

She turned around, finally, her face like one of her paintings.

'Zelo sem utrujen.'

'Zelo what?'

'Zelo sem utrujen.'

'That's not English.'

She cleared her throat even though there had been nothing wrong with her voice. 'You know of the Bechdel test, don't you?'

'Bechnel...what?'

'The Bechdel Test.'

'Bechdel...the female thing? Feminist...'

'Do not feign ignorance, dear.'

'I wasn't feigning, I was just...I'm confused.'

'The test is very simple.'

'No, I mean I'm confused about you.'

'We're talking about the Bechdel test, dear, not me.'

'But...what...why are you talking about a test?'

'You wished to have an answer. I have given you one.'

'Huh, when?'

'The thing I have just told you.'

'The Bechnel test...do I know of the Bechnel test...that's your answer?'

'Bechdel, dear. Yes, it is.'

'I don't get it.'

'Try.'

'I did, but...' I looked left and scrunched my forehead, pure theatre. 'You're saying I'm...what? A misogynist? Feminist? A fake feminist? Wait, Bechdel test is about film, isn't it?'

'Bechdel, dear. I cannot make it any more transparent.'

'Ha, you could. Pretty sure you could.'

'I'm very tired,' she said, her eyes brown again.

'Is it about feminism? You think I'm not respecting you...I'm too blunt? Too pervy? The same bed line...'

'I must sleep.'

'Dami, no, don't sleep yet. Was it the same bed line? Cos I said the floor straight after...maybe too mumbled...I'll take the floor...same room only, not bed...that's what I said...some of it.'

'Bedtime, dear.'

'Serious...it's not even twelve, we've got loads of time to...'

She turned back and glided towards the door, her cloak rising up as if that old library draught had just woken up and swept through the doorway.

'...talk.'

'Goodnight.'

'Dami, don't go...'

I ran to the door and checked the corridor, but she was already out of sight.

'Dami...' I shouted, not really expecting an answer.

I woke up alone with the candles burning, a hangover and a shitload of snow outside.

There wasn't much that was clear about the night before, but I remembered three things pretty distinctly.

Damijana believed she was a witch.

Damijana threw me on the floor.

Damijana didn't want to fuck me.

#

I walked up and down the corridor to her room, up and down, all the way to the end, a small circle then back again. I did it many, many times, noticing nothing on the walls, and nothing on the floor.

Outside it was snowing so heavily it looked just like a piece of blank white paper hanging over the glass of the window. I knew this without looking because it was like this every day now. Not that I knew what 'now' meant anymore.

I stopped walking and looked at the painting at the end of the corridor. The young man, painted out of something like wax. He still looked sick.

'I know how you feel, man...'

I woke up alone, looked at the snow outside then went straight back to sleep.

The candles may have been burning, I didn't know, I didn't care.

I woke up and felt the space next to me for her pale body.

She was there a minute ago, I was sure of it, but now...

Nothing.

I looked at the candles in the corner of the room and my God, they were burning, and the snow outside, Jesus, it was fucking snowing.

#

I sat on my chair in front of the typewriter, the fire burning. The page in front of me was blank. It had been blank for days...or what I thought were days.

It was hard. I couldn't even remember falling asleep or waking up anymore. Or I knew it, but...what was it? It was no longer a cut...a divide. Did that make sense?

I looked at the page.

Was that something? Should I write about time?

I typed the title: 'TIME'

What next?

I looked over at the fire and the lack of a woman sitting in front of it. She hadn't been there for days. The only time I'd seen her was in the courtyard, the day before. She was coming up the steps again, from the door I was forbidden to enter.

'Dami...where have you been?'

'Busy, dear.'

'That thing the other night...the things I said...'

'It is unimportant.'

'Yeah, but...I just wanted to say...'

'I have things to do. You may apologise later, if you wish.'

'Yeah, I know, I'm...wait, what?'

I'd walked after her, into the hallway, but by the time I'd got there, she was gone. *You may apologise later, if you wish.* Apologise for what? Touching her knee? She was the one who came up to my room...she moved closer to me, not me to her...I didn't initiate anything.

I started typing, angry:

'There was a man stuck in a castle with a witch. The witch was beautiful like no other. The witch would not let the man do things to her...even though she said she adored him. The witch lay on the bed next to the man and put her leg close to his. She touched him on the thigh. She told him to kiss her. The man kissed her. The witch moved away. The man told her he loved her, said he'd take care of her, or she could take care of him, whichever way she wanted it. It was a good thing he was offering. The witch laughed in his face. The witch left him alone as usual. The witch was a fucking tease. '

I woke up and the candles were burning and...

I closed my eyes.

Go away.

I woke up from a dream of her...me the hero, her the other hero...and told myself to rectify things, to go straight to her room and apologise.

Dami, I'm sorry...

I'm sorry you threw me off the bed.

I'm sorry you walked out on my declaration of love.

I'm sorry I was genuine, Dami, and I'm sorry you broke it.

I didn't move.

I looked around the room.

The candles were burning and the snow was falling to its death and why the hell should I have to say sorry for anything?

#

The courtyard was covered with snow and in that snow were lots of holes from where I'd been walking. I'd been doing it for a while. Not sure how long, but I figured it was more than a few hours. My target was to cover the whole courtyard in holes.

I looked at the sky and saw the Sun going down and the clouds floating over but I didn't want to go inside yet.

The basement, the basement.

Sure, why not?

I walked over to the steps, not caring enough to check the window above or the corridor over the other side. If she was watching, what could she do? She was only a woman. Not much in the way of muscle on her. Okay, she seemed to have a few weird tricks...she could throw me a few metres across a room...but nothing huge. It's not like she

was actually a witch. That was ludicrous. And besides, it was only a basement. How serious could it be?

I walked down the steps.

And what could she possibly have in there anyway?

At the bottom of the steps the door wasn't just unlocked, it was open. I stood there and stared through, but it was too dark to see anything. If I wanted to know for sure then I'd have to go in.

I took one step forward...

...then stopped.

There's something wrong here...definitely something wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was some voice in my head, not audio, visual, and it was spelling out the word 'DONT' in capital letters and without an apostrophe.

But why not...it was only a basement.

DONT.

But...

DONT.

I retreated a step and stared at the gap between the door and the wall. The voice was probably right, it did look pretty dark in there. But then it wasn't a voice, it was in my head, which meant...it was myself telling myself not to go in there.

That was weird.

Or maybe it was Damijana the so-called witch planting pictures in my brain?

Ha, doubtful.

But...

I stared at the dark space a little longer, long enough for an image of a teen wizard being slaughtered in a dark tunnel to come into my head...then turned and went back up to the courtyard.

Maybe tomorrow.

I woke up alone, noticed a lack of natural light, turned to the window and saw it was still dark outside.

The candles were burning.

I sat up and looked at the door.

#

I leaned against the first-floor balcony, my tree-killer jacket done up right to the collar, and looked down onto the courtyard.

There were no footmarks in the snow.

That's the only thing I could notice. What else was there? Nothing changed here. There was no summer or spring. No thawing of ice or hearts.

Damijana, you are a cold creature.

An unapologetic creature.

I lit a cigarette I'd brought from my room and smoked it. I looked forward to when it was done, when I could throw it down onto the snow and mess things up a bit.

I got down to halfway, when there was a noise.

Was she coming out of the basement again?

I took another drag and looked onto the courtyard.

There was a figure moving across the ground towards the steps. It was her, obviously. Who else would wear that damn cloak?

She stopped at the top of the steps, turned and looked up towards my position. I didn't bother to duck.

'Couldn't sleep,' I said, waving the cigarette in the air.

She stared at me.

Now I felt like ducking.

'It feels like ages since we've talked. Don't you think?'

A tiny, tiny breath of wind swept across the courtyard, lifting the edges of her cloak an inch or two into the air. She didn't seem to notice.

'You feel like a game of chess or something?'

I smoked the last bit of the cigarette, waiting for her answer.

'You should sleep, dear.'

I looked at the spiral stairs, weighing it up in my head. 'Yeah...I guess.' I looked back down at the courtyard.

It was empty.

I sat in front of the typewriter, the fire burning, the curtains drawn. On the paper was one line.

'The witch didn't know how to say sorry.'

It wasn't a story, but it wasn't a lie either. She didn't. She was...what? Scared? Why she was scared I couldn't figure out, but...

'Have you written anything today?'

Jesus...

I turned quickly, half my body jumping out of the chair. Damijana was standing about a metre behind me. Her hair was shorter than usual, but everything else...the black cloak, the pale hands...was the same.

She pointed at the page. 'You have a story?'

'No...'

'I see words.'

'That? No, it's just...it's nothing. One line.'

She walked forward and took the page and read what I'd written. It was an attack. She would know it's an attack.

She put it down and walked back over, stopping just close enough for me to lean forward and grab a kiss. Was this a taunt?

'Are you angry?' I asked, edging back half a step.

She moved forward, matching my half a step, put her hand against my cheek then ran it down to the bottom of my neck. 'I don't think I should have to say sorry.' Her nail moved back up and stopped on my throat. 'I won't say sorry.'

'Neither will I.'

She turned away and walked over to the fire. I followed her, not getting too close.

'You don't adore me anymore?' I asked.

She waited a while before answering. 'You look tired.'

'I am tired.'

'You look thin.'

'What? My arms?' I checked my waist. 'My stomach?'

'Your face.'

I felt my chin and pulled at my cheeks. 'Yeah...maybe you don't feed me enough.'

'There is plenty of food in the kitchen.'

'Maybe I don't like eating alone all the time.'

'I see.'

'Do you?'

'I think you should sit down for a while...think of something to write for me.'

'Yeah, I know the routine.'

'I shall sit and keep you company.'

'Fantastic,' I mumbled.

She either didn't hear it or didn't care...instead she pulled a book out of her cloak pocket...or cloak pouch...sat down and started to read.

I went back to the typewriter and did what I always did: stared at a blank page. I stared at it for a long time, not caring about the rules of the game anymore. She didn't mind sitting in silence, why should I?

I stared into the white of the page and thought of nothing and then nonsense. I wondered how the paper was so white. Did they dye it? I had no idea. I didn't care. What else? I thought of the Midwich Cuckoos and the man trying desperately to hang onto that image of the brick wall. I tried it too. It was tough. Too tough. The wall changed to Pink Floyd and Pink Floyd became Hong Kong. I was walking next to someone, telling them some of my ideas for a TV show...I didn't want to make a TV show. I kept talking, something about Slovene dissidents in space and a journey through a wormhole and a planet full of Russians and...the person, it was Michael Douglas...I was telling Michael Douglas about this idea and then we were walking into a

goliath of a building, maybe the IFC or the one in Tsim Sha Tsui near K-11, and then we were in a lab and he was strapping me down to a chair and prepping a needle...and I was still talking, still telling him my idea, but he wasn't talking back, he was just nodding and prepping the needle and then he was putting it against my skin and looking at me, and then he asked, how far are you prepared to go, chuck, how far, and then...

And then nothing.

Michael Douglas flickered like a cheap hologram and vanished, along with the lab, along with me. It was right there...clear as snow...then it was gone.

I stared at the paper again.

'You may stay with me tonight.'

I looked up, towards her chair, but she wasn't there...she was sitting on the rug, stoking the fire. 'Tonight, dear. You may stay with me.'

'What?'

'You may stay with me in my bed.'

'In your...!' I checked the room for Michael Douglas and Hong Kong, but they weren't there. 'You want me in your bed?'

'That's what I said.'

I got up and walked towards her asking if she was really sure about this.

'Yes.'

She patted the rug next to her, so I sat down [near to her, but not too near] and looked into the flames.

'Okay then.' I thought of touching her knee, but didn't. 'I accept.'

She went to the table, picked up the page of viciousness I'd written, and brought it to the fire. 'You can do better than this,' she said, then let go.

'I know.'

'Much, much better.'

'I know, I will. I promise.'

She was right. And fuck it, I didn't care. It was one line. Let it burn.

I entered the room with my hands in my pockets, unsure if I was early or late. I figured it didn't really matter, as there wasn't any way to know what time it was in this place, and the invitation was for the whole night. If she wanted me to go away and come back later, fine, I could do that, as long as she didn't cancel.

'You're here.'

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, in a black nightgown. Her legs were crossed and her hands were holding each other. Mine were sweating, very lightly, but enough to make me seem nervous.

'Reporting for bed duty,' I said, putting my hands in my pockets.

She didn't answer.

Bed duty? What was I saying?

'Nice nightie...'

She stared at me.

'Yeah, I was starting to wonder if you ever took off that cloak. Thought you might have a whole wardrobe of the things...seven black cloaks...in your wardrobe...'

'I only need one cloak, dear.'

'Right. One cloak. That makes sense. I guess you must have to wash it a lot...'

'I do.'

She uncrossed her legs and put them out straight, the end of her nightgown crawling up her legs a little. God, they were so pale. God, I was already fucking this up.

I walked further in and tried to pull conversation out of the things on the wall. The first thing I saw was a painting. What looked like a zombie carrying a woman, the buildings behind him made of shadows and jagged edges.

'Is that surrealist?' I asked.

'German expressionist.'

'Oh.' German expressionism. Which one was that? Wagner? 'I don't know that one.'

'It's film. The painting was inspired by the Cabinet of Dr Caligari.'

'A film?'

'A professor uses a sleepwalker to murder people in a village.'

'That's pretty dark.'

'They say it's based on a legend.' She moved backwards onto the bed and propped herself against the headboard. 'I believe the legend is true.'

I wanted to go straight over and kiss her and...get those pyjamas off and hug her so fucking tight...but I didn't. Obviously. That would've been assault. Wouldn't it?

I took a few more steps, keeping my distance from the bed.

On the table was some kind of figurine. It looked like something tribal, with a weird kind of hat on its head and a stick in its hand. Peruvian maybe?

'That's Hostnik,' she said.

'Horse nick?'

'Hostnik. He's a magical demon from Balkan mythology.'

'A what?'

'Never mind.'

'No, I meant...what kind of demon was he? I know what a demon is...'

'It doesn't matter.'

She pulled the blanket up and slipped under.

'You're going to sleep already?' I asked.

The candles flickered and went out.

'Yes, dear.'

I didn't know what to do so I stood by the table a little longer, picked up Horse nick, checked him over then put him carefully back down. Didn't wanna piss her off by breaking the little guy. I walked to the side of the bed, where there was still space to get in, and took off my shirt.

'Dami...'

'Yes?'

'You know the guy from the commune...Žižek?'

'The man in the bear costume? Yes, I remember him.'

I took off her old friend's purple jeans and then his socks and left them both on the floor.

'Did you ever invite him here?'

'No, dear.'

I lifted the blanket and got in, moving towards the middle so it wouldn't seem like I was edging closer to her in a sneaky, gradual kind of way. My legs touched hers, but she didn't flee, thank God.

'How come?'

There was a moment of silence before she answered.

'Why should I?'

I pulled my arm up and scratched my head then lowered it down closer to her side. It touched. She didn't flinch. I moved it further forward and then...fuck it, Billy, be bold...I put it over the waist and onto her stomach. She didn't retreat.

Oh God. This could not be real. Technically, she was in my arms. I was holding her. After all this fucking time, I was finally holding her.

'He's creative...he started the commune with you.'

'So?'

'I don't know. I just figured he'd be the kind of person you might want to be around.'

I moved my hand slowly, stroking her stomach, or the part of the nightgown that was covering her stomach, going up a little but not too far then going down a little, as far as her hip. Still, she didn't react.

'He was always interested in numbers, not art,' she said. 'The day I left, he didn't try to stop me. He was too busy doing interviews.'

'Yeah, he still does...'

'You see.'

I pushed my head forward until it was buried in the back of her hair. I kissed her.

'He's not a genius like me then?'

She didn't answer.

'Good.'

I moved my hand higher up her stomach, not limiting myself, higher, higher, each time pulling the nightgown up a little further with it...fuck, don't stop this, Dami...please don't stop this...

I kissed her hair again, then moved down to the neck and kissed her there too.

'I adore you, Dami.'

My hand moved over her breasts, clipping her nipples, and up to her neck, then back down, this time staying longer on the breasts. She had given the okay, hadn't she?

But she wasn't moving...why wasn't she moving?

I closed my eyes, moved my hand away from her breasts and went down...to her stomach, to her leg, to the edge of the nightgown and under, up and down her thigh, higher, higher...I couldn't be sure, but it seemed like there were nothing under there, no knickers...so I kept on going, up and down and then up again, confirming the lack of knickers, up further, further and onto her...

...mattress.

Huh?

I pushed harder until the mattress resisted and bounced my fingers back up.

What the...

I opened my eyes and saw nothing but blanket. Where was she? I tried to turn and almost fell off the bed. It wasn't possible, I was...the edge was right there.

How the hell?

I dug my hand into the mattress and pulled myself further into the middle of the bed.

Damijana was still in the same place, silent. Did she do that? How? No, it was...no one could do that. I didn't even feel myself move. What the fuck?

'Dami...'

'Yes, dear?'

'What just happened?'

'When?'

'Just now...'

'We were talking about Žižek and the commune.'

'No, after that. Remember? I was...hugging you and then...I was on the other side of the bed.'

'You moved away, dear.'

'I did?'

'Yes.'

'I don't remember.'

'It's unimportant. Let's go to sleep, shall we?'

'Yeah, okay. I suppose.'

'Goodnight, Billy.'

'Night.'

I waited a few seconds, seeing if she would adjust her position or move further away. She didn't do either.

Okay then...that was a sign. If she didn't want me, she would've put up defences. She would've moved to the other side of the bed.

But she hadn't. She was still in the middle.

I stretched my legs out to the empty side of the bed, technically my side, and took my pants off as quietly as I could. It didn't matter if I was naked or not...if she did reciprocate, the pants would come off anyway...but better to just get it out of the way early. And, yeah, she might be shocked to feel my cock against her at first, but...she'd understand. She did adore me, after all.

I hung my pants out the side of the bed and let them fall to the floor.

Pictures of Oggy and Megan and all those dummies in Hong Kong came into my head, moving from one body to another to the next to another. Some of them started to repeat. The first time I'd gone inside Oggy. The hostess in the love hotel, Bobo in the bath, what's-her-name on the passenger seat of the car. Miriam. Sadia. Bonnie. All the women I nearly had, but never did. Opening their legs, getting on their knees, jumping on me, pulling me inside. Ha, even Tomoko...Tomoko and her fucking John Lewis essay.

I stifled a laugh and slugged myself back to reality. Forget all those others, they were nothing compared to this. This would be all of them times a hundred million. A million million. More than that, whatever the number was.

I put my hand around my cock and pulled a little.

Jesus, I was hard. I mean, I'd been hard pretty much since the day I got here, even in bed with Chad, but this was different. I'd never been this close to her before...in the same bed...with almost six months of frustrating prologue.

I took my hand away and stared at the back of Damijana's head.

This is it, Billy boy. This. is. it. She invited you here, she paid your rent, she's lived with you for six months. She wants it. What other conclusion is there? Man, she's not even wearing knickers.

I moved up to her back again and, more adventurous this time, reached over her side and started stroking her stomach. I leaned my head forward and kissed her on the hair and on the neck, making sure at the same time that my cock didn't touch any skin.

No reaction.

I kissed her again and told her I adored her, I really did fucking adore her.

No response.

I moved my hand over her breasts and ran my palm over her nipple. Usually this kind of thing would get a reaction of some kind, but here...nothing. Was she already asleep?

'Dami...'

No answer.

'Dami...are you asleep?'

The back of her head didn't move. She was faking it, had to be. No one could fall asleep that fast.

'Dami...' I said, one more time, giving her shoulder a tiny, tiny push. 'Are you awake?'

Again, there was no answer and, honestly, I didn't care. She'd wake up as soon as I touched her, and if she didn't I'd...ah, if she didn't, it'd mean she was really asleep, so I'd probably just stop.

Or maybe rub a little then stop. Five minutes max. Ten if she made good sounds. Then stop.

'Dami...' I whispered.

No answer, no movement.

I reached down and pulled up the edge of the nightgown, slowly, slowly, until it was up to her stomach. I waited a few seconds to see if she'd push it back down, but she didn't so I pushed my body forward until it was locked against the back of hers...my cock sliding under her ass and between her thighs...then I moved my hand over her waist and down onto her bare, unguarded pussy...after six fucking months, that elusive Slovene cunt and...Jesus, it felt good...good, unreal, glorious...so fucking glorious I wanted to move faster...in my head, I

was already inside her, but I couldn't do it that way, I knew I couldn't, it was too fast, I had to give this time to land, to sink in, so I breathed out quietly a few times and rubbed my fingers up and down on her, once, twice, ten times, looking around the room and at the back of her immobile head and around the room again, but that was no good either, it was too slow, too fucking slow...forget preamble, fucker, get in there, get in there before she changes her mind...that's the truth of it, you slow it down, she'll fall asleep...and I agreed, rubbing one more time for good measure and then obeying myself, breathing quietly and going in, two fingers, straight inside her, at long fucking last, that beautiful Sloven-...

The room dropped

like a stone

off a cliff

the bed too

Jesus fucking...

christ

My neck...

fuck

tight

too tight

it's too

I looked down, but the bed wasn't there anymore...no, it was, but it was a metre, two metres down and it was...I was in the air, and my neck...was in a vacuum...no oxygen, it was...

The image in front of me finished loading. It wasn't air or faraway walls...it was her. She was...she was there, right there...staring blankly at me...

'Dami...'

I tried to say more, but...my neck...my throat...this grip was like a fucking python...

Her face changed

got smaller.

No, something was pulling me backwards.

backwards fast...

Faster...

What...

Things went dark.

Something hit my back, hard.

Then stopped.

Another drop

and

I was sitting on something.

'Fuck...'

I opened my eyes again and the whole room was in front of me.

The door was behind my back...or my back was against the door and Damijana...she was sitting on the bed, her black nightgown pulled all the way past her knees, her eyes glowing lilac.

I didn't move. No, worse than that, I couldn't move. The bitch had broken my fucking spine.

Jesus...how did she...

'My back...' I spat out, but not very far.

'Zaslūžil si.'

'What...'

'You are on the floor.' She put her legs out and jumped off the bed.

'Let me help.'

'You've broken my spine...'

She walked over and lifted me up. Somehow it didn't hurt as much as I figured it would, but it still hurt a little.

'Jesus...'

'There, dear It's not broken.'

She opened the door and carried me out into the corridor and dropped me by the wall.

'My back...'

'Don't be a child. It's over now.'

'It's fucked, I can't...the bone...'

'Good.'

'Good?' I tapped my spine gently in different places, each tap bringing out sharp breaths. 'You tried to paralyse me... somehow...tried to...'

'No, dear, I punished you.'

'Tried to break my spine...'

'I punished you because you tried to rape me.'

I stopped tapping, hearing the 'r' word. 'Huh?'

'You tried to rape me, so I punished you.'

'I did what?'

'You seem to have a problem hearing things the first time.'

'Dami...'

'Maybe you are tired'

'Tired? My back almost got snapped...for nothing.'

'It was a pre-emptive punishment.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'That is why I said 'pre-emptive'.' She glanced downwards, at my cock, which was still poking up like a flagpole. 'If I had allowed you another five minutes, you would've tried to put yourself inside me. Six more minutes and I would've been raped.'

'Six...'

'There's no point denying it, dear.'

'I didn't even...Dami, you told me to come here. You told me to come and stay the night, in your bed.'

'Correct.'

'Exactly, you told me to come. Not me. Then you half break my spine and say it was my fault...' I tried to point an arm to animate my argument, but my lower back wasn't having it. 'Fuck, why am I even arguing this? You invited me into your bed. What did you think we were gonna do?'

'Sleep, dear.'

'Sleep?'

'Yes.'

'Come on, Dami, sleep? We're not six years old.'

'I invited you to my bed to sleep.'

'Sure...'

'I did not ask you to have sex with me.'

'You implied it.'

'I do not imply things, dear.'

'You did...'

'Implication is a tool for aggressors.'

I stopped a second and looked at her pale face, reviewing my defences, searching for more. Everything I'd said was right, but...looking at her face, it was tough, confusing. She didn't seem angry at all. It was like staring at an android. 'Dami, I don't understand what's going on here. You're making me look like a sleaze.'

She bent down and ran her nail along my cheek, not sharp enough to cut, but not exactly tender either. 'It's not sleaze, dear, it's rape.'

'Stop saying that...'

'Attempted rape then, if you prefer.'

'Dami...'

She stood back up. 'The core is still the same.'

'Dami, you invited me to stay in your bed. I didn't ask for it. You did.'

'Your argument is futile.'

'I didn't say anything, you just...okay, why would you invite me up if you didn't...'

'I have never had sex.'

'...wanna do anything with...' I stopped, realising my arm had found some strength from somewhere and my finger was pointing at her. I dropped it immediately.

'I have never been interested in having sex.'

'You've never had sex?'

'Now, as I said, I am very tired.'

'Never?'

She turned and walked back to her room, leaving the door open behind her.

'Not with anyone?'

No answer.

'Dami?'

No answer.

'I can still see you.'

It was true, the door was open enough for me to see her half of the bed. She was lying on top of the duvet, face down on the pillow, her black gown slipped down off her shoulder, enough to see the top of her arm and nothing else.

You're taunting me, I thought.

You're taunting me with your naked arm.

And back violence.

Won't work, Mia

I'm done

Done with this

Never gonna touch you, even if you beg

Even if you finger yourself with my mars story, right in front of me

Even if you apologise

I'm done.

My foot was still mobile, a little bit, so I poked it forward, curled it round the side of the door and pulled it shut.

Almost shut.

Hostnik was still visible.

I sat there for a while longer, moving my back a little to get it mobile again, watching my cock deflate, waiting for the door to open wider, daring Damijana to come out and say sorry, thinking of different ways why I wasn't a rapist. Because I wasn't...it was bullshit, lies, fakery...fraud.

She'd dragged me here, to her room, to this fucking castle, locked me in that fucking library for half a year.

I didn't do anything.

It wasn't me who...

A spasm ran halfway up my spine as I tried to stand up.

Fuck.

She was the rapist, not me.

I woke up in my room, with the candles burning and something not right. How did I get here? Not the castle, the bed...how did I get into this bed?

I couldn't remember.

I got up and lit a cigarette and thought about...

Fuck. Last night.

Some words came into my head, real fast. Rapist. Never had sex. Flying through the air. Chokehold. Can't breathe. Flying across the room. Damijana. Magic.

But it couldn't...

Flying through the air. Chokehold. Castle.

...there weren't such things as magicians or magic, it was all illusions and...

Eight grand. Flying. Message in the snow. Disappearing Damijana. Always winning games. Those paintings. Edward Voltaire. Four hundred years old. The sick guy painted in wax. Forbidden rooms. Kathoo-loo. Beast-man. Flying through the air. Do you believe I'm four hundred years old, dear?

I smoked the cigarette to the end and then fell back onto the bed.

There weren't such things as magic or witches, I repeated to myself over and over. Whatever it was, it was a trick. A good trick, a really good trick, but still a trick.

I sat back up, pulled the candle over and lit another cigarette. I smoked it down to the tip, thinking everything through.

She likes my words...

But she won't fuck me.

She might not be a real witch...

But she did almost break my spine.

Which meant...

I stubbed the cigarette out on the floor. I looked over at the window.

Outside it was snowing.

I walked quickly down the stairs into the hallway, my jacket half on and my shoes untied.

I didn't know what was going on here, but it was something not good. The best thought I had: she's just shy. The worst: she's a serial-killing witch. I didn't believe either one with much conviction, but better safe than cut into little pieces.

I got to the front door, put both hands on it and pulled. It wouldn't budge. It wouldn't even rattle.

I pulled harder, but no change. I tried sudden bursts of pulling, but that just made my shoulder hurt. I tried kicking it and nearly broke my foot. Jesus...what was this thing, dilithium?

'You can't go outside today.'

I turned and she was standing at the top of the stairs, in that one black cloak.

'Dami...'

'You must write.'

'Actually, I was thinking of...' I looked back at the front door. 'I want to go outside, if that's okay?'

'Cannot.'

She walked down the stairs and turned left towards the library, where I knew that fucking typewriter was waiting for me.

No, I wouldn't.

'Look, Dami...I've been here a long time.'

'No.'

'I think it's time I went home.'

'No.'

'It's no good for either of us, me staying here.'

'No.'

'Please...'

'No.'

I looked at my hands and thought about doing the begging pose, maybe show her how desperate I was...

I looked up, said 'Dami...', but it was too late. She was gone.

The hallway was gone, too.

No...

I blinked a couple of times and looked around. I was in the library. The fire was burning. The curtains were drawn. My feet weren't holding me up, the chair was. The typewriter was sitting in front of me.

'Shit...'

Her voice came from somewhere in the room. 'Write for me, rapist.'

'Dami?'

'Write and you can rape me again.'

'No...'

'Again and again and again.'

'I don't...'

My hand shot forward and placed itself on the keys of the typewriter. I tried to move it back, but it was held tight.

'Write.'

I woke up and the candles were burning.

Outside it was snowing.

How?

I'd just been in the library, writing...this wasn't possible, it was...

Wait...

I tried to pull back the image of the typewriter and what was on the paper, but it was no good. The typewriter appeared, and the paper, but there were no words on it.

I didn't write anything.

It was a dream, wasn't it?

I remembered the hallway and then the typewriter and my hands being forced to type, no connecting scenes in between...

And the night before...that was a dream too.

I never went to her room, I never put my hands on her...in her...that whole thing just didn't happen at all. How could it have? I would never do that...and she adored me anyway. It wouldn't get to the point where I would need to do that.

I rolled onto my other side and watched the candle flame flicker from side to side.

It never happened.

I would never...

The flame steadied itself and became uninteresting, so I sat up and tried to stretch my arms outwards. There was a pain in my lower back. The same pain as...

Jesus.

No, it couldn't be.

That never happened.

My back...it's only hurting now because...

Because you tried to rape me, dear.

No.

I've never had sex.

No.

You tried to rape me, Billy.

No, that's not true.

I got quickly out of bed, put on my clothes and walked over to the candles. I stood there on standby mode, staring at the window a few yards away.

I didn't try to rape her, that part was a lie, I knew that, but it had happened...the scene had really happened, even if the truth of it was skewed. I mean, I'd never do that. I was raised by a single mum and two older sisters. I respected women, I wasn't sex mad like Jay, I didn't...it wasn't what she said it was...I liked her, yeah, but she liked me too...and she didn't stop me...she didn't say anything...I would've stopped if she'd said no...I wouldn't have done anything at all if she hadn't invited me there in the first place...it was her fault for confusing me...for not responding to anything...all I did was stroke her a little...put my fingers on her...that wasn't rape, it was just...no, it wasn't anything...she did not say no at any point, why am I even debating this...the first time I knew anything was wrong was when she threw me across the room using her fucking fingers...she broke my back just cos I touched her a little...that wasn't right, that was assault...assault was worse than rape...no, rape was worse, but I didn't rape her...I would never have done that, ever...she's the one who did something bad, not me...I'm the one who should be angry, she...she's not even human...how can she throw me like that? It's not human, it's witch-like...alien-like...why did I forget this? She's a witch and she's toying with me, all this time, she's been playing with me like a little sex toy...but not even sex, just a toy...if she were human and she said, I adore you, Billy, you're a genius then we would've had sex already...but she's not human, she can't be...she threw me across the room without touching me...it's not even arguable...she wasn't...no, she can't be...can she? I mean, physically, how could anyone do that? Or maybe it's different, maybe there was some other way she was

doing it...maybe she's a witch in name only...or maybe she had some little trick that looked supernatural but really it was all explainable somehow...I didn't know how, but somehow...nah, it was impossible, she couldn't be a witch or an alien, she just had some tricks...dangerous tricks that could break my back...and it wasn't like she'd done anything completely impossible...there were women in the amazon, in Mongolia who were super strong, maybe she had some of their blood in her...or maybe a drug, that grey vasic stuff she talked about...maybe that made her stronger...or made me weaker...yes, that was it, she'd drugged me and made me light as a feather, and...

Wait, where did they come from?

I stopped the self-trial and stared at the wall opposite the bed. There were posters pinned up. Four of them.

I looked at each one, recognising the films from the images alone.

Jodie Foster pinned down on a pinball machine.

Jennifer Jason Leigh pinned down in a car.

A Korean schoolgirl pinned down and tied up in a forest, about to die.

Kika pinned down by a man in an animal costume.

Oh fuck off

Hyping Bitch.

That wasn't me...I didn't do that...

I used to dream about saving that schoolgirl...not hurting her.

I would never hurt anyone.

I grew up with three women. I wouldn't do that. They taught me not to do that. I wouldn't do that anyway, even if they'd never taught me. This wasn't me. What was this? That fucking bitch...she was twisting things...she nearly broke my back, I didn't do anything...she could've said no at any point...she didn't though, she didn't say anything, I know she didn't...

I looked at the poster of Jodie Foster, her left tit spilling out of her top.

I started to get hard.

No...

Don't look...

She's messing with me, get the fuck out...

Escape.

Get out of here.

I put on my tree-killer jacket and went closer to the window. I purged all images of women from my head and focused on the drop. It was two floors up, not that high...and the snow...it never stopped, so surely it'd be deep enough to break my fall.

I looked for the latch to open the window, but there wasn't one. Huh? I was sure there was a latch there before, though technically I'd never opened the thing.

I looked for some other kind of window opening device, but the only things I could see were the glass, the frame and the snow outside.

Fuck, how were you supposed to open this thing?

Brick?

I jabbed the glass a little, I didn't really know why. It's not like it would break after one gentle poke.

It didn't even make a sound.

Fuck's sake...

Was this really the only way out? What else was there? The front door? Yeah, maybe, but it was always locked. Fuck, more than locked, she'd glued it shut, but still...she had to go out sooner or later.

And the writing...I hadn't done anything the last week or so and what did she do? Nothing. She's not a complete nut. She had limits. All I had to do was sit at the typewriter every day and say, oh no, nothing's happening in my head, I can't write, and that would buy me time. Then, next time she went out somewhere, I could just sneak down to...

The door opened behind me.

I turned and saw her, expressionless, holding a candle.

'Time to write, dear.'

#

I sat in the library, the fire burning, the curtains drawn.

Damijana was reading by the fire. I had no idea what she was reading and didn't care. She hadn't said a word about what happened the night before, except, 'is your back okay, dear?', and I wasn't sure if

that was a wind up or genuine concern, so I'd just mumbled fine and that was it.

The truth was she probably felt guilty for nearly breaking my spine. That's why she wasn't talking about it. Or apologising either.

Fucking pseudo witches...

I looked over at the windows, at the snow and grey sky outside, pretending to think of story ideas. My hands were on the keys of the typewriter, fake-ready.

I accidentally thought of a title...left wing robots...but I didn't write it down, even though it was pretty good, because she didn't deserve a title like left wing robots, not after what she'd done.

It was pre-emptive punishment, dear. You tried to...

Fuck her, I wasn't typing shit.

Ever.

Again.

She looked up from her book and told me I should stop delaying and just type a while and see what came out. I said it didn't work that way.

She went back to her book. I saw her flick through a few more pages before she raised her head again.

'Are you tired, dear?'

'No.' I looked up at the ceiling. 'I'm uninspired.'

She put her book on the floor.

'You look very tired.'

'And thin, right?'

'Very thin.'

'So?'

'I think you should type something.'

'I can't.'

'Try.'

'Type what? There's nothing...'

Her pale hand pointed at different things in the room. The shelves, the fire, the curtains, the paintings on the wall.

'Use what you see around you. Write how you feel about these things.'

'What I see?' I looked in fake amazement at the room around me. 'I've been looking at the same room for the last...fuck, how long...months, years...'

'Time is unimportant.'

'Yeah, maybe if you had a clock or two put up, it'd be a little easier to...to figure out how much of my life I'm wasting away in this fucking place.'

She stood up and walked over to the table.

'You're angry.'

'I'm annoyed.'

'Write it down.'

'Write what down?'

'The anger.'

'Ha, no way.'

'Write it down, try.'

'Trust me, you don't want to see that.'

'Why not?'

'Because it won't be a pretty thing, Dami. My ID is not a pretty place right now.'

'The ID is never a pretty place, dear.'

'Yeah, well, it's even less pretty than it usually is.'

She moved her hand over the keys of the typewriter. 'Try.'

'It's really not a good idea.'

She moved her hand out of the way. 'Just try.'

'Dami, I'm warning you...'

'No need for warnings, dear. I'm prepared for anything, whatever you create.'

'Even criticism?'

'Yes.'

'Brutal criticism?'

She smiled. 'I'm a big girl.'

'Fine. Okay then.' I put my fingers over the keys, knowing exactly what I would write. 'I'll just type a while, see what comes out.'

I typed out half a page, her eyes watching me all the way. When it was done, I tore the paper out and folded it up into a shitty little aeroplane and threw it towards the fire.

Somehow, she wasn't by the table anymore, she was next to the fire, and she reached out a hand and caught it.

'There's my ID...' I said, for some reason not really surprised she'd moved so fast.

'Thank you, dear.'

'Enjoy...'

She opened it up and read it out loud:

'The tired man sat in the empty castle day after day after day after day after day after day after day after day after day with a robotic woman sitting by the fire who was out of her fucking tree and called him a genius and gave him eight grand and told him to come to her room and invited him into her bed and told him to write every day for some unknown fucking reason she never let him know and they did this same routine day after day after day after day after day after day after day until she told him to come up to her room and stay with him and when he came to her room and tried to kiss her she threw him across the room and nearly broke his back and then the next day she wanted him to sit at the typewriter and write another fucking story as if nothing had ever happened, as if they aren't stuck here together and what kind of fucking nut invites a guy to her castle and into her bed and doesn't wear knickers and then freaks out when he touches her a bit, not any fucking nut I know, not any fucking nut anyone knows.'

I sat in my chair, waiting to be thrown across the room again.

But her mouth didn't move. Her eyes didn't glow lilac.

More minutes passed. Or what I thought were minutes. What was taking her so long? Was she re-reading?

'You don't like it?'

No answer. I tried again, harsher.

'Not genius enough?'

She looked up.

'Weren't stuck here, not aren't.' She folded the paper in half, and then in half again, and put it on the fire. 'Why don't you write something a little less whiny?'

'Whiny?'

'Perhaps a more honest account of your attempted rape last night...'

'My what?'

'You heard me, dear.'

I stared at her, waiting for the smile to come. It didn't. I breathed out loud, louder than I'd intended, and looked at the typewriter.

'I know you put those posters up in my room...whatever you think I did last night, that wasn't what happened.'

'We talked about this part already, dear.'

'Not really.'

'Yes, outside my room, last night.'

'That wasn't talking, that was bullshit.'

'You came into my bed and tried to force yourself inside me without consent.'

I glanced at her, tried to hold it then went back to the typewriter and idly tapped a few keys. 'Without consent? Seriously?'

'I did not say yes to you, dear. Is that not the meaning of consent?'

'You invited me to your room...your exact words, 'dear, you may stay in my bed tonight.' Remember?'

'That is correct.'

I looked at her, holding it this time. 'Exactly. That's consent. And we didn't even have sex. I kissed you a bit, okay...but you threw me across the fucking room, without consent. How is that even close to rape?'

'Ah, you wish to talk about distinctions.'

'Yeah...what? Distinct what...what do you need to be distinct about? It wasn't rape, it wasn't anything. It wasn't even sex. Fuck's sake, Dami, this road you're going down...'

She turned and looked into the fire.

I paused a second then kept going. I'd talk to the back of her head if I had to, I didn't care.

'Okay, I really don't want to argue about this, but...you can't just say I raped you, Dami. You can't do that, it's not fair. It's not true either.'

'Fairness is a diversion, dear. What happened is fact.'

'Fucking Lee Van Cleef on a *hong tone*, I told you already, I didn't even go inside you. It's against all my upbringing, my character...my

Mum and two sisters, they never...they're women, all of them...why would I want to ra-...do anything like that? I'm not a caveman, I love women, I respect them, all of them. Seriously, you can't just say I did something like that when I didn't...this kind of shit doesn't go away, if anyone finds out about it...Jay or someone...and the poster stuff...that's fucked up too, even more fucked up, it's...Jesus, are you even listening?'

She didn't turn. I half-raised myself out of the chair, but quickly sat back down again when I felt my back twinge. I reached around and rubbed it, but the pain was persistent. Was this how old people felt all the time?

I did little circles with my knuckles, digging in as hard as I could without moving any bones. I punched my back like a nut.

Man, this wasn't doing anything...

I stopped rubbing and sat up straight, looking over at Damijana to see if she'd turned around yet. Nope. She was stoking the fire.

'Okay, Dami...I'm sorry I touched you. I'm sorry about that part but, still, you didn't say no...if you didn't want me to do that, you should've just said no, I would've stopped. I'm not what you called me.'

No answer.

I looked at the typewriter, wondering if she believed me. Maybe typing it all out would be better...at least I could give a more structured defence...

'Writing is not about self-defence.'

'Huh?'

She turned from the fire, her eyes lilac. 'You and your type...the shells you put up around yourselves...'

'My type?'

'I give you isolation, you write about cities and people. I give you bleakness, you write about surrealism. I give you your own reflection and you deny it.'

I rubbed my back again even though the pain had receded a little. 'That's kind of vague, Dami...deny what? What am I denying?'

'Everything of interest.'

'Like what? Tell me one thing...'

She stood up and walked towards me. No, not walked...her feet didn't seem to be doing that motion. It was more like floating.

'What...Dami...how are you doing that?'

'You claim to write about honesty and truth, yet only the truth that suits you. Are you a rapist? Yes. Will you claim it, explore it? No.'

'Seriously...are you on an invisible skateboard? You're floating.'

She stopped right next to me, picked up my hand and placed it on the typewriter. 'I'm trying to help you, dear.'

I attempted to move my hand away, but her grip was like a wrestler's. Then I looked at my hand and it was free. There was nothing holding it down.

'What the...'

'Write something.'

'Dami, my hand.' I tried moving it again, but it was like it was glued to the keys. 'I can't move.'

'Write something true, something nasty and beautiful.'

'Is this you? How is it...how are you...what is this?'

'Quiet, dear.'

'It won't...'

I tried shaking my hand loose, but it barely moved. 'My hand...'

'You are a rapist, Billy. You wish to pin down women and penetrate them. Write about it. Your words will be glorious.'

'I'm not a rapist...I told you. Stop saying that.'

'Lažnivec.'

'What...'

'It is your nature, dear...like Louis and the others.'

'I didn't do anything. I've been here for months and I haven't done anything. What are you on about?'

'That just makes you a slow-burning rapist.'

'Bullshit, I'm not slow...you invited me to your room, I didn't...'

I tried to use my other hand to move my possessed hand off the typewriter, but it was no good, it wouldn't budge. 'How the hell are you doing this?'

'And you would've gone further...'

'I can't move any of it...'

'If I were a real woman...powerless...'

'It won't...what? You are a real woman...what are you talking about?'

'*Nič več laži.*' She looked at my hand and forced it over to the 'a' key. 'Time to write.'

'Wait, what are you doing?'

My possessed hand typed out a title:

'all men are rapists'

'Dami...'

She didn't stop. Or my hand didn't stop.

'Let's start with one of your fantasies, shall we?'

'Fantasies?'

'Don't worry, dear, it'll feel better when it's all on the page. Just let me get you started...then you can do the rest.'

'I don't have any fantasies. And I can't even move my hand, how can I...'

She smiled and continued the puppet act. 'It's incredible, always denying the most interesting things about yourselves.'

'Seriously...my hand...'

'What is it you say...the worst criminal is the potential inevitability of every single man...I believe that applies to rapists too.'

'Wait, are you even doing this? Is this you?'

'Quiet, now, dear. It's typing time, we need to focus.'

She started my fingers on the keys again. I tried to resist physically, mentally, but there was no mechanism to break whatever device she'd put inside me. It was bizarre...I could see they were my fingers, I could see they were on the end of my hand, but...there was no feeling at all.

Was there any tech out there that could do this kind of thing? I had no idea, I'd never read science magazines. I didn't even know how gravity worked.

'Which rape shall we choose...?' she said, looking at the page.

I looked for scars or cuts on my hand where metal things could've been inserted...possibly while I was asleep...but there was nothing. Jesus, maybe she'd drugged me again...grey vasic...but when? I

hadn't drunk anything, I hadn't eaten any food prepared by her. But maybe it didn't work that way, the usual way drugs worked. Maybe she'd got it in me a different way. Maybe that's how she made me think she threw me across her room and...was it? But that was different. I was thrown, literally, I felt it on my back, it wasn't a hallucination. And this thing now, my hands. It didn't make sense. Any of it. Fuck, what was this?

'Ah, that one seems promising.'

'This can't be real...'

'Yes...that'll do nicely.'

I tried jerking my hand again, but it still wouldn't respond. 'Dami, just tell me, how are you doing this?'

'You are still asking that same question?'

'Yes.'

'But you already know the answer.'

'I don't, what answer?'

She creased her brow, either confused or annoyed. 'Magic, dear. I use magic.'

'Come on...'

'*Sem ti rekel...*'

'Did you drug me? Was it that Grey Vasic stuff?'

'*Morate res učiti slovenščine.*'

'Dami, talk to me...'

'*Govori na strain.*'

'Not Slovene, English...'

'*Ste zelo nadležno.*'

'Dami...'

'*Dovolj.*'

I said 'Dami' another few times, but it didn't change anything, so I stopped and tried to wiggle the tips of my fingers. The idea was to start small and work my way up. It didn't matter. The fingers did nothing, not even a shake a little. Fuck it, whatever she'd done, grey vasic, machinery, whatever it was, it was airtight. Only thing left to do was to do nothing. I tried to calm my breathing, aiming for one every second, and watched my hand hover over the machine. It didn't matter

what she typed, not really, cos it wasn't me. Let her play her games...however she was doing this...it wouldn't mean anything.

My fingers started to move, hitting keys faster than my conscious self ever did.

Fantasy #1: frozen café rape

The man sits in the café, looking around. He sees a pretty girl studying with her friends nearby. They are all students, much younger than the man. The one he likes is wearing a vest top. He stares at her a while and imagines what it would be like to have her. But he can't talk to her. It'll take too long. He wants her to adore him quickly so he blinks and freezes time. Only himself and the girl are outside of the bubble, though she is not yet aware of him. He pretends to look around, confused. The girl notices him, he turns and notices her. They look at each other, panicked. The man stands up and walks towards her and asks her what's going on, what's wrong with everyone, why are they all frozen. The girl can't speak. The man looks around and then back at the girl. It's taking too long. He'll have to win her trust, charm her, convince her that it's safe to have sex even though everyone else is frozen around them. But she's automatically frightened, and that's no good. He doesn't want to talk to a scared little baby, he wants to fuck a stranger. The girl

'This is bullshit...'

'Quiet, dear.'

'I don't wanna freeze time...'

'It is not yet complete...'

'Why would I ever wanna do that, it's...'

She put a finger to her lips and said 'shhh' then started typing again.

The girl is frozen like the others. The man rubs his knuckles against her chest, her tits, and then moves down to her legs. He undresses her and kisses her thighs. He takes his time with her breasts...tits...then moves down to her waist and takes off her knickers. He lays her down on the sofa, the same seat he used to write his zines. He decides on the position then flips her around and takes his pants off. He rubs himself

against her cunt then, impatient, slides himself inside. He moves back and forth, but something's not right. The girl is too still. Too silent. Too dry. He unfreezes her and puts his hand over her mouth. She is confused at first, but once he gets a rhythm going, she starts to like it. He asks her if she likes it and she moans. He continues fucking her, turning her around so he can see her eyes and her tits at the same time. He puts his hands on her waist and controls her movements. He comes without telling her. He asks her if she liked it. She says yes, they should do it again. He says no, that would be tedious. He wants to try her friend. He gets dressed and goes back to his seat. He unfreezes time and watches the girl. She looks confused for a moment then goes back to her books. The man looks at her body for a moment then moves on to her friend.

'There we go, dear...all done.'

'Fuck off.'

'Missing some flair, perhaps, but that is understandable; my language skill is not what it once was...'

'Can I have my hands back now?'

'*Seveda*...you will need them to continue your work.'

I waited for her to click her fingers, but nothing happened. It didn't matter. I could feel my fingers again. I moved the hand off the typewriter, wiggling each finger to check it was functioning properly.

'I've given you a sample, limited as it is. Now all you have to do is turn the searchlight on other areas. Last night for instance.'

'You're insane,' I said, as matter of fact as I could make it.

'Don't be melodramatic, dear. I'm the complete opposite of insane.'

'Worse than Caligula...'

'For example, rape. To me, it is meaningless. It is a thing you do to each other. You use words like brutal, inhumane, evil, whereas I would say power, force, aggression. You hide from the idea, I try to help you bring it to the surface, to explore parts of yourself you don't dare reveal. Where is the madness in this? It is the basis of all art, is it not?'

I ignored her and re-read the words on the page.

'Okay, dear. You may read it again, if you wish.'

She stopped talking, but I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was watching me closely. Fine, watch me, I didn't care. They were still her words, not mine.

I got to the end of the story, let my thoughts lead that way for a few seconds then started to feel hard.

'As I said, it is far from perfect. There is a lack of authentic perspective, perhaps any perspective...I admit, it is difficult for me to write from the experience of others...but I think we got most of the more interesting details.'

I went back to the top and stared at the title, fixing the words as words with no meaning, hoping it would kill my erection. It didn't. It couldn't. I knew from long experience that once my dick was hard it wouldn't go down for at least ten minutes. Fuck. What did it mean anyway? It wasn't my fault I was hard. I used to get hard looking at pictures of Dame Maggie Smith, it didn't mean I actually wanted to...that I wanted her. Not a chance. It was human nature, that's all. Man nature. I read the title again. What did she think this meant? The whole thing was bullshit. This...fantasy...it wasn't me. I never...I didn't think like this. Okay, there was something similar, a long time ago, but...it wasn't like this...the girl liked me, she liked me in real life, she didn't...she was only frozen for a short time, at the start of it cos I didn't...the story was running on too long and I just wanted to skip forward a bit...it wasn't rape, she liked it...when I unfroze her, she liked it, and I liked it better that way too, better than when she was a dummy...it's not like I was in complete control...a little bit, but it's a sex dream, not reality...and it wasn't just me, women had this kind of fantasy too. I'd read about it, I'd seen it in films. And how did she even know about this? It was in my head...years ago...months ago...how did she know I thought about this? Was she in my head? But then...if she was in my head, she'd know it wasn't really me...I wasn't actively like this, it was just...it was a thought. I wouldn't ever act on it...every person had these kinds of thoughts...you couldn't punish someone for that. I saw it on Star Trek, the Bajoran, Colonel Kira, she said you can't do that, you can't judge people on how they think, only what they do. And she was right, you couldn't, it wasn't fair. And I didn't even do anything. It was a sex dream, make believe, not rape. All men did this,

women too. There's no way it was rape...the girl would tell you that herself. She was having mystery sex with a mystery guy and...she wasn't even a real person, it was bullshit, all of it. She couldn't use it this way, it wasn't fair. It was my head, not reality. My thoughts. Just like Kira said. Fuck's sake. It wasn't even real, it was a dream. Why am I even giving it time? Why did she type that shit out? To trick me? Jesus, how the fuck did she even know about this? How did she puppet my hands, how did she throw me, how did she...

'Resničnost je dolgočasno, dear. Fasado.'

'What?'

'Are you still structuring your defences?'

I blinked and looked at her. Then at the page. Then at my hands again. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'What doesn't make sense, dear?'

'The thing you just did with my hands...the bullshit you just wrote here...your bedroom last night...throwing me, floating in the air...this whole castle and the endless sky of snow...'

'Ja jaz sem čarovnica.'

'What?'

'Nič...'

'I don't understand.'

'Jaz vem.'

'Jaz vem...I don't know what that means? Why would I know that?'

'Pozabi. How about we put this one to the side...!' She took the page out of the typewriter and a new one appeared. 'Try a new, longer piece. Same title.'

'I can't...'

'It's easy, dear. You just use one finger after the other...one thought to the next...until it's complete.'

I looked at the typewriter then my hands. No, not *my* hands, just hands. Objects for her to play with. 'Look, Dami, I don't wanna piss you off, really...you or your magic machine...but I'm not writing like this.'

She turned away, probably calling me a motherfucker to the other side of the room. Then she came back, putting her hand on my shoulder, gently. Not a death grip. 'This is not a trial, dear. I have no

use for judgments or remorse. No one's going to spit at you on the street. I'm trying to help you, liberate you...can you not see that?"

'I can't.'

'Try to see it.'

'No.'

'Try.'

'No.'

'You haven't tried.'

'I won't.'

'Then think of the work, dear. Your stories could be glorious, braver than Lermontov, if you just follow what I've laid out for...'

'I don't care about Lermontov. I just wanna go home.'

Her eyes turned lilac again, and her grip got a little tighter.

'No more writing.'

'You will.'

'I won't.'

'*Ja, moraš.*'

'I just want to go home.'

Her fingers pressed into my shoulders like a metal vice, feeding the same pain my spine had felt the night before. 'You will stay and you will write.'

'No,' I managed, almost biting my tongue. Gods, she was strong.

'*Moraš...*'

'Fuck...my shoulder...'

She took her hand away and looked at my fingers. I didn't make any move to stop her. I couldn't, I was still feeling the after-pain from her robo-grip. Besides, if she wanted to puppet me again, what did it matter? It wasn't me.

'Deal,' I said, rubbing my shoulder. 'Just open the front door and I'll be on my way. I won't tell anyone you're here, I swear. You're safe. Everything will be like it was before, no changes. Just open the front door and let me walk out. I'll find my own way back to Ljubljana. No grudges, I swear.'

She stood up and looked at the bullshit on the typewriter. I didn't add anything to my pitch. I waited. Maybe if she re-read it a few times

she'd realise it was bullshit? Maybe she'd feel some guilt and apologise?

A few minutes passed and she still hadn't said a word.

'Dami...'

'Quiet, dear.'

She took the paper out of the typewriter, folded it up and put it somewhere inside her cloak.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

She nodded at someone or something that wasn't me then did that floating trick all the way to the library door.

'You're letting me go?'

'*Nikoli...*'

'What?'

'*Nič.*'

'I don't know what you're saying.'

'It is one word. You cannot guess?'

'No.'

'Your Slovene is pathetic.'

'I'm not Slovene, what do you expect?'

'After nine months, with a Slovene Study Book by your bed, you do not even know '*nič*'.'

'Yeah, well...'

'*Ne vem.*' She tapped her fingers on the back of the door. 'We shall try again tomorrow.'

'No.'

'See if you feel differently about things.'

'I won't...' I said, rubbing my shoulder, but she was already out of the room and the door was shut tight.

I waited a few seconds for her to walk out of earshot then added 'you crazy fucking cunt' as soft as I could.

Damijana put the paper on the table and straightened it out. 'Ona je ostal z mano,' she muttered, glancing at the book to the side. The book, as usual, didn't answer.

She walked to the middle of the room and pointed her finger.

The wall in front of her was clear of its previous words. The room was quiet. The castle was in sync.

She breathed in and out and then waited.

Nothing happened.

She dropped her finger and stared at the wall, looking for even the trace of a word. Even the beginning of a 't' or the dot of an 'i'.

There was nothing.

Zato ni bilo končano . Ne še. Ona bi komaj kaj uporabljajo kapljico njega, skoraj nič ... da ni nobenega smisla ... ostale Lloyd, Louis, Romuni...čprav je DJ trajal dlje, kot je to.

She raised her finger again, pointing it straight at the wall opposite, determined.

'Aktiviranje,' she told her finger. 'Nekaj storiti...'

The finger started to move.

Markings appeared on the wall...then letters...then words...then, finally, a complete sentence.

She read what was written.

THIS IS BECAUSE ALL AMERICANS SOUND LIKE CHEVY CHASE OVER THE PHONE

'Kaj...'

She read it again. Then again with her face tilted slightly to the left.

'To je nesmiselno.'

She erased the words from the wall and went to the window, looking out over a landscape of white nothingness.

To se je zgodilo tako hitro, morda, vendar ni bilo nič drugega, je treba storiti.

Deček je bil porabljen.

*Ona bi poskušali mu priložnosti, vendar je, da bi ji blokiran vsakič.
Pozabi.*

To je bila njegova krivda ni njena.

I woke up with the candles burning and the snow falling not so heavily outside, and I knew as soon as my eyes were open what I had to do.

#

The castle seemed deserted.

But then it always seemed deserted. Me and her, wherever she was hiding, were the only ones around, and she never showed herself much unless it was night or I was typing one of those shitty stories in the library. Apart from that, nothing.

I walked into the library, behind all the shelves, checking for her. I didn't think she'd be around, but then I also didn't think she could choke half the life out of me...or throw me across the fucking room.

Ha, what's this?

One of the books was poking out of the shelf. Was this one of her favourites then? I picked it up, read the cover and laughed. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it.

'I Spit On Your Grave: a novelisation'

'Very funny, witch...' I shouted.

No answer.

'Very fucking funny...'

I put the book back, checked the other aisles then left, calling the typewriter a 'twat' on my way out.

#

I walked out into the hall and tried the front door.

It was locked tight.

'Pedant,' I mumbled to no one.

I shrugged off the slight disappointment and did a lap of the ground floor corridors surrounding the courtyard. Then the first floor. Then the second. I checked corners I'd never paid much attention to before, looked behind chairs and curtains in rooms I hadn't spent any time in. I even pulled some of the paintings off the wall and looked for...I didn't really know what, hidden switches? The front door key? Nah,

not the door key, she had to have that in her cloak or in her room, and the only way I was getting that was straight up smash and grab, which was a non-starter for two reasons.

One, I couldn't hit her, she was too pretty, too female, though she wasn't acting like it much lately.

Two, I couldn't hit her and hope to do any usable damage cos, somehow, she was stronger than Jake the Snake Roberts.

And three, maybe there wasn't even a key. I'd never seen one, and the only time I saw her open the door, when we played in the snow that time, she just opened it, no key, no card, nothing.

Maybe she used an electronic lock?

It was possible. But that meant my situation was even direr as that switch could be anywhere.

Nah, better just to find another way.

#

I went to the forbidden room, or as far as the forbidden staircase which led up to the forbidden room. I thought about going up, I really did. How bad could it be? She knew how to choke, sure, and throw me and puppet my hands, but she wasn't anywhere near the level of Blackbeard. And was Blackbeard even that bad anyway? I mean, he didn't kill anyone. He just kept paintings, and then the woman found them and...man, was that the right book?

Ah, forget Blackbeard, he wasn't even real anyway.

I stared at the first forbidden step and then the second. I looked at the painting on the wall next to me, the young man in wax. He looked more than ill, he looked dead. No, he was dead, but...I mean, he...what did I mean?

I looked back at the steps, the third, the fourth, the ones way up top, but didn't climb. Fuck it, she wasn't up there. Or I couldn't hear her anyway.

No, but there was no one anywhere. The castle was empty. Damijana...she was either out or asleep, and if she was asleep then good. She wouldn't know I was getting the fuck away from her.

I walked back downstairs, past all the paintings, and out into the courtyard. Apart from the front door, this was probably my best bet. Unless there was an invisible force field at the top?

No, couldn't be, too sci-fi. What I could see in front of me was what there really was, no add-ons.

I ran my hands along the wall, feeling for cracks, weak points, anything that could be hammered and broken open. The whole thing was about three, maybe three and a half times the size of me, twenty-foot max, so if I could get the hole big enough, there was a chance I could make it to the top and pull myself over.

But there was nothing, no big cracks.

I did it again, going slower this time.

There had to be something, it was made of stones, plural, not one huge...

Wait, what was that?

I turned around and scanned the rest of the courtyard. No one there. But that noise...what was it? Scraping?

I looked up.

Jesus...

She was watching me, from the balcony...the same spot I'd stood that time I couldn't sleep. Her hands were on the wall, her face leaning over the side. One floor up, she wouldn't jump, would she?

I waved at her, not smiling.

And why should I? I wasn't doing anything wrong, I was just...what was I doing? Trying to escape, okay, but what would I say if she asked? Man, I didn't know. Feeling the wall? Feeling the workmanship of the wall? Was that even a viable...

Wait, where did she go?

I looked along the whole of the first-floor balcony, but she wasn't there. Did she duck down? Would she ever do something like that? It was quite sneaky, she might. But it didn't make sense...I was watching, I didn't look away, and she'd vanished. Man, she was quick.

I pushed away from the wall and walked out of the courtyard and back inside. The hallway was clear and there were no noises coming from the library so I went up the stairs and along the corridor to the left. It seemed darker than before, but the candles were still

burning...they were always burning, night and day...so why was it so dark? Didn't candlelight travel?

I turned into the corridor that led to her room, but there were no candles there and it was so dark I couldn't see the door at the end. My hands felt the walls to the side and I moved slowly along to the next window. I looked outside. It was still daylight. I looked back at the corridor. Still dark. How? I felt the glass of the window to check it was actually regular glass, and it was, it felt normal. The light, it just wasn't going any further than the glass. Was that her doing? Could fake witches do that?

I blinked a couple of times then looked as far as I could down the corridor. There was...I wasn't a hundred per cent sure, but...no, there was...there was someone there.

Damijana?

It was like a slightly darker shade of black against the rest of the shit I couldn't see. Was it her? Why didn't she turn on a light? Fire up a candle?

'Dami?'

The darker patch of darkness grew larger. Whatever it was, I didn't like it, I didn't want to meet it, I didn't want to be in the same corridor as it.

I put my hands on the window and tried to open it, but it was stuck, it wouldn't...

'What are you doing?'

I turned, sharp.

'Hey...'

Damijana was standing by the painting of the French pervert, staring at the window just past my head. There was light in the corridor now. All the candles were lit.

'I hope you're not leaving.'

'No.' I took a step away from the window. 'Just getting some fresh air.'

'I see.'

'Was that you doing the...that thing with the darkness?'

'Yes, dear.'

'That's one of your tricks...playing with light?'

She ignored me and looked at the painting of Frenchman.

'You can really do that?'

No answer.

'Dami...are you okay?' I asked, noticing that both her hands were hidden behind her back.

'I was just thinking about our little painting tour the other day...about Louis.'

'The French guy?'

'There was one thing I never mentioned, which I think might be quite interesting to you. Yes, the French man.'

'Uh-huh...'

'It might qualify as a story, but I'm sure you don't mind.'

'As long as I'm not typing it.'

She took a step closer to the painting. 'Louis the Moon King. That's what he called himself.'

'Great nickname.'

'It suited him, in a way. He was always full of grand, extravagant ideas...childish ideas. A trait, I suppose. At first, I thought it to be a performance, an actor's tic. But after a whole year, *ne, to ni bila predstava*. It's strange, you're the only creatures I know who insist on it in the first place...the performance of self.'

'Err...you're saying you don't perform?'

'But with Louis it was not quite a performance. It was more a part of him, as constant as these castle walls. Which was one of the reasons I tolerated him for so long...or liked him...I'm not quite sure which. It is a difficult distinction for me to draw, and perhaps redundant. *Ja, odveč*. Where was I? Ah yes, the snow ramp. I remember the night it happened, dear, very clearly. It was snowing heavily outside, more heavily than was usual...'

'That's odd.'

'...and Louis always had this idea in his head, that when it snowed...if it snowed heavily enough...there would be a snow ramp going from the games room to the ground.'

'He wanted to slide down it?'

'It would never get that high, I told him that many times, but he wouldn't believe me. That's why he came into my room that night. I

will persuade you, Damijana Duck, he said. We will rest here until morning then you'll see. Of course, I didn't care one bit, but he was adamant so I let him rest on my bed for a while. Poor Louis, he thought his schemes were so clever. All of you do. *I don't like sleeping near the edge, Damijana, it unnerves me. It's cold, are you cold? We should move closer to keep warm, I won't do anything, I promise.* But I could see the look in his eyes...it's a look I know well...'

'Dami...if this is another dig about the rape thing...'

She raised her voice, killing my sentence. 'It didn't happen immediately, *seveda*. We talked about film for a while. His ideas weren't new, but they weren't tired either so I tolerated them. Then he talked about love...an endless subject. He told me he'd never loved anyone before and didn't know if he ever could. He said he was incapable of it, and it troubled him. He wanted to, he hated himself for his perversity, but it was beyond his control. Naturally, I recognised the sentiment as spoken by Lermontov sixty years earlier, but I didn't say anything.'

'Who's Lermontov?'

'After he'd finished his self-delineation, he said goodnight, turned over and pretended to sleep. I could hear his thoughts, *is she asleep yet? Should I do this? Of course, I should, there's no-one else here. Is this not the nature of the beast?* Twelve minutes later, his hands started to wander. I was curious, and I did not despise him, so I let him touch me...it did not mean much to me, like I said...I even let him put the tip of his penis inside me...all the while pretending to be asleep.'

'What? You said you'd never had sex...'

'But then he became aggressive...he tried to pin me down and put it deeper inside, telling me that I'd always wanted it this way. A strange line, I thought, but *pozabi*. I told him it was pointless to continue, I couldn't feel a thing, but this only seemed to make him angrier. He grabbed my hair and pushed my face into the pillow, and told me we would be doing this all night, all night until I made some noise. Of course, this was impossible...I needed him to create, and how could he do that if he hadn't slept? He couldn't, none of you could, so I gave him another chance. Stop, dear, or I will stop you myself. I admit, my voice was hindered by the pillow, but I'm certain he heard me.'

Needless to say, it did not work.' She stopped and looked at the painting. 'I suppose you can guess what I did next.'

'You threw him across the room with your pseudo magic?'

'That's right, dear.'

'Lovely.'

'But he would not stop. He came at me again, his hands going for my throat and...I admit, at this point, I was tired, so, as he strangled me and tried to reinsert his penis, I took the knife from under my pillow and sliced across his throat.'

'Ha...what?'

'It was quite a fine cut, from ear to ear, not always easy to accomplish.'

'You cut his throat...'

'It was a strange thing. Most of you take a minute to drain, sometimes two. But Louis...he had more blood than a bull. It took four minutes before his hands loosened around my throat.' She paused, nodding to herself. 'Of course, it was an impulsive act on my part. A stupid act too. As soon as he was dead, I thought the same thing I'd thought with you. If I had let him live, his rape could've informed his art. I confess, I felt a pang of regret at that point, the films he could've made, but he was already drained, so there was little to do but clean up and move on to the next one.'

'That's a pretty morbid story, Dami...'

'*Ali je?* I admit, morbid is not a word I have use for.'

'Well, it is. Very morbid.'

I turned back to the window, certain she was making the whole thing up. Physical abuse? Sure. Fucking with my head? Yup, almost every day. Murder? Impossible. She was far too pretty for that.

'Are you ready, dear?'

I didn't turn around. 'Ready for what?'

'*Ne mislim, da bom vas dodal na moj slike.*'

'What?'

'*Slovensko, dear. Morda ce si naucil nekaj.*'

'Okay, Dami...whatever you say.'

I looked at the snow on the ground below, thinking of Louis the Moon King, wondering if he was right. Had the snow ever come up as

high as this window? Probably not. It would be a pretty cool thing to see though. And a good way to get out of here.

I looked further along, going down the snowy hill to the...what...

'Je že v redu. Čas umreti. Bo krvni seveda, vendar ne več kot...'

'How the...'

'...štiri pintih.'

'Dami, look...' I tapped my fingers against the window, not caring if she could see past me or not. 'Two people...outside on the slope.'

'Nemogoče...'

'They're coming up...'

'Bodo morali ubiti trije zdaj.'

'What's that?'

'Teh dveh prvih, potem...'

'You know I don't understand a word you're saying, right?'

'Ostati tukaj govedo.'

'Okay, fine. Keep slogging.'

I went back to the window and watched as the two figures got closer. It seemed to take them forever to get up the hill, but they kept going, just like me and Chad when we first...wait, that guy...in the blue jacket...that wasn't...

I turned around and said, 'it's Jay, he's here, he's actually fucking here,' but I forgot the words as soon as I saw what was in her hand.

'Jesus...'

She put the handle of the kitchen knife to her neck, her fingers wrapped around the blade.

'Dami...?'

'Morda bo kravato ste gor?'

'Huh?'

'Dal ti bom namig.'

'What's with the knife?'

She shook her head, took her hand off the blade and tapped it against the painting of the Frenchman. *'To je knjiga v prepovedano sobo.'*

'Dami...'

She turned and looked at the painting, letting the knife drop to her side. I thought about making a grab for it, but...no, that might antagonise her.

Instead I edged closer to the wall, out of slashing range, and glanced back at the window, checking on the progress of Jay and the bear guy. Good, they were still there, walking up the hill, looking kind of drunk and clueless.

I turned back, starting with, 'Dami, look, just let me out for five minutes, I'll...'

But she wasn't there.

'Dami?'

It was no good, the corridor was empty. I looked at all the doors nearby, but they were all closed. Where the hell did she go? Could she teleport now?

I thought about it for almost a quarter of a second then turned back to the window and started tapping again.

'Here...up here!'

It was him, it was really him, walking up the hill with...ha, the bear costume guy, Žižek ...they were nearly at the castle walls.

'Jay!'

But he wasn't looking up. Neither was Žižek. Was this...was the window soundproofed? Why couldn't they hear me?

I banged on the window, so hard it probably should've cracked.

'Jay!'

No reaction.

'Up here, you clown!'

Nothing.

He was turning around, looking at the forest and talking to Žižek. What? Did he not see the huge fucking castle right in front of him? What the hell was he doing?

'No, come back, you fucking...'

Jay and Žižek were walking back down the hill, into the forest.

'Are you blind? I'm right here...'

Then they were gone.

'Jay...'

I turned and ran. The corridor, then the corner, then the other corridor, past the sick guy in the painting and down the...

Wait...was that...

I stopped so fast I almost tripped on my shoes and did a forward roll.

The door...it couldn't be...

I edged back and rested the back of my head against the wall, looking up towards the forbidden room. No, I had seen it right. The door, it was open. Not much, but it was definitely open.

Well, fuck me, Dami...half a year, nine months, whatever it was, and you've finally opened up the Choccie factory...

I wanted to run up and look, see what all that portentous shit she'd spewed was about, but then I remembered what I almost tripped over for in the first place. Or not remembered, I knew it all along, how could I not, Jay, here after all this time, but I rebalanced the two of them, Jay and the forbidden room, and realised one was probably more important than the other.

I pushed away from the wall and started running again, towards the hall, telling myself that the whole forbidden room open door thing was probably a trap anyway.

#

The front door, as it had been half an hour earlier, as it probably had been since the bronze age, was closed.

Ah, but maybe not locked...

I threw myself against it, twisting the handle in the same move. The door didn't budge. Why would it? It opened inwards. Fuck. I stepped back and pulled the handle, but it still wouldn't move. I pulled harder and harder, twisting the handle, shaking it, blowing on it...but it wouldn't open.

Man, why did I bother? This thing just didn't open, ever. I looked around the hall. What else? Break that glass?

I ran over to the window next to the beast-man statue. It was the same view as the first-floor window, only lower.

Okay, you...

I breathed out, wrapped the jacket sleeve around my hand and threw a fist at the window. It bounced right back. I tried it again, same result. What the hell was that? Rubber? I felt the glass with my finger, but it didn't feel any different than regular glass. Maybe my fist just wasn't solid enough? I looked around and saw a little stool by Yama so I ran over, grabbed it, ran back and launched it at the window. It didn't make a crack. I picked it up and tried again, but it was no good, it didn't even make a sound when it hit the glass.

'Fuck!'

I shouted it as loud as I could, I didn't care anymore.

'They're gone, Dami...'

I dropped the stool on the stone floor and it made a bigger sound than it did when hitting the window.

'Good job, fruitcake, they're all fucking gone...you're stuck with the rapist forever.'

I punched the window again. Still rubber.

'Just open the door...let me out...'

The door didn't move.

'The door, Dami...come on.'

No answer.

God, where was she?

How did she move away so fast?

Why was this door so fucking hard to open?

Why were the windows made of indestructible sponge?

I looked around the hall, searching for other ways out.

The beast-man statue stood silently in the corner, staring a metre above the top of my head, unconcerned, unmoved, king of the crazy bitch's castle.

'Any ideas, Yama...?'

It was weird, even though it'd done nothing for the last nine months, I still half-expected its eyes to glow red or steam to come out of its ears. It didn't. Instead it just stood there, emotionless, like that half naked guy from Deadly Force.

'You wouldn't tell me even if you knew...'

Yama kept on glaring.

'Fucker...'

I turned to the courtyard door and started walking. My plan was pretty ropey. Find cracks in the wall and try to climb over. Again. For the five hundredth time. Failing that, go up to the second floor, try to squeeze out of one of those arch windows and drop down. It was a long shot, I knew that, but it was better than sticking around here, waiting for...

Ah, hang on...

The second floor...

That door...

It was open, for the first time in nine months it was open, it was forbidden, there could be a secret door or a slide running down to the ground outside or a phone.

But

it was forbidden

she had a knife

Bluebeard.

I counted out both sides and it was three each, but then I thought, okay, she has a knife, she could stab me anywhere, if she really wanted to stab me, which she probably didn't cos if she did she would've done it already.

And if she'd been worried enough to make the room forbidden in the first place then...

Ah, fuck it, why not?

#

I walked past the dead wax guy on the wall, up the spiral stairs and towards the open door of the room she'd told me never to enter.

It was still ajar.

Good.

I walked in without trying to think my way out of it. If there was something in here she didn't want me to see, a map, a secret exit, even a computer with internet connection, I had to find it.

You never know, it could even have the key to the front door. Or another door I didn't know about that also led outside.

Or maybe it had a weapon...

Something that could hurt her or stop her tricks...

I went to the little window-slit to see if Jay or Damijana or Žižek were visible, but as usual it was too snowy to see much of anything.

No, not hurt her. It was Damijana, she was...she wasn't a monster, she was just...I wasn't sure what she was, but it didn't have to be psycho.

Meu Dami...beautiful Damijana...nah, she wasn't that bad, was she?

She'd let me stay with her. She'd given me all that cash. She was beautiful like Natalie Wood and Mia Sara and Maggie Cheung. I didn't have to hurt her. I didn't want to. All I wanted was for the magic and all the rape talk to be gone...or for a key out of here...or for her to be kind again. Any of the above.

I looked around the room.

There was nothing.

Wait, no. There was a book on the table. I looked around the back of the door, but that was it. A book and a table.

I walked forward and picked it up.

‘Chants de Maldoror // Comte de Lautreamont’

Chants de what?

I put it down and looked at the ceiling and the floor and out the window again, but there was nothing else in there. Chants de Maldoror. Was that French? I knew 'de' was...but 'chants' and 'Maldoror'...

No, wait... 'chants' was French for song...wasn't it?

I picked up the book again and opened to the first page. There was an inscription:

‘Vous vouliez mon âme ... mon implacable, ancienne, Damijana’

And underneath it, in red letters:

‘Vous êtes un génie. Le seul.

D’

Okay, definitely French.

I accessed the eight years of French study I'd done in school but the only thing I pulled back was 'ou est la plage?'

I tried again, looking at the inscription again.

Okay...vous etes un genie...I knew that...you are a genie...no, genius...you are a genius. Le seul...seul was only...the only genius...

Hang on, who? This guy? She was calling this guy a genius? That couldn't be right. I was the genius, not him.

But it was written right in front of me, in red lettering no less.

Shit, this guy...a Frenchie...

I flicked to the first page and read what this genius had to say for himself. It was all in French again, fuck, advanced level French, way too hard for me to...no, wait, I knew that word, and that one, those ones too. Something about evil...okay. Sharpen your nails and scrape them down a child's cheek...huh?

I read the line again, unsure if my translation was wonky, but, no, it seemed to be accurate. Well, 80% of the words were accurate, I knew that much. Scrape might be scratch, I didn't know, but even if it was, the sentiment was the same.

Scrape your nails down a child's cheek.

Huh?

I closed it and put it back down on the table. What was this shit, Dami?

But it was in the room...the room was forbidden...the only genius...

The only genius.

Ah...

Hang on...

'The book...the guy in Metelkova...'

That's it, he'd said it right to my face...she always carried it around with her...like it was the greatest book in the world. Even though everyone else thought it was shit.

God, they were right. It was shit.

Scrape your nails down a child's cheeks...

Nah, worse than shit, it was fucking awful. Incubus wrote better lyrics than that, and they were for twelve-year olds.

Huh?

Where did that come from?

I'd never even listened to Incubus. Well, maybe one song, but that was at Uni when I was...ah, shit, her. Man, did that really happen?

Fuck it. There was no time to think about that kind of thing. Incubus was gone, so were the 90's, but this French twat was still here, pedalling his kiddie splatter-porn, stealing my fucking limelight.

Something had to be done.

'Okay, Dami Duck...' I picked up the book and tucked it under my arm. 'Your only genius is going for a little walk.'

I checked the rest of the room one last time for anything I'd missed then walked out, not bothering to close the door behind me.

Five seconds later, I rushed back in, calling myself a clown in Cantonese, grabbing the table and racing back out.

The book had blinded me for a minute or two, but as soon as I left the room I remembered the word 'escape' and then the words 'wall in the courtyard' and then I thought of the table sitting there in that room and the chairs in the library and I couldn't believe I'd spent the last ten minutes being jealous of a fucking book.

Okay, it was still on the table as I carried it out into the courtyard, but it had lost its Vulcan mind grip on me by at least eighty per cent, so I was able to focus on getting up on this table, jumping up and grabbing the top of that bastard, taunting wall.

'Okay, fucker...'

I positioned the table against the wall, climbed onto it, breathed onto my palms to give them a bit of life and looked up.

'What...'

It was, typically for this place, impossible. The wall had grown...by at least five feet. In fact, it looked the same now as it did from the courtyard floor.

Ah, you're not beating me that easily.

I ran across the snow and back inside, heading quickly to the library and my writing chair. It looked pretty sturdy, but I couldn't be sure so I climbed up and put my full weight on it.

It didn't break, it didn't even creak, great.

I grabbed it and thought about grabbing one of the shelves too, but one of those would weigh about 200kg, so I settled on the chair, telling myself it would work, it had to work, and hurried back outside.

It was weird, Dami and the knife were still somewhere in my mind, obviously, but I wasn't checking corridors or dark corners for her anymore.

Must've been too focused on my furniture mountain.

I got back to the table and put the chair on top, pushing it right against the stone wall so it wouldn't wobble. I climbed back up and, slowly, got onto the chair.

I looked up.

'Fuck...'

The bastard had grown again. Not just grown, it had doubled in size. The whole thing looked like the walls of Agincourt. How was this possible? Even if I jumped, I wouldn't get halfway.

I climbed back down and looked at the wall again, predicting that it would be its normal size again, and I was right, it had shrunk back down to around twenty feet.

I reluctantly got back on the table and then the chair, just in case it was a fluke, and looked up.

The wall was huge again.

I half expected a giant inflatable ball to be sitting up there, laughing at me.

'How can a wall...' I started, before recalling all the other impossible things that had happened here in the last few days. No, the last nine months, if I took the blinkers off.

I was stuck here, as small and pointless as Sean Penn at a Pistons' try-out, and I had no idea what to do next.

If the wall wasn't the way out then what?

Where else was there I could go?

'Jay...'

I shouted it as loud as I could, about ten times, but I knew it was pointless. It had already been ten, fifteen minutes since I'd seen him on the hill, he'd be long gone by now.

'This fucking place...'

I looked at the thing sitting face up on the table in front of me, and its stupid French title and its insulting inscription note and its pride of place in the room my book should've been in, or one of my zines at least, and thought, scrape your nails down a child's cheek has to be one of the worst lines I've ever read or heard, maybe even worse than 'synth of your soul' or 'this ice is cold', and if I'm not getting out of here then I might as well do the world a favour, do her a favour too, if she can calm down long enough to see it. I mean, she probably only liked it cos it was in French.

I picked up the book, hissed at the wall and went back inside to the warmth of the castle.

#

The library was empty and the curtains were drawn and the shelves were still, and thank Yama, the fire was burning.

A little song was playing in my head, over and over....

Scrape your nails down Incubus' face

Scrape your nails down Incubus' face

Burn this fucker.

Burn.

Man, it was already better than the Maldoror version.

I walked over and tripped a little on the rug, falling in slow motion next to the fireplace. My elbow hit the stone hard and throbbed a little, but adrenaline pushed it to the side-lines. I opened the book again, told myself this was wrong, it was her property, not mine, ignored myself then tried to rip out the first page. Okay, it didn't make much sense, but it was the best idea I had. In fact, I'd tried to construct some kind of logic around it on the way over here. Basically, the idea was: burn the book, say it was an accident, wait for her to break down in tears then grab the key to the front door and get out of here.

Obviously, it relied on her having the key, but that wasn't really that far-fetched, especially if she was coming back in from outside. Unless she came in a different way and the key was somewhere else?

Ah, it was meaningless to worry about it, as long as I couldn't get out of here any other way then what did I have to lose?

Nothing.

She'd either come back, see the book on fire and collapse or she'd come back, see the book on fire and slit my throat...or threaten to slit my throat...or maybe just choke me a little and throw me across the room...

Or maybe she'd come back, see the book on fire and thank me for destroying terrible writing...

Maybe that's why the door was open...

'Fuck...'

The page of this stupid book wouldn't tear. I pulled harder, but it was no good. What was this, plastic?

'Tear, you bastard...'

It would not obey.

I stopped and looked at the inscription again. *You are a genius, the only one.* Right. Because he wrote about scratching kids' faces? Where was the honesty in that? Did he scratch kids in real life? Did he fuck!

I punched the page, not feeling stupid at all.

This guy didn't do anything...just wrote out a load of bullshit...more bullshit than I ever did...he deserved to be ripped up...

I looked at the flames.

...or auto de fe'd.

'Sorry, Dami...'

I opened the book wide, vetoed any rationalism stupid enough to still be in my brain and threw the whole thing onto the flames. Then I went over to the table, sat down in front of the typewriter and watched it burn.

It took a strangely long time for the pages to catch fire...maybe it really was plastic, or had some kind of flame retardant coating, I didn't know...so I passed the time by thinking up better lines than 'scrape your nails down a child's cheek' and typing them up for her to read when she came back. That way it would be easier for her to forgive me.

No, wait, not forgiveness, envy. Recrimination. I wanted her to realise she'd been a cunt to me, to see how much better I was than this wanky French guy, even though his work was currently on fire and wouldn't be available for direct comparison.

I stared at the paper, waiting for something to click.

It didn't happen.

I waited longer but that just made it worse as after three minutes my mind turned in on itself and thought solely about the idea of waiting three minutes and what would happen if I waited four minutes and nothing came.

The only idea that broke through this, the only idea that had any kind of experience to it, was the passing of time, specifically the passing of the nine months I'd been in this castle.

It was weird, the more I thought of it, the more it felt like years.

Decades even.

Time moved slower when you were Merlin without Arthur.

Ha, not a bad line.

Better than 'scrape a child's cheek' anyway.

I typed it out:

Time moved slower when you were Merlin without Arthur

I re-read it a few times and fell quickly out of love with it. What was it she'd said...this is glib and worthless, you can do better, dear.

Ha, better...for who?

I checked on the fire, saw the book was still surviving, shrugged then typed out another line:

The book will burn when it's 451.

It wasn't bad, but too referential perhaps. And the reference wasn't subtle enough. Even Jay had heard of that book.

I looked at the words 'the' and 'will' and 'when' and thought, it's too normal, that's the problem. It's constructed correctly, the grammar is right, which means it's worthless. Every book in every book shop starts the same way even if it is well-written, it's still a guy waking up or a guy giving his life history, never something like *'in the man with 2 brains he didn't have to look very long before he found a whore whose brain he could replace cos it was already at the 80 minute mark'* and even that one had grammar that worked, so maybe it was better just to cut loose and experiment, but not in a wanky way, not

like that clown who painted 'black square', it had to be entertaining wank, like...like what?

I stared at the typewriter for a minute until Genichiro Takahashi appeared on my shoulder and said, no, that's the problem, stop thinking, start typing, anything, trust your fucking instincts for once.

I started typing,

Zero time to count cunt DRACULA...star tutors make mistakes too, kent's no place for exclusivity, glob gains arch blue eye hit that and regret fibs bring chin trade sideways

I paused, remembering the Incubus line, and typed another:

dracula stations don't attack because emperors don't rule the right way...Damijana does...Damijana watch, Damijana hide...ha, beak fuck duck, fuck a hologram, nothing watching...do anything...fuck fuck...art communes orbit the planet bullshit because the planet is all they need...Germans can't be poet, too implacable...too cute...word can't form system, system don't like to fuck...don't like fuck, forget to, why need to...prepositions are for art communes...prepositions are art communes...fuck verbs too and to fuck you...prepositions art communes...hatmandu tennis no way play videogamediebloody...castleskeepandkillyouandmakeyouwakeupthewitchandlesburningandfuckingsnowsnowinglikeneverendingsnow

I took a break and stared at the empty chair at the other end of the table. Her empty chair. Ha, what would she make of this shit? I tried to put a different girl there, a kinder one, but the only female face I could picture was hers. God, that's how bad it'd got. The only girl left in the world was a nut who tried to break my spine. An impossibly strong nut who almost never smiled. A pale, beautiful nut who said I was...

I leaned forward over the keys and typed some more:

The pale girl sat in the café, studying. I watched her. She laughed with her friends. Unclear, blurry friends. I froze time. I walked over to

her. She didn't move. I put my hand on her shoulder and ran my hand down her shirt onto her breasts. Onto her tits. She tried to push my hand away but I was too strong. I didn't flinch, why should I? I flipped her round and pulled down her knickers. I buried my face in her cunt and licked it while rubbing her tits. She moaned. I held my cock...my dick against her cunt and then pushed it inside. She said she'd never had sex. I didn't care. I held her ass and moved her back and forth. I was the boss of this. It didn't matter if she liked it or not. She turned around and told me her name was Damijana. Damijana the fake witch. And she liked this cos it wasn't rape and she was wrong before and it was so good to be fucked after so long alone in this castle and I could keep fucking her as long as I liked in every room in the castle even the forbidden ones even next to that fucking French book or Yama or anywhere. I ignored her and kept fucking on y...my own terms cos

I stopped typing and looked at the library door. I didn't know why, but I was sweating. I wiped my forehead. I looked at what I'd written. I took out the page and ripped it up. A new page appeared. I took a breath and started typing.

The girl lived alone in the castle. She didn't need any men, they were useless. But sometimes, when she sat by the fire in the library, she thought it might be nice to have someone.

I could smell smoke so I looked over at the fire and saw the pages were finally alight. Thank God for that, I thought, before suddenly worrying about her reaction and reducing what I'd done to bullshit binary. If it was just a normal book, she'd laugh and forgive me pretty fast. Give me the front door key even. If it wasn't, if it really did cause her pain, some kind of emotional breakdown or depression, I'd just tell her it was an accident and nurse her back to health. *Sorry, Dami, I slipped on the rug and...*

There was a noise.

Something was screaming...not in the room, outside, in the sky...it didn't sound human, it was more like a wild animal...a jackal or something...having its guts ripped out.

The fire flickered and then extinguished itself. What? The first time in months the fucker finally goes out, and it's now?

I walked over to the fire, grabbed the poker and tried to jab it back to life.

'Vi...'

I spun round, almost dropping the poker.

She was back, standing only a few yards from me. Black cloak, pale hands...burnt face. Blood on her neck. Huh?

'Dami...'

'You went into the room.'

'What happened to your face?'

'You took my book...'

'There's blood on your...'

'*Ste brez vrednosti*'

'Come on, not Slovene again. I don't understand a word you're saying.' I saw her looking at the book sitting on the remains of the fire, its cover charred. 'That...it's not...okay, it looks bad, but...I was cold. Really cold. I'm sorry.'

She didn't laugh.

'You disobeyed me.'

'Huh...you mean the room? Yeah, I went in, but the door was open. I thought that meant it was okay.'

She stepped forward. No knife, but there was still that weird look in her eye. I looked back at the book and tried to will it into flames again, but it was done.

'Okay, not so close...'

I turned around, raising the poker...not to hit her, just to prod her back...but it wasn't in my hand anymore.

'What...'

'*To je moje poker.*'

I looked at her hand, but it turned out I didn't need to...the poker was already against the skin of my neck.

'Hey, careful...'

'Previdni?'

'Prev what?'

She dropped the poker and grabbed my throat. *'Ste brez vrednosti...'*

'Dami...!' I tried to say more, but it seemed my throat wasn't wide enough for whole sentences.

'Si upate niti dotaknil...'

Whatever my little book pyre had done, it hadn't affected her physical strength. She shoved me backwards and then I was flying...I didn't try anything to stop it, I just closed my eyes and...

I landed hard on the chair next to the typewriter, so hard I went over the top of it and crashed onto the floor.

'Jesus...!' I mumbled, rubbing my back. 'There was no need for that.'

'Goljufije...'

'What?' I thought about throwing the chair at her, but what was the point, I knew I'd miss. Instead, I put it back on four legs and sat down.

'Meh wah?'

'You're a fraud.' She was in front of me again, both hands on the side of my head. 'Pretending to speak Cantonese.'

'Meh?'

'You didn't even make it to intermediate. Couldn't do the tones, couldn't pronounce words babies could manage. You're pathetic, *goljufije* compared to him.'

'Look, that book thing, I wasn't trying to...'

'He spoke four languages...you can't even explain yourself in one. *Ste brez vrednosti*. I should've killed you weeks ago.'

'Killed? Kill like-...'

'After that Mega Man story.'

'Wait, you mean that whole knife thing was-...'

She tightened her grip on my head.

I tried to swat her away, but my hands were like sponge. She didn't even blink.

'Dami, wait...'

'Dovolj.'

'Just let me...'

'Tih...'

I looked around the room for a weapon, a soft weapon, but there was nothing. Only the books on the shelves, and the poker on the floor by the fire, but...no, they were too far away.

The table?

Kick it at her leg, hope the edge was really sharp?

Her grip tightened again, like an anaconda around the director of Anaconda 3. I could feel the edges of my skull starting to crack. God, it couldn't end this way...it wasn't sudden enough. I'd feel everything. I'd be the first guy to ever know what it was like to have bits of bone poking into his brain. Jesus, it was too much. I had to do something. Anything.

'Ah...' I said out loud. It was supposed to be in my head only, but my brain probably wasn't working right. 'Dami...'

'Tih...'

'I love you.'

'Tako toge...'

'I love you and I wanna live with you...writing for you...everyday...'

'Vi...' She loosened her grip a little, smirking '*Ne moreš niti razumeti večno*. Every day, the same thing. What's the time? What time is it? Where's the clock?'

'I...love...you.'

'*Moji glavi...*'

'I...do...'

'Love what? Natalie Wood? *Sploh ne vem, kaj sem.*'

I looked at my feet, mentally preparing my defence...but then I saw my hands and remembered the Anaconda 3 line and...ah, it probably couldn't work, but...

'Dami...'

'Every day, listening to your nonsense, watching you eke out every pathetic little word...telling you the mundane things you put down were words of genius...putting up with your constant attempts to get me into bed. Why won't you fuck me? Why won't you fuck me? I love you, Damijana. I adore you. Gods, even Louis wasn't this annoying...'

I took as much of a breath as I could. 'Duck station, ban banki moon...'

'...even he knew not to try...what?'

'Dibbi confab dento khan...'

She tilted her head just like bad actors did when they were confused. '*Kaj počneš?*'

'Kentaro baba...sam ling lok yi sei chat ling...bando tooki bubu...ah rock mines...cooper Bradley...'

'You're madder than Edric...' She let go of my head and stared at me. 'Or pretending to be.'

'Wabba hut mowgli hunt no no...bam.'

I closed my eyes and prepared to swing...

'Are you performing, dear?'

...tightened my fist...

'You are, aren't you?'

...but I couldn't.

'Well?'

It was Dami...she was too pretty...too...I just couldn't. But I had to do something...talk to her again...reason with her...

'*Toliko kakor jaz sovražiti, da sama ni boljši od ta farsa.* I am tired of this charade, dear.'

The sound of her voice seemed to make my mind up for me. I pushed my arms and my body forward, ducking low, and aimed for her waist.

Connect.

I pushed forward a few steps then let go.

'*Moji glavi...*'

She'd gone back about a metre, no more. Shit. And now she was leaning down to pick up the poker again...wait, why hadn't I done that?

'*Še ostati pizda...*'

I looked down by the fireplace, searching for a weapon of my own. There was nothing swingable, only...ah, that would do it. I bent down, picked up the half-charred book and threw it at her body.

It wasn't the hardest throw I'd ever done, but it seemed to take her by surprise, clipping the side of her cloak and ricocheting onto the wall behind.

'Ne...'

I saw her stumble backwards, her eyes still lilac, her face shaking...Jesus, all that from being clipped by a book...was this real?

'Dami...' I edged closer. 'You okay?'

She stumbled a little more and then fell, her body hitting the rug, her head slamming against the stone floor just beyond it.

Jesus...

I walked forward, my legs shaking a little, looking for blood creeping out from under her head...

'Dami...' I leaned down and put my hand out towards the side of her face. 'I didn't mean to hurt you...I'm sorry.'

A wall hit me in the side of the head. I grabbed at air and then at my head, feeling for the epicentre of the giant fucking missile that had just exploded.

'Vedno sem rekel bivanja...'

I pulled my hand away and saw blood. Then two hands. Then Damijana waving two black sticks in my face...not black sticks, pokers...the poker...

'Dami, wait...'

I threw a hand out to take the brunt of the damage, hit something that didn't feel like a poker, felt even sharper pain, closed my eyes and dropped...

#

It was snowing...

Outside...

I was running...

Fast.

Tens of trees passed me, hundreds, thousands, like an endless forest of...

I stopped, sucking in cold, dry air.

There was a bear on the snow...on the ground up ahead.

I looked back the way I'd come.

There was nothing except trees.

I looked back at the bear, took a couple of steps to the side and then moved forward, pushing my shoes down into the snow.

The bear didn't move.

I got closer. There were its legs, there was its stomach...wait...

I stopped.

It wasn't a bear.

I walked forward, one step, two steps, three...

The body of the man was covered in blood from the neck down.

From the neck up, there was nothing except a jagged windpipe.

A few metres further down was the head.

I walked forward and stared at it. The veins, or the arteries, whatever they were...they were untethered...hanging out.

I knew that head.

There was a whistling noise from the trees.

Wait, where was Jay?

I looked around, as far as I could see, but there was no one else there.

'Jay.'

The whistling got fainter.

'Jay...' I tried louder.

The whistling stopped.

I looked down at the body near my feet.

'I'm sorry, man.'

It was all I could think of. I didn't know him that well, and he'd had his head cut off. What else could I say?

There was a noise, another whistling sound, but a lower pitch...

I turned to the left and saw trees folding over...hundreds of them...a wall of snow pouring over...avalanching towards me...

I blinked.

The avalanche had turned into a door.

I blinked again.

The door was closed.

I blinked again.

The door was closed...and the whistling sound was coming from the cracks...

No.

I blinked and saw Jay holding his head in his hand, smirking.

'What you doing, bats?'

'Jay?'

'Feels cold in here...'

'Jay, is that...'

#

I opened my eyes and stared at the open space where Jay had been standing a few seconds earlier. Or a few minutes earlier, a few hours...however long it'd been.

But it wasn't snowing anymore, it was stone.

I rubbed my head, remembering the brawl. Man, how long had I been out? Minutes? Hours? I looked around for my attacker, the mad woman, but she wasn't where she was before.

'Dami?'

The whole room was empty.

'Daaa-mii?'

I got up and walked slowly over to the fireplace. The book was gone, with a pile of grey ash left on the coal.

'Dami, you here?'

No answer.

I walked to the book shelves and crouched down to see if her feet were visible, but there was only floor.

She really was gone.

I stood back up and grabbed the edge of the shelf when I started to wobble.

The books in front of me were cutting themselves into two and blurring and...

I took a few breaths and waited it out. She'd hit me pretty hard, hard enough to knock me unconscious. It was only natural I'd feel a little faint.

I was right.

The pain passed and the books returned to one piece. I took my hand off the support shelf and tried calling her name again, but there was no answer. Wherever she was, it wasn't in the library. Though she did move quickly sometimes and appear out of thin air, so that wasn't

final, she could still be lurking nearby. Maybe she was floating up near the ceiling, watching me.

I looked up at the ceiling.

Nothing except a mural I'd never noticed before. Ha, nine months and I'd never looked up. Maybe that was for the best. Far as I could make out, it was the sacking of a city. Blood and guts everywhere.

'Okay, Dami...!' I said, edging slowly to the library door, turning and looking three different ways as I went. 'Leaving time.'

Nothing moved.

'Bye then...'

No footsteps, no whistling sounds, no pokers.

'Okay...'

I closed the library door behind me, I didn't really know why, then did a quick spin of the hallway to make sure she wasn't waiting with the kitchen knife.

She wasn't.

The place was clear, except for Yama, who was still doing the silent husband routine in the corner, and some purple paint on the floor.

'Dami?' I said, softly.

The name bounced around the hall and came back to me with no additions.

'Good.'

I walked quickly to the front door, the one that had resisted me so many times, and tried the handle.

Yup, it was still shut.

Impossibly shut.

A front door that let people in but never back out.

A collaborating door...

A door's the thing, to catch the conscience of the king.

Huh, what?

Hamlet?

I jabbed the side of my head, twice. A thousand different things jumped up and down, waving, screaming at me as if someone had just pressed a fast-forward button inside my brain. Jay. Hamlet. Incubus.

Maldoror. Damijana. Sex. Žižek. Rape. Chad. Money. Ralph Ellison. Captain Jean Luc Picard.

I focused on the front door.

My hands pushed and pulled and banged against the wood, but it was no good, the thing was pulled in tight.

I gave up, looked at it for a few seconds then tried again.

Then gave up and tried again.

And again.

It was dumb, but what choice was there? There was the front door and there was the front door. I'd tried everywhere else and there was no other way out of here except the invisible cracks in the courtyard wall and maybe that forbidden basement which was always closed, just like everything else in this...

No, wait, the basement door...

It had been open once...

But that was one time in nine months...and it hadn't been open earlier when I'd tried the thing with the table. Had it?

Honestly, I couldn't remember. I'd looked for cracks in the wall and put the table against the wall and that was it. Besides, the steps were so far down I wouldn't have seen an open door anyway...

Would she really leave it open?

Maybe.

She'd left the other one open, why not this one too?

Would she?

After all this time, after all her defensive work up to this point, would she really fuck it all up, twice in one day, just cos I wanted it to be true?

'Would you Dami duck?'

For some reason, I looked at Yama when I said this but he didn't care. Fucker didn't even shrug his shoulders.

Ah, forget him. She'd disappeared, she was hurt at least a little, maybe it was worth a shot.

It was either that or stay here forever

typing out pervy sex fantasies and

playing hungry hippos in the fucking games room and

probably losing too.

I nodded to no one, pointed my eyes directly at the left side of the stairs and started walking.

#

No wolf sounds.

No wind whistling through the snow.

I peeked my head round the wall and looked at what I figured was my only way out of this place. I didn't have my jacket on...or her friend's jacket...but for some reason it wasn't as cold as it usually was.

Maybe it was the adrenaline rush...

Being knocked unconscious would probably do that to you, make your body temperature higher.

At least I thought it would.

Not that it really mattered.

I took a few steps across the stone platform, checking behind me twice to make sure I wasn't being stalked.

No sign of her.

I stepped down carefully from the stone curb and looked ahead, towards the steps.

The snow on the courtyard was as deep and white and Zhivagoesque as the first day I'd arrived, my earlier footprints having been swept over already. The only things different were the table and the chair by the wall and a black lump lying near the stone steps on the other side.

Quite a large black lump...

I shuffled forward, arms out in defensive positions.

Well, it was either a huge piece of coal or...

It took me five very slow, very cautious steps to realise it was her. And then another three steps to see she wasn't moving.

Oh Dami...

She'd clearly crawled out here all the way from the library, but...that didn't mean she was dead.

I circled round the edge of her, ostensibly heading toward the steps, but spiralling inwards to see if she really was as dead or unconscious as she seemed.

If she were only knocked out then I had to help her. Despite everything, I had to at least pull her back inside so she wouldn't freeze to death. And then maybe search her cloak for the door key. If she had one.

'Dami...'

Nothing moved.

'It's me, Billy.'

Not even a flicker.

I crouched down and moved to the side so I could see part of her face. Her eyes weren't lilac anymore. They were closed. A tiny stream of purple liquid was running away from the side of her head. Was that her blood? Could blood ever be purple? Not that I'd ever seen, but...if it was her blood then whose was the red stuff on her neck?

'Dami?'

She didn't move.

'Are you asleep?'

No answer.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you so hard...I didn't mean to hit you at all.'

Nothing.

'Dami?'

Still no answer.

Her body started to blur and split in two, just like the poker before, and a sharp throbbing pain crept up, getting stronger and stronger, more constant, fuck. I sat down on the snow next to her body and rubbed my head. It felt like someone was building a housing estate in my brain. I rubbed my palm against the back of my scalp then brought it back down. Still leaking, shit. But it wasn't that wet, so...

Ah fuck it, if it were that bad I'd have been dripping blood all the way here. I checked the snow behind me. No blood trail. I checked Dami again. Still unconscious. Or dead. Shit. I wanted to move closer and check her pulse or her heartbeat, but what if she wasn't really out? What if she was faking again?

I tried to think things through. The positive thoughts came first: she's not dead, she's just unconscious. She wasn't really gonna kill you. She skipped her meds the last few days. She likes you. She let

you stay here. She gave you eight grand. She cooked stew for you. Then the negative: she did try to kill you. What meds? She almost crushed your skull. When she wakes up, she'll try it again. She hates you. She wants to slaughter you. She said your writing was shit. You hit her on the head. You killed her. She'll never fuck you now. You killed her.

Shit.

She still wasn't moving.

What was I supposed to do here?

I couldn't carry her, I was too scared, and I couldn't hit her again, it was too barbaric. I couldn't search her cloak for the key cos that would involve touching her and what kind of person would I be if I took a key off an injured woman? Besides she'd be ready for me this time. Probably. And my head...felt like Dinosaur Jr had moved in...with a huge sound system and...fuck, I needed an aspirin...or a doctor...or a cushioned head before I could think about opening that door and...

Wait...

Her arms were...not twitching, but...I couldn't think of the word for it. They were just moving really, really lightly.

Shit, was she...

I put my hands up as fists, halfway between dropping down, picking her up and running to the nearest hospital and the other thing...kicking her in the head.

I didn't move.

I couldn't.

Something in my brain pulled out that same old bullshit: she loves you really. You almost fucked her. You could fuck her later. If you play your cards right. No, better than that, you could fuck her now. Drag her inside, stroke her a little, tell her it's okay. Tell her you saved her from the cold and everything's gonna be okay as long as you strip her down and stroke her thighs and...

I slapped myself.

There was no time for this shit. Her arm...it was moving again. Mini-spasms and finger twitches. She was recovering...without any kind of medical attention.

Of course, she was a witch.

She didn't need my help, she'd be just fine.

Okay, think.

Think, you fucking wretch.

I can't search her for the key, she's moving already.

There might not even be a key.

She was a witch, why would she need one?

Fuck, what else?

Okay, right, wherever she was going, whatever she needed to do, had to be down those steps because...because that's where she was crawling to...which meant the door could be open again and...

It could be a passage leading outside the castle.

Or something else.

It didn't really matter.

Whatever it was, it had to offer more hope than this place. Maybe some medical equipment too...

I edged away from her, cos edging was my thing, and watched her arms closely for any sudden grab attempts.

There weren't any.

When I felt my foot hit stone, I rotated and looked down.

Man...

The other door...the big forbidden courtyard door with a thousand steps leading down to it that had been locked almost every time since the day I arrived...was open.

'You little fuck...'

I looked back at her body, expecting her to be upright and floating toward me like an angry, beautiful wraith, or begging me for help, but she was still in the twitching stage. Ah well, she'd be able to take herself back inside now. She didn't need me. Release clause activated.

I turned back.

The door was still open.

I bent down and picked up some snow, trying to ignore the sharp thud inside my head as I did it. Every movement was painful now. Better to do things slowly. I stood back up, slowly, made a ball out of the snow and threw it into the dark space below.

It vanished without a sound.

Okay.

I turned one last time to check on Damijana, who was still twitching, then picked up another lump of snow and moved slowly down the steps.

Every step was matched by the door staying exactly how it was, along with another mortar attack on my brain.

Jesus...

I counted each step. There weren't a thousand of them, only forty, I could see that when I got halfway down.

Forty wasn't so bad.

Only nineteen more detonations then I could walk at ground level again.

Five steps, four steps, three, two...

I got to the bottom and put my hand right through the door space, desperate to get on with things.

It was open.

Ha, it was really open...as open as Jane Fonda circa 1971.

Another sharp pain struck at the same time as the Jane Fonda line.

Jesus, even creativity set it off.

Even Jane Fonda lines...

Fuck.

I leaned in past the door and tried to work out what kind of room it was. Big enough to hide in? Too hard to tell, it was almost pitch black. I felt along the side for a light switch but there was nothing.

Shit.

The only places that were ever pitch black were dungeons and basements and deep space, and none of those things were...

I didn't finish the thought. My head was throbbing again, the builders had returned, fuck. I rubbed the top of my skull, the place where it hurt, and looked at my palm. It was wet with blood, wetter than five minutes ago. I looked at my shoulder and saw it was dripping there too. Shit. Whatever it was she'd done, it was getting worse. If I didn't find a doctor, or a bandage, or a Jane Fonda soon...

I took a breath and stepped forward.

Five yards in and I'd lost sight of the door.

I kept moving forward, raising my legs slowly and putting my feet down on whatever was in front. I half expected some spikes or nails.

Cold stone floor, cold stone floor...

I started to relax a little. Well, not relax, my head was still hurting pretty bad, but I did rope in some confidence from somewhere. My steps became firmer, my breathing became calmer.

There was nothing bad in here...no certain death.

Nothing bad in here...

Nothing bad in here...

It was basic but seemed to work. The way I figured...between Jane Fonda flashbacks...if there were something bad in here and it wanted to kill me, it would do it no matter how positive or negative I was.

Better an idealist than a fucking schmuck.

#

Ten, fifteen minutes later [though it could have been shorter, I didn't know] I hit a wall. It didn't hurt even though I was walking quite fast...adrenaline took most of the impact, which I guessed made some kind of sense.

I reached out with my hand and felt along the stone until I felt something different.

Wood.

Another door?

I groped down and found a handle. It turned easy and opened, letting in a stampede of light that almost blinded me.

Weird thought, but...I'd never known light to move that fast.

It was as if, suddenly, light was diverse like people and some light could move at regular speed and other light could go a little bit faster. 1.7 x the speed of light.

Actually, why not? Why did humans assume light wasn't intelligent? If you really thought about it, light could...

The builders slammed another slab onto my brain and forced me to stop.

Jesus, it was getting worse.

I pushed the door a little further and stepped forward into whatever was outside this damn place. My best guess was: somewhere in the forest near the castle.

My weirdest guess: Bridget Fonda's sweatband.

#

It didn't...

What...

I stood in the middle of a place that I couldn't possibly be standing in.

Around me were the exact same walls and turrets and level of snow that had been in the courtyard in the other place.

The only thing missing was her. All of her, the cloak, the head, everything. There was no dent in the snow where her body had been laid out and no footsteps going in either direction.

But...how?

Had I gone in one huge circle?

Impossible. I'd gone straight all the way down that tunnel. There was no way I'd taken even the slightest curve...

Unless it was so slight it couldn't be recognised by human senses? Or my head wound had damaged my...

No, it wasn't right.

This courtyard...it was the same, but it wasn't. It couldn't be. I'd gone straight, I was sure of it, it couldn't be like this, it was...

I coughed, hard.

Jesus, the air...it tasted like sandpaper...

Or sandpaper particles floating into...

I coughed again and again, my throat dry, retching, and my head wet, beating like a drum with concrete...

Jesus, what was...

I coughed again, spitting out blood.

What...

The blood landed on the snow and made a spiral shape and then the whole thing, the snow on the courtyard floor started to rise, like a perfect white spaceship launching into the Slovene sky.

The spaceship rose a little higher then split into two.

Then into four.

Then into seven...

Then...

I looked back at the stone steps, coughing like an 80 a day smoker, spitting out more blood, and the steps, they were moving too, swinging from side to side, turning white, firing explosions at me, landing them inside my brain and...I couldn't see the rockets, but I could feel the...

I could feel the ground of the courtyard and...

it was shaking and shaking on me rough and...

holding me down and...

I coughed again, more blood.

The stone steps...

the cold stone steps

they were

they were stone and

Dami, the stone steps...

Dami duck...

I fell to the ground, or the ground slammed into me. The air tore at my throat, my lungs, the inside of all my skin.

Stone steps were close but

Fifty feet, sixty

they were

out in rage or

con caving

conko I can't

Venus

Venus green gas

Ice esk

ice as

fonda ice cold

ice cold

ice its

in venus

inside

rape not
type
Ima

One month later, Tsunashima, Japan

Daniella got to work at the same time as every other Monday.

She walked the same route, round the side of Omori station and bought the same shit from the same bakery. Pizza cake and sausage roll. Looking at them made her feel sick. Seeing the bakery lady looking at them made her even sicker.

The walk to the school was ten minutes and it was humid. She got there early. She walked into a spare classroom, sat down and ate the pizza shit. She couldn't remember the week before, or the taste of the week before shit, but she was pretty sure this was just as bad.

She picked up one of the cheap-looking pens and wrote notes in her notepad, trying not to look at the walls or the door or the class going on next door. God, she thought. Why does no one interesting work here?

Five minutes to the bell and one of the older teachers came in.

'It's cold outside...' he said, rubbing his hands. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'It's nearly lesson time.'

'Five more minutes...'

'More like two...'

He sat down with his coat on and talked about politics. Japan's becoming fascist again, he said. The leader looks like a murderer. I think he wants war. Daniella ignored him and dreamt of her new comic. It would be like Naruto, but better, edgier.

'...Dave was saying they were there since ages, thousands of years, but I was telling him, yeah, actually, they're not native, they came in boats, huge canoes, four, five hundred years back.'

Daniella pulled out of her Naruto world and tried to understand what the other teacher was asking her.

'You know what I'm saying?'

'New Zealand?'

'The Maori, yeah, they're not native, that's what I told him, but he's too stubborn, he wouldn't accept it. Got wedded to some fairy tale I don't know when, but...you can't fake history, we've got books on this stuff, hundreds of them.'

'I don't know.'

'What's that?'

'I don't know about New Zealand history.'

'Huh? I thought you studied it, at Uni...'

'Not me.'

'History, I mean.'

'Nope.'

He looked at his feet, at the giant koala attacking Thailand on the wall then back at Daniella. 'You don't read any, even now?'

'Not much.'

'Not even UK or Japanese or...'

'I did read a book on Venezuela, the hidden left...'

'Venezuela? Chavez?'

'The poor are the roots and the buds and the flower. Everything else is pestilence. But that was two years ago.'

'The poor what?'

'I might be misremembering, I don't know. The only other history book I've read recently was a short history of Turkey, children's version.'

'Okay, I think the channel switching's going a bit here...what I was saying was...'

The bell rang.

She moved quickly to the other classroom without saying goodbye and waited for her student. I don't want to do this, she thought. I really don't want to do this.

The first student came late and, as usual, was a prick. A three-year old prick. No, he wasn't a prick, but he wasn't listening either. Daniella said his name five times before she got an answer. The kid couldn't write his name. He couldn't count. He couldn't do much of anything except say 'goo-goo-da-da.' Daniella had taught him that.

Lunchtime. She got out of there and went to the Gold Lion Hotel. She used their free internet to look and see if anyone was reading her comics online. No one was. The hotel guy took her bag and put it on the floor. Daniella asked him if he thought it was a bomb. The guy said no.

'Then why are you putting it on the floor?'

'This is safety.'

'Huh? Whose safety?'

The guy smiled and walked away.

End of lunch.

Daniella went back to the centre. She taught two adorable little girls. They were fun. They talked about chickens and how they worked at KFC. Chickens cooking chickens. She remembered a complaint she'd got about not correcting young students. That kid was three. These girls were six. Could they see the difference? Did they really think a chicken would work at KFC? She didn't correct herself. Fuck it. And fuck the parents.

End of lesson. End of day.

She walked to the bus stop and thought she should probably go to a bar in Yokohama or somewhere different like that. But people would stare at her and she wasn't in the mood for that. Instead she went to Yoshinoya. She ate the same shit she ate every week. Beefu to gohan. She thought she said it wrong. But they didn't care. She ordered it every week. She could say 'Michael York is no man' and they'd still give her the same shit. She ate. People stared at her. She checked her phone. No message from Tomomi. No messages from anyone. She made notes in her notepad and thought ahead.

Got to find more people.

A student? A creative? Another comic artist?

Go to the University tomorrow. Don't look like a tramp. Take some comics and art and put them there?

Tie my hair back, wear contacts, put on my Blake's 7 t-shirt. Probably be wasted on them though. Probably be wasted on Tomomi too.

Daniella went back home and went online for a while. A while turned into the whole night. She didn't think about going out. Well, just once she thought about it. But she didn't. She couldn't. She talked to Tomomi online. Tomomi barely talked back. She told her about the song she was listening to. Dan Dan by My Little Airport. Tomomi didn't know it. Tomomi told her about her day using wacky speech. Or wacky language, because they weren't actually talking. Then she was gone. No goodbye. Daniella looked at the conversation they'd just had and saw a strange rhythm. Most of her questions had gone unanswered. Tomomi was in her own fucking world. She was probably anxious, Daniella thought. Or there was something going wrong up there, in her head. She could sense it. Tomomi was holding all the cards and she didn't know how that had happened. She was the artist. She was the active one. Why was Tomomi dictating play? Fuck it. Forget about her.

She went to the bathroom. She came back. There was a website about an Indian guy learning Japanese. He'd put a video up, claiming he was fluent. She clicked on it and tried to follow his words. It was tough. Japanese was tough. Verbs were at the end of the sentence. The word order was all mixed up. The Indian guy said you had to put in 25 hours a week, even if you worked 12 hours a day. Any less and it wouldn't stick. She got bored. She searched for Evelyn Wong instead. The lovely Evelyn. The girl she'd seen looking beautiful on the side of a bus. She found her blog and read it. She was a model from China. She'd done an ad for Maxims Devil cakes. She was a Capricorn. Daniella knew all this already. She read more. Evelyn's own words about herself:

'I'm just a girl...waiting to become a real woman' [Tagline]

‘Love doesn’t mean looking for the perfect partner. It means looking at the imperfect partner perfectly.’ [Philosophy on love]

‘I like feeling pretty.’ [On beauty]

‘Being a model is not about creating a pose. It’s about creating a character.’ [On work]

‘I’d like to get into acting.’ [On future plans]

Daniella studied the quotes. She laughed. She hit the sofa. She felt sick. She looked at Evelyn's picture. She was sitting in the snow with her legs spread, her face smiling. Her skin had no flaws. Her hair had been well-styled. Daniella stared at the picture for a while. She got tired of looking at the same picture. She clicked off the blog and told herself she'd come back to it later. Later, Evelyn, she promised. Daniella looked at the wall and briefly thought of sending her a message. But she didn't. She went to the kitchen and made a cup of tea. The teabag leaked. Little specks of brown floated up to the surface. Shit. She tried again. She succeeded. She went back to the couch and searched for porn. She typed in 'Evelyn Wong sex video'. She wasn't there. Damn. Thank God. She searched for 'Asian ladies fuck'. The same fifty or so video clips came up, all straight. Why were they automatically straight? She clicked to refine the search then stopped. She saw the video image she'd seen before, the one with the Korean girl riding the asshole in shades. God, she despised that guy. The way he had sex. His smug face even though he hid his dick the whole way through. Those fucking shades he wore. She clicked on the video. The sex began. She put her hand over her mouth, yawning. She looked at the wall again. 'Evelyn'. God, you're pretty. God, you're dumb. Tomomi's got more brains in her fingernail than you've got in your entire body. But your face is nice. And your body. The video clip finished and she realized she hadn't seen any of it. She played it back. The guy in shades held and pushed the woman about like she was a rag doll. She felt the same way she'd felt the other times. Uneasy. Angry. Violent.

The video ended. She stared at the 'reload' button but didn't click on it.

An e-mail alert flashed in the corner of the screen. She clicked on it. Probably another rejection. *Sorry, Daniella, your comic is not quite what we're looking for at this time.* Bastards. What am I? Not middle class enough? She thought of all those people who said it would be easy because she was black, because she was gay. Not fucking likely. Not on her terms. What kind of person would put that in their submission anyway? How would you even go about phrasing it? Fucking publishers, they're all college friends and rich kids. The message opened up. She read it. What the...? She read it again, wondering if this was a joke.

*'You are a genius. Come to Ljubljana. Live with me forever.
D'*

She stared at the keyboard. This couldn't be for real.

She thought of all the people she knew whose name began with 'D'. She couldn't think of any except 'Dad.' But he was gone. She wondered if this 'D' was a man or a woman. She decided on woman. Hoped for a woman. She shook her head. She read the message again. She wondered where Ljubljana was. Croatia? Slovenia? It didn't make sense. It was ridiculous. This couldn't be for real. Could it?

She stared at the screen for a while then opened a new page and searched for Ljubljana.

'Realising he was fighting a losing battle, Hojo burnt the monasteries and returned to his castle where, along with 34 family members, and two hundred and twenty retainers, he committed suicide.'

