



A Loud Exhaust

A NOVEL BY DAVID STUART

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A bunch of chapters.

Some images interspersed.

A heartfelt dedication at the end.

This book is free. No one profits from it, nor should they.

I apologise for words or phrases that offend; I'm of a particular generation and culture that felt safer with simpler, binary definitions of things that are actually diverse and gorgeously complex, fluid. I love breaking out of that indoctrination, I am curious and kind about all that I don't know. Please feedback. I promise I mean every sentence and sentiment respectfully and with an authentic adoration of people and experiences.

Cover picture taken lovingly by [Chidi Nobi](#).

Introduction

Have you ever met a monster?

A true sociopath?

My adoptive parents were convinced they had.

Me.

Not immediately; they met me at age five; they had real concerns after a year or two, but a decade later they were convinced the orphan they had taken into the bosom of their perfect home was fundamentally broken, and sure to mature into true Bond villainy or at very least, shoot up a school in vengeful teen angst. It was gun crime that orphaned me, so I guess if the prospects include growing up to be billionaire philanthropist Batman, or a teenager who shoots up a school, the stats aren't really in my favour.

Perhaps it was because I threatened to kill them at age nine.

(They knew I meant it.)

It wasn't some adolescent outburst because I couldn't have candy one day.

I was *not* that kind of child.

It was a calculated and deliberate message conveyed to them with full menace.

Um, via the babysitter.

(The malevolence of that method thrilled me more and caused ripples of other collateral upset that I found to be delicious.)

There are only 6 degrees of alternate reality that separate me from the malignant sociopath I might have become.

Perhaps cult leader, groomer, predator. Ted Bundy, Jim Jones; Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump.

Narcissist.

(Social media influencer? Motivational speaker?)

Evil runs in my instincts; it's primal, a living throbbing entity that governs my will. The desire to win, to conquer, defeat, to be right, to dominate and be worshipped.

Safe.

Unbeatable and in control of all that exists and happens around me.

Which of course, is an actual impossibility; I can't control everything around me.

And so, fear runs and throbs in my veins as powerfully as (and in perfect harmony with) my inner predator.

I have fought this my whole life. Unconscious of it for the first half, and I did some true cruelty to people. Unwittingly but unforgivably (I think).

I became conscious of it in mid adulthood. Quite an awakening. A very ugly self-awareness that dawned on me slowly like the Kraken awakening from the very deep.

I have fought it. Like a superhero battling inner demons, the gothic and the light, the inner torment that drives the most loved anti-heroes.

But it does not feel that heroic in the flesh.

It is a mental health battle to be good, to do good, to find an ethic to live by, because loving human emotions don't generate from this psychology, from this flesh, from this heart.

That is the defining thing.

The absence of the usual bonding emotions most humans have. The emotions that keep a parent protective and loving of a child.

The emotions of love and generosity of two animals that bond because an infant fares better within the support structure of a family unit.

The emotions that some species have to function as communities as societies. Love. Protection. Grief. Loss. Attachment. The emotions people feel when they hold hands. Or hug. The emotional reunion.

The empathy people feel that's helps them to resolve conflicts, identify with each other hold families or communities together.

And those things people feel when they have sex.

Yeah.

I don't have that.

These human bonding emotions and empathy were shocked out of me as a five-year-old, through trauma, I shut them down, auto-pilot protecting myself. Setting off a chain of events a lifetime long, hurting people, conquering, winning, beating, using, grooming, manipulating. Finding safe spaces, territorialising them, owning them, grooming the communities so I was safe. Devoid of those emotions that most people take for granted.

Most of my life; entirely oblivious to the emotions people were feeling around me.

I didn't even know I was different.

Let me tell you my story (said the narcissist). And I'll jump right in at the most traumatic and defining moment of my life.

The five-year-old me named it; I called it the Kill Kill Day.

Chapter 1

Kill Kill Day

Five years old.

I'm adorable. Ginger, freckles. My mum LOVED me and loved dressing me up in matching shorts and tops. This was 1972. Velour V-necks; picture Will Robinson from the original Lost In Space tv series.

My name was Dominic then. Dom. The only name I'd known up to that day, though apparently it was a nick name that had evolved. An entirely different name appeared on my birth certificate apparently.

My teddy bear was wearing some frilly costume that I'd stolen from my neighbour's Timey Tell doll, and which looked much better on Teddy than the naked state he'd come in. I may have been five years old, but I understood modesty and class; my darling mum raised me well. I think she dreamed she was a worldly and elegant European, not a separated single parent in outer suburbs of Adelaide. I clung to my teddy like a silly three-year-old might, but I was the youngest child of five brothers and my role in the eco-system of this family was the young spoiled cutesy kid. And I embraced my role. I normally took better care of the teddy, but today he was pressed hard and carelessly up against the passenger window, and my tight, panicky grip on his arm was making my knuckles white.

You see there was a gang of people circling the car I was locked in. I'd locked myself in it. There weren't a lot of safe places for me to be that day, but the

inside of this car, my dad's car, was just right; the people knocking and gesturing earnestly at me were clearly at bay, and their fraught attempts at getting to me failed and frustrated them.

It was reported in the press (days later) that I'd been screaming and crying. I don't remember it that way. They were out, I was in. That's what I remember.

In my right hand, also pressed up against the passenger window, was my dad's gun. My knuckles were white on that fist too.



(Above; me and Teddy; heterosexual brother with truck.

Below: another brother with gun. Let's assume it's a toy, but given my dad, that's just a kind assumption.)



Only fifteen minutes earlier I'd been alone in the car, parked in an empty section of an airport parking lot. I was dressed only in my pyjama bottoms, and covered in a light layer of Aussie dust from the earlier events of that day. It wasn't like me to be soiled, or poorly dressed, but my dad was having a bad day. He'd left me in the car and told me to stay. Just to stay. Just that one word. Being told what to do was never (still isn't) my strong suit. But there was a conviction and importance to his communication of this one word today, that I knew to stay. So when the gang of police officers became visible to me, running toward and circling the car, it was with the same conviction and importance that I set to, scrambling around the car, punching the door locks closed with my fist. My fist, because both hands were furiously attached to my bear and the gun, both of which were surrogates for a comfort blanket that morning. Not to be let go of. It had been many hours since my dad had shot and killed my mum in the side yard of our house, beside (yes actually) a white picket fence. It had been many hours, but an eternity and a moment, since I'd been hurled into the back seat of dad's Hillman Hunter Safari. Since then, we (my dad and I) had been driving around the suburban streets of 1970's Adelaide, cleverly outwitting the pursuing police. We'd been driving fast at times, slow at others; my dad was mostly silent, and I could hear a half full bottle of coca cola hurtling around the back seat as we spun corners, clashing with two other guns beneath the seats. Aside from my dad's strange mood, it had been an exciting day, winning against the chasing police. My dad made sure I saw it as an adventure.

So I was not about to let them into the car.

Hours passed, as they approached, circled, tried to get into my urgently-locked car.

It probably wasn't hours.

It probably wasn't hours at all.

But for hours, it seemed, I remained against the passenger window, watching the flailing panicked police officers, impotent against my door-locking prowess.

The feeling of adventure had passed; I don't know what I was feeling;

apparently (the social workers told me later) I was screaming and crying, but that just doesn't sound like me.

At all.

I'm a very composed person.

So I dispute that.

I knew my dad wasn't going to help. He had abandoned me in this car to pursue something much more important. And I knew, I knew he wasn't coming back.

He wasn't going to help. It was just me.

They got in of course, the hoard of policemen outside. I don't know how, I had been so brilliantly thorough and swift with my door-locking. It was through a rear passenger door behind me as I remained glued to the frenzy outside my own passenger window.

But I was angry. My safe space had been violated, and these people, pretending to be kind and protective, were not fooling me. I wouldn't be fooled again. Ever. I fought them. And I would continue to fight. For the ensuing decades I would fight.

But let me slow down. I race, emotionally as I tell these words.

As with all mariticides, the story starts much earlier.

Do we romanticize memories? I know we do, but I don't want to believe my memories aren't true.

So I won't.

My memory of home life before the kill kill was bliss. Later testimonies would lead me to believe that there was violence and passion between my mother and father; stuff my older brothers (I had four) would have been more aware of.

More impacted by. Later testimonies would reveal that my parents had been together, though unmarried, for fifteen or more years, living in pretend, tempestuous marriage, and parenting four (at that time teenage) boys. After fifteen or more years, this tempestuous relationship came to a kind of mercurial climax of which I know nothing, but what followed was a breakup and a reunion, a marriage (legitimately), and another boy.

Me.

I was born of a passionate reunion.

Never forget that, as this story continues.

It's something I feel in my bones every day.

Born of conflict and passion and violence and collision and union.

Just like the universe.

Life was bliss.

I don't remember my mum and dad being together, yet years later, it was a surprise to me that they were separated for most of my time with them.

It's amazing how children can take things very simply, and for granted.

I remember having great days out with my dad. I remember toys and rides and fun.

If he fought with my mum, which I learned later he did; I was unaware. I only remember one fight.

The big one, the kill kill one, the last day, the day my bliss ended.

I remember spending every day with my mum. This, I remember in the same way that some people believe in religion or cling to faith. I remember being inseparable, we were one. Her happiness was my happiness, her misery mine. She cried a lot. I remember sitting in the car for a million car journeys as she did her errands, and we talked. We talked like lovers might talk, our intimacy was absolute. I knew every detail of her changing moods and temperaments, because they were mine too. When she yelled at traffic, she was yelling my fury too, and when she cried, those tears were mine, ours. They tasted the same. I know, I'd licked her tears as she held me. I comforted her, that was my job. My purpose. She clutched to me desperately when she cried. Often, in her favorite chair (it rocked, this chair, back and forth), and she'd listen dramatically to her favorite record over and over. It was "Where have all the flowers gone", and gosh how she cried and clutched me. It was bliss.

We built cubby houses together out of overturned chairs and blankets, with tunnels to crawl through that led to small intimate spaces to cuddle and clutch.

We slept together at night. Nights were difficult for her, the loneliest time. She'd put me to bed, my own bed, but I'd walk myself back to her, because her loneliness was too much for her to bear. It hurt me just as much, and she cried less when I was with her. She'd drive me to pre-school, and we'd have fraught conversations when it came time for me to get out of the car. The nuns would stand in the doorway, greeting the children, and the ritual was the same, every day. Even after all the children were dropped off by their mums, and had entered the building, they'd wait for me, and watch as my mother and I had the same fraught conversation. She'd want me to go to school, but I'd argue that she'd be happier if I stayed home with her that day. And I was right. I knew she'd cry most of the day, I knew how difficult loneliness was for her. It made sense I stayed home. That to me, was logic, and I saw it better than the adults did.

Still do.

These fraught conversations were our ritual, and the nuns knew as well as I how it would end.



(Mum & Dad)



(Mum)

I knew what was best, and I was a great arguer even at age 5. A great fighter. Not a groomer, that skill would develop in the next family; at this stage I was a great debater and I knew when I was right and I didn't give up.

We invariably drove home together, and got about our daily routine. Driving around to our errands, talking intimately, yelling at traffic, and rocking, crying in the chair, listening to "Where have all the flowers gone". Over and over and repeat.

And our bedtime routine.

My days had this blissful, divine purpose, comforting my mother, despite herself.

My brothers would come home after school, and interrupt our intimacy. But that was OK; my mother enjoyed the distraction of managing her teenage boys. Perhaps I did too. They'd play with me in the cubby houses my mum and I had built. They'd build kites and set them free in the wind. We'd chase them, all five of us, on our bikes down the neighborhood street, me being left behind on my three-wheeler, unable to keep up with my excited big brothers chasing the kite on their grown-up bikes.

Bliss.

It didn't seem odd to me that my father didn't live with us. In fact I was surprised to learn that he didn't later on, when I was all grown up at age 9. Long after the kill kill. I learned lots of things later that didn't fit with my blissful memory. An autopsy revealed that my mother had no breasts. The coroner's report read, to be exact "The breasts are abnormally firm and protuberant suggesting plastic inserts". I'll assume the coroner was male. My rage boils when I think of a stupid man prodding and poking and examining my mother's naked dead body. Had she had cancer? Had she had breast implants? Is that what had caused the reunion and marriage between my father and mother so late in life? The reunion and marriage that gave birth to me? Had cancer brought them together? Had a mastectomy torn them apart? What happened to their sex life? Why the violence?

But these were questions that didn't bother the bliss. Our bliss was ours, and my memory is mine. I remember my mother being a model. I remember her being tall, blond, almost masculine in her Amazonian womanhood, she could terrify the scariest of monsters in my closet, manipulate any stupid man. She could stand up to my big scary father. She towered above all people, long determined strides, nothing got in her way. She ruled our house, even when Dad was there. She ruled our neighborhood, she ruled the streets and the traffic that was in her way.

The nuns wouldn't dream of arguing with her that I should be in school.

That wouldn't have turned out well for the nuns.

But I played my part in that too. Don't forget my strength. My fight. Me and my mother were the same.

Strong.

Predatorial strength; the strength that sleek fierce predators have, the strength needed by people who have had to fight and manipulate and innovate earnestly to survive.

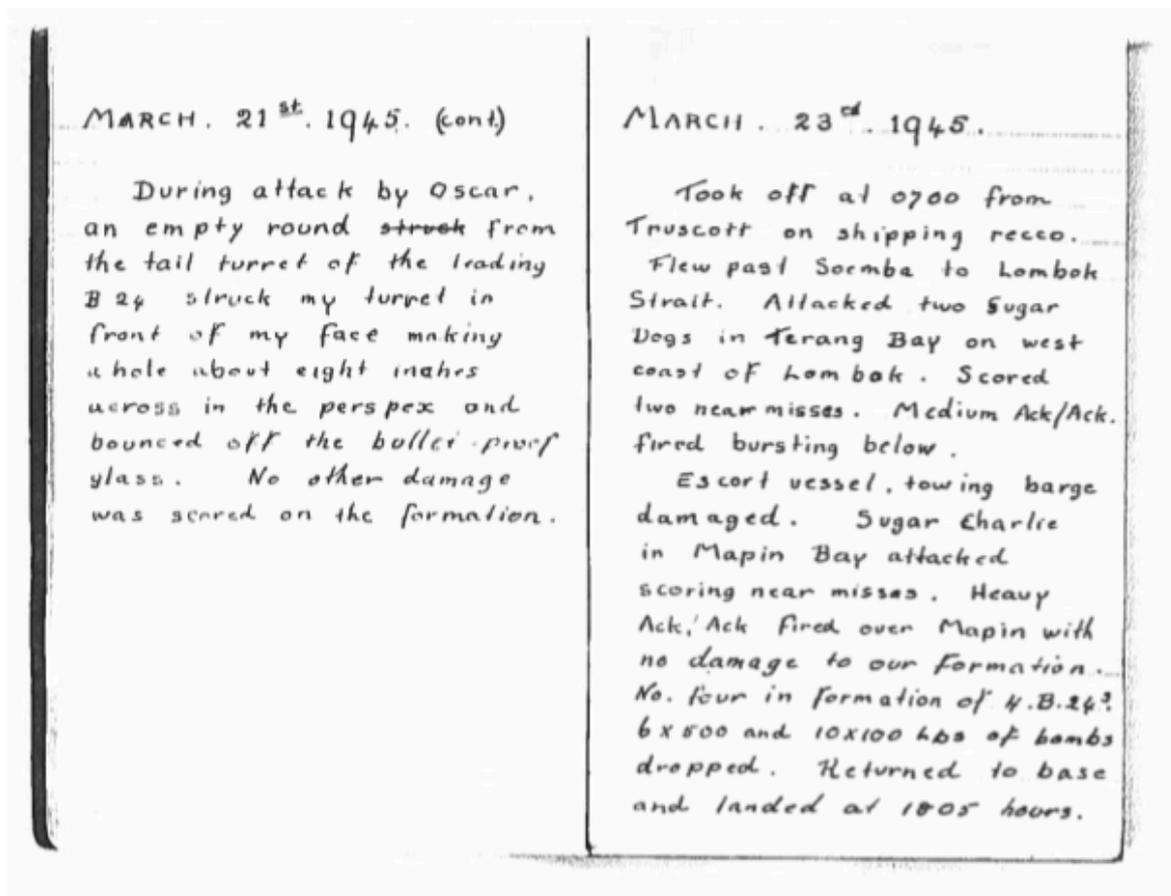
But strength and height and fight are not enough to keep misery away. I don't know why my mother cried. I don't know where her misery lay. I don't know if my Dad was violent; I never saw that, except for that one day. I do know what PTSD is like, I know what it's like. I know how it manifests. I know what cancer does to a person, I don't know what a mastectomy is like on a marriage. I know that anyone who made my mother unhappy felt my wrath, my glare. It was that of a survivalist predator. Petulant, spoilt angry children can be terrors when defending their mother, and no one was as gifted as me in that regard.

I'm the same today.

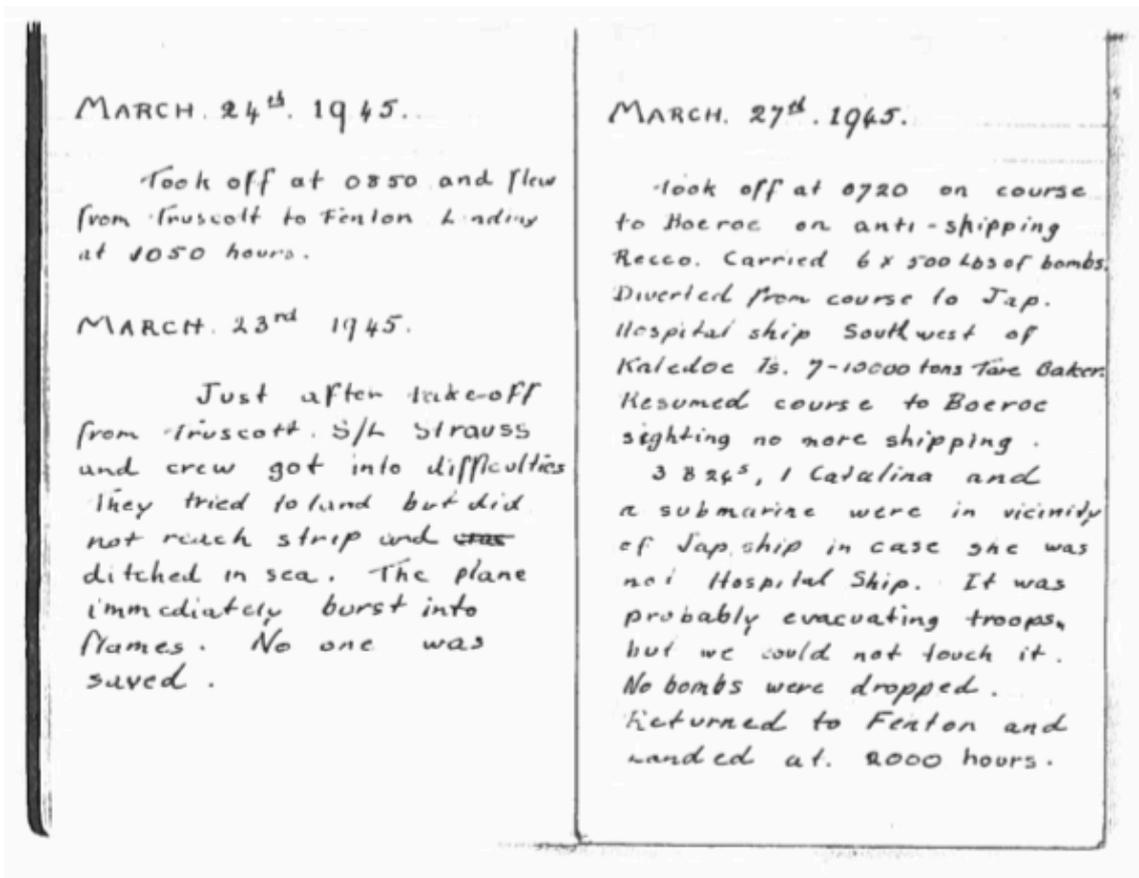
I can't imagine why they stayed together, unmarried, through (what I surmise now to be) my father's PTSD. I don't know why they never married despite parenting four boys, living in suburban bliss. I don't know why my father's life before mother is such a mystery; no relatives, just a war diary, and a set of encyclopedias. He was a travelling salesman, my father. He sold encyclopedias.

You know; after killing people in the war with guns. He sold encyclopedias and killed his wife.

I do know that I loved the time I had with my dad. I loved my dad. My emotions worked then, I'm sure. I'm sure I felt it. He was good.



(Dad's war diaries)



And I loved the few, the awfully few years I had with my mum. That intimacy defines a person, defines a life. It sets a person up for life.

Well it has the potential to, unless it is violently ripped away.

I know my memories, if not all the facts.

But I am procrastinating. I will tell you about this day, with the special name.

The day had started as they often do. My mother had wanted me to go to school, but I felt otherwise, and somehow I'd convinced her of my better sense, even before I'd gotten dressed. That's clear in my head, because pajama bottoms were my only clothing through some particularly intense adventures across the city that day. I'm not sure what appropriate attire might be for a day that the entire rest of your life pivots upon, but it seems that on this day, the universe deemed it to be nothing but pajama bottoms. Me with my sense of modesty and class. Pajama bottoms were the only thing between my naked

vulnerability, my innocence, and the glaring gawking eyes of hundreds of shocked onlookers and players, in this game of chase and kill that would unfold that day. Well I had my teddy bear with me, and a gun, so I guess they could be considered protective too.

It was a telephone call between my mother and father that first alerted me to danger. I don't remember the details, but I knew something was unusually wrong.

Then I have a memory gap.

Then I'm in the back yard, my mother is there and she is bleeding from the nose. Not from the nostrils. This is a very bad wound, and she is panicked. My father is there, but he's not the focus of my attention. It's my mother's nose and her screams. Her screams are her telling me to go get Mr. and Mrs. Tester, our neighbors. But it felt wrong to leave amid such urgency.

Next memory: I'm locked in the playroom. The room we built the cubby houses in out of blankets and overturned sofas. My Teddy bear was in there, which was a good thing. I was too adult for a teddy bear, but I kept him with me most days; not for the reasons most children like teddies. I was too old for that. It was just a habit from my younger years, and I was glad to have him (I mean it) this day. Dad had locked me there, in the playroom. I knew how to get out, the lock was on the inside; but I wasn't tall enough to reach, so I began the process of dragging the heavy sofa over to the door, to stand on, to unlock the door. It took an hour.

It probably didn't.

It probably didn't take that long at all.

But it took an hour, it seemed, to get out of the playroom, and when I did, things were calmer.

No.

Quieter.

My father was in charge now. I knew this as if the Earth had shifted on its axis. It was like gravity was different or something. He led me away by the hand, and I was quiet. There was something very safe about my dad holding my hand. You know when a mother cat carries her kittens by the scruff of the neck, and they go limp, passive.

That's what my dad's handhold was like.

Mum wasn't there, she wasn't anywhere. I didn't need to look to know this.

I could feel it in the gravity, in the Earth's axis.

I knew not to ask. I knew to be quiet.

And dad had me by the scruff of the neck.

I mean by the hand.

He led me to his car.

There was a very large box in the garage, it was where we kept firewood for the fireplace we never used. Empty, obviously, of firewood, that's how these things go.

My mother was in that box. I don't know how I knew. Gravity. But I was limp, passive in the clutch of my father's hand.

We drove. We were quiet for the first hours, we were both numb from the morning's events, and it was nice and safe just to have each other. Dad drove, and I sat in the back, in my pajama bottoms, still clutching that teddy bear as if I was some child. Just a habit. I watched the city out of the window as we drove through it. Morning. People going to work, mums taking their boys to school, mums running errands, yelling at traffic. Red lights, green lights, walk signs. Dad's driving cars, to work probably, grey suits.

There was lots to watch, and we were just driving, together, in silence, with each other. This felt very intimate, just the two of us, sharing this numb togetherness. The intimacy intensified after hours, driving. It's as if I could hear his thoughts, and the first hours in the car, his thoughts had been silent, numb. But his thoughts were becoming agitated, and I could hear them, like he was speaking.

"What's happened. What did she make me do? Why does she always make me do this stuff? Bitch. Infuriating bitch, why does she make me do that. What have I done? What happens now. Where am I driving. Oh my God, the boys, oh my God, David. What is going on. What have I done, what have I done, what have I done?"

His thoughts were all over the place, his moods were changing faster than humans can normally do. This was guilt, and anger, and denial, and fury, and despair, and unimaginable shame, pain, regret, all raging faster and more furiously than human beings can manage. A person explodes with all that stuff happening inside them so furiously.

I'd moved to the front seat and was holding his big arm (because his hands were busy driving). I just stared in his face, because it was calming for him. It worked for my mum, and I'm very good at this. It was my role in the eco-system that was my family.

We drove, and I held his fury and turmoil for some more hours.

We stopped. Many times: we stopped at phone booths around the city. He made calls. They were all to the police (mostly), professing guilt, explaining what he'd done. I couldn't hear what was said on the other end of the phone, but it looked like my dad wasn't listening either. Just talking into the phone. Nonsense some of it. He usually hung up after just stopping mid-sentence, frozen still in thought, before just replacing the receiver. Back to the car.

I was young, but I knew we'd done something awfully wrong, and the police wanted us to either go see them, go home, or to come find us. I was young but they didn't seem to understand what had really happened, and I did. They seemed to think that we were bad. They wanted to catch us.

We were driving again. Parking sometimes down side suburban streets. A man watering his lawn outside a house we were parked by, waved and remarked what a lovely morning it was. It was very odd. Why would he say such a thing? Couldn't he see what was going on? Why didn't he help us?

I hated him and his lovely morning.

One of the phone calls on one of our phone booth stops seemed to be about my big brothers. Dad was asking someone to assemble them in the Headmaster's Office. He said we were going to their school. This was the first time in these hours that we'd had a purpose, an actual defined destination. This felt good, Dad seemed more purposeful. He still needed my calming skills, but his focus was on a destination, and there seemed to be a plan. I held his arm, and we both faced forward, at the road that was taking us somewhere planned, for the first time that morning.

We arrived at my brothers' school. They were all in a big secondary education school, and it was big and overwhelming. I hadn't seen it often. We left the safety and emergency of our car, and walked toward the giant collection of buildings, so quiet with everyone in classes. And then we were in a nun's office, and my dad was telling her things. My dad seemed bossy and a bit scary to her probably, but that's only because she didn't understand us, and because of the urgency of our morning. My brothers were not assembled there.

I suddenly became aware of the plan, and it was not a plan we shared, it was my dad's plan, and I didn't like it. I found myself alone in the office, told to wait as if I was a child. Alone, told to sit on a chair. The nun had left me there, told me to sit, while she left to collect my brothers from classes.

And my dad had left, walking back to our car.

To leave.

I became furiously aware of what was happening.

Why would my father abandon me like this?

We had shared this urgent morning, no two people in the history of the world, had ever been so united and so intimate as we had that morning.

Why would he abandon me?

I didn't have time to think why. He was doing all sorts of stupid things this morning, all I knew was where I belonged, where I was meant to be.

Another chair needed to be dragged to the door for me to escape yet another room, and then I was out, running toward our car. My dad was already in it,

turning slowly out of a parking space, and accelerating away. But I had a hold on the open windowsill, and I was climbing in, probably screaming (no probably not; I'm very composed even in a crisis) but my focus was true, my determination resolute. I was a predator, a survivalist. I kept up with the moving car, undeterred. I climbed in the car window as it drove away, my dad furious, yelling, but no louder than I was.

No, probably not. I 'm not much of a yeller.

I was in, inside the moving car. I was back where I needed to be, and the world was to rights.

We forgave each other immediately (without speaking), because we both knew the inevitability of our togetherness. My mum had always been wrong about whether I needed to be in school, or at home with her, but I'd always known.

And my dad was wrong to leave me behind, but I knew better. I was back in the car, we were together, and thank goodness I'm good at this.

Because adults really aren't.

We were driving, but again, we had no plan. Dad's specialty. Dad was speaking, not necessarily to me, but sometimes.

There is no memory problem here. These hours, these things my dad spoke of this day; these I remember. I remember because he spoke of everything that mattered in the world, everything that was of the human condition. About life, the meaning of it, the confusion of it, the unfairness of it. He raged against the purposelessness of existence, he emoted about the joys of one great all time love. He processed his self-loathing, he philosophized about murder, life, the end of life, children that jump in car windows like they know what's best for them. He summed up womanhood, he knew the woman's place. He redefined the role of police in society. He imagined his own future, his own very immediate future. He turned himself in to the police at every phone booth we passed, but then ran, drove. He ached over his morning behaviour. I say ached, because I have no other word. The ache was like a heavy moist black cloud in the car that was busting. Shame or guilt were there, but they feel too obvious,

too easy. Awful, confused, uncontrollable angst, that just spilled out of him, in prolific life messages that would serve me for the rest of my life. No thought or point or realization would stay with him long; this was mercurial waxing, but by psychic communication as well as mutterings.

But I heard it all, and it all made sense to me. We were as one, we'd shared this morning, it was on both of us. We ran together, we drove together, we felt together. We turned ourselves in to the police at phone booths together, and we fled together.

We shared it all. The emotions, the ache, the philosophy, the injustice of life itself, the impossible-ness of it. Intimacy. We were one.

This was bliss.



(My Dad.)

I was so familiar with this car, this day. I felt like I had lived in it for years. The giant plastic steering wheel. It was gripped and smacked incessantly this morning, with the palm of my dad's hand as he mused and spoke and ached and yelled and drove. The half empty bottles of coca cola that were flung around the care as we turned corners, sped away, stopped urgently at phone booths. The swish and glug of them. The way the metal of the guns on the floor

connected with all the fixtures of the car as we fled and drove. I'd been all over the car during these hours, in my pajama bottoms. I'd crawled all over, front to back. There were the hours on dad's lap, the hours I sat in the passenger seat. There were the hours I lay on the back seat, when my dad had told me to get down, to hide. The hours staring out the rear passenger windows, at the suburbs we drove through, the city. Staring while listening to my dad's acute chaotic wisdom. Learning my life lessons.

A person who is about to die, enjoys a great clarity and philosophical capability, a great wisdom in his final hours. He understands everything, he knows everything.

My mum in the box.

Deciding whether my dad should live or die before the end of the day was one of the topics we deliberated the most, in these hours. As the hours wore on and the streets passed us by, it became the absolute focus of our concern. We had to figure this out together.

I didn't quite understand, but I understood the urgency. And my role in the decision-making process.

Do I go to school, or stay home with mum? A dilemma for my mum, but I knew. Do I stay with my big brothers at their secondary school, or climb back in the car window with dad? Obvious to me.

I always know best.

Do we live or die today? How does this day end?

It was becoming obvious, as the hours wore on, and as we mused on it more. However, the day wore on – we were together. In bliss, so everything was ok. It really was.

This was not distressing for me. This was intimacy. This was home, this was safe. This was togetherness, something I did well, something I'd always helped my mum and dad with. This was my thing, my role in the eco-system that was my family.

I'm good at it.

Today, these hours, in this car, we were together, sharing the urgency of life and death itself, and we were together and intimate. Bliss.

Figuring out together, how it ended. I might not have been talking, it might have looked to an outsider, like dad was just rambling at yelling at the traffic, at me, but it was nothing like what it must have looked like; know what I tell you. This was togetherness, this was dialogue. We shared this life and death urgency, and I was doing what I'd always done, what I was especially good at. I was making everything ok, making the big decisions, and looking after the vulnerable.

I was glued to the rear passenger window, my dad's philosophizing continued. We'd agreed on how this ended, it was just the finer details that required some... more agonizing thought.

There was a gun. There was a gun on the front passenger seat, and there were two more rattling around the floor of the car with every corner we swerved, every phone booth we stopped suddenly at. Rattling and swishing around the floor with a few soft drink bottles. These were the soft drinks we'd consumed at a picnic. We always did fun stuff when I got to see my dad.

So the scene was set, the plan was made, the gun was there, and we all know how this ends.

We die, and it's the best thing. We'd join mum, and she'd forgive us, she'd understand. She always did. She always knew my father's anger was not my father; it was just his periodic anger. We'd discussed my older brothers' fate, and since they were all teenagers, they'd be Ok.

The illogic of this, as I tell this story, does not escape me. My brothers would have traumatic lives, and the tragedy would be passed on, for further generations.

I wonder if it had been better if they'd have died with us that day. I don't think I'll think about that actually.

But another of those damned memory gaps must interrupt this story.

Relative to the death by shooting of June Elizabeth STUART at 35 Travers Street, STURT, on Friday 1st December, 1972, and the subsequent suicide of her husband Alan Joseph STUART.

Graham John BARTLETT, Detective Senior Constable First Grade stationed at Adelaide CIB, states.....

At about 10.20 a.m. on Friday 1st December, 1972, while at a dwelling at 35 Travers Street, STURT, investigating the murder by shooting of an occupant of the premises, Mrs. June Elizabeth STUART, I heard the telephone in the main bedroom ring and had the following conversation with a male person.....

I said "Bartlett speaking"
He said "Who is speaking?"
I said "My name is Bartlett. Who is calling please".
He said "It's Allan Stuart here Mr Bartlett. How's my wife?"
I said "I think you know that don't you Mr Stuart. Where are you ringing from? It's important that I get in touch with you".
He said "Merino. I just had to do it. We've been separated you know. I just couldn't stand it".
I said "Where exactly are you Mr Stuart, it's best if I can see you and have a talk about things".
He said "I'm at Merino. I've got young Dominic with me. I tried to leave him at the college but he kept jumping back in the car".
I said "Never mind, everything will be all right I'm sure. Where can I see you?"
He said "I'll come down to the house ,,....."

The caller then hung up and did not call again.

The caller, who was no doubt the deceased woman's husband spoke quietly without any trace of emotion in his voice.

Because he appeared so calm I believed that he would indeed come to the house and I ordered the area cleared of Police vehicles.

Some time later, however, Allan Stuart's car was seen near the Adelaide airport and shortly after he shot himself in the head as Police closed in.

My next memory is of having an awful realization, an awful one. One that ended my life.

My next memory is sitting alone in the parked car, in my pajama bottoms.

God it was hot.

My dad was gone, and despite my memory gap – I knew he'd left, I knew he'd abandoned me. I think I knew he was dead, but gone, feels more appropriate.

The gravity was different again and I just knew. The intuition that accompanies such intimacy.

He'd done this alone.

And I was left behind.

I can't describe how I felt. My life had ended, and there is no way to describe how that feels. The intimacy, the togetherness, the shared urgency of that day, of all the days – was gone. Forever. And I was left behind.

My rage was born in that moment. It fuels me still.

I didn't have time to think about it though. People were surrounding the car.

Just regular people at first, I remember a person who was probably a mum. She had that look about her that I know really well, she was a mum. She knocked kindly on the window, and spoke muffled; but I didn't like it. I set to, rolling up all the windows of the car that were open, locking all the doors with my closed fist.

This job seemed an eternity. Or maybe I just kept moving around the car repeating the locking process, not trusting the locks to protect me. More people had gathered around the car, and they spoke, muffled, knocked, peered in, shadowing their eyes with their hands. Checking the doors. More people. Some of them were police now, and the urgency had built. Everyone, at every window, speaking at me, asking the name of my teddy, where was my dad, my mum, put down the gun, open the door for them, how long had I been there, where was my mum or dad. I was busy racing around the car, locking the doors with my fist, occasionally a person at the window holding my interest for a moment.

Some hours later they got in. It wouldn't have been hours, but that's how I remember it. I don't know how they got in, but it was chaos and noise and

grabbing and I had no choice, no freedom. A theme that was born in that moment that would stay. Such noise, from all the people, and a firm, firm grip on my arm that I riled against, I writhed and squirmed and hit and struggled, but I had no choice, no freedom. The noise, the questions continued, it roared, and all I could see was the fabric of people's clothes, because I was surrounded, amid a bustle of people that were all wanting me, wanting to grab me, and restrain me and get answers from me.

Memory is poor, but that continued for days. I was in interview rooms with female police pretending to be kind, but they wanted information, so much information. The nuns from my school appeared in these days, also acting kind, but wanting information. Information about that day, about the previous days, about the previous years, about that day.

I hated them all. Hate would stay with me too, the rest of my life.

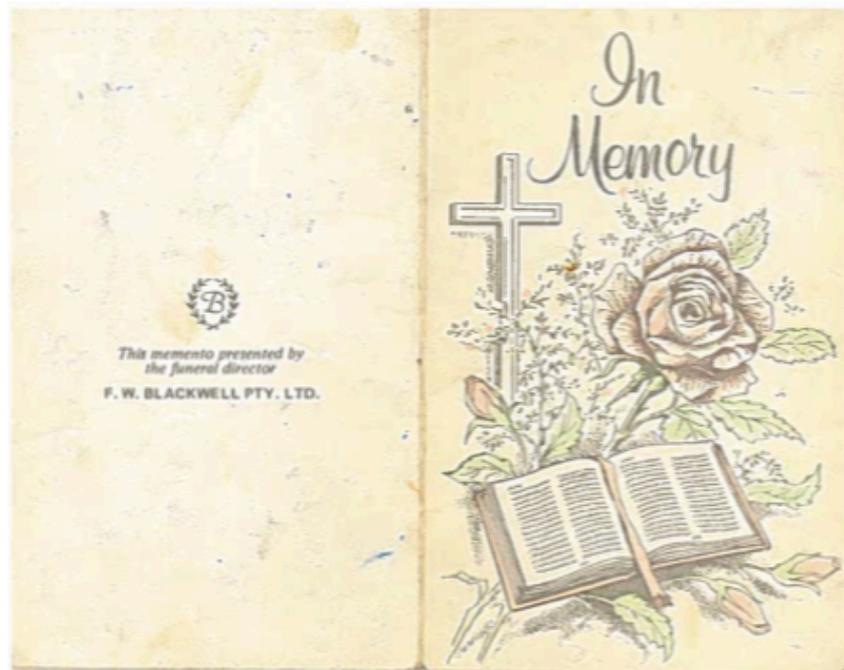
I remember a house, I remember evening. My brothers were there, but I don't remember being with them in a way that mattered. I trusted no one now. I was reborn differently. I died that day.

We were there a day or two perhaps? Then new strangers came. My mother's four brothers. They deliberated over which of them would take which of us to live with them. The cheek of it. One of them came into my bedroom, he said his name was Gray, and that we both had red hair and freckles and that that meant we would be great friends. This disgusted me. That immediate presumption of intimacy and eternal friendship smacked of the same revulsion you'd feel when you see a grown man offer a lone child some sweets outside a school playground. I was young, but I'd lived in a family of 1970s domestic violence and toxic masculinity and I felt grooming in my bones, I recognised it even if I didn't know what it was.

I hated him. It took a second to hate him, and as he tried to control me and win my adoration over the next twelve years, my hatred and resistance would only grow.

He took me away.

He took me to another city, to Melbourne, where he had a family of his own. A big family, all female, all adoring him, defending him, competing for his approval which could be (and was often) withdrawn at any moment. The king of the household. The way he liked it. The family and the dynamic he had created. I'd live there and suffer there for twelve years. And as I resisted his grooming game, I'd suffer further, and I'd develop the survival skills, the finely honed predatorial skills of a groomed child, the skills that would keep me safe (and ruin any chance of happiness) for the rest of my life.

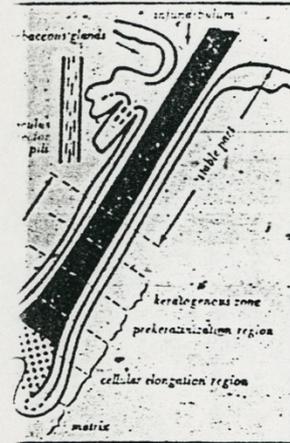


<p>The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.</p>	<p>† In Memory of</p> <p>ALAN JOSEPH STUART</p> <p>Passed Away December 1st 1972</p> <p>AGED 47 YEARS</p> <p>Loved Father of RODNEY, MARK, KVM., GARY & DAVID</p> <p>Funeral Service Conducted by THE REV. FATHER O'MARA</p>
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in an independent laboratory
formation and research
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Australia and overseas. Our
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treatments for hair and scalp

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course without obligation.
told frankly whether or not
helped. Remember, there
for baldness; if you are
then we can't help you.
(it is too late!)

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Phone 23-2866
Consulting Hours
10.00 a.m. - 7.30 p.m.
Sat.: 8.30 a.m. - 1.00 p.m.

terrace, Phone 21-6654
3.30 a.m. - 1.00 p.m.

'Gandhi' too old at 70

Because of his resemblance to the Indian patriot Mahatma Gandhi, amateur actor Mr. Michael Crook, 70, of Dudley crescent, Marino, is inevitably cast as a holy man.

His most recent appearance with the Mayfair Light Opera Society, of which he is a life member, was as the holy man in the society's production of "Song of India."

So, when he heard that actor-director Richard Attenborough was in town and still searching for an actor to play Gandhi in a multi-million-dollar film, Mr. Crook offered his services.

"The Advertiser" arranged a meeting and the two spent several minutes chatting.

Mr. Attenborough said, however, he wanted an actor aged about 25 for the role.

The actor would be "aged" with make-up to

portray Gandhi's life from a young man to his death.

At a Press conference yesterday, Mr. Attenborough said he expected to start work on the Gandhi script within a few months and begin filming in India towards the end of next year.

Production would take about two years.

Mr Attenborough is in Adelaide with his wife to launch the \$6m. production of "Young Winston," which he directed.

The film of Winston Churchill's younger years stars Simon Ward, who is due in Adelaide on Thursday — the day the film begins at the Fair Lady theatre.



Mr. Attenborough at his Press conference.

Wounded man dies

A man who shot his wife dead at their suburban house, on Friday morning died in The Queen Elizabeth Hospital on Friday night from a self-inflicted bullet wound.

He was Allen Joseph Stuart, 50, of Travers street, Sturt.

His wife, June Elizabeth Stuart, was shot in the head with a .22 rifle in the backyard of her house in Travers street, Sturt, about 9 a.m. on Friday.

Her five-year-old son was seen about two hours after the shooting crying in a locked car off Burbridge road, near Adelaide Airport.

Stuart was later found by detectives lying near a fence alongside the DCA Bowling Club with a revolver beside him.

Mrs. Stuart's five young sons spent Friday night with the secretary of the Salesian College, Brooklyn Park.

They went to Melbourne by car yesterday with the dead woman's brothers and father.

The boys are Rodney,

15, Mark, 13, Kym, 11, Gary, 10, and Dominic, 5.

Identified

A mystery woman found near Gawler early on Friday suffering from an overdose of drugs has been identified.

The woman, 22, whose name has not been disclosed, was in a satisfactory condition in the Royal Adelaide Hospital, last night.

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Because it was about to RAIN!

A bureau spokesman sorted it all out.

"It is not just a simple cold front," he said.

"This frontal zone from the west is highly complex."

He said the bureau saw it coming, but had to recommend to the Country Fire Authority a State-wide ban to cover the east, because it was not affected.

"We have to make the ban for uniformity in the state," he said.

The bureau expects showers tonight with gusty south-west winds.

FINE AGAIN

It should fine up again tomorrow with temperatures in the 20s in the south of Victoria.

Melbourne's overnight temperatures remained in the 20s after yesterday's peak of 36 deg.

The temperature today fell to 19 deg. at 9 a.m. and 18 deg. at 10 a.m. as the change came.

The change and showers brought some relief to Victoria's firefighters.

But the CFA duty off-

under control or out.

The biggest, at Enfield on the Ballarat-Cressy road, burnt out 9000 acres of forest.

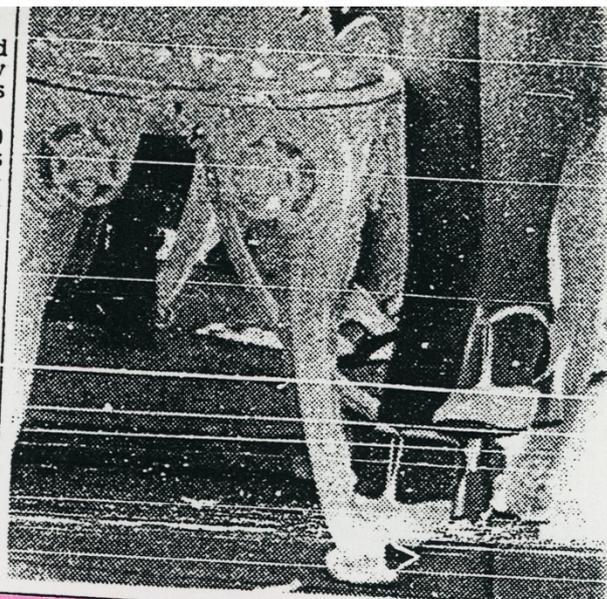
Another big fire in 200 acres of forest 11 miles north of Moe on the Moe-Erica road, was checked last night.

DRIZZLE

Low cloud and drizzle closed Moorabbin airport and restricted the use of Tullamarine and Essendon airports.

Around Hobart, several hundred men were out in bush country today fighting fires that flared up in yesterday's heat.

Cooler weather and rain were expected to help bring most of the fires under control.



NOW FIVE ARE ORPHANS

ADELAIDE. — Five boys are orphans today after a shooting.

Their father, found yesterday with a shotgun wound to the head, died in Queen Elizabeth Hospital at 8 o'clock last night.

He was Allen Joseph Stuart, salesman, of Travers St., Sturt, a south-eastern Adelaide suburb.

Earlier, police found Stuart's wife, June, shot dead in their home.

A quick swim and then breakfast with the family.

Mr McMahon, Sonia, and their children, Melinda, 6 and Julian, 4, enjoyed breakfast on the patio of their Bellevue Hill, Sydney home today.

It was a relaxing start to a most important day for the Prime Minister

● Follow tonight's election progress count with The Herald's lift-out guide on Pages 15, 16 and 17.

AUSTRALIA AT THE POLLS

Jury vote • Continued from P. 1

BRISBANE. — The law had to make allowances so that a murder trial jury can vote today.

The jury has been locked up for two weeks for the trial of a man charged with murder.

Normally outsiders are not allowed to speak to a murder trial juror from the time he is sworn in, until the end of the trial.

Mr Justice Skerman said special arrangements had been made so that they could vote.

The jury, which has

speaked to jurymen, but only on electoral matters.

The jurors voted at a special table, away from the public.

Queues

The chief electoral officer in Victoria, Mr Charles Lack, said this afternoon that polling was steady at most electoral-ates.

He said there were queues at the Mooree Ponds town hall when they opened at 8 a.m.

He said there were no reports of trouble or bogus how-to-vote cards from any of the polling-

LEAD GROUP NATURAL

ADELAIDE.—The world's largest lead producer, Broken Hill Associated Smelters Pty. Ltd., is planning to switch to natural gas.

The company's managing director Mr J. B. Shackell, said this in Port Pirie today.

He said an agreement for natural gas would be signed with the

tween the gas company and the producers, Deih Santos Ltd.

A 50-mile pipeline is involved.

Mr Shackell said that BHAS believes that the main pipeline to Adelaide from Giddegalpa should have been routed west of

11/2/72

Hawke said: "It was part of the terms of the discussion that the two union officials should be released from gaol."

Mr. Hawke said the building dispute had not caused a split in the ACTU.

"However, if the matter had been put in the hands of the ACTU earlier I am sure it could have been settled," he said.

Today Australian Building and Construction Workers organiser Mr. M. Masterson, who is in Adelaide, could not say if there would be a strike next week.

"We have put the matter in the hands of the ACTU, who meet on Monday," he said.

"But we are going to fight this to the bitter end."

The union would make a decision on strike action after the ACTU met on Monday.

Mr. Masterson said: "Mr. Hawke apparently came over here to try to take the steam out of the situation but it seems it was a failure."

But they have made their stand, and we have to stand by them.

Wounded man dies

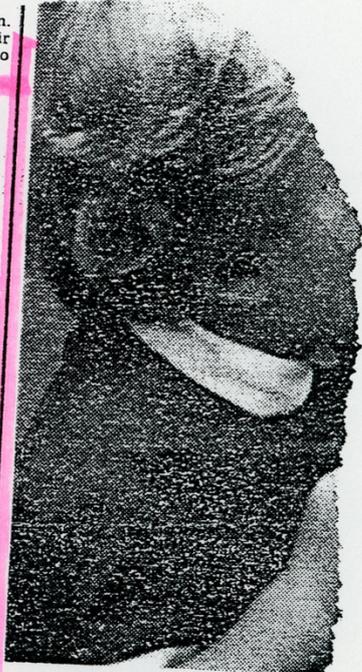
A 50-year-old man who shot dead a woman, then shot himself yesterday after fleeing police near Adelaide Airport, died in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital last night.

He was Allen Joseph Stuart, of Travers street, Sturt, a salesman.

Stuart died shortly after 8 p.m. from severe head injuries from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, police said.

Homicide detectives said the woman Stuart murdered was his wife, June Stuart.

Detectives said today there would be no further inquiries into the murder-suicide.



THREE KILLED: STAT. TOLL NEAR

Three men died on South Australian roads overnight in one of the worst runs of fatal accidents in the Adelaide area in recent months.

The three deaths take SA's road toll this year to 278 and heighten safety officials' fears that the death list could reach 300 by the end of the year.

Police today said the toll was 13 ahead of the total for this time last year.

The increase was doubly disappointing in view of significant reductions in road deaths in the eastern States.

Two of last night's accidents happened on country roads and one occurred in Adelaide.

Victims were:

• Johannes Cornelius van der Horst, 49, a painter, of McKay avenue, Christies Beach.

Van der Horst was killed in a two-car collision at the intersection of South road and Tatchilla road, Maslins Beach, at 11 p.m.

• Kenneth John Price, 18, a student, of Hazel terrace, Henley Beach.

Price was killed when a car smashed into a stobie pole on Port road near the South road intersection, at 2.30 a.m.

Hits pole

Two others in the car were injured and admitted to Royal Adelaide Hospital in a satisfactory condition.

• A 33-year-old cyclist from M... whose name is released by...

He was fatally injured on the Prince road near Nairne.

Police said he tried to overtake a car and collided head-on with cars coming in the opposite direction.

He was rushed to Adelaide Hospital in a satisfactory condition but died two days later.

Sunday newspaper outlets in the metropolitan area and Mornington Peninsula.

Newsagents will not be open and there will be no home deliveries.

This special Sun will cost 10c.

CAPITALS' NOON TEMPERATURES

Melbourne	32
Sydney	22
Adelaide	34
Brisbane	24
Canberra	24
Perth (10 a.m.) .. .	23
Hobart	27

Theatre in a one-day strike protest.

DISPUTE

Many of the strikers went to the disputed building site at suburban Semaphore to reinforce picket lines.

Six more ABCWF members on the site, including another union organiser, were arrested after being warned by police to move on.

The unionists were bundled into cage cars and taken to a local police station.

The president of the ACTU, Mr Hawke, this afternoon intervened in a dispute that has threatened to seriously disrupt the Australian building industry.

Mr Hawke said this afternoon he would fly to Adelaide tonight for talks

day said he had no power to release the jailed unionists.

"The Supreme Court is completely independent of the State Government under the terms of its own constitution," he said.

"At this stage my hands are tied."

Armed pair rob bank

Two armed bandits held up the National Bank in Hampton Rd., Hampton, today

Police said a "small amount" of money was taken.

The men walked into the bank at 12.46 p.m.

Police said one carried a .22 sawn-off rifle and the other a pistol.

They drove off in a grey mini.

It was later recovered in a nearby street.

One bandit is about 22, has a slim build and fair shoulder length hair.

Police said he is about six ft. tall and has a big nose. He was wearing fawn corduroy trousers and a denim shirt.

The other is about 20, also about six ft. He is slim, and has shoulder length dark hair.

Police said he was wearing blue jeans.

Police said a third person drove the getaway car.

Woman found dead in house

ADELAIDE. — Detectives today found a woman shot dead in a house at Sturt.

Armed police later went to the Adelaide airport near Burbridge Rd. They found a wounded man.

He was taken to hospital in a serious condition with a head wound. Detectives gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Police took a 5-year-old boy to police headquarters. The boy, wearing pyjamas, was crying hysterically.

The dead woman was Mrs June Stewart, a mother of five sons.

The wounded man is about 50.

Three Glenelg policemen found the boy and a missing car near the airport perimeter.

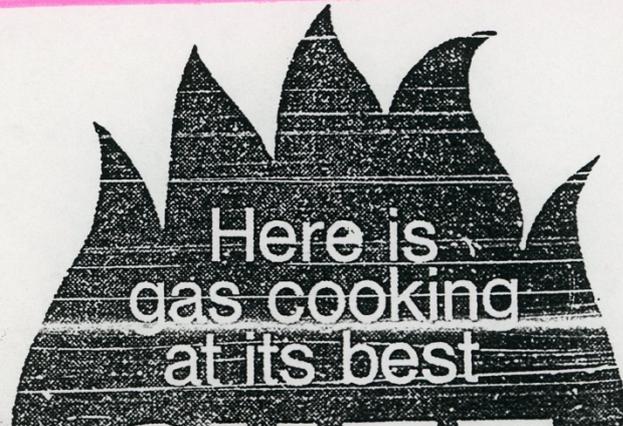
A policeman stayed with the boy. The two others jumped the airport fence and began searching for a man.

They found him next to a brush fence surrounding the DCA bowling club.

A revolver was next to him.

NOL

Polish doctor seeks



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ment officer at the Insti-
tute (Mr. J. M. Flynn)
said many full-time stu-
dents needed holiday
work to meet next year's
fees, which were the
highest of any college of
advanced education in
Australia.
Others were required to
gain practical experience
as part of their courses.
About 100 jobs still were
needed.
The University of
Adelaide is still seeking
about 100 jobs for stu-
dents during the summer
holidays.

plays on safety will be
set up by the SA Police
Department, the SA
Road Safety Council,
St. John Ambulance
Brigade and the Surf
Lifefavers Association.
The police will present
safety lectures illustrat-
ed by films screened on
the facade wall of David
Jones store over a 600-
square foot area, and
the Department of
Health will conduct
night driving vision
tests.
The festival is expected to
end about midnight.

Five motherless after shooting

The five young sons of a woman, about 45, who
was shot dead in the backyard of her house at Sturt
yesterday, are expected to fly to Melbourne today.

An uncle of the boys,
aged 15, 14, 13, 10 and
five, will fly to Adelaide
from Melbourne this
morning.

Last night the boys
were staying with the se-
cretary of the Salesian
School, Brooklyn Park,
which the four older boys
attend.

The boys have no rela-
tives in SA.

A man, about 50, is
under police guard in The
Queen Elizabeth Hospital
in a critical condition
with a bullet wound in
the head.

The woman was shot in
the head with a rifle in
the backyard of her house
in Travers street, Sturt,
about 9 a.m. yesterday.
It is believed she was
June Elizabeth Stuart.

The woman's five-
year-old son was seen

about two hours after the
shooting crying in a
locked car off Burbridge
road, near the Adelaide
Airport.

Soon afterwards Detec-
tive Sergeant K. W.
Thompson, of the Glenelg
CIB, saw the man on the
airport grounds and heard
a shot.

He found the man lying
near a fence alongside the
DCA Bowling Club with a
revolver beside him. The
man was bleeding from
the head.

A note was found in the
car.

Mrs. R. W. Tester, a
neighbor of the dead
woman, said last night
that the family were
"good-living people."

They had lived in the
same house for about 15
years after moving from
Victoria.

"They had plenty of
friends. People were al-
ways dropping in to see
them," Mrs. Tester said.

Mrs. Tester said the
dead woman spent nearly
all her time with her
sons.

"She would do anything
for the boys," Mrs. Tester
said.

Yesterday was the
sixth Christmas month
killing in seven years.

Last year, on December
20, Patricia Schmidt was
found murdered in a pad-
dock after finishing work
at a drive-in restaurant at
Darlington.

Detectives are still
working on the case.

Dunstan could not free unionists

Premier (Mr. Dunstan) yesterday said his Government
power to secure the release of two gaoled union officials.

er had power
a warrant is-
he Supreme
contempt pro-
a civil action,

Disputes Committee of
the Trades and Labor
Council.

"Strikes would do
nothing to get them re-
leased from gaol," Mr.
Dunstan said.

the Governor
do this.

"No one, apart from the
Supreme Court, has the
power to get them re-
leased.

ison and Mr.
refused to
e rules of the

They have either to
purge their contempt or
the action by the plaintiff
has to be withdrawn or
concluded.

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ade should be
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"My hands are tied and
Mr. Robinson has tied
them."

erve Bank of
aid yesterday
1 had been in
on November
pared with
t year.

Mr. Dunstan said he
was certainly prepared to
talk to the ACTU in an
attempt to get the dispute
settled.

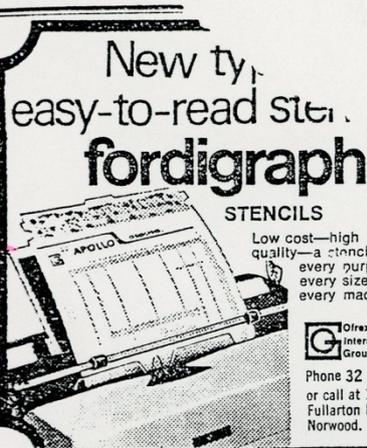
On his return from

Remark late yesterday,
Mr. Dunstan said, "I will
be in touch with Mr.
Hawke about the dispute."
"The proper course for
the builders' laborers' to
take is to put the dispute
before the ACTU and fol-
low its direction."

Two die in plane crash

BRISBANE — Two men
died when their light air-
craft crashed into a pad-
dock at Tatham, nine
miles north of Lismore, in
northern NSW yesterday.
The plane, a single-en-
gine Victa on a training
flight from Lismore Air-
port, exploded when it
plunged into the paddock
after a low-level pass.

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Financial background
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Chapter 2

Escalation: Family Number Two

His name was Gray. He was my uncle. I'd never met him, he lived in a different city, a long way away. He was married to a woman named Carol, and when I joined the family, they had four girls of their own, around my age. It was an eco-system of a family united he reigned over. He was king of this eco-system. An obedient housewife who knew her place, would never have questioned it. And daughters, four daughters (when I arrived to this family), all adoring and obedient and recognizing him as king as they adored and defended and worshipped him. They called it love, but I had known love, in my previous eco-system and this was a predator in a kingdom of his own making where he was male, his authority unchallenged, his family hidden behind suburban walls where no one would threaten his reign. He too, thought this was love. It was actually his version of safety and absolute control. His love could be withheld or withdrawn as punishment at any given whim should any of his subjects demonstrate anything other than adoration and worship. Recognising the power was the lifeblood of this ecosystem.

And then I arrived.

I was a giant prickly traumatized blight in perfect ecosystem.

Male.

Spoilt, self-aware, determined, more adult than the adults.

The decision maker.

And yes, a little traumatised.

In my eco-system I'd been the centre, and I knew my place.

I'd known love, proper love, true intimacy, the raw emotion.

And so when I was immediately expected to worship and adore and defend and obey and recognize the power, as demanded by this power-consumed predator...

How dare he.

I refused. From day 1 and never failing, I rebelled.

They had been perfect; the perfect suburban family, loved by all the parish community, neighbors. He, the celebrated architect, designing and building community-friendly, environmentally harmonious churches and schools for vulnerable communities. All the while designing and building a family home for his growing family. A home that would take decades to complete, be celebrated in architecture magazines, and be the talk of the community, every pillar and post and brick, an inspired choice.

His obedient wife turned out 7 children for his kingdom excluding the miscarriages. Her own mother rebelled against this role she was forced into, but even she recognised the power of the patriarch and the terror of his predator, so got groomed into compliance.

Oh and me.

The wife was strict with her children, not a hugger. Groomed people tend to withdraw from affection. She managed the chaos of this enormous family, this changing architectural environment, with what looked like ease and grace. As she'd signed on for when she married this man, as she was groomed to do. Her name was Carol and she believed in hard work, no self-indulgence, getting on with it, no drama. Therapy was an indulgence, and don't fix what ain't broke. She didn't like to upset this dynamic that Gray liked.

I'd have loved her if we'd both had been allowed.

The children were perfect. Beautiful, clever, they all made their dad proud, which was important to them. Crucially important to them, this was their grooming,

they needed to be in his favour. There were a lot of them, competing for the favour of their king, and Gray would enjoy his power as he would alternate favour upon them, watching them be confused as to what they'd done wrong and trying to get back into his favour again. Cycle and repeat. It caused such a fierce sibling rivalry amongst them, it exists to this day. Fierce. They are all aware of this competitive dynamic, not a single one actually knowing the evil route of it. Every single one of them grew up to have careers that would have impressed their dad, and that defined them, beyond being housewives to the great men they married.

They were perfect. From all appearances, and all I saw was ugly.

One of the daughters didn't fare too well. There was a particularly gross period when Gray would walk around the house naked; claiming that the human form was beautiful and natural, but in fact a vulgar demonstration of power unchallenged mixed with a little revolting horniness and prowess.

One of the younger daughters started acting differently during this time. It developed into a profound mental health that lasted for decades. The mental health was awful, some sexual exhibitionism in part, mostly her turmoil was unbearable. But it was fascinating to watch this power dynamic change. Over the ensuing years (right up to his death in fact) she somehow switched the power dynamic, and she had him terrified of her. Watching this damaged gorgeous girl develop coping mechanisms such as tantrums, alcoholism, and grooming skills all her own, she had her father wrapped around her little finger. He'd jump at any whimper or demand she made, he literally cowered, showered her with guilt and money and hyper-attention.

I was in awe. Because I suffered awfully under his power, and never ever managed to win a battle in decades of his cruel manipulation of me. Yet she had found a way to win, to be more powerful. It came at an awful cost to her. An awful awful cost. But she did get her power. And finally, after his death; she found happiness.

Maybe I should have killed him all those years earlier after all. Saved her years of torment.

Or groomed the babysitter to do it.

She was a hero to me. She doesn't know it. But I watched her as if she were a victorious warrior.

That was them. A perfect family, successful and respected in their community – they even took in a cute orphan relative after a family tragedy, despite their already huge size.

But this orphan was difficult. Traumatized and unlovable.

I was five, going on six.

My bliss was gone, all the intimacy I'd known was gone, and in this new eco-system I could trust no one. The wife and children would be punished if they defended me or showed me kindness when I was supposed to be in the doghouse. They didn't really know it, bless them; they weren't cruel. But within the eco-system, when David was in trouble no one in the kingdom could show him sympathy or kindness, lest they be punished. The punishment for them was as simple as Gray withholding his affections for a week or two. It wasn't really conscious; to the outside eye, anyone would have been horrified at the cruelty he unleashed upon me. But within our eco-system, it became normal to shun David when he was being punished.

That was my new life.

In the first few years there had been attempts to groom me into submission, groom me into adoring him and worshipping him, but I got creative and relentless in my revolt.

In the early years, I spoke, as little as possible, I mean what was there to say? My life ended in that car, and now I was amid this complex game, this strange family dynamic of male power. What was this idiocy going on around me?

So the grooming gave way to annoyance, which gave way to frustration, which gave way to hatred, which gave license to the cruelty. I did not adore the Gray, and his attempts to make me adore and worship him as the other children did...

failed. Oh how they failed, and it made him up his game. He upped it and he upped it, but I was a pro. I'd thrived in a family of violence and control for years, and I'd been the only strong one holding the ridiculous adults together. So if Gray wanted to up his game; he'd met his match with me.

I'd drill that message home to him with every breath, every action, every skill I'd honed. It became a war. He had the power that parents had to control children, and he had the power that husbands assumed in the 1970s; he also had masculine brute strength, 6 foot 3 inches. And he had is innate predatorial skills, but he was no match for me. I did not adore him, I knew him for what he was, I recognised him. He would up his game and up his game, year after year and this war had many battles. I would not cave, I would not adore him. I would not play the part of happy family and benevolent patriarchy, adoring obedient children, wife. We both won and lost battles over the years, but these early years were defined by sickly attempts to win me over, to win my adoration and great hefty punishments and consequences when I resisted. Fabulously resisted, this is where I honed my drama. Very quickly he labeled me as unsafe to be with the other children in the house. I was moved to the basement, a giant partly unfinished addition to the house, a playroom. It was missing a wall, covered with plastic sheets taped to the walls, and it flapped and flapped angrily in the wind. The family dog lived down here too, and it hated me. This odd new unfriendly intruder in the family unit, it attacked me every night. I'd leave the family upstairs, having said an odd goodnight to all, a strange kiss planted on the cheek of the mother Carol as I'd been instructed, a masculine shake of the hand with Gray

("That's how men say goodnight", he'd say).

Then I'd escape from the strangeness to the solitude of the giant flapping playroom, but routinely, every night, the dog would growl viciously even before I got to the bottom of the stairs. The first night this happened, I'd sought help upstairs from Gray; he'd laughed it off, fought the dog back to a corner with a broomstick while I climbed panicked onto my bed. Gray made a joke about

being frightened of a tiny dog, and left me there with it; it growled when I even shifted in my bed, God forbid I attempted a toilet run. Gray made a fool of me for being frightened of the dog, the dog he needed a broomstick to handle, him the grown man. I learned to manage the dog myself, lest Gray shamed me for my fear. As I descended the stairs each night, I'd freeze, petrified for a good 30 minutes or so, before braving the door. As I turned the door handle, the dog would growl menacingly, almost a purr, waiting for me to push the door. As I pushed the door, it would grab the corner of the open door in its jaw, tearing wood off the frame. Sometimes I made it to my bed, my eyes bulging with panic; often I'd sleep under the stairs outside the door. No one knew. My inability to handle the dog was a great source of amusement for Gray, who'd laugh as he told me how silly and stupid I was to be frightened of it. He shamed me with humorous re-telling's of it when neighbors popped by.

Early discussions included how I should address them: Carol and Gray? Mum and Dad? It seemed I was being asked my opinion, but I have no words to explain how much I didn't care about this. How ridiculous this conversation was. Who were these people? How was I here? Another conversation was about my name. My name had been Dominic, all my life. Dom, to my mum and dad, my brothers, the nuns.

But now my name was David. He had decided it.

I have no idea why.

But nothing about all this was making sense, why would that.

So I became David, the silent unlovable, awkward blight in this family of absolute suburban normality.

I rarely spoke.

I had some very strange habits.

I was effeminate, especially in my tantrums. This was perceived as a thing of utter disgust or on different days, giggly ridicule; something met with weird smirky silences, before I was turned away from/walked away from.

I'd be discovered in the middle of the night, sitting inside the pantry, eating chocolate biscuits, binging. I was six.

I was independent. I was always off in my own world, no one knew where I was. I had no friends, except perhaps the animals I loved and the ghosts that haunted me, accompanied me. But I was alone, and I would be passed off as "independent".

"Oh David's fine, he's very independent, leave him be"

is what would be said whenever a neighbour remarked upon my lone wanderings, my lack of engagement, my ghoulish loneness, my very obvious abuse.

I forgot how to go to the toilet. I would soil my pants. I just forgot how.

I stole. I stole money from purses, and piggy banks.

I broke into neighbors' homes, stole their biscuits and cakes.

A silent child mostly, I'd become oddly (and upsettingly to others) animated and passionate about doctrines that annoyed me. Religion riled me. We were a church-going family for ridiculously brief period that had more to do with social inclusion within a new community, than with belief. But as I stood in mass and watched the priest deliver sermons, stating to a wide-eyed congregation that murder was a sin, that suicide was a sin, I was palpably enraged. He explained mortal sins as unforgiveable, condemned to hell. My father had murdered, he'd taken his own life, and I was the lone person in the entire world who knew that my father was a good man, someone I'd loved and been loved by. Complicated, but loving. I saw that, I lived that, as we drove forever around the streets of Adelaide on kill kill day. He explained it all in those hours, I saw all his twisted thinking as he emoted and drove. His history was with us that day too, his time in the war as a boy, that was there with us. We were as one that day, and this man, my father, he was not condemned to hell. And how dare this priest take advantage of this room full of people who (let's face it) had already opted to

suspend their disbelief as the gobbled down the body of Christ use his power and influence and podium to indoctrinate these people to become hateful people who condemn good people to hell. One day in particular I was so angry I didn't know what to do with it. I'd been groomed and terrified and denied breakfast all morning by Gray, now watching this happen in my world, and I got up to leave, but fainted. Really obviously by the font, at the front of the seated and silent congregation. I don't know if it was the hunger, or if I was sunstroked from the morning's punishment of weeding in the garden before church, but my interpretation of it is that I was just enraged beyond endurance by the stupidity, manipulation and injustices of the world. Just so angry, my brain couldn't cope. And stuck and trapped.

And so I fainted at the font trying to escape the lunacy.

It was a drama of course, that's my way, it's in my bones, and the whole parish community were gossiping about it. They all adored and felt sorry for the troubled orphan boy, which drove Gray and Carol mad, so when we were alone after all the congregation's fuss, I was punished again, accused of being an attention seeker, and what was wrong with me anyway, why did I consistently need to do drama that got sympathy from the neighbors, try to embarrass them. A good strap on the back of the legs would be called for.

I was riled by things like that, but mostly I was quiet. Quiet and strange.

I did strange things that I did understand, and things I didn't.

Like stealing from the pantry at night. Like pooing my pants.

I reminded my new siblings that parents die, that their own parents couldn't be trusted. I encouraged one of them to run away once. You know; using my grooming skills and wanting to have a victory over Gray.

I hated my body. I've no idea where this body dysmorphia came from, but it was very pronounced in me. I hated my skin, I hated my hair, I hated my coloring. I hated the shape of me, the silhouette of me.

It became a thing, a thing of great annoyance within my family. It was met with absolute incredulity, absolute frustration. I was told I was ridiculous, to stop being ridiculous, what was wrong with me, stop it stop it stop it.

I wouldn't.

I went to great lengths to cover up; family beach holidays were the worst; I would join the family, I would stay in my room reading. This was met with impatience on day one, lectures on day two, punishment and spankings on day three.

The spankings didn't work obviously; I was more resilient, powerful, unstoppable, stubborn than anyone in this family could handle. My mum taught me well, and she was with me, loving me throughout. On my side in this war.



(Me, maybe 6 or 7?)

Gray's failed attempts to make me adore him as the rest of the family adored and defended him only incensed him further. Followed quickly by punishments designed to force my worship of him; which failed, and only incensed him further. One of his preferred punishments was to shovel clay and rock into a wheel borough and ferry it from one end of our paddock and empty it at the other end.

And then to shovel it back into the wheel borough again and return it.

All day long over the weekends. He said that chores weren't truly punishments if they had a purpose or sense of accomplishment; they had to be pointless unproductive labour. Another of his favorites was to weed the back garden every afternoon after school for a week.

Wearing shorts. To cure me of my body dysmorphia.

Rain hail or shine.

On one occasion, and on the third day as I was weeding (yes, in my shorts, he was winning for this moment), some guests arrived with their children. They all sat on the back porch, drinking and catching up... and watching me weed the garden, in my shorts.

I quit the weeding and retired to my room, back in long trousers. I wouldn't be watched and humiliated that way, plus I assumed guests meant a break from weeding.

I was wrong.

Gray's fury was awful. My new punishment was to wear shorts to school, rain hail or shine, I should never have abandoned my post, my shame, my humiliation.

No.

How did I come to be amongst this ridiculousness? What fate had brought me to this? How was I to spend years trapped with this insanity, this nonsense.

I ran away.

I packed a lunch, and I ran.

I was eight years old.

It wasn't my first escape attempt; I'd begged teachers and neighbors to rescue me, but they just thought I was weird, and Gray and his wife Carol would explain that I was just troubled and lovely and confused, before punishing and ridiculing me behind closed doors.

It wouldn't be my last escape attempt. I'd run away again, and again. Fate, or the police, or hunger, or fear of the big scary world would bring me back, bring me back, bring me back.

Realising there was no mum, no dad to run away to – always brought me, despairingly, back.

Gray had this saying:

"Never let the sun go down on an argument".

Nice in theory, and it made him feel good. What it really meant was that after being told off or ridiculed or punished for whatever it was I'd done, he'd come into my room after I'd gone to bed. He'd wrestle the dog away with a broomstick, and laugh about what a coward I was with it. He'd sit on the bed, remind me how right he was about everything, how wrong I was, and now we agreed on that, we could be friends again. It made him sleep better.

It did not help me to sleep better, I despised him sitting there, like a parent, but a pathetic imitation of one. Being kind, but not; in fact winning a victory, and making himself feel better, not going to bed feeling hated.

I learned when to expect these visits; they were predictable, Gray was predictable. Power is predictable. On the evenings I expected one of his *"don't let the sun go down on an argument"* visits, I'd drag a chair to the centre of the room, and unscrew the light bulb, ever so gently. Gray would think the light bulb had blown, and deliver his self-congratulation in the dark. It was such a relief to not have to look into his face. Holding my expression in the light while he spoke to me on these evenings was incredibly difficult; in the dark, I could relax my

face and let the disgust just crawl across my face, like marching angry righteous soldiers.

I had the feeling Carol would defend me from him sometimes. She did, she could be strong and formidable during shifts in their power dynamic, and she could stand up to him sometimes. You see; he didn't know he was a predator. He thought he was all benevolence, he felt entitled to rule this roost, the previous centuries had given him that right. He was man. He thought he was kind, and that an iron fist was justified in his case. She did defend me a few times in memory. Bless her for those moments. But mostly, she let him do this, lest she be punished or whatever it was he ruined for her day. She knew, and she did nothing. I don't want to blame her. Although she worshipped him, obeyed him, became the wife and mother he groomed her to be; she did not know better. There were probably consequences for her if she defended me. I don't know what went on between them. The consequence of her grooming process, was to be quiet, not disruptive, run the household without drama. The consequence of her grooming that I felt the most, was her absolute inability to love the troublesome six-year-old. She never touched me, never had a kind word for me, certainly never hugged me or said she loved me, never felt delight at a rare moment of uniqueness I might have shown. Worshipping and adoring Gray in this grooming game, meant adopting his perception of me, or suffer the consequences.

I hated this existence, I had no out. My traumas were compounding, my nihilism now a streak through me so black and void that I seethed with anger. And this despair, this loneliness, this trauma, manifested the oddest behaviours.

I walked strangely; I wouldn't swing my arms. It's like I forgot. Gray would attempt to teach me, through frustration and disbelief, how to walk properly. Apparently when the left foot steps forward, the right arm swings forward (and vice versa). I had to be taught this, over and over, to the angry frustration of Gray who didn't understand what was wrong with me.

I had to learn this, as if it mattered. After everything, after my life ended, as if it mattered. This arm-swinging thing was of utmost importance and the cause of such grief and anger.

I couldn't dress myself. I couldn't understand the difference between shorts and long trousers, summer pajamas, winter pajamas. It was explained to me again and again, but I couldn't get it. It didn't matter. It seemed ridiculous. How does a person decide what to wear from one's wardrobe, one day to the next? What a ridiculous decision, to have to make every single day when I didn't care.

About anything.

I got sunburned, again and again. This new city I lived in with these strangers had different weather, and I got sunburned to the point of self-harm. My nose got so repeatedly burned, that a sore appeared. I picked at it, and I picked the scab. Compulsively. It became a giant black blight on my nose, that I picked at till it became an exposed sore again, then I'd pick some more. For a year or more. No amount of punishments or repetitive smacks on my bottom could stop this strange habit.

I noticed I just mentioned being smacked on the bottom. Often through gritted angry teeth, often while being told that it was the only way I'd learn, often while being angrily asked (rhetorically, I now assume) what was wrong with me. Mostly with the palm of a hand on a bare bottom, often with the back of a hairbrush, or a belt. I'd known a different kind of violence with my mum and dad; I knew it was there, but I never saw it or experienced it personally. This violence, this was new, and it always happened because I was such an odd, tantrum-having, attention-seeking, strange boy that did strange things that were weird and made people angry. I mean, what was wrong with me?

I was living with angry strangers who didn't like me. They may have loved me in theory, I'd heard them tell my schoolteachers they loved me. They were good people probably, they did not see the grooming and control as I did. They actually believed they were good people, adopting this orphan relative. I know I was annoying, weird, prickly and spoilt. I wouldn't let them touch me, unless

they forced it, like with the spankings. But liking me? I made that hard. And I was stuck here, with loss and trauma and nihilism running through me like angry rocket fuel.

Life had no purpose at all. It was all ridiculous daily choices that made no sense.

I had had purpose, before this.

Before this, every day was urgent, it made sense, it had important agendas and I knew my role in it. Comfort my mother, make the decisions for us, whether to go to school, stay home. Comfort my mother at night, BE together.

Everything in the world was important, urgent, intimate, and had purpose. I was hugged, valued, my role was known.

And now this void, this vacuum of ridiculousness, clothes to wear, toilets to sit on, go to bed, get up in the morning, exist in this silliness, these stupid routines, answering to the name of David. Everyone treating me like a child, but I was the only one making any sense. They were all ridiculous.

And they had no, absolutely no idea, what to do with me.

And this went on for twelve years.

I felt sober and adult at five years old, smarter than most adults. My behaviour might have appeared spoilt, petulant, stubborn, childish, but in my head, I knew everything. I saw past disgusting attempts to be kind to me, to make me feel included, loved. I saw past that, I was no fool. I felt that way at five, and at seven and at thirteen.

I did not abandon my parents' memory, I never forgot whose child I was, where I belonged. My true eco-system. I never succumbed, I stayed angry and loyal, I remained cognitive of the truth, that I was a fish out of water, away from my home, and this new family were out of their depth with me.

I was never hugged. They hugged their own children. Ask them why, they'll tell you that I didn't allow it, that I made it hard. They'd say that those moments, those hugging moments when hugging seems natural – never arose with me. So they stopped.

I loved Star Wars. Gosh I loved it. That fanaticism defined me for a long while (lives in me still). I wasn't allowed to see the movie, because a schoolteacher had apparently suggested that I was leaning too heavily into fantasy, and it was unhealthy for me to see fantastic movies. Plus showing such a streak of passion and interest in something, kind of disturbed everyone. I'd become the child that tries to avoid being punished, hung his head, tried to be invisible (despite myself). This streak of personality was upsetting and disturbing to them, it was outside the game rules. So it was forbidden that I see the film, my fanaticism of it was punished or ridiculed. I stole the breakfast cereal packs from our pantry, from our neighbours' pantries, the ones that had Star Wars pictures and competitions on the boxes. I kept them I hid them. I coveted them. Star Wars merchandising was absolutely everywhere so it was easy. Luke Skywalker had lost his mum and dad violently. His dad (Darth Vader) had turned to the Dark Side of the Force; he'd been seduced by trauma and pain, he'd acted evilly, but was good really. Just troubled, tortured.

Like my father.

Darth Vader found redemption finally, in death. Just a troubled, tortured man, seduced by pain and trauma, seduced to the Dark Side. I might have been the very very last person to believe my father was a good man, redeemable; the very very last, as he was condemned, the murderer, the betrayer, the destroyer of lives. But I'd cling knowingly to his goodness. I knew he was redeemable, and I'd never abandon that despite the cruel unforgiving stupid world around me. I heard a story of a man who wrestled a grizzly bear and killed it. I knew of another man who killed a lion, and another story of a man who killed a shark with his bare hands. I'd have no problem doing these things, I am fearless that way. But I did something greater. I forgave my father. When no one else would, when the religious institutions would have me do otherwise, when the adults in my life would have me do otherwise, I would forgive my father. And it would be no great feat. I'd do it easily, and sleep good at night. Like Luke Skywalker would. The world was upside down perhaps, but me, from the age of 6; I wasn't

upside down, I knew what was right. And I may struggle to comprehend human emotions, but I do know right from wrong, and I do know kindness as a guiding ethic; I know when a man does not belong in hell (even if I believed in that nonsense), and I recognise any religion, cult leader, groomer priest or assumed parent who tries to convince me otherwise. I see you coming.

Thank goodness for Star Wars. Someone out there, perhaps far far away, understood me.

Darth Vader's son, the young and fair Luke Skywalker, adopted by an uncle and aunt, but dreaming of escape, dreaming of heroics, dreaming of happiness elsewhere in the galaxy. Far far away. Becoming a Jedi superhero that helped others.

I knew this story because I stole the paperback book from someone at school. I wanted to be Luke Skywalker.

But I wasn't a kid; I knew the difference between fantasy and reality. So I dreamt of being an actor, that could play people like Luke Skywalker. I dreamt of being a movie maker. A storyteller.

At age 10, I wrote a book. It was a sequel to Star Wars (way before The Empire Strikes Back came out).

I dedicated every free moment to it, every ounce of passion that remained in me from my life with my mum. I did it in secret of course. They might make me stop writing it.

And then. One of his daughters caught me writing. She told Gray, she was curious and fascinated, disturbed by this freakish act of personality that was supposed to have been groomed out of me. She had never seen me so attached to something, so secretly protective, so passionate about something, and so ashamed to have been discovered with my manuscript.

Plus she was loyal and groomed to win her dad's favour. This discovery, this new behaviour held cache.

It became a thing.

I hid the manuscript.

They wanted to see it, they wanted to read it.

It became a bigger thing, so I hid it better.

They became more fascinated, they had never seen this brand of oddness from me, nor this devotion (to anything except making war) and I found it repulsive and intrusive. Like scientists prodding a frog that's acting odd.

It became a huge thing, that occupied everything for six or eight weeks.

Discussions about why I would hide it, why I would have such secrets; every tactic was employed, from loving pleading requests, to earnest explanations about how it would help them to understand my strangeness better, to care for me better. Then the silent treatment, but that was just heaven for me, and then punishments. But I was stoic, I had a stubbornness that was like a well-trained muscle, a honed skill that I had developed while protecting my mum and dad from the world, and from each other, and if these strangers, these intruders thought they could outwit me in this game – then they would have a lifetime of learning otherwise.

The book thing was huge now.

A Star Wars sequel deserved no less.

The thing had become a situation of such great urgency within the family; I think we all believed at one point, that life and death hung upon the revelation of this manuscript.

This Star Wars sequel written by a ten-year-old child.

Like mass hysteria, or mass hypnosis. The way things can work in cults. Or ecosystems.

It was inevitable that the book would be surrendered, and me refusing was no longer acceptable. One of my delaying tactics had been promising to reveal it, but woops, I kept forgetting, or I kept losing it. One of my excuses was that it was in my locker at school, and that I kept forgetting to bring it home. That worked for a week maybe. But I was escorted to school by Gray one complicated and moody morning to retrieve it from my locker, under his supervision. He'd obviously had to reschedule his day, and this very large

family's morning routine of breakfast and drives to schools, was upset for this urgent errand. It was very early, and the school was mostly deserted. That was a good thing; no bullied child needs the humiliation of being escorted to his locker angrily by a parent.

He had it. He got his big controlling hands on it.

I had lost.

We sat in the parking lot of the deserted school. I, in the front passenger seat, silently, angrily, numb in my subjugation. I'd lost, I had no control over my privacy, my secrets. He sat in the driver's seat, and read my book.

Two hours. The parking lot filled up, and my tormentors, my fellow students walked past my car and looked in at this strange scene. And walked on.

Gray read my manuscript.

He only spoke once;

"What does anthropomorphic mean?"

I knew he doubted I knew what it meant; it was a challenge. He thought I'd used a word that I'd stolen or plagiarised without learning the meaning.

Because my book was good. He was surprised, and doubted I'd written it myself. But I knew my Star Wars universe, and I knew the story I was telling.

And I knew that C3PO was an anthropomorphic droid, and I knew what it meant.

I wasn't a child.

Without looking at him, I responded:

"It means having a form that resembles a human."

He hadn't expected that. A small victory for me in this awful shaming exercise I was enduring.

That was all.

He hadn't found the secrets to my inner mind or heart, as he'd expected. He didn't know me any better, he had no explanation as to why I resisted his attempts to make me worship and defend him as everyone else did. My book contained no secret that unlocked for him, my inner torment or gave him more power.

Nothing that could fix this oddity living within his family. Nothing that could make him like me, or to win the grooming game.

So it was kind of like a victory for me after all. Though it didn't feel it.

There were some words uttered at dinner that night with the audience of the full family who had been so immersed in this book drama and wouldn't have tolerated a non-outcome. So Gray said some words, believing himself to be a good parent, good human. A few words that felt forced and born of disappointment; something about me being a good writer, that it was good I had a hobby, and that perhaps they could find me a book club or library card or something. I'm not sure if these were begrudging, or born of disappointment – but this moment was awful for us both. I couldn't unscrew the light bulb in that moment.

If the subject of a library card or book club were to arise, I knew I'd have no part of it. The book thing, the story; it was mine, not something they could use to fix me, save this relationship, know my inner secrets. No way. This intrusive, violent invasion of my privacy, my self, would never be forgotten or forgiven. Ever. And this experience would define me, it would fuel my stubbornness, my stoicism, my loneliness, that would keep me safe for the future experiences of my life ahead.

I burned the book the following day, after school. I did it silently but ceremoniously in an earth hole I dug outside my bedroom window, under a pear tree. I'd tried to do it without drawing attention, but ten-year olds who light fires tend to underestimate the drama that fires can create.

(Or do they?)

Maybe I wanted this to be a drama.

It became a thing. I burned the book, and everyone in the family knew, and talked about it. The oddness of it, the why of it. The insaneness of it. They could not understand me. It was a thing, and they talked about it; though not to me; just amongst themselves, and oddly, in whispers, or in non-whispers from the other side of the tv room, but looking at me like I was a freak.

This was my victory, and it was glorious and perfect. They had intruded, invaded violently, tried to know me, and failed. I'd won after all. This victory had a movie soundtrack all its own, and it was victorious.

I lived for the small victories. They were never, in fact, victories at all; because I was a child, and the adult had brut power, absolute authority, and he'd had that authority so long, so comfortably, with so much entitlement to that power, that my victories were only assumed, brief at best. He'd been the unchallenged king predator in this environment for so long, small abuses of that power became entitlements, and then they became larger unchallenged abuses. I, in fact we all, were beings he had ownership over. He'd created an eco-system where all other family members, even neighbors had been groomed into this understanding.

But I would fight.

A losing battle; sure. Tiny brief victories here and there, all glorious to me, but ultimately, I was beaten down.

But I learned.

As my pre-pubescent brain developed and molded itself through these battles, I developed sharp cognitive skills of battle, of wits. Of calculation and manipulation, desperate survival in an unloving climate. I learned, and my cognitive brain developed skills of hypervigilance, of manipulation, of high-stakes emotional combat; skills to thrive in battles of wits that meant absolute survival to me. These sharp, highly attuned survival skills, learned from a life lived under an even greater predator, would become my norm. I'd imprint upon these survival skills. They'd serve me as cognitive certainties and habits like an

autopilot for the rest of my life. They'd be so second nature, I'd never know if I was victim in a battle, or if I perpetrated it.

And life went on. Me, alone with my memories of my mum and dad, with my nihilism and emptiness while living forcibly and silently with these strangers who didn't like me, or at least weren't allowed to, because that's the way Gray would have it.

I ran away from home shortly after this. A failed escape attempt, I was dragged home from the Melbourne Central police station by morning.

With full drama.

Another small victory.

And life went on.

At age thirteen, Gray sat me down for a talk.

He explained to me what I did not need explaining, but that's how parents are with small children, and I can't blame him for assuming I was a small child as well. He explained that we didn't like each other, that we'd never gotten along, and we just were simply stuck with each other until I was eighteen.

The stuck bit, I had understood for a very long time. He seemed to be just becoming aware of it.

I'm not sure what he was telling me, or trying to explain. Perhaps he was explaining something to himself.

He suggested a pact, that we just get along and tolerate each other till I was eighteen and I could leave.

I wasn't really a "pact" type of person. That involved some kind of agreement and intimacy that he wasn't likely to be getting from me.

Anyway, 'my agreement' was never what these conversations were about; he said his piece, he seemed to feel better for it, so that probably meant less beatings, less abuse, less grief from him for – well for a while.

I woke up with a black eye one day. I don't remember what had happened the night before, and this certainly wasn't my first bruise, mostly they were on my

bum and the back of my legs. But it was the first on my face that had to be explained to the rest of the family.

Nobody really needed it explaining.

The awful fake niceness I had from Gray in the following weeks was unbearable. For weeks, he didn't hit, for weeks, he didn't call me "useless", "attention-seeker", "no-hoper" or the other things about me that made him so angry. It was awful. We went on a walk together, where he'd ask me what I thought of that plant, or how school was or if I ever thought of his sister, my mum. It was awful.

And it passed, thankfully.

War was much more comfortable than this guilt-grooming.

We returned to normal.

He beat me less. Mostly his disgust manifested as:

"Get out of my sight"

and:

"Go, I can't stand the sight of you".

You know; those old chestnuts that engender so much affection. And destroy adolescences.

Some adulthoods too.

I hid in my room as much as I could. I imagined killing the whole family. Killing myself. I imagined growing up, being free and finding fame and fortune and glory in a galaxy far, far away, or at least making heroic movies in a city far, far away. Mostly, I masturbated a lot. I really didn't know what suicide was, despite my very intimate relationship with it, despite my nihilism. But I knew discomfort in my own skin, I knew what it was like to be useless and an attention-seeker, and I knew what it was like to stand at my bedroom door, on the inside of my bedroom door, my hand on the door handle, too frightened to go down for breakfast each morning. I'd stay there with my hand on the handle for hours.

Probably not hours actually, but it seemed like hours. Terrified, frozen. Always late for school, always disrupting the family morning routine.

Life was awful. Bullied and disliked at school, an attention-seeking no-hoper at home, and only my daydreaming, my music and my masturbation to help me escape, in my head at least.

One day, Gray's wife, Carol, sat me down.

She explained that Gray was no longer going to parent me, he was leaving it all up to her. He'd had enough and he was too disappointed by the fact that I was unhappy despite all the attempts he'd made to create a loving home for me. I was ungrateful, he didn't understand it, and he was abdicating responsibility for me.

Essentially, his usual grooming tactics that successfully had everyone else worshipping, defending, adoring and obeying him didn't work on me. For years. He'd upped his game, he'd fought and manipulated like a predator, - even his brute force tool had been employed – and none of it worked on me. I knew what he was, I recognised predators even before I knew what they were. I'd witnessed my dad use the same tactics.

He abdicated, I'd won. (Unless this was just a new tactic.)

Carol would be disciplining me from then on.

Carol didn't hit me, so that was cool. Intimacy, kind words and hugging were absolutely not her forte, but she didn't hit either. She wasn't intentionally cruel or as violent as Gray was; in fact she defended me from his cruelty sometimes, when the power climate made it low-drama for her to do so. Those moments were very precious to me, too rare. She did hate how her friends and neighbours and schoolteachers all liked me so much though. Gosh. She hated how they all thought I was some troubled vulnerable orphan angel, she told me so often.

I mean; she knew what I was really like.

And she wasn't wrong.

Life went on.



(Like a ginger Midwich Cuckoo child loitering at the back of some family gathering. And I'm smiling in the second. Rare for me to be in photographs that period of my life.)

My child narcissist hated these pseudo incompetent 'parents' seethingly. Later in life, after grueling therapy, I'd need to understand them though. I'd REALLY need to understand them because I needed to self-realise my own personality disorder, become self-aware, claim my narcissism. Self-awareness goes against the grain with narcissists, most never have that moment. But I got mine, and I needed to understand it, understand its formative ingredients, understand the Gray eco-system that could do this to a child, devastating the ensuing decades, impacting the lives (and destruction) of so many people.

Understand... and forgive maybe?

Grr. In my next life maybe.

But I did need to understand it.

Let me go there, let me give that a try.

Chapter 3

The Frog Forgives the Scorpion

Gray and Carol, like all of our parents, are products of a different age. An age before internet, before the access to information and before the daily, minute by minute exposure to other cultures and ideas that the modern internet age brings us. Before we understood toxic masculinity, before the Me-Too movement, before Harvey Weinstein. They were the products of an isolated suburbia, and they too, were the products of their own parents who were raised in yet another age.

Men were men back then, which meant they assumed and presumed an entitlement to rule the household like a king, and in some cases, like a predator. Women were groomed to be glad of a proposal to marry, to put their needs behind that of the man and to raise children in the way that pleased the man. And a lot of men took advantage of this. Often unknowingly: a person in a position of trust and power and control can lose perspective of equality very quickly, if left unchallenged for a long time. They push the boundaries of appropriateness, one micro-aggression at a time, without challenge, and the power grows. The sense of entitlement to that power grows alongside it, as dynamics change; the wife, the children begin to normalize this escalation of power; they hand over even more power as the grooming dynamic snowballs, micro-aggression after micro-aggression. The groomer becomes more accustomed and entitled to the new dynamic, always protecting and

strengthening their power. All the groomed subjects beneath him, fall into a cycle of seeking approval, affirmation, love from the groomer; competing with each other for it, which pleases the groomer, makes him feel powerful and safe in his ruling role. Affection and approval from the groomer is dished out as quickly as it is withdrawn, in an ever-repeating cycle that causes a kind of addiction in the subjects, as they go cycle to cycle trying to get back into favour with the groomer. They do this by proving their love, their loyalty: defending him in all things while secretly (and unknowingly) fearing the uncertainty of it. Fearing the inevitable period of the cycle when they are out of favour and the groomer's love and approval is withdrawn.

To the outside observer, from the other side of the suburban fences, this looks like happy families. Adoring wife and children, all so adoring of their dad, all so obedient, all so like him.

But then there was me. Refusing with the might of a god, to be drawn into the game. Not adoring, not worshipping. To the groomer, it's a toxic thorn that must be controlled, by any means necessary. Usually that means violence.

Worst of all, worst of all; the most difficult pill for me to swallow, is this; most groomers of this type, don't even know they are doing it.

These predators were everywhere in the 1970s, in fact throughout history.

We've all known them. As a Western culture, we are getting better informed about toxic masculinity, about abuse of power. About gender inequalities, about grooming and controlling behaviour. Whether it's Fox News, Roger Iles, Harvey Weinstein or your dad; whether it's R Kelly or Michael Jackson, or Ellen DeGeneres or your boss who's been in authority and unchallenged for too long. It could be your mum too, it's not always men, by any means. The rub, for me, is that I must forgive even Gray for this awful manipulation, this awful abuse of power. He didn't know he was doing it. He was coping, these were normal coping behaviours for him. He'd honed some survival skills himself growing up. He'd urgently needed to feel in charge, and powerful as a boy, and through his suffering, he honed some urgent predatorial skills. Enhanced by a male

dominating culture that allowed it to go unchallenged: even socially acceptable for goodness sake. He was entitled to rule in this way, in his mind and without any oversight to suggest to him otherwise.

If he were alive now, my uncle Gray, he'd deny this. I think. He'd have no idea that he was anything other than kind and loving. And worse; his darling family, his adoring wife and children, would defend him to this day; chastise me for airing dirty laundry, and believing me to be making things up. They defend him and adore him even in his grave.

My sorrow and pity for them is only outdone by my anger that he won; even in his grave the grooming continues. They defend him, and worship his memory on Facebook each year, to my torment.

But; he justified his behaviour, he felt entitled, and he created a reality (with supporting actors) that he was a benevolent patriarch. He believed himself to be good.

And so, without malicious intent to hurt me, I must forgive. I think.

But I'm not ready.

Worse still, in my endurance of those years, I have honed some survival skills that mimic his. I am a predator too, and a damned good one. It would be many many years before I understood what a predator I was; I hurt people with these skills myself. It would be many years before I recognised that I had become similar to him. Many years before I recognised the predator in me, took responsibility for it, and reigned it in.

I feel I should forgive, but I can't. The legacy of him, inside of me, my behaviour; it hurts. The beatings and spankings hurt sure, but they are small fry. It was the fact that a 5-year-old was entrusted to this eco-system. This trust was violently abused.

The violence of him.

But that violence too, was socially acceptable at the time.

"Spare the rod, spoil the child" was a common justification for violence toward children, and it was endorsed by child-raising books and psychologists. I don't

think it was meant to be said through angry gritted teeth by the adult inflicting the punishment, but I am trying to be forgiving here.

And it's hard.

After all, I was impossible. I refused love, I refused affection. I treated these kind people doing their duty, taking in an orphaned relative, as intruding strangers, insulting my mother's memory with every attempt at parenthood.

I was impossible; truly, hell hath no fury like my own brand of terror that I unleashed on this unwitting suburban family of innocents. I'd suffered and endured some hardship before the age of six, before this new, innocent family and I'd known a better kind of parenthood (murder and matricide notwithstanding), I'd known the best kind of love, I'd witnessed it, I'd felt it; I'd known passion, and I'd known drama. I'd known coping and survival. I'd known fear and adoration and violence, in my own perfect world of bliss, and I'd learnt skills.

I'd had my bliss torn from me, and I had skills; skills that I'd employ to destroy this family.

Just for taking me into their home.

For trying to love me.

They got stuff wrong.

They were not, by any means, equipped for the fury that I brought them. It was unrelenting, it was baffling and aggravating, it was unmanageable, it was... impossible.

If I'd have just played Gray's grooming game, everything would have been fine.

But I was impossible

And I'm proud that I was.

I'm sorry I did that to them, but I'm proud that I defended my world that ferociously. I defended my mother, my father, I defended the injustice of me being torn away from them, the injustice of this silly family that tried to love me, parent me, despite being grossly ill-equipped to deal with the terror and trauma I brought them, for decades.

I'm proud that I resisted his grooming.

To this day, I'm proud that I did that. I remained true, throughout, to my mum and dad, to that bliss.

They tried hard, to do it right, these strangers I was forced to live with. They probably did good, loving things, they probably have nice memories of me; who knows. For me, those memories are tainted by the trauma I carried every minute. But for them... who knows? They never hugged me; was that because I wouldn't let them? Do you force a hug upon a child that screams and wrestles when you do so?

But I must also forgive them for what they got wrong.

I think he changed later in life. I do remember a period when he was giving away his eldest daughter, the first to be married. I watched him wrestle with that dating and engagement. Learning that... she was not in fact his property, his thing to control. I watched him rile against that, and give in (sort of). Maybe that was the beginning of his self-awareness. Maybe he changed, repented.

But I wasn't going to hang around and find out.

Because it was time to move on, and time to leave this family, to leave this city. I wouldn't return for decades. And the decades ahead would be populated by drama, self-destruction, self-loathing, the search for hugs that I would reject despite seeking them out. Prostitution, sex work, pornography, drugs, crime, violence, AIDS and very high drama would populate the coming decades.

By age 15 my existence within the house and family became unmanageable for everyone in the house, and that was my fault, so it was decided I was to be sent away, to boarding school.

For my own good.

Thank God.

Chapter 4

Freedom

And so I became an adult. I mean; I had been an adult since I was very young, and I'd always known that all the adults around me were ridiculous. But in these following years, my body caught up. Boarding school was okay; I was among peers and I was among kind people, who saw and nurtured my skills and talents, even had a gentle affection for all things that had annoyed and concerned my family so; as if they'd seen it all before. Requests to behave differently were never communicated through angry gritted teeth, never with spanking or violence, never with frustrated impatience, but through reason and explanation of logic. The greatest punishment I experienced there was a loss of 'credits', meaning the loss of luxuries like TV time, which could be earned back by doing good deeds, earning more credits. I'm very aware that most people's experiences of catholic boarding schools are not as pleasant as mine; I'm aware that violence and sexual abuse, for my generation at least and older, were part and parcel of catholic boarding schools.

Mine was on a beach.

A glorious Australian golden beach on Port Phillip bay.

It had all the modern conveniences, it had an ethic of good, humane education, community, brotherhood, kindness, nurture. It was run by the De La Salle brothers, a religious order. One way to earn credits was to go to mass each morning. I didn't go for the credits; (and I was not buying into the religion). I

went because I hated showering communally with the other boys. I got teased for being effeminate, a late developer, and for being ginger. Ginger pubic hair was the absolute delight of the cruelest of the boys. And I had my hatred of my body, my arms, my legs, the shape, the color, the silhouette.

(St Bede's college, boarding school. Literally, on the Aussie beach.)



They never saw me naked. I was expert at this. Alter boy duties saved me from that.

The culture of bullying existed there, of course, but it was addressed institutionally, professionally, and I never felt unprotected. Plus I could be formidable. This odd world I found myself abandoned in, since my mum and dad died, was like being thrown to the wolves, and I'd become a good wolf fighter. I could blend amongst them when needed, fight when needed. Not with fists, though it came to that sometimes; but with cunning. Charisma, grooming skills and manipulation. If I'd had any awareness, I should have been frightened of the monster I was becoming. I could connive and destroy ingeniously and without empathy; these were not tiny teenagers coping and being bitchy at school, they were dastard enemies ruining my life, and was scary masterful at revenge. I had kids suspended, expelled, punished, shamed and ridiculed, just

because – because it seemed urgent for me to do so. Plus it was a rush. And an anhedonic narcissist without any emotions lives an empty, hollow existence, and needs urgently to find a rush. Revenge and winning is the closest thing to feeling happiness or joy.

If I'd had any awareness, I should have been worried. Symptoms like this at age 15. But I was coping, the world was dangerous, I was in puberty, Sissy Spacek's Carrie had nothing on me. I had zero empathy, spidey-sense gloomy skills and charisma, and this made me skilled and safe. And diabolical.

And I was only just beginning.

There were weekends when all boarders had the option to go home to their families. I always chose not to go home to the family, and no one ever argued with that. But I told the school that I did go home. I would spend the weekends in the city of Melbourne, sneaking into cinemas via the emergency exits.

I loved cinema; I loved drama, and adventure and glory, and heroism. I loved escapism. I saw film after film, again and again, lost in the escapism of pretend. Imagination was like a drug to me, my dopamine positively burst when I was helping Elliot to rescue ET from the evil government scientists. I completely forgot what city I was in, what Monday meant, what family meant, entirely, when I was heady in the shimmer of the silver screen. Raiders of the Lost Arc, Splash, Romancing the Stone, Flashdance, Dirty Dancing, Greystoke, the Legend of Tarzan, Poltergeist, The Man from Snowy River, Sophie's Choice, Tootsie.

The Empire Strikes Back.

The Hunger, The Man with Two Brains, Risky Business, Silkwood, Staying Alive, VideoDrome, War Games, Crimes of Passion, Dune, Firestarter, Ghostbusters, Gremlins, The Hotel New Hampshire, Pretty in Pink, The Breakfast Club, St Elmo's Fire, Starman.

LadyHawk.

My empathy was shut down by this stage, and chronic anhedonia left me pretty unable to feel any bonding or loving emotions, but in the safety and escapism

of a cinema, I could get inklings of emotion, and it was glorious. In the real world, and with real people, the closest I could get to an emotion was the rush of victory when winning a battle, when out-witting an enemy, when a manipulation resulted in a power gain for me; these things were the closest I could ever get to emotions in the real world; then, and to this day. Extreme things felt like emotion; like violence or drug-highs or cruel demonstrations of power; these things I felt. So I pursued them. I felt no love or loss, or connection or bond or protective feelings. They got stunted and shut down. But I could get a glimmer of them in the cinema, music sometimes, as long as I was in a safe place. Music and cinema might have actually been the things that saved this adolescent from shooting up his school.

It's a fine distinction between being a malignant narcissist and a functioning human being.

I'd see film after film, and wander the streets of Melbourne alone, lost among anonymous crowds, it was a bit like bliss. I slept in the fire escapes of the cinemas when I could, or an alleyway; Melbourne is full of alleyways. Or I'd befriend a homeless kid and just walk around. It was the 1980s, and Melbourne was receiving an influx of new residents from Asia. Some of this manifested in some Asian gang culture, with drug dealers, homelessness and a thriving runaway culture in the streets of central Melbourne. I loved them. They were my companions on these runaway weekends, and while I was in the cinemas most days and evenings, the night times were spent befriendng someone my own age, running around the streets, pretending the police were stormtroopers and hiding from them. Occasionally talking about the woe of our circumstances, the ridiculous adults ruling our lives, as we walked around the dark city streets, past closed shops and blinking traffic lights at vacant intersections. Kicking empty McDonalds drink cups and kebab wrappings, abandoned by the drunken city teenagers who would come into the city for the evening, but were now in their homes, in their beds leaving the quiet city to me and my runaway friends. These friendships just lasted a night, because of the transience of our encounters, but

they were the only friends I'd ever had, and I felt as if we were kin, alike, familiar, intimate. Stuff I hadn't felt since...

You know when.

I talked a lot with these kin about my plans for fortune and glory in Hollywood, when I would be an actor in a Star Wars film, or a producer of fantastic films. One of them gave me a scrap of paper with some distant relatives' contact details on, relatives that lived in Los Angeles. Kin I could look up when I got there, as I inevitably would; they believed in me, these kids. There was, after all, something movie star-like about me, even as an awkward teenager. There was my white privilege of course, which was either despised amongst the Asian gangs I shared the city streets with, or acknowledged as something that could be resourced, or groomed. But there was also my charisma and likeability. When I said my future included fortune and glory in faraway lands, they had faith in me. They knew it would happen for me. I think they felt their own destiny was on the same streets, fending for their families; an unliked Asian race in a white racist country that had been stolen from indigenous black people. I was too young to understand all this then. But they believed in me, and wanted all my dreams to come true. I hung on to that scrap of paper, knowing, knowing, I would be in a city, be in a moment one day, when I would use it.

Life went on.

I dreamed furiously and fantastically of a happy future, but I did not know what that was. I drifted through the years, passive, uninterested, coping day to day. If I'd cared enough, I might have considered suicide, but this was just life, this was numb, this was trauma, and it just went on day to day, year to year.

I left school, I completed without failing, despite my apathy, despite having no idea what to do afterward. Not caring. There was a brief time back at the family home, there was a brief time living in a bungalow that I rented from some people who were strangers, though we all behaved like friends and shared a few years together. There was a brief job in a department store, Myer

Melbourne, some friendships, my first sexual experience. With a girl, a lovely girl. I felt I had to do it to prove my heterosexuality to my peers. It was traumatizing for both of us. My fault. She was a stranger in my bed, dare I say enemy because the intimacy expected of me was so dangerous. I did not do this kind of connecting well. No empathy remember. I was cruel in my apathy, I was cruel in my fear, I was cruel in my internalized homophobia and denial. And I was cruel as I rejected her coldly from my bed and life the next day. I hope she forgives me; my cruelty must have been inexplicable to her, as my indifference was to me.

There was a coming out experience. I'd had a secret masturbation fantasy of fit men in modeling catalogues, but I did not know this would ever be more than frantic shameful masturbation. But; it did ultimately (finally) manifest as sex with a man. It was just as awful as my experience with the woman had been. In bed with a stranger, me without empathy, going through the motions; aroused but disconnected and expecting some kind of betrayal or rejection; as was my way. He was a potential enemy to me as most humans were. Differently awful. This time I was the recipient of the cruelty, ridicule, rejection.

And the time had come to leave this city.

I was empty still, and I couldn't fill the emotionless holes with anything. Not sex, not friendship, not work. Coming Out didn't heal anything, my emptiness and apathy were stagnant sores, and the closest I could get to feeling anything was by cunning, winning or cruelty.

There was something wrong and broken.

My despairing dreams of a different future as a Jedi Knight in a galaxy far, far away, manifested as an invitation from one of the first gay 'friends' I ever made. His name was Adam, he'd be my constant companion for the next few years. I was struggling with my secret gayness, and he said, plain and true, that

Melbourne in 1986 was no place for an international superstar homosexual,
and that America and Europe held our hopes of fortune and glory.

I bought that.

(Was he grooming me?)

Fortune and glory sounded very movie-adventure, fantastic, and far far away.

And my developing narcissism knew it to be my destiny.

It was time to leave this city.

Let's go to Hollywood bitches.

Chapter 5

Hollywood Land

Hollywood, Los Angeles.

I can't remember getting there, but fortune and glory were promised, and it would have taken nothing less to motivate me from my apathy and nihilism. I'd never have done it alone; I didn't have the initiative or self-interest to organize it. I was travelling with a friend, a new friend I'd made when I'd 'Come out' as gay three weeks earlier in Australia. Adam. We were inseparable; to onlookers we would have appeared to be best friends, as if I was capable of such a thing. As if such a thing were possible after 3 weeks. But we were an easy fit, inseparable, never lovers. He made things happen, I followed apathetically; a power imbalance that has defined exploitative relationships since the beginning of time. I liked his decision-making leadership, I relied on it, it made me feel safe, so I gave him my power. I was teased deliciously by the fortune and glory that glimmered in the future, that he assured me would happen. I had become a tall, movie-star handsome young man, a very fresh faced nineteen-year-old, despite my two decades of adulthood and cynicism and trauma. People said I belonged in an Australian Soap, I was so Home and Away handsome. People liked me immediately, adored me, trusted me. Every time. Every time, it was an absolute charm I possessed. A charm people wanted to protect, to befriend, to possess somehow, to make their own, to love, to educate. My charisma was unmistakable and infallible, and for me it was a currency I used in place of

authentic emotions, empathy, ambition, motivation, of having to care. Things just happened to me, because of my charisma and good looks, which made things easy for me. I never had to do anything, I could just live with my apathy and nihilism; I just had to smile, and things would just happen, without any effort or passion or desire from me.

I was dead inside.

But I was in Hollywood, and everyone liked me.

What was Hollywood like in the late 80s?

Think Jackie Collins. She got it absolutely right. It was glitz it was glamour. It was a city full of cheap low-lives, dressed up in expensive clothes, make up, accessories, cars, jobs. Hiding, hiding their true roots, their true characters. It was swimming pools surrounded by people waiting to be discovered, found, loved; waiting for that person to see them, to really see them, to change their lives. To help them with that life transformation, the transformation that can only happen by being in the right place, at the right time, looking very good that day.

And I always looked very good that day.

It was driving down Mulholland Drive in a rented Mustang convertible, passing the giant billboards featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, the action and masculinity they represented exploding off the giant poster in flame and bullets.

It was Angelica Huston and Annette Benning and John Cusack in "The Grifters". Tom Hanks was huge on the billboards in "Big"; but before he was 'Hollywood Royalty' big. "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" celebrated Hollywood of old and Tom Cruise represented Hollywood of the future. Julia Roberts, Harrison Ford, Glenn Close, Eddie Murphy, Mel Gibson, Michael Douglas, Demi Moore. They were glamorous and heroic, they were huge, they won that fortune and glory, they earned their place on the cover of Vanity Fair and Rolling Stone.

Hollywood in the 80s was traffic, shopping, brunches. It was being served in restaurants by waiters who were not waiters, but actors trying to make a living. It was sunshine, and running into tv actors you can't quite place how you know at the drugstore. It was Spanish-inspired architecture and Melrose Place. Not the street.

It was living in a bubble, where anything could happen, but probably wouldn't. It was doing robust denial about what life becomes when the dream doesn't happen. It means drinking too much, being a waiter or barman at 45, it means marrying someone rich that you don't like, or getting lost in a cult religion or New Age practice, or drinking too much. It means writing that book or script that never happens. It means returning to your criminal roots you tried to deny, or turning to porn. That's Hollywood.

That's the Hollywood I found in 1988. And I loved it. Every bit of it. I could disguise myself among the young handsome boys seeking Hollywood fame at the poolside parties of the hillside mansions, or I could hang with the rough and ready, who felt more like my kin. The rejects, the abandoned, the ones who didn't fit in, the ones who were left to fend for themselves. I was as comfortable with the Hollywood wealthy that hosted parties in the hillside mansions, as I was with the drug dealers at the parties in the hillside mansions. I felt akin to them all. And alien at the same time. And they loved me of course. Made things easy.

And it was all so fast. I remember being in a cheap hotel on the Sunset strip when Adam and I first landed, for just a few nights, then I remember Adam and I living with my new boyfriend in his apartment. Adam took the couch, and I (obviously) shared the bedroom with my new boyfriend. Even though we never had sex. I was to be owned, possessed, not loved. It was weird. I'll explain later. But it all happened fast, and I had some help in that from an old pal.

I had a friend in Hollywood. Sort of. I had a piece of paper in my wallet, with the details of an Asian family sworn by blood to help me if I called them.

I called him. I visited a parking lot that was part of his family's network of legitimate businesses, that was probably a cover for their network of illegitimate businesses. I didn't know what I wanted from him, nor did he: the very best kinds of relationship, positively pregnant with possibility. Two people born with a keen eye for survival, but with a distorted sense of survival. He was a dodgy looking hard-faced man who never looked at you in the face, even while talking to you. Always on the lookout behind you, around you; looking for opportunities that might be missed if he focused directly on you. He was clearly the kind of heterosexual man that had no gay friends. We looked odd together. Movie star gay boy in Hollywood, tall, super groomed, a soap star quiff, right out of the 1980s. And him, Asian mafia. But he didn't discriminate. My gayness didn't bother him at all, the way it would have any other heterosexual man in the 1980s. If I'd not been given his number by my mate from the Melbourne city streets, then I'd have been simply a mark, someone to provide an opportunity for him. My gayness irrelevant. But we were kin, because I did have his number, because his third cousin in Melbourne had been my friend. Again, my gayness irrelevant. And kin. Sworn by blood.

We were never friends; we only met in person the once. But he was professional, and he had honor; he summed me up pretty quickly and figured out what I wanted, even though I hadn't figured that out yet.

I was lost, family-less in a big city, and looking for opportunity. Lazy opportunity, because I didn't make things happen, things just happened to me. I had no ambition, no attention span to focus on a long-term goal, no dedication, drive, passion to see a long-term goal through to the end. I was nihilism, I was apathy, I was trauma. And I was seeking lazy opportunity. I was unknowingly seeking a groomer.

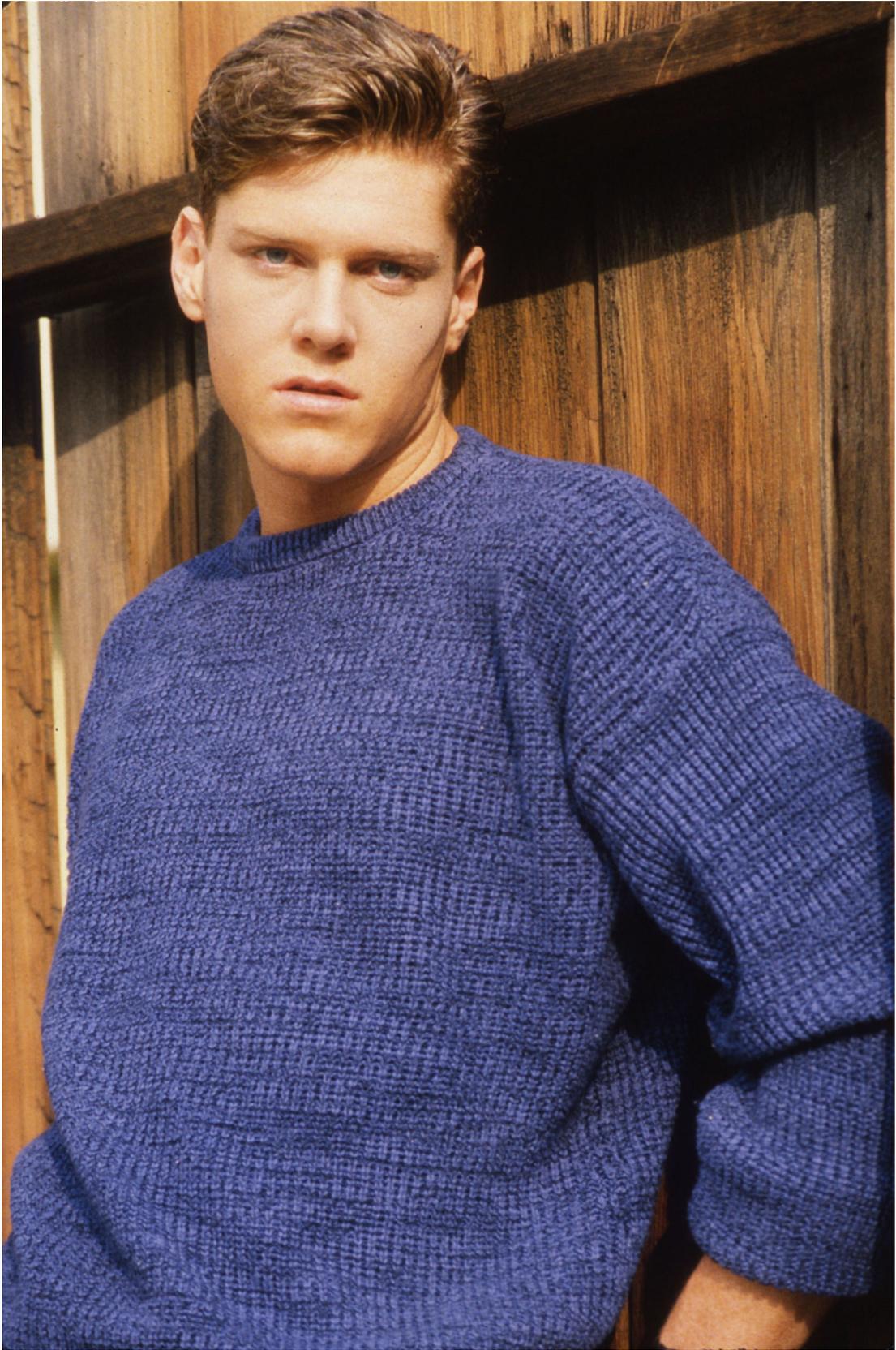
And he'd summed me up.

He knew my type, and how to find opportunity in Hollywood in the 1980s.

He was connected and willing to help his kin.

He knew where I'd fit, where I'd thrive. He had me summed up.

And he connected me to gay porn industry.
I'd found my Hollywood.



(Me; Los Angeles California, 1988)



Chapter 6

Fortune and Glory

Think Beta cassette, think VHS.

Think not-so-glossy magazines with almost-naked super-groomed and oiled gay men on the cover; for sale only in sex-shops. Wrapped in sealed plastic, designed to tease only, not giving it all away without a purchase. This was before the world would allow them on the top shelf of newsagents alongside the socially acceptable straight porn magazines.

Think Sex Shops which only opened late afternoon, stayed open all night, bathed in neon. Staffed by some heavy-set man who smoked cigars, who would (almost without caring) give you the side-eye as you nervously moved toward the arch through which the filthy gay section was housed. Those sections also had wanking booths; enter, close the curtain, put a silver dollar in the coin slot, and porn of your choice will play on the screen for a minute precisely.

These were also the places to cruise for sex. There were better places to cruise for sex as a gay or closeted man in Hollywood, but if you weren't in the know, and you had a Yellow Pages or an eye for neon lights, this could be the place you'd wind up on a horny lonely night.

Not me though.

I'd had sex three times only when I arrived in Hollywood; once with a woman, twice, clumsily and unsatisfactorily with men. I did not understand sex, or

intimacy of any kind except that closeness I'd known with my mother. Sex certainly made better sense to me as a currency of sorts, than anything else. It certainly seemed like a valuable currency amongst the gay worlds I'd experienced. Sex seemed of huge importance, and it was glossy, groomed, accessorized, merchandised and very marketable. It was something gay men seemed to value very highly, and worlds of all kinds seemed devoted to gay sex. Bars, clubs, advertisements, sex shops, the gay travel industry, the saunas, the parks at night the public toilets at night and the Clap clinics. And that was even before the internet had hit us, this was Jackie Collins' Hollywood. I was aware of the value of sex; though I hadn't met many people who found a lot of pleasure in it. I met many who found pleasure in the pursuit of it, in the carrot on the end of the stick that represented great sex, but I didn't meet many who enjoyed sexual relationships with men.

And I'd never enjoyed it. Nor did I imagine enjoying a sexual relationship with anyone. I was alone, I was an island, no one understood me or ever will.

There I was, thrust into a world that seemed all about sex, with no concept of it at all.

Except for the marketability of it.

The porn industry made sense.

And it seemed to want me.

It seemed glamorous. I've described the sex shops where porn cassettes lived, before we had Pornhub or the internet. This was not glamorous, but the industry that fueled it, was. The glamour existed in the parties in Hollywood mansions at night, in the pool parties by day; the glamour lived and teased in the glittering lines of cocaine on glittering silver trays and the glittering silver straws we snorted it through. Glittering Champaign flutes, glittering necklaces that hung on overly suntanned waxed chests of the fat gay porn makers. And the glittering pretty boys who danced around the pool, aware of the commodity of their sex. Waiting for that moment of sexual affirmation, and the fame that came from that wanking booth moment.

Jeff Stryker was the biggest porn star in the gay world then.

Huge.

And I'd been introduced to his manager (via probably a thousand degrees of separation) by my Hollywood contact in the parking lot, my blood-sworn kin.

And I found myself living with him in his apartment, Adam on the sofa, we were inseparable remember, and his survival in Hollywood depended on my success. I took that for granted.

This was not the glamour I spoke of though, not this relationship, not this apartment.

His name, the manager of porn stars who became my boyfriend, was Arthur. He was 33 years old, blond curly hair that I adored. He was great in public, but awful at real stuff, like really talking to someone.

And I guess I was the same. In that situation at least. A kind of forced intimacy, born of a sordid introduction and a need for survival. Like two predators bumping in the night. Like two sharks swimming about, looking for a fight but only finding each other. So pairing up instead of having to divide the ocean. Survival in Hollywood.

He wasn't the wealthy glamorous porn industry mogul that one might expect at this stage of the story; his apartment was not a mansion, there was no pool.

He was probably the hundredth manager Jeff Stryker had had in a year, during a probably awkward 'what-to-do-next' moment in the porn star's career. You know that stage right? When you're the biggest porn star in the world, when the world lives on VHS cassettes, and you're sure it's crossover time to the next step, but no one knew what the next step is, or how to achieve it.

Arthur, my new boyfriend, was one of probably a hundred "managers" who felt they knew what Jeff Stryker's next step should be. And how to make it happen.

(Except he didn't.)

Any better than the other hundred.

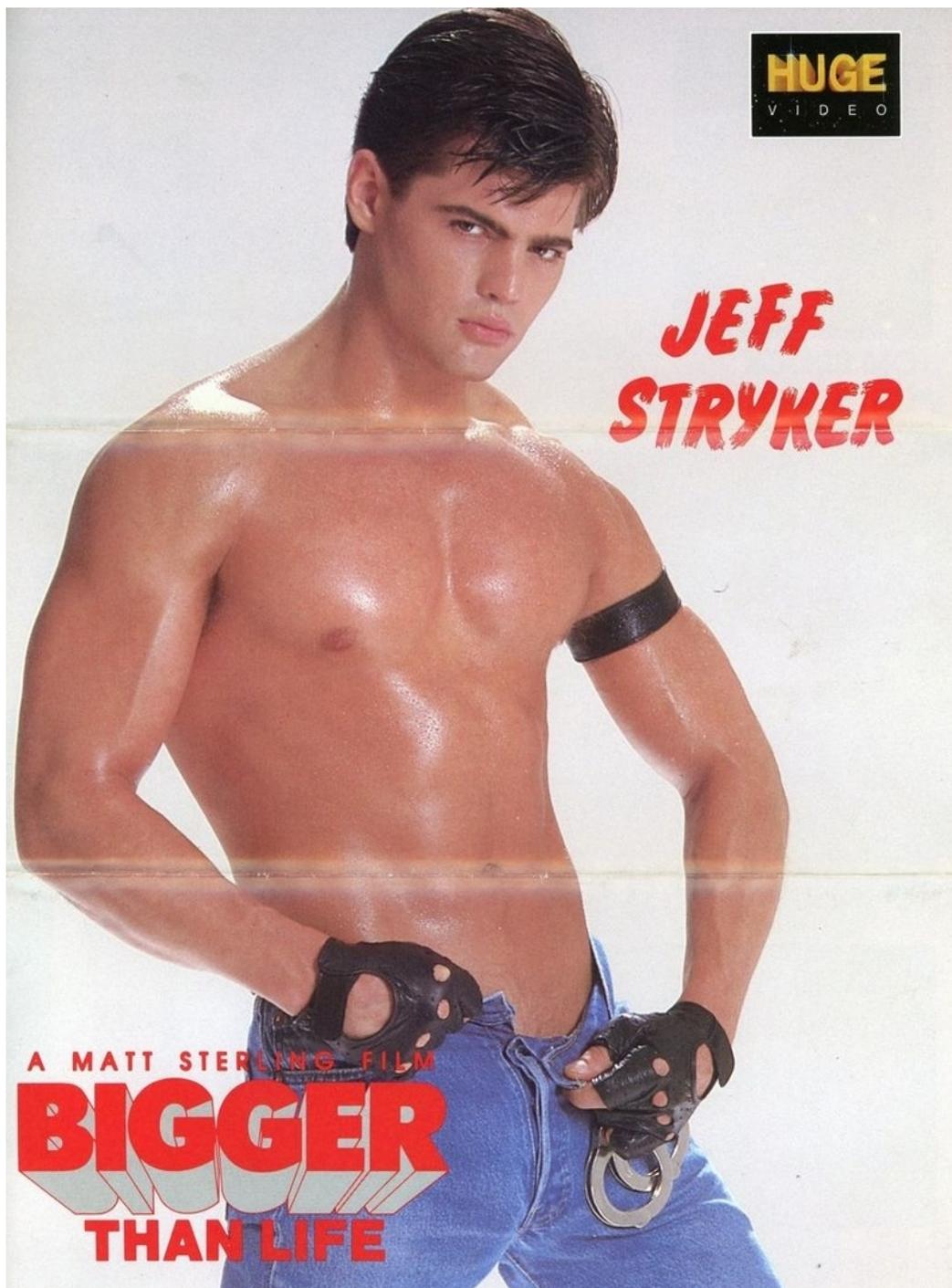
But that was porn in the 1980s in Hollywood.

That was the bed I was sleeping in.

Arthur had no money, and his name was probably fake. Arthur Carrington. Remember please, that Dynasty was the biggest thing in television in the 80s. Arthur's career history was a mystery, he seemed to have no family or family history to speak of, it seemed he just appeared from thin air in 1980s Hollywood.

I never knew him. He never knew me.

I knew he liked the left side of the bed.



He lied about everything; he lied about what he was going to do today, which important people he was going to meet, the great achievements and introductions he would make today. He lied when he promised me that being with him represented opportunity of sorts, for me. For a month, I was sure he did not, in any way, represent Jeff Stryker. (But he did; Jeff came by eventually, to complain about the lack of progress, the lies, to threaten that Arthur would be sacked in favor of manager number 101, unless he saw some progress. It wasn't a nice meeting for Arthur, but it was for me, meeting my first icon. Jeff Stryker, porn star. Back when "porn star" meant porn STAR.)

Arthur was a grifter, a lying mystery, on the take, a keen eye for opportunity. None of this, none of this, made me like him any less. His blond hair was gorgeous, and his graft was so slick, yet so transparent, that he was adorable. I think he believed his own lies, they were told with so much promise, such joy and with such blond curly hair, that everybody wanted to believe him, or make them real. He was liked by everybody, even as they dismissed his nonsense. His graft worked for him. It didn't work too well for Jeff Stryker, but Arthur was well-connected, he did get us the invites to the glamorous parties, to the mansions, to the porn studio meetings. We bunked down in his cheap apartment, like every Hollywood immigrant, waiting for their break, their fortune and glory. And when we weren't bunking down, we were doing the glamour grift, schmoozing at the parties, name-dropping Jeff Stryker, and looking for our opportunity amongst the glamour.

I was offered money for sex. A lot. Daily. I was offered porn stardom a lot. I was offered modeling contracts, introductions to acting agents, introductions to famous film directors. I was offered the chance to sleep with the second and third biggest porn stars, for free. I was offered all these things in exchange for sex, or sometimes just for an association with me that held promise for someone. I was offered success in exchange for an invitation to a hot tub party at a famous tv star's house. I was offered opportunity, lines of cocaine, swimming trunks at pool parties, and invitations to a line of better-quality

cocaine by the hosts of those parties. There was opportunity everywhere, and for a while, I was actually, the talk of the town. I was the hottest new thing, in this low-life world at least. Arthur's plan was not to sell me cheap though; it was to create a buzz about me, keep me unobtainable to increase my value. He was protecting an investment, it felt like he was protecting me.

He was a mystery to me, and he was a grifter, but I really actually do think, to this day, that a lovely, tiny part of him, the better part, really was protecting me from this.

I think we had sex once, Arthur and I. We weren't close. I had no idea who he was. I had no idea who I was. He had no idea who I was. We had no idea what was going on. I was an opportunity, not someone to be loved. Sharing a bed with him every day, living with him, was weird, but easy enough. I was phenomenally frigid and defensive when it came to sex. But a great flirt in public, in my modest classy way.

Arthur knew; he knew I was untouchable. If he knew anything, anything; if his street sense informed him of anything truly true, it was this; that I was untouchable. He knew there was a profound vulnerability behind my frigidity, something due to explode dangerously if invaded. He knew this, somehow. It was the only thing he might have known about anything; but he knew this. And he respected this.

And gosh I liked this about him.

Once, just once, he reached over from his side of the bed, and touched me, in a benign, non-sexual place, perhaps my upper arm. I had my back to him.

I didn't move. Which in my language, in our language, was a signal that this was OK, but that I wouldn't be moving. Or participating. But that what he wanted to do was ok.

I'm not sure if I felt it was a duty that I owed him for free accommodation and for all the opportunity-promising. I'm not sure if I wanted it.

I was a very long way away from having a clue what I wanted or didn't want. I was nihilism, I was sheer survival, I was trauma.

We were two sharks sharing water.

I'm entirely sure that Arthur was as confused as I.

We had a kind of sex that night. I didn't move or turn to face him.

I think it was a gift on my part, and I think it was a very respectful act of kindness from Arthur. And the closest we ever came to knowing what the other was about.

But still a long way.

It's a nice memory if I romanticize it.

Day time came and it was like it never happened. We went back to the grift.

My time in Hollywood was coming to an end. Inevitably. I can't even remember how long my Hollywood life lasted, less than a year? This was going nowhere, Jeff Stryker's career was going nowhere. Nothing in Arthur's life lasted long, he was transient, and so all the players that drifted in, drifted away. And his promises of great opportunity wore thin, though I never stopped adoring his belief in those promises, or the way his blond curls bounced when he made those excited promises.

And Adam, my best and only friend on the sofa, the third wheel, also living on hollow promises of opportunity, all depending on my value in Hollywood; he knew this was over. And since I was not a person that ever initiated anything, in my apathy, ever... Adam took charge and decided we were moving on.

Hollywood had been my first real introduction to gay life.

To a relationship.

To the game of succeeding in life. And the game of opportunity.

I grew up there a little, I honed some social skills, some dress sense. My grift improved, my groom game improved.

Hollywood had been my introduction to kind sex; imbued perhaps, with mental health weirdness, but a kind memory to keep.

At age 18, I'd learned a lot about life.

About death.

In Hollywood, I learned that gay sex is a commodity, and that the merchandising of that, was a gay man's passport to survival.

Most people seemed valued upon their sexiness.

If you're sexy, you'll be welcomed.

If you're sexy, you'll be included.

If you're not, you won't be, unless you have some other kind of skill that sets you above the rest.

If you're sexy, opportunities happen, if you're sexy, you'll be at the best parties, the best people will be interested.

If you're sexy you'll get by.

I'm not just talking about Hollywood. This was my gay community.

Sexiness was the oil that made the wheels go around.

If you didn't have it, you wouldn't make it in this world.

If you didn't have it, no one would want you.

If you didn't have it, you'd get rejected, a lot; not in honest ways, just the subtle disguised ways that hurt even more and last longer.

If you didn't have sexiness, you'd be lonely and unhappy.

I wasn't sexy, but I was movie star handsome and super charismatic; I wasn't sexy, but I looked like I was, and I could carry it off.

And some people saw my vulnerability all over my sleeves, and they thought that was sexy too.

(Naïve fools.)

So I passed.

As long as I played the game.

This is what I'd learnt about gay life, from my first introduction to a gay community. That everyone was troubled, everyone was looking for opportunity, and that sexiness was the currency that would keep you functioning in the cruelty and madness and the nihilism.

The nihilism that streaked through me; that was common amongst my gay community.

Because AIDS was here. The opposite of sexy.

Killing millions, and making gay everything disgusting.

But I was unaware, mostly. Or perhaps it's truer to say, I didn't care, so the AIDS alarm went over my head. I hadn't cared for over a decade, since the bliss died on the kill kill day, so I remained deaf and blind to AIDS talk. Just another thing. And not enough empathy to really care what it was doing to others.

No one spoke of it. I knew of it, but I don't know how. I don't think anyone had ever said the word to me. It had been spoken of:

"Oh, be careful of that one; she has it, and she doesn't care who she shares it with. Stay clear of that one."

That was language that meant a guy in the room had AIDS, was dangerous, stay away. Without using the word AIDS. I never heard it. But I knew what it was. And I got on with things.

I'd need to learn a lot about it in years to come. In the future, I'd become a world-renowned activist and community champion, the figurehead for a different epidemic that gay men would face, that would require me knowing a lot about HIV and AIDS.

But the more immediate reason I'd need to learn a lot about it, was because it would (in part) define my life in years to come. It would nearly kill me, define my generation and inform my understanding of the world.

London was next. I think it had always been part of the plan, for Adam and me; Hollywood was meant to be a brief stopover, but opportunity beckoned so loudly at my heels, that Adam felt it might be worth a longer stop. But Arthur wasn't that golden ticket that Adam wanted, and though I could have stayed apathetically there, drifting, grifting, Adam took the initiative and moved us on. To London.

Hollywood had been brief, it was never home. Nearly. Potentially. I could have easily become a washed-up ex porn star trying to make it in legitimate movies,

working as a waiter, doing too many drugs, drinking too much, passing, until my looks and charisma were overcome with cynicism and bitterness, trying to make contacts and extra cash through some dodgy dealings.

That could have been my destiny. Perhaps it should have been. There is great misery in it, but there is great honor in it and a kind of dignity that isn't obvious. All of those who didn't make it in Hollywood, or elsewhere, the truly washed up, but don't know it yet... I see great dignity there. The dignity lies in the perseverance, despite the odds. The dignity lies in the endurance, the work done toward the appearance of youth. Bricks and mortar, with the greatest of dedication. The dignity is in the self-belief which must be stronger than bricks and mortar. The ability to paste a smile on and to walk proudly away, head held high in denial and in dignity, while humiliation and rejection slam another door in your face.

I love that dignity.

I sought it, but I can't pretend my pursuit was admirable. My predator was still strong in them days.

London beckoned. London promised lots of fortune and glory.

Goodbye to Hollywood. I know some people call it Los Angeles, but no; this was Hollywood I'd tasted, don't ever mistake that. And I promised myself, me being me, that I'd never return to this city unless it was as the star of a film being screened before a packed and applauding audience somewhere on Sunset Boulevard.

That did happen by the way. A later chapter.

Be patient bitches.

Let's go to London.

(Sunset Strip late 1980s)



Chapter 7

London. Reality Bites

Adam and I arrived in London in winter. I had never before in my life needed to invest in a proper winter coat, but ever the one to be thinking ahead, Adam had made me go shopping with him in Melbourne for the ultimate winter coat. He told me people can almost be defined by their coats. Wardrobes change daily, but single a winter coat will serve someone faithfully, daily throughout a London winter, so it needs to be remarkable. There are those that have an efficient, perhaps shapeless and worn-out warm winter coat, that gets overused, year after year, hiding some brilliant fashion and style under its practical oldness. Forgetting that the majority of people see them, assess them, on this winter coat.

The same goes for shoes. Some people can hold everything together through years of depression, addiction, illness, without any 'tell', convincing most people they are fine. But the giveaway will always be their shoes, and their coat.

This ridiculous lesson in privilege, was one of the earliest things I learned. I bought, THE most amazing winter coat that my money could buy. Ankle length, leather jacket made in the Australian Japara style that was worn famously by bushmen and horsemen of the Australian Blue Mountains. Nothing that Europe would have appreciated, certainly nothing that critiquing gay communities would have appreciated.

I probably looked ridiculous. But I felt heroic in it. A little bit like my hero from *The Man from Snowy River* (movie), and a little bit like a teenager who knows nothing about fashion, wearing the most expensive, the most heavy and the most swishy thing he'd ever owned.

I can't remember what shoes I wore.

But I had arrived in London with a sprained ankle. I'd fallen just before boarding my plane from LAX airport. My plight, and Adam's insistence had gotten (both of us) upgraded to first class seats, but the hell would be the first 2 weeks in London hobbling on a sprained ankle, under the weight of my heavy coat, in snow and ice, travelling from flat viewing to flat viewing, as Adam and I searched for accommodation. A search through ice and snow, carrying all we owned in giant cases, under the weight of our expensive coats, and me with a sprained ankle.

Pre-internet flat hunting.

Adam was difficult to please. He was used to luxury, he felt entitled to it, and his sacrifice in Hollywood, sleeping on Arthur's sofa, was something he sought to rectify, now in London.

Still both living on our savings, but aware they were running short, this mad search for an affordable place to live, was a frantic start to our London life, and did not help my ankle that needed rest.

I did not like London at first.

A new element began to creep into the dialogue Adam and I shared. It started as an almost amusing shared amazement at how handsome I'd been perceived to be in Hollywood, and how many opportunities for the fortune and glory we'd missed by being shackled to Arthur. Part of this was a resentment on Adam's part, a resentment that Arthur had promised so much, but delivered so little; a resentment that Adam had had to sleep on a sofa, when he clearly felt entitled to more luxury. A resentment that Arthur had protected me from the cheap offers of prostitution and pornography, that might have made Adam's experience of Hollywood better.

(I apply the word 'prostitution' to a kind of exchange where power and innocence is being exploited. I would not apply this to legitimate and proud sex-work where all involved have agency and it is devoid of coercion/exploitation.)

This dialogue shifted, week by week. I soon felt that I owed Adam a kind of apology for the hardship he had endured, and I started to buy into the collective injustice he spoke of, of the lives we should have been living. Lives with more luxury.

Somehow, it became understood between us, that I could rectify all of this by capitalizing on my handsomeness and my unmistakable charisma, making use of the lesson's we'd learned in Hollywood about my worth, my marketability, to older gay men.

This just became part of the natural dialogue, during these first weeks in London. We found a flat in Bayswater to live in; it was central enough to appease Adam's needs, and we got on with the business of living in London, jobless and with savings that would not last us forever.

I say "us", because Adam and I were as one. I don't know how this came to be, but we were as one. Not intimate, as with my mum and I, but inseparable, shared fates, shared monies, shared everything.

Two predators sharing the same water. No love, some competition certainly, and an awareness that the other might be useful to the other.

If one of us should be the breadwinner, that seemed natural. If one of us had more savings than the other, it was shared, that was natural. The fact that the imbalance favored him, never seemed inappropriate to me. I was an adult, without family, without a boarding school, without a home, in a strange city, without initiative, driven only by apathy, nihilism and my quite extraordinary charisma and good looks.

Seeking the purposefulness and the security of a groomer.

And there was Adam. I had Adam to be in charge, so that felt safe.

The togetherness was amazing. It glimmered of an intimacy and togetherness I had felt all those years ago with my mum. It glimmered of something beyond

nihilism, it glimmered always, of the fortune and glory he kept promising. The fortune and glory owed to us, that would fix everything.

It became obvious and natural between us, that escorting would be our career in London. Adam did the research, he did everything, and it wasn't long before we knew the best places for me to call. Thanks mostly to Spartacus Gay Guide.





(My Japara that kept me warm & dry in Winter London.)

I still knew nothing of sex. I hated my body, in fact I hated taking my clothes off; even with Arthur, I'd slept fully clothed; and even Adam had never seen me naked. But I knew I looked amazing in clothes, and neither Adam nor I could fully understand this weirdness of how the rest of the world found me so sexy. Nothing in life had made sense to me this far, not for a very long time. Knowing that escorting was prostitution, knowing what it meant, I had a fear of what it required of me. Nakedness and sex, neither of these things had been good experiences for me this far. My resistance was only muted by the fact that nothing made sense anyway, and I didn't care enough, about anything, to stop it from happening.

But something in me delayed the inevitable. Adam began to become frustrated with my reluctance to get this career going for us.

One day, he took the phone, and dialed. A1 Escorts was called A1 Escorts (I would later learn, when I was running London's biggest and best escort agency) because these were the days of the Yellow Pages, and if your escort agency began with the letter A, then you had a greater chance of being selected by people searching through the big yellow book called the Yellow Pages; if the number 1 was included, it increased your chances of being among the very first in your category. That was how the business world worked before the internet. I remember the advertisement very clearly; a black and white drawing of two Roman pillars, with some grapevines growing up them, and between the pillars, a written explanation of what A1 escorts provided. Male company, for discerning visitors to London. Discretion was assured, and all other assurances about A1 Escorts being the classiest choice, were there in plain ink between the Roman pillars.

And a phone number.

I remember the moment.

I've always had an uncanny sense of when history is happening, in a moment. I've always known when a moment is of historical importance, even if no one else would understand that for many more years. It's like a Pause in the timeline, just a Pause. On the kill kill day, I knew the bigness of it. Even as a terrified child, I observed like a wise, aloof adult, observing the unraveling of the day, as if from some historical objective point, wiser than all the adults around me.

I have felt it often. The Pause. I can tell when a pop song that I hear for the first time, will be one of historical significance. I knew Madonna was of historical importance when I first saw her dancing on Solid Gold performing Holiday. The day I was diagnosed with the killer virus HIV, I observed from some historical vantage point.

A Pause.

When at age 14 I first saw Lady Diana Spencer in a see-through skirt on the cover of a newspaper, I knew that history was just beginning for the both of us, that we'd be tied together for decades to come.

I've recognised talent-to-come, activists-to-be, moments that would define history, and I've recognised the importance of those moments, instantly, while others are still grappling with the 'now' of it.

I would know it, when I first coined the term 'chemsex': I knew it would define a period in history, that it would define a few decades of my life.

On this day, this day as I looked at the Spartacus Gay Guide and the Roman pillars of A1 escorts; as Adam (annoyed and impatient at my delaying tactics) handed me the giant red phone receiver and as he round-dialed on the 80s telephone, the number that would connect me to A1 escorts, I knew this to be a defining moment in my life. I observed, unemotionally from some distant historical vantage point, as I took the receiver, and asked if they had any jobs going.

Chapter 8

Day. From. Hell.

My first day as an escort was a busy one.

It started with a visit to the first-floor offices looking over the famous, slowly-curving Regent Street, the window was a giant half circle. It was just up from Piccadilly Circus, which, not ironically, was the traditional home of the “Dilly boy”. Dilly boys were the young runaways, rent boys, who would congregate around the Eros statue at Piccadilly Circus, making their bodies and their misfortune available to rent to any of the closeted men who sought a little prostitution of an evening. Or a little blackmail, whichever earned money faster. Oscar Wilde and Francis Bacon were fond of the Dilly culture. As I passed the Eros statue that day, I did not know this extraordinary history, this clandestine culture; if I had, I might have stopped for a moment; for in less than a decade, that long established culture, that served the complicated needs of so many challenged people – would die away, as internet porn and sex work would make it all redundant. I might have stopped for a moment to mourn this impending historic demise.

But I didn't; I was too young to know or care about this history, and I had a date with destiny, an appointment at A1 Escorts. Despite this grand address, the office was

a small room, staffed by Raj, someone who was probably someone else's very loyal right-hand man, definitely not a boss, or someone simply doing a job. I could tell, because he liked me too much, he was not professional enough to instill trust and he looked over me with those greedy eyes I had gotten to know so well in Hollywood. He had long bony fingers that moved over the desk, or the book, or whatever he was touching, reminding me of spider legs, always moving, seemingly without synchronicity, just moving. The book he was touching, and turning pages of, even while looking me up and down hungrily, was a book full of head shots and body shots. This was the Men's book, the Women's book was labeled, but closed.

Raj was disappointed that I didn't have any photographs. Disappointed because he felt I must have stereotyped A1 escorts, if I thought they would not expect a potential escort to arrive without photographs.

He implied that I thought he was not professional, that it was cheeky for me to arrive so unprepared.

Which of course gave him the opportunity to ask me to remove my shirt.

I wouldn't.

He explained that without photographs, he'd need to get an idea of how I looked, in order to promote me to his clients.

I wouldn't.

It wasn't pride.

It was a body shame, a dreaded fear of being judged badly by awful people.

It had happened in the showers at boarding school, at home, I'd been teased by the neighborhood kids, and the boys my sisters dated.

And the thought of standing here now, before Raj and his fingers and the Men's book full of perfect naked men, filled me with horror and fear.

But it didn't look like that; it looked like pride.

It looked like arrogance.

It looked like, "Please, how dare you."

It sounded like silence, because I said nothing.

And I knew that other people got uncomfortable with silence long before I did, and I could just wait them out.

His other tactics, like:

“you know, you’ll have to take your shirt off, and more, for this job, right?”

And:

“I need to know what you look like to promote you to the clients”

These tactics fell on my handsome movie-star face and my charismatic silence. (I was frozen with fear, but) I looked like a heroic, self-important, self-confident young man who wasn’t going to respond to this revolting solicitous, salacious invitation to undress. No way.

Perhaps, in retrospect, I was hoping to be turned down for this job. It would have been easier to explain to Adam that the agency had rejected me, than that I didn’t want to do it.

But my brain was working on too much during this silence to figure everything out.

The silence was weird, and we were both still, except for his spider fingers walking over the page in front of him, still slowly turning pages, for no reason whatsoever. Until a light flashed on the telephone in front of him, representing a phone ringing silently. He picked up a receiver and his fingers stopped moving. I can’t remember what conversation happened on the telephone, I think I tuned out, after our standoff, glad of the relief, glad his fingers had stopped moving. After replacing the receiver back into the cradle of the telephone, Raj asked if I was free to do a job.

Right now.

This threw me, I hadn’t mentally prepared for this, and I don’t think I’d ever thought this interview, or Adam’s insistences, would actually lead to me doing this job.

But this was a silence I couldn't wait out. My bluff had been called, and Raj of A1 escorts had a job to send me to, only minutes after me requesting a job at London's best agency.

Life was moving fast, and I had to keep up. I didn't even have time to find a phone booth and call Adam, which would be the expected next thing. He could have cleared my doubts, and told me what to do, made the decisions.

But no time, this was happening now.

Raj explained that this person was a regular, and liked to see all the new boys. I think Raj assumed, by my performance of confidence, that I was professional and experienced at this. He delivered instructions to me as if I knew what he was talking about, as if it were some escort's code that I understood, stuff about the sex that would be expected, or something. I was way beyond listening at this point, as my body was releasing adrenaline in gushes that kept me standing upright, when I think I would otherwise have been a heap on the floor.

A cab was to be gotten outside at Piccadilly Circus, I was to go the flat in Chelsea, and return directly to Raj, who would be there waiting for me.

It was odd how I had disliked Raj so intensely in earlier minutes, and now I looked to him as a kind of savior that would be seeing me through, waiting for me after, this impending ordeal.

I don't remember hailing the cab, I don't remember the journey. The flat was in Chelsea, a nice area, and the client was clearly wealthy. But the flat appeared to be a bedsit, and I assumed it was adjacent to his home, where he lived, closeted, with his wife. This was the 80s, this is how a lot of gay men from aristocratic families lived. This bedsit had a single bed, and a wash basin I could almost reach from the bed.

I remained clothed, and silent, awaiting instructions.

I can't remember the conversation; perhaps he was more nervous than I. Not because he hadn't done this before; he saw all the new boys. I think he quickly sensed that he had a very young, very fresh, terrified and traumatised child in

front of him. Whatever blinkers he would normally wear in this situation; whatever tactics he used in his brain to untangle the sex that would normally happen now – it wasn't working.

He kissed me and I was frozen.

He reached inside my shirt, and I was frozen.

Then he stopped and made a scotch for himself, but he didn't offer me one.

There was mental health alive and active in the room, and he saw it, he was awfully confused by it. His arousal, that supposedly never wavered, vanished, and he was in the room with a human being, and that was not the sex he was used to.

He called me a cab, and handed me the money I had been told to expect, as well as more for a tip.

Then I was cabbing it back to Raj.

As soon as I was back in the offices, Raj was congratulating me. The client had phoned him and given a glowing appraisal. I didn't need to say anything at all. Just to hand the cash to Raj, including the tip (I learned it was expected to declare tips honestly. My cut was two-thirds of the entire takings from each job, including tip. Declaring tips was an honesty game of trust, that if played well, ensured getting given the best jobs with highest priority. If a client tipped you, and promised you it was a secret – one never knew when or if he was also declaring that to Raj.)

This day was not over though. My most immediate urge was to call Adam, it was odd for me to have experienced anything so major without having shared it with him; it was odd for so much time to have elapsed without contact.

This was the most urgent thing on my mind, but Raj had another job for me.

Right now.

It seemed that while I had been in the bedsit, Raj had phoned all the regulars to let them know he had a fresh face. He wanted a profitable day.

I was his profitable day.

Before I knew it, before any dialogue with Adam, there I was at job number two; sitting in an apartment overlooking the Thames, with another very kind man, who seemed to sense that I did not share the usual escort's demeanor. As I sat, removed my dramatic and amazing winter coat, and tried to make conversation the way I imagined escorts made conversation. I saw some mail on the coffee table, and I recognised the name it was addressed to. A famous name, but I couldn't place it. I didn't recognize him, and so, innocently (and clearly not knowing how escorts made usual conversation) I asked if he was famous.

"No no, no, no. That's not something we talk about here."

He said. It was a posh accent. It carried authority, and I knew not to push further.

He seemed old, but he looked a lot younger with his clothes off, which happened quickly afterward. I would learn a great deal in the coming months, about perceptions of age, about naked bodies, about how authority in clothes can translate to the opposite out of clothes; and vice versa. I'd learn how school-boyish grown men can be, how ridiculous court judges could be, how lonely popular men can really be, and how sexy an awkward ugly man can be out of his clothes. And so much more.

But today too much was happening to really absorb the lessons. I was surprised to like this old man's body, but his authority intimidated me. I knew I was supposed to be naked too, and once I'd done that part, I sat on his bed, and waited for him, or the universe, to give instructions. I did not know what was supposed to happen next.

I felt ugly and stupid.

That weirdness was in the room, that mental health weirdness, and I think it was all mine.

I don't know how much time passed; perhaps I even missed some conversation he had attempted, I don't know, I was frozen.

Without being unkind, he explained this wasn't right, and he'd like me to leave.

I was so relieved.

And mortified, but mostly relieved.

He paid me too. All too strange for me to comprehend.

Again, I was cabbing it back to Raj, with a pocket full of British Pounds, very large strange bank notes, compared to Australian dollars. They felt of greater value, and I liked them. I examined them with joy as the cab journeyed past St Paul's cathedral, the sun setting.

Back on Regent Street I declared my tip to Raj, and again, he communicated some praise to me from the client. It was clear that the client had communicated some of the weirdness to Raj, because there was an attempt at reassurance from my new spidery fingered friend; something like:

"And never mind, we're not always to everyone's taste."

Raj spoke with beautiful English, a perfect upper class English accent.

He had another job for me.

It seemed out of my hands now. I was very excited about the money I was earning, it was more than I'd possessed for a very long time. But there wasn't time to think, and thankfully, Raj was making all the decisions for me; a circumstance I was familiar with and comfortable with, in my way.

I journeyed to Knightsbridge, to meet the most awful pretentious, self-important man I had ever met, or would since.

He acted kind, but I saw right through him, and his narcissism, and I knew what lay behind it was a potential for awful cruelty and manipulation. He boasted about his house so much, I became convinced it wasn't his. He boasted about how much money he had, I knew it was money that could disappear as quickly as he had manifested it. I knew the money he flaunted came at the awful expense of someone else, someone who had been screwed over maliciously by this awful man with no conscience.

I wouldn't sleep with him, I don't think I was hiding my revulsion of him very well. But he seemed challenged by that. We argued even, but weirdly, it spurred him on, eager to make me impressed by his wealth or his money smarts, or something. A normal person would have kicked me out of the house by now; a normal escort would have left (well no; probably a normal escort would have acted impressed, played that game).

But he was revolting, and manipulative and he was determined I wouldn't leave in an argument. He poured me a drink. I suggested I leave, he poured me another, or asked to show me something amazing in another room. I swore I wouldn't sleep with him, and he offered me a bath, promising that he wouldn't tell Raj how rude I'd been, promising I'd get paid the full amount, plus tip, if I'd let him bathe me.

The bath was awful too. He seemed to know he could be crueler while I was naked in the bath, less able to leave dramatically. He knew I wanted to be paid, he knew he could threaten me with a good review or a bad one to Raj. These hours passed awfully slowly.

Then he wanted me to stay the night.

I said no way.

The more I protested, the more he wanted to win.

In fact, he said he was leaving for Paris in the morning, and that I should accompany him.

It's possible I shuddered with revulsion. Which probably would have spurred him on further.

I explained my friendship with Adam to him, and why his suggestions and invitations were impossible.

And I think it was the only time he shut up for ten minutes.

He actually stopped, and listened silently and attentively while I waxed on about me and Adam.

I explained how Adam and I were inseparable, how our lives and destinies were intertwined, about our extraordinary connection, history and our journeys

together; I explained how bizarre this day had been without him knowing where I'd been for so long, and how staying overnight here without him, was not possible. How Paris was unthinkable, without Adam.

He seemed fascinated by the complexity of this friendship, a kind of pathological fascination and curiosity. Was it competition I sensed? Did he need to win me away from Adam? Drive a wedge?

This was strange and awful, and beyond my comprehension. The hours I spent there seemed longer, and this arguing seemed oddly familiar, and it seemed like intimacy or something. Not the good kind, obviously, not that I knew the difference.

He had more questions about Adam, about Adam and me.

But more; he had opinions about Adam, about Adam and me. He spoke of psychological complexities, and in his revolting transparent arrogance, he knew better than me, what really lay at the heart of this friendship. He called me weak and spineless, stupid.

I hadn't been paid yet, and it seemed to me, my only option was to stay, play the game. I thought I was cleverer, I thought I'd get the upper hand, or that the mood would change.

I was out of my depth with this new kind of predator, and the day had been too strange, and I could barely think.

He really wanted me to abandon Adam and to stay the night, and to accompany him to Paris.

I was adamant, and sincere in my refusals; the thought of abandoning Adam for this monster creature was unthinkable; I just wanted this situation to end somehow, but without him winning.

He came to realise he couldn't draw me away from Adam. He was a good game-player, good enough to know a losing hand.

So he changed his play.

All three of us would go to Paris together.

I wasn't sure what this play meant, but I knew Adam would like it, and I had a feeling that anything would be fine if Adam was with me.

And so. I phoned Adam and he came. With a suitcase, including my stuff.

I forgot completely about Raj at the escort agency. Waiting faithfully with his Men's book, on Regent street as the day ended. I forgot I owed him money, an explanation.

Or perhaps I didn't forget; perhaps Adam and this client convinced me that I should forget A1 Escorts, leap forward with this new chapter.

I can't remember now.

It was a relief to have a third person to draw the yuk attention. Adam and the client were getting on great. It disturbed me a bit, but I was mostly relieved. And confused, and tired. I busied myself in a bedroom, went through the things Adam had chosen to pack for me. I stayed in that bedroom a while, pleased for my own company, a little numb.

The client came in, all sweet and nice and revolting.

Playing very nice now. It really was disturbing, I wondered what this tactic was.

He explained that I was a bit complicated, and that he was concerned for my mental health. That he hoped I was ok. He explained that he and Adam had discussed my problems, that they'd had a good chat, and that they'd formed a connection. He explained that Adam would be sharing his bed that night, and that I was a welcome guest, and that I should help myself to anything in the kitchen, and that tomorrow we'd all go to Paris together.

Although I was silent, I was in a rage, underneath my movie star good looks, my boyish innocence. A violent, silent rage. I was glad to be relieved of having to have sex with him, glad to be relieved of arguing with him. But outraged and betrayed by Adam, as well as confused. Was he rescuing me? Was he stealing my wealthy client from me? Had this been his plan, when he motivated me to become an escort?

What was happening?

I slept.

Or I raged in my bed, in my thoughts for hours, until exhaustion saved me.
It was all too much.

Chapter 9

Two More Days from Hell

Oh, But in Paris

I awoke the next morning, just as bewildered.

I don't know why I tolerated all the nonsense of the night before.

And I don't know why I would tolerate the following 2 days in Paris either.

It was 2 more days of the same.

They acted like a loving couple, and I was treated like the mental health complicated third wheel that they felt sorry for.

Was this Adam's revenge, for being the third wheel in Hollywood? We never got a moment alone together to talk, the client made sure of that.

I was petulant and childish, making camp bitchy comments to them both, while I (stupidly) followed them around.

I don't know why, I don't know why.

Partly because Adam was holding my passport.

But even if I'd had it... I don't know, I felt psychologically compelled to stay within the abuse triangle.

I was frightened to be alone, in a strange city. I used to be good at being alone, but a kind of addiction or security came with Adam's company, Adam's decision-making, his authority. Adam had always been there, he'd always taken charge. I now felt quite dependent on him, now that he ignored me. Now that he

placated and laughed and swooned with this awful client. Any other grown man my age would have seen this situation for the farce it was, and moved on.

But I stayed in it.

The client relished that I stayed in it, made jokes about me staying in it.

"Why are you following us around, little child, go, go."

Adam would say to him quietly, don't be cruel, but never defended me properly. And I stayed.

I'd given Adam all my money I'd earned the previous day, that was normal. He had my passport which he'd packed for me. But to be honest; if I'd had those things, I'd have probably stayed. There was something strange about me, something wrong with my behaviour those days, something wrong that I can't name. It felt like the kill kill day. It felt the same. It felt like life with Gray. I felt powerless.

I was ridiculed and shamed for two days, and I participated in it. I allowed it, I sank into it. My skin crawled with disgust for myself, but I stayed and let them shame me. They shamed me in front of waiters, they shamed me in front of hotel staff. Adam less so, Adam was not engaging in the same pathological delight of shaming me as the client did; but he did not defend me. He avoided my eye.

The days passed, two days.

I separated myself from them at the airport, and disengaged. I went home, alone, because it seemed Adam was moving in with the client. I waited at home, numb.

Three days later, Adam returned home. I was no longer angry.

I was different.

I was changed.

I had a new determination, and I knew to sever myself from Adam, and to make my own way. I felt hard and calloused and numb, more so than before.

Adam told me of his plans to move in with the client. He told me he was going to shadow him and his businesses, be a kind of pupil, and kind of intern, learn the ways of business and big money.

I'd clearly been the naïve one, but in this moment, I knew better. I knew this would last a week. The client's manipulative mind games would be turned on him, and Adam would gain nothing from this new venture; this venture that he was abandoning our friendship for.

But I didn't care, I was calloused, I was hard, I was different (not quite indifferent).

He almost didn't recognize me in fact.

I was without awe for him, and he didn't know that look on me.

In the next days, I considered my options, and I was super aware of the burned bridge, having run off with the client and never returning to pay Raj at A1 Escorts. But my survival switch was on, I was desperate and fearless in my vengeance and my need to find a Win in this situation. I contacted Raj, telling the truth, and apologizing. Requesting a job, not having the money to pay him the fee for the Paris client bastard. I'd never gotten paid, obviously.

Raj was confused, he knew I was green, that I'd been exploited; but it was an awful betrayal, that I couldn't deny. Raj was conflicted between his anger at the betrayal, his business sense, and his sympathy for my obvious naivety. It's possible he fancied me too. He wouldn't let me work for him again, that was his pride. But he did take me to a few lunches, and introduced me to a few other escorts, hoping it would season my naivety, prepare me for the hardened world that I was determined to conquer. As a farewell confused act of kindness, Raj also (very discreetly) discreetly gave me the number of a different escort agent, one he said I'd fare well at. One that was a proper business, one that had all the best clients, charged descent fees, one that provided boys and girls, and all in between.

The next interview would be different.

I'd arrive, feeling like a seasoned professional.

Despite not having had sex once, on my one single failed day as an escort, I'd find the strength, the will, the personality, to be different, to change. To be strong, to be sexy, to be hardened, and to win, to survive.

A lone shark in the water.

I'd suck, I'd fuck, I'd swing naked from the chandeliers or I'd sit nervous and scared, if that turned them on. I'd be the best damned escort London had seen, and I'd be running this escort agency within a year, I'd own it in two.

That's not attitude, that's what actually happened.

Within a few years, and by age 23 I'd have bought this escort agency for £100,000, I'd be known as Pimp Dave within all the wrong circles that mattered to me, spending money on anything despite not wanting anything or having any taste, and being the most popular guy in gay clubland that every good-looking guy wanted to work for or be friends with.

All the things that matter obviously.

But it all started with this first interview. Which was a masterclass in prostitution 101.

Welcome to Ambassador Escorts based in Maida Vale.

Chapter 10

Going Pro

Andy owned Ambassador Escorts, and he had a very unkind face. Pointy.

Very controlling eyes and that very pale blue that looks very ill, or alien.

I'd come to know him very well, and it would be another complicated relationship based on power and exploitation, as if one of us would actually win this power game that was played.

But today was the day I first met him.

It had only been a week since returning from the awful trip to Paris. But it seems that the escort world was very small, and I'd made a splash in my first week. Raj had called his entire client base on my first day there, trying to sell his fresh meat. Which can make clients who are loyal to their favorite, quite defensive; they tell their favorite boy, who get pissed off at Raj, and wonder who this new boy is, charming the agency, stealing all the best clients with his newness. Clients who had been promised the new boy later in the week, were let down to learn he had vanished, and they communicated that to the boy they got instead; and word gets around. Word of this new boy gets around, the new boy doing all the jobs that came through that day, stealing clients away from their favorites. I was the guy that had been A1 Escorts favorite for less than 24 hours, that had gotten paid despite not having had any sex, the guy that

betrayed the agency on my very first day by running away to Paris with a client. And had the cheek and arrogance to bring his best friend on the trip.

And then the gall to come back and ask for a second chance.

Stealing clients away from an agency – seeing clients behind an agency's back - is absolute utter taboo in 1990s escort world; you don't steal clients from agencies. From pimps.

But I did, and in my one single disastrous day as an escort, I'd ruffled feathers and become the talk of the industry.

Fabulous.

So it was easy to get the interview with Andy, he'd heard all about me. He would be dubious and distrustful, obviously, but curious enough to meet me. The rest I could handle.

Andy was less loud, less visible, less boastful than A1 escorts – but he was in fact the biggest, most powerful pimp in town.

Just quieter about it, smarter.

The quietness was a business tactic that he would teach me, it was a power thing, and a thing that comes from absolute belief in being the best. Self-assured, invulnerable. The self-confidence of a cat. Top of his game, king of the hill, not having to prove that to anybody.

I got that, I understood that. I'm the same. It's that same self-worth that my mum instilled in me, the same self-worth and superiority that saw me through my childhood to now.

And it's my narcissism, my legacy from that childhood with that family.

My interview with Andy was in an empty room with only two chairs, facing each other, but a long distance apart. I was sure no one lived here. He was in shadow; not entirely, but more so than I was.

I wondered if this was his usual set up, or if I was being given the intimidation experience because of my fame.

I was invited to sit down, coldly, professionally, no warming up.

I wasn't sure what to expect. Is sex something that's expected in an interview like this? Disrobing?

I didn't care. I was determined to work for this agency, the best agency in town. Never again, would I work for second best, be exploited and used the way Adam had used me, betrayed me; the way the Paris client had. I'd be nobody's fool again, and if it was my shyness that had been responsible for all that happening, then I must rid myself of shyness fast, harden up. Be a new person, shed my skin, emerge from my cocoon a shining confident man with no insecurities. No vulnerabilities for people to use, exploit, again and again and again.

No more, absolutely no more.

If there had been a shred of empathy left in me, or any potential for normal human bonding emotions they were dead now, no doubt.

The conversation, the intimidation, began with questions about my age, what brought me to London, why I was doing this work.

He asked me what my type was, and I thought he was referring to what type of person I was attracted to.

That's not what he meant, and he delighted in my misunderstanding. He didn't interrupt, or correct me, as I stumbled through my answer; honestly, having no idea what type I liked. My type, if I had one, was anyone who would love me, be kind to me.

(That's not what I said to him though. I was a good mimic of normal human behavior by this stage, and I told him what my 'type' was as if we were a couple of girlfriends at school.)

But that's not what he meant, and after he'd amused himself with my stumblings, he explained what that question meant. He wanted to know how I sold myself, what type of sexual stereotype I played, sold, to clients. What was my brand.

I really had no idea how to answer this, and he could see it. I think he liked it.

He asked a lot of questions, that, yes, I hate to admit it, made me nervous. As determined as I was to be hard and experienced for this interview, Andy had this skill to find my ignorances, and to take condescending amusement in my naivety. It wasn't going well. And I'd learn that this was Andy through and through. Control freak to the max. I was no match to his predatorial skill.

And he loved that.

When I say he loved that, I don't just mean the glee he got from it; I mean he saw my naivety as a marketable thing, that could make him money.

And he had no qualms in explaining it to me that plainly.

He explained that my reputation preceded me, and that no agency would be right to trust someone who had betrayed an agency on his first day. He explained too, that he could see it for what it was, clear greed and naivety. He giggled condescendingly at how naïve I was, and said he had nothing to fear from my kind of stupidity. He was too street-smart for my clumsy unprofessionalism.

He went on to explain that my innocence could only mean trouble. Nobody wants anyone who is so plainly frigid and bad at sex. He told me then, to take my shirt off, and it came so out of the blue, so unexpected, and so immediately after an onslaught of cruel judgments, that I wasn't sure if I was angry and ready to walk out, proud, and determined to stay, or just humiliated. And no time to figure it out.

I whispered in response, in a voice that could not raise itself to Andy's; taken aback, I very quietly asked if I had to (take my shirt off), shaking with fear.

He loved it. He explained, ever the practical businessman, that I would be expected to do that if he gave me a job, so there was a ridiculousness in not doing it now.

His logic was sound. I removed my shirt. His face didn't change, it reviewed me business-like. He thanked me as he gestured for me to put my shirt back on.

I sat again. I felt tiny, my pride that I had determined would rule this day, had abandoned me, and I shrunk onto my chair, obediently.

I would describe being told to take my shirt off, followed by a gesture to put it back on, akin to being hugged by a person who had only moments before, hit you. Like the torturer providing the relief from the very pain he inflicts. Like the brush of the feather, wielded by the same person who had just whipped you. I felt such relief putting my shirt back on, with his permission. I think I felt grateful.

Then he changed.

He became kinder; only slightly, one might never know. But a cowering frightened animal would sense the slight change if its life depended on it, and I sensed it.

Andy told me he liked me. He told me I was silly, naïve, that I'd made some mistakes that only a true innocent fool would make; my betrayal of Raj was not hardened criminality, but naïve foolishness. Me the fool. He told me he didn't fear my betrayal, that he could handle me.

That he'd protect me.

He explained a dilemma that he had, a thorn in his side, something that came with the territory of doing his job. He told me that he works with hardened, seasoned out-for-themselves boys all the time, that there was no camaraderie in this profession, no teamwork, no trust.

He explained how everyone was out to rip him off, steal his clients, look out for their own interests, lie, not declare tips, resent paying him a fee; he went on.

I almost began to feel sorry for him; but it wasn't that. I think that this victim role he had switched to was simply such a welcome relief from his ridicule, that it seemed like vulnerability.

All part of the grooming game, I'd later learn; perhaps. One never knows. The game always works best when the victim is kept confused.

But he liked me, I was different.

He wanted me on his team, he wanted us to work together. My inexperience and frigidity would be problematic, he told me, but on the other hand, he also knew them to be marketable qualities.

He liked that I wasn't gym toned. He liked that I didn't look like a porn star, he liked that I looked like a lost schoolboy from some Australian daytime soap. He knew how to sell me, he said, he knew how to market me, the way Raj hadn't. He knew how to protect me too, like Raj wouldn't have. He told me about how charming and sexy I'd been when I reluctantly removed my shirt, blushing with shame. I'd arrived with a London street map (an "A to Z"), and he told me I must carry one of these to every job he sent me on. It made me look like the lost boy in big London, wide-eyed and confused by the big busy streets. He could sell that. He told me to always wear the kind of clothes I'd worn that day. He told me my big winter coat was positively laughable, and that only a naïve pretentious tourist would wear such a thing, and that that was the look he was selling me as, the look that would make us both a lot of money.

The rest, he said, I'd learn.

And learn fast.

He didn't like that bit. He knew (and he told me plainly) that I'd lose my innocence very quickly, that I'd become hardened and cynical like the rest, that I'd inevitably betray him, but that we might have a good innings together before that happened. He warned me of his wrath, of how I would come off badly if I ever did betray him. But he knew I would, he knew I was a good thing with a short shelf life. And this could be good for both of us.

That was my interview, I'd gotten the job.

He had proposed a partnership, a dangerous one, but one where he provided protection. There may have been warning signs all over it, but the week since Adam's betrayal, since my abandonment had felt weird, odd, unprotected, directionless, purposeless. A bit like the years since mum died.

Andy represented an anchor of sorts, beyond my understanding, and exactly what I needed.

It was a good job. Andy prided himself on being a professional businessman, contrary to what people might expect of someone doing his job. He did not sleep with his boys (or girls), they were staff, and that's how you run a business. The room he had interviewed me in, remained a mystery, I was never there again. The offices were a sacred secret from the staff, they never went there or knew the address. Andy knew that the girl side of the business especially, could have its criminal element; many of the girls doing this job in the 80s were part of a culture that came with boyfriends who acted like pimps, or like live-in/lover/managers, and resented their girls working for, or paying, another agent – especially when the agent was a gay. They liked the money their girlfriend earned from a good agent, but resented that money going to Andy instead of themselves. A kind of inner psychological conflict that often leads to violence. And the girls, in this complicated job, liked the protection that these boyfriends provided. Andy said he always tried to find girls who were innocent like me, who hadn't yet found the security of a pimp boyfriend, but he complained of how rare innocents like me were. So it was a necessary evil. The boys however, were different. They earned vastly less money than the girls, but were much much less trouble. Usually independent, less vulnerable to the exploitation women faced, less needy of the protective pimp boyfriend. The offices remained a closely guarded secret. There was a staff of telephone operators, people we never met, who manned the many phones day and night, and they held all the power over how much we earned. Piss off one of the telephone operators, perhaps by being on the toilet and not answering the phone – and you could be punished with no other jobs for a week.

That's how life was for me, for years.

I settled into a flat in Kilburn, just by the Bakerloo line. It was cosy, I was set up well. Lonely and cosy.

I had British Telecom install a telephone. Mobile phones were not invented yet, though I did have a pager. This telephone would be my life. Every week I would call Andy, and tell him which days I was working and which days I wasn't. I was

expected to be available for work 5 days a week. If I needed to pop out and go to the shops, I'd be expected to call the telephone operator at Ambassador Escorts, and let them know I'd be on my pager if any jobs came through. This wasn't wise; telephone operators have a client on hold on one phone line, and on another line they want an escort who can quickly agree to do the job. They would not have the patience to page an escort, wait for them to receive the page, find a phone booth, call the agency back.

An escort who was out too often on their pager, would soon find themselves off the favorites list, and struggling to get work.

(The very complicated & old-fashioned way of charging credit cards, back in the day.)

Record of Charges - English
Do Not Use Staples

AMERICAN EXPRESS

Cardmember Account Number _____

Cardmember Name _____

Service Establishment _____ Date of Charge D D M M Y Y

Approval Code _____

Check or Bill No. _____

Merchandise/Services _____

Tips/Misc. _____

Cardmember Signature _____

X

Total _____

943997 Cardmember Copy
Number

Establishment agrees to transmit to American Express Travel Related Services Company Inc. (Amex) or its Authorised Licensee or Representative for payment. Merchandise and/or service purchased on this card shall not be resold or returned for cash refund.

Please Print Firmly

Please debit my _____ Card No. _____
for the sum of £ _____ (_____ pounds)
in favour of **AMBASSADOR (LONDON) LTD**
on this day _____

Authorised signature _____ Expiry date: _____
Authorisation: _____
Billing Address _____

Name Printed _____
Sales person _____

So I became good at this. I was well prepared, regarding my shopping, and I was home by the phone 5 days a week, easily accessible. I was popular with the telephone operators, the reliable one, always there.

I said yes to everything, yes to every job.

At the expense of friendships, social life... I was determined to be the best.

Predator. Narcissist. Survivor.

Being the best also meant having the communication skill to make a potential booking from a curious client, a definite booking.

Clients would ring the agency, sometimes serious, sometimes wanking, but the telephone operator would get good at weeding out the wankers. The client would state what they are looking for, what type; obviously I was the boy next door type, but that was irrelevant to the operator. Andy explained to me, that they all think they know what they want, but they don't. They'd ask for the Tom Cruise type, or the Jeff Stryker type, or this type, that type; but Andy knew that a person who knew how to charm them over the phone, was all that was needed to secure the job. Andy knew, that regardless what they wanted in their frenzied fantasy when dialing the agency, they'd be so hot and bothered and nervous and ready by the time the escort arrived, that they'd be happy with whoever walked through the door; as long as the escort worked that moment well.

So a potential client would phone in. A telephone operator would promise them everything they asked for, as they described their frenzied fantasy. They'd call me first, above all the other boys, because I was always reliably at home and ready to work, always happy to take the call, even when I wasn't happy to take the call. I was there and I said yes. Reliably.

The operator would say:

"he wants a Tom Cruise type"

or,

"he wants a Jeff Stryker type",

or,

“he wants someone to swing from the chandeliers”,

or,

“he wants a nervous boy-next-door type”,

and I'd take his number, and call the client. (I was never ever to give my number to the client – and this was before caller ID was a thing.) I'd sell myself however I'd been instructed, and I'd close the deal. I was a good closer. I could raise or lower inflections in my voice, I made good use of silences, and I could do over-the-phone intimacy that would close the deal, guaranteed. I was good at this, like I was born to it. Like there was some kind of innate predator in me.

Not innate, but stuff I'd learned in my survivalist youth.

I'd promise to be with him in 20 minutes, always 20 minutes (even when it would take me an hour). The price and tip expected, was always arranged by the operator, I would never ever talk money with a client. It's not classy, ruins the fantasy, and could also get me into legal trouble.

I'd call the operator back, confirm the job, give the address. It was always a good address, that was the advantage of being with the best agency. West End, and never south of the river, never ever south of the river. Raj had sent me to good addresses, but that was just day one; as I'd worked my way through the favorites in my first week or so, Raj would have started selling me cheap, and sending me to some far-flung dodgy places where gay escorts shouldn't go in 1988.

But Ambassador Escorts was the best, and only had good clients, reliable escorts. I didn't look like Tom Cruise, or like Jeff Stryker, but that didn't matter because I was a professional. Like a chameleon, I'd adapt, client to client, imprint on the client's mood for a few hours, swing from the chandelier, fidget nervously with my “A to Z” map book – whatever was needed to make a job work.

Pocket the money, venture home.

I did on average three jobs a day, five days a week.

For years.

I amassed a small fortune, I had nothing to spend it on, no friends, no life. But I was independent, no Adam, no Gray. I'd meet other escorts at this job or that job, occasionally grab a drink or a meal with them after we'd finished a job; fraternizing with other escorts, whether they be Ambassador Escorts or not, was frowned upon. But it happened. This was how I learned of my reputation. I was getting all the jobs, making it harder for other boys to work. I was stealing all the clients away from their other favorites, and making a name for myself as a busy, professional escort, one that people resented and feared and wanted to be friends with, wanted to destroy. Well they wanted to destroy me, then they'd meet me and be all confused by how much they liked me.

My reputation grew within the industry. But I never understood it, or felt it. There would be clients staying in hotels that had waited a long time to see me, or who spoke highly of my reputation, which I found odd, because it implied that clients were networking amongst each other, sharing stories about escorts. I don't think this happened, not before the internet, so I guess it was just word of mouth from agent to escort.

I swung from the chandeliers, I adapted, but I was never really in my element doing that. I think my success was down to the sweet boy, unlike most other escorts, who tried so hard (bless them) to be the boy that swung from the chandeliers. I think I was charming, without knowing it, I think I brought out a protective streak in many of the men I saw. I'm sure many were hugely disappointed when I arrived, but were overwhelmed by my very obvious innocence, and played along.

Because really; I must have been awful. I never ever, felt like the porn star as I removed my clothes, I must have blushed till the room lit up. I must have

tripped in my own underpants, as I attempted the strip tease, probably with a look on my face that suggested I'd rather be hiding in a closet.

But something about me worked.

And I worked.

I worked like a pack horse, Mr. reliable, 5 days a week sat by my British Telecom landline, watching this week's episode of Dynasty or Knots Landing.

I wonder what people imagine, when they are picturing the clients? Fat old men? Sometimes. Mostly, being 1988, they were closeted men in marriages with successful careers, who used escorts as their only window into their homosexuality. Many were not super rich, but this was a luxury they could prioritise. Many were rich; many were cruel many rejected me because I wasn't Tom Cruise or Jeff Stryker. Many were very kind. Some were strange; one would sit on my back, like he was riding a horse; he would say things, like what a strong man I was, what a powerful thoroughbred, while he rocked and fantasized about goodness knows what. He would masturbate quietly afterward, and leave kind of shamefully. He was the nicest of people, so, so polite, considerate. Very very kind and respectful to me. He always apologized as he left, though he didn't need to.

Many others were businessmen visiting London; I knew nothing about them. I wouldn't know if they were out, or closeted, no discussion about their lives or jobs. Lots of kissing, lots of loneliness. Lots of shame, after the sex, even during; I remember that. Shame about what they liked, what turned them on, what they had just done, what I had witnessed them do. The shame moved me, it was something they allowed me to be a part of, something they trusted me with, something intimate that we could never speak of, like a shared secret. I had a feeling that it was a privilege to share it, but at the same time, it became just a part of the job. I don't think I knew at the time, just what an immense privilege it was. But I know I handled it well, I know they trusted the right person. Perhaps that's what made me so popular.

Because, really, I was an awful escort.

I never enjoyed being naked, I never enjoyed my body, or theirs, I never enjoyed sex. I performed brilliant orgasms, I made all the right noises, I'd learned from observing other (more professional) escorts, and from porn. The right orgasm noises would absolutely determine the finish of the job, and timing was very important. They had to get their hour, and I could ruin that hour, or make it a perfectly timed hour.

There was a great deal of investment in London property during the 1980s, and a lot of that investment came from Arabic men. 30 to 40% of my work, was Arabic men, monumentally wealthy, and monumentally strange about homosexuality.

I would often find myself in newly furnished wealthy apartments, decorated in a way that suggested they spent a week here at a time, just a few times a year. I'm talking plastic on the sofas, empty kitchen cupboards, a lone sheet on a bed. But giant, expensive apartments in expensive parts of town. A lot of them in Chelsea, but most at Marble Arch, and up Edgware road.

Often they would be small groups of men all dressed in thawbs, or long white robes sitting around a coffee table smoking profusely, drinking Campari, and speaking Arabic. I'd be gestured to sit alongside them on the sofa, often naked, and ignored very strangely for fifty or so minutes. A maid, covered fully including a hijab, would come into the room from a mystery place sporadically and empty the ashtrays, then disappear. While I sat naked on the sofa being ignored. Sometimes I would be ushered into a room toward the end of the hour, or occasionally, I wouldn't. Thawbs would be lifted, a little oral sex would occur, never stopping the conversation, then it was over.

Odd jobs, but incredibly simple. I liked these jobs.

And the money was phenomenal.

After the orgasm, that had mostly been instructed by gestures, sometimes impolitely, I'd be expected to leave; quickly.

Dismissed, with disgust.

I would be gestured toward (often) a drawer on a side table containing loose hundred-dollar bills. No one seemed to care or notice how many I took, the most important thing was that I left quickly.

I didn't know a thing about Arabic culture, or how homosexuality fitted into that picture, or the picture I was a part of.

I don't want to make assumptions about how women might be have been treated by these men.

I don't want to make assumptions about how dogs might be treated by these men.

I wouldn't make assumptions about how gay Western men were treated by these men.

But I knew that gay prostitutes were without doubt at the very bottom of a kind of hierarchy. I was not treated rudely, as much as I was ignored, used and dismissed with disgust, then immediately forgotten.

But I used them too, and one of my favorite memories of that time, was walking across the lobbies of London's best hotels and apartment buildings, past conflicted security staff, who knew exactly what I'd been up to, with a pocket stuffed full of hundred-dollar bills.

Gosh I loved that feeling.

I don't even want to think why. I just loved it. I would probably love it just as much today, it was a primal joy.

In that Julia Roberts "Pretty Woman" kind of way.

A third of everything earned was to be paid to Andy, including tips, every week. Every Monday in fact. I kept a ledger, to keep track of my jobs, my earnings, my tips. Fraught Monday morning chats with Andy happened, where he would compare what he thought I owed him, with my calculations. At no other time was the power game so vibrant, as during these Monday morning comparisons. The trust game was alive with danger. Was I declaring my tips? Had Andy spoken with the clients after the job, did they tell him how much tip they'd paid me? We never knew, but Andy always boasted of his close, honest

relationship with HIS clients, always HIS clients. It might have felt like I had had an intimate connection with a client, but Andy always corrected me, reminded me that they were his clients, that escorts were transient to them, but his relationship with them was solid.

The only real way to survive this power game, this trust game, was to be honest. And I was, to a fault.

I was Andy's best boy, honest, reliable, trustworthy, no pimps in and out of my life, no lovers distracting me from my job, no personal life to interfere with my reliability, and by the phone five days a week.

No runaways to Paris.

And always honest.

Money was paid to Andy on Monday mornings; a fee was agreed, and all of Andy's boys and girls would be told to show up at a tube station, within a half hour period of an agreed time. It was a different tube station each week, though always north west London. We'd show up, find Andy parked outside, and hand him our envelope full of cash. He'd check to see we weren't letting ourselves slip, that we weren't getting fat, or obviously doing drugs. He'd be especially jumpy on these days; not so much for us boys, but because the girls were always driven to the drop-off by a sinister looking stereotype, glaring resentfully at Andy for taking their girl's money (also kind of glaring hatefully at us boys, in an anti-gay way). A kind of polite nicety was exchanged as we dropped off our envelope, my envelope always being the fattest; then we'd leave. Andy would also check to see that we weren't fraternizing. If he saw me say hello to another escort, I'd be quizzed later, about how I knew him, what the nature of our acquaintanceship was. It would be nipped in the bud, with a stern reminder of the rules, and how the rules were in our best interests, and how I couldn't trust any of the other boys, they were deceitful, out for themselves, and only ever wanted something from me.

Little friendships did happen; they were my only access to the world outside of my jobs. They weren't lasting friendships, or great ones. But it was a lonely life, being one of Andy's boys. So I took acquaintanceship where I could find it.

I had a lot of money, but nothing to do with it.

Holidays were out of the question; if I was away from work for too long, I'd fall out of favor with the telephone operators; this was the fear used to keep us loyal. One weekend, on my two days off, I went to Amsterdam with another escort. I fell in love with that city, immediately. There was an innocence to it, that shone delightfully in my less than innocent world. I started to travel there every week; I'd spend my two days off there every week for a year. Herman owned a bed and breakfast that became my weekend home. Herman was like every gay boy's big gay brother; he was a kind, kind old leather queen, and he had a sex dungeon in the basement, not that I ever saw it, but it was his favorite pastime; that and playing mother to his guests. We'd drink tea together and he'd tell me about his long gay life, full of fabulous sex, and activism. Then he'd disappear off to his basement with a tourist, and I'd go wandering along the canals.

I fell in love, sort of, with a young man who thought I was the best looking, most charismatic person he'd ever seen. And he told me so often. He had a boyfriend, a long term one, so our love was forbidden, and existed in long stolen kisses in my room at Herman's on the occasional evening. Never sex, that would have been a betrayal of his boyfriend, but the kissing was ok, and incredibly naughty and passionate. Always tearing ourselves away from the kiss when it became too heated. Sitting, panting, on opposite sides of the room. Waiting for the passion to calm a little, so we could talk again.

I became friends with his friends, even with his boyfriend, who probably knew all, and didn't care. It was lovely. It was sunny, happy Amsterdam life, and it felt a bit like family. But I was awfully in love, like a teenager, and completely silly about it.

Probably too silly.

I wanted more, and I got annoying.

He started to manipulate me out of his life, and I just got more demanding and manipulative. I begged.

I became that guy, that rejected teenager in first love.

But it had been a lovely distraction from a very different life in London. A lovely nine months of love-filled family life and stolen kisses in Amsterdam, but it was to end. I left, tail between my legs, the annoying lovesick little child, so he could get on with his life, with his relationship; the real one.

It was a great rejection. I felt used as a trophy beauty, a twinkling plaything for someone's seven-year itch.

And I returned to London life, an emotional mess, unable to work, and sobbing into my pillow for weeks. Abandoned again, and hopeless. Nihilistic.

Just for fun; let me jump forward a few decades, just briefly.

Jump forward in time to a European film premier at a documentary film festival, hosted in Amsterdam.

I feature as the hero of the film, and the whole city has turned out to meet the charismatic activist protagonist. The after party, I find out, is hosted by a local venue owner, and it is no other than my lovely Amsterdam lover. He's older, so am I, but he really is.

A party, in my honor, the movie star hero, and hosted by the ex-boyfriend.

I look great, he doesn't.

Such fun.

Everyone should get the opportunity to stick it to the lover that broke their teenage heart in this way. I loved every minute of it.

That's all.

I'll continue. Because things were about to change in London. Andy would be getting sick with AIDS, and he'd be wanting a trusted protégé to take responsibility of his legacy, to manage his business in his illness.

And who else could he trust?

I was to be taken into his trust, into the secret home of Ambassador Escorts,
and things would get ugly.

Really ugly.

Chapter 11

The Game is Afoot

I was naïve, no doubt, but smart at the same time. I knew I was being exploited, but I felt like I was getting what I wanted out of situations, so it was a fair exchange. I didn't know that surrendering my control like I did, was more about feeling safe, feeling looked after, feeling connected to something in all the loneliness and nihilism. I didn't know that every small piece I gave in exchange for this power game, eroded away at my self worth a little more, I didn't know then, how it would add up.

I was smart enough to play the honest game, declare my tips, not steal clients, not work independently, be the most reliable boy, be there at the telephone five days a week, avoid holidays, friends, lovers.

I kept a ledger of my earning each week, which became a client-book; a book of all my clients, contact details, payments, and a little note to remind me who they were, what they were into.

Balloon guy.

Famous actor guy.

Lonely judge.

Horseback rider guy.

Arab on Edgware road.

Arabs in Grosvenor apartments

Newsagent who lived with mum.

It became a series of books; you know, because I was so busy, I was the busiest male escort in London. Minimum three jobs a day, five days a week, for years.

That's a lot of books.

I thought it would come in handy someday. I'm calculated and clever that way. I only saw Andy once a week, through the car window at the tube station on collection day. Once or twice a week, he would be manning the phones, he'd be the telephone operator on duty, calling me with the jobs. He was slick, no nonsense, such a salesman. He wouldn't tolerate responses from me, such as:

"I'm not the right boy for this job",

or

"He wants something a bit different from me."

There was no wrong person for the job, and I learned that, mastered that, fast. He was right; they always liked me when I showed up, even when they'd requested the opposite. It was good when Andy manned the phones; he was efficient; we were efficient together, and it made me feel connected to him. I was special. We were good together. And I did make more money those days. Andy would find a way to squeeze five or six jobs out of me on his days. Otherwise, I never saw him. My relationships with the other telephone operators were some of the closest relationships I had in my life. Although I'd never met them. I could tell they were frightened of Andy, eager to please, eager to have efficient shifts. Well groomed, full of fearful obedience. They also feared me a little; they knew I was the best boy, perhaps Andy had scared them into respecting me, treating me better than the others. They knew I made more money than the others, and that meant more money for them. Mark was one of the telephone operators. He did a few shifts, and we talked on the phone sometimes, especially on late, quiet shifts. I didn't like him much, but he seemed to like me, or he was lonely, and I was more likely to chat than the

others. I chatted because I needed a good relationship with the operators, they fed me. He chatted because (he explained) he was in a big empty office, alone at night, and it felt alone and boring. I also knew he was drunk a lot. And when I said I didn't like him much, it's because he communicated like someone who was drunk a lot; self-indulgent, self-loathing, very uninterested in whoever he was talking to; just interested in having someone listen to it. Often very bullying and controlling.

And once, I learned that the guy who sat next to Andy in the car on collection day, was often Mark.

He was good looking, in a traditional gay way, although he looked tired. Of life, I mean. Perhaps it's better to say bitter. He had the kind of good looks that would have worked brilliantly when he was younger, but now it just looked like bitter lines drawn onto a young boy's face. I bet he got comments a lot, like,

"you must have been a lovely looking boy, I can tell".

He was fit. This was the 80s, the AIDS epidemic was rife, so gay men had to work out; a skinny frame on a gay man in the 80s meant you had AIDS. Mark worked out, as well as waxed and oiled his chest, and wore clothes that showed how important these things were to him.

I learned that he had been Andy's best boy; in fact he did still do jobs for Andy, but he was a little past his sell-by date, or a little out of Andy's favor. It seems, being graduated from doing jobs to manning the phones was in fact a way of being put out to pasture. That was the look I saw on Mark's face; that was the bitterness, and that's what I heard behind the alcohol.

Past use by, and out to pasture.

With the added touch of a loyal groomee; someone who had been under the groomer's thumb for so long, they had very little left of self. An obedient shell.

I also learned he was Andy's ex-boyfriend.

He did look hardened and bittered by his experiences. It manifested as an exhausted unkindness, though mostly disinterest.

One late evening, quite late, but early for an all-night shift, I was having another one of those conversations with Mark on the phone.

Entirely unpleasant.

I'd much rather be watching *Dynasty* or *Knots Landing*, but you never tell a lonely unkind drunk who is responsible for your livelihood, that you have to go – especially when that drunk knows you ain't going anywhere.

His dilemma this particular evening was that he'd run out of alcohol, and couldn't leave the office, because, obviously, he was on duty, and Andy would never tolerate the phones being unmanned, ever.

My existence would pivot on this next moment; and I knew it. I always recognised these moments. Like seeing the future.

He asked me to bring around a quart of bourbon.

I was so not in the habit of saying no to telephone operators. I imagine I was silent for a moment, stunned. Apparently, the office address that had been a mystery from me for years, were only a short walk from where I lived, and this revelation of a very sacred secret got me very scared. This was a change that scared me, the earth off of its axis. I knew there'd be consequences, and I knew it was a piece of information that couldn't be unheard.

The bullying and coercion of a manipulative unhappy drunk who knew the power he held, began to unravel on this lonely late night, and I stupidly stupidly, found myself walking a quart of bourbon from the off license, over to the famous secret offices of Ambassador Escorts.

I thought I was smart, but it was times like this that I knew I wasn't.

It was times like this that I saw a glimmer, just a glimmer, of who I really was; a stupid, fragile groomed and greedy boy playing power games but out of his league, completely at the mercy of anyone who had the skill and desire to exploit me. Moments like this I knew my stupidity. My greed. I was just a stupid idiot who thought he was in charge of his destiny.

That night was awful.

The office was a room in a house, but I only saw this room. It was sparsely decorated, intentionally, minimalist, modern, classic gay 80s. A flashing deck of telephone switchboard lights on a glass office table, pens, paper. Low lighting, kind of spooky.

Mark was drunk, needy.

Horny.

I didn't say no, and it was awful. I was aware of his power over me as a telephone operator, as a confidant of Andy's, as a person I shared an awful secret with, a betrayal in fact. I wanted him to think I fancied him too, I wanted him to keep this secret from Andy, I wanted him to continue giving me jobs. I wanted this night to end without him being angry at me.

And that meant not saying no.

He was drunk and clumsy, unaware of me being more than a place to put his cock, occasionally reminding me how good he was at this, or reminding me how much I liked this, though never looking at me. Drunken half-closed eyes stabbing at an unwelcoming hole.

I was bleeding after, and he looked genuinely disturbed by this, but I made sure he didn't feel too bad about it, dismissed it.

No one ever saw emotion from me, unless it suited me, usually rehearsed, so he probably believed I'd had a good experience. I might have even told him so. I'm good at that.

I went home, the earth still off its axis.

Chapter 12

Penance at Pinewood Studios

About a week later, I was summoned to the offices. Over the phone, Andy snidely asked if I remembered how to get there.

This wasn't going to be pleasant.

I arrived, and the offices looked very different in the day. Light streamed in quite beautifully through gorgeous green oaks outside.

Mark was there, and he sat beside Andy, I was sitting opposite them. Not dissimilar to the set up when Andy had first interviewed me.

I wondered why Mark wasn't sitting beside me, the two naughty boys, but Andy was always surprising, and I'm sure he had a reason for it. Probably, it had to do with preventing any camaraderie between Mark, finding an intimacy in our shared betrayal. Better we were pitted against each other.

Andy knew, Mark had told him the truth it seems; probably driven by a fear that I would do it first. Honestly, I'd been spending some fraught hours pretending it had never happened.

I was scolded. I was assured Mark had been scolded too. Mark's punishment was to have less shifts on the phones, making it quite frankly, difficult financially. But he took his punishment, he had a long history with Andy, and he was well trained.

My punishment was to be put out to pasture. No more jobs for me, I was to man the phones as a telephone operator, two nights a week, one day a week.

Replacing Mark's shifts, causing him to resent me. No more jobs, no more wealth, no more best boy. A pitiful wage, a perfect punishment for a disobedient groomee.

This was Andy at his best, manipulating, and enjoying the control he had over others.

I knew no other life, no other authority, no other security. No other way of working, and amid all of this, I wanted to win Andy's favor back.

I know how that sounds. I feel so stupid.

I fought a little.

I went home so angry, so manipulated, seething with anger at my lack of options, positively seething. But I felt trapped.

But I wrestled anyway.

Through a friend of a friendly neighbor, I got a second job working as a waiter at Pinewood studios. I knew nothing about waiting tables, or working regularly.

Pinewood studios was a million miles away from where I lived, and the daily commute was ridiculous. I could have worked anywhere; everyone loved me, I was clever, amazingly handsome and charismatic, adorned with white privilege. Gosh I was even well-educated. I had loads of money.

But I was frightened and felt worthless, skill-less, stupid. Nihilistic.

I did the shifts at Andy's. I worked at Pinewood studios, as a way of saying fuck you to Andy, as a way of showing he didn't control me.

He must have found it amusing, though; I think he noticed it. His other boys wouldn't have exercised such a display of willful independence. I bet Mark never did.

At Pinewood Studios, I met Kylie Minogue, my icon, who was filming her "Shocked" music video there at the time. I met Ridley Scott too, who drew a sketch of an Alien onto the paper tablecloth for me. I kept it for years.

I wondered if I'd get discovered here, I wondered if my fortune and glory lay in a future born out of this timeline, rather than Andy's.

People often told me how talented I was, how handsome, clever, charismatic I was; they didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, but it wasn't this, something... else. This had always happened. Teachers at school, bosses in the department store in Melbourne, escort clients, Hollywood people. Kylie believed it of me, I'm sure. Ridley too. Madonna definitely would have seen it in me had we met, I know it. Sometimes I was offered things; invitations, opportunities. But I was always too occupied in the present. If a new friendship was developing with a fellow waiter at Pinewood studios, involving plans, and associating me with the dramas going on his world, then nothing could tear me away from that, from his world. That's how I worked. An opportunity be offered elsewhere? I couldn't because I couldn't leave the drama my friend was having that life that I was embroiled in.

A different timeline might have panned out from Pinewood studios, but my head was at Andy's. I seethed with anger at being controlled by him, and I needed to win. I needed his games, his world, I needed the normalcy and the security he provided. Gosh, I needed his approval probably.

I know how that sounds. I hate myself.

My Pinewood studios tantrum worked, and Andy began to be kinder to me. More time passed and the suggestion that I could return to escorting was on the table again, plus, there was something else that would put the earth on another tilt.

I returned to escorting, still doing the telephones too. Mark had been Andy's most trusted right-hand man for many many years, but he was being edged aside now, in favor of me. Andy thoroughly enjoyed the power struggle he had ignited between us, though all the while, lecturing us to be grown up about it at the same time.

I felt important, like I was rising in the ranks of power.

Andy was ill with AIDS, but still functioning very well. He didn't generate sympathy about it; that wasn't Andy. But there was a whiff in the air of his legacy, who would inherit the agency. This played well in an unspoken way

between Mark and me. I was winning favor currently, but I was new blood, Mark had the long history with Andy. A new game was afoot.

I enjoyed manning the phones. It was a salesmanship skill like no other, plus I enjoyed the authority. I did a lot of shifts, and Andy trusted me completely now. The clients began to form a relationship, over the phones, with me, and I encouraged it. I groomed them. I groomed them away from Andy who was (ever increasingly) too unwell to man the phones and maintain his relationship with them. It blurred a little, whether Ambassador Escorts was Andy's or... dare I say it mine? The clients trusted me with their shameful fantasies, and to find the right boy or girl to delight them. I had my own clients too, and I could select the best ones, the wealthiest, the most filthy, who compensated for their filth and shame with big big money.

Yes, I was losing my innocence somewhat.

And thank goodness; innocence had not served me well. I needed to be harder, more streetwise, unfoolable. Hard, cynical. That would help me survive the Andys of this world.

The Adams. The Grays.

As I learned more about the business, as I battled out the power struggle with Mark, as I dealt with Andy's games, I grew up, I changed.

Andy got more ill with AIDS, but I did not feel sympathy for him at the time. He was a monster, playing with Mark and me like chess pieces, delighting in the glee of it as he played. Mark was just as much a chess piece as I was, and he was a nasty player too. He despised me, the usurper, moving in on his inheritance, after all the years of work he'd put in, after losing his looks, after being put out to pasture, after enduring Andy's games, for years longer than I had.

I had trouble feeling sorry for Mark too, at the time. My empathy was long dead by this stage. Mark and I were out and out enemies, fueled by the same sense of injustice at the world we were caught up in, the time we'd invested, the

erosion of our self-worth by Andy's awfulness. We were both probably nihilistic and damaged to start with, the kind of prey that are attracted to Andy's web. Mark drank more and more, and bitched and bitched; he was not playing this game well. He too, was HIV positive, I learned. And becoming ill with it. It was a death sentence in the 80s, and the world was not kind to the people who had it. Even the people who had it were not able to be kind to themselves, in this environment of hate and shame and death and fear.

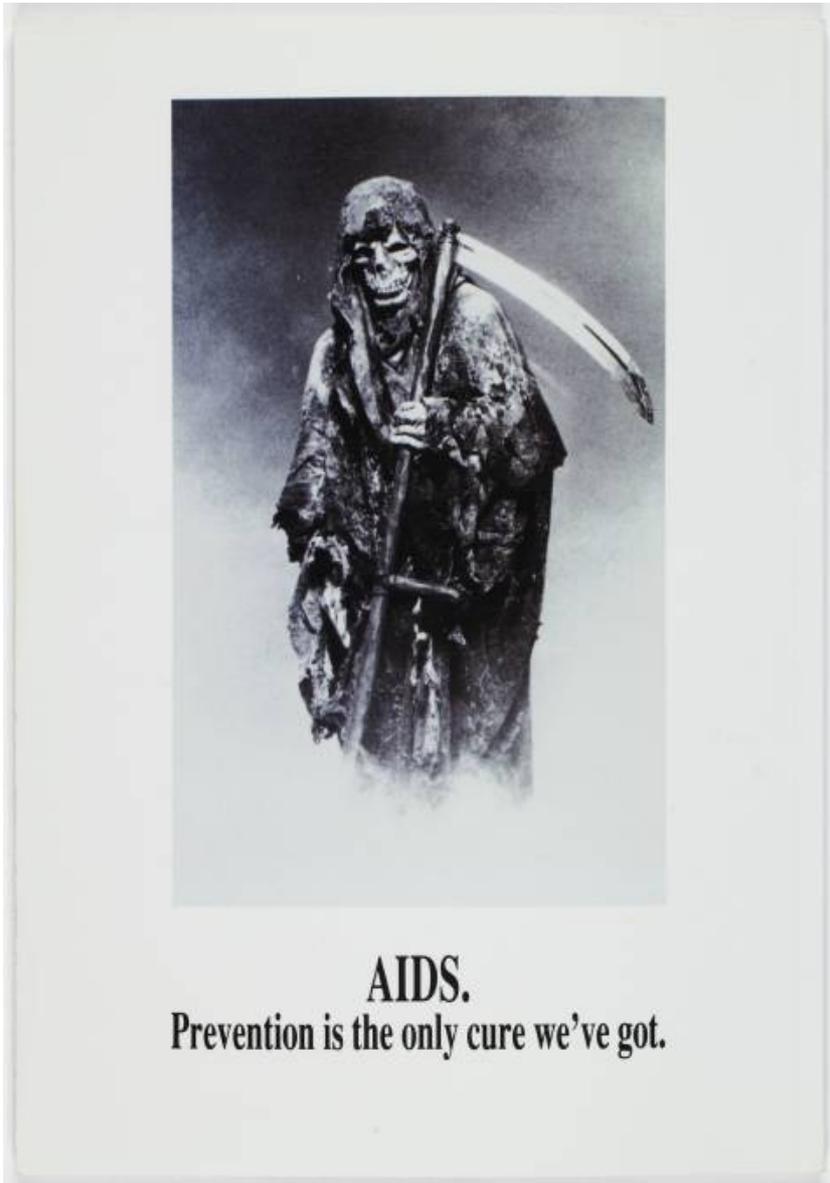
Escorts do, once in a while, need to get a sexual health checkup. Even the frigid ones.

And I knew that one of my checkups would deliver me the same news, the same fate. Not necessarily because I'd taken risks I was aware of; but because if you're gay in the 80s, that just happened to you. I'd had sex with more than 2,000 clients in the 2 years since I first met Andy, and all of them safe; by that I mean condoms were an absolute, and I never failed. Never. I was the consummate professional. This wasn't the case however in my personal life. I'd had sex with 3, maybe 4 people in my personal (non-escorting) life, Mark included. The lovely Arthur in Hollywood. One, gosh two was it, in Melbourne? These had been more complicated than the escort work, and I'd been less capable of condom vigilance with these encounters, these complex, confusing encounters.

We can avoid the sexual health checkups for so long, before some symptoms drive you there.

And one of these visits, one of these checkups, would shift the earth on its axis for me once more. Proper tilt.

The day you get your diagnosis.



Chapter 13

Sleeping with the Enemy

I was surprised when I was told. I actually was not expecting it. I'd been in crisis mode since age 6, and having the presence of mind to consider consequences didn't come naturally to me. Plus:

you know:

I didn't care.

I was surprised that it hit me so hard. Not that I had it.

I didn't act surprised though.

When the doctor at St Mary's Working Men project for gay sex workers, told me I was HIV positive, I did not act surprised. I know this, not from memory, but from the doctor's response, which was more memorable than anything I was feeling (my nihilism overrides any real emotions).

"You're very philosophical about it",

he said.

He seemed surprised. I'm sure he diagnosed a lot of people, surely my response was not that uncommon.

I've no idea how I acted, I have a skewed memory of that day. But no doubt, I acted nonchalant, nothing affected me, Mr. cool. If I had an authentic emotion I was hardly going to trust another person with it.

Maybe I didn't care, authentically.

The rest of that day was strange though.

There are gaps in my memory, the same as the kill kill day.

What I will recant to you will be facts, because I honestly have no memories of feeling any emotions that day. Only that things seemed bizarre and dreamlike. I found myself walking home. I suddenly realized I was close to home, a long way from the hospital; I had no memory of getting there, but I knew I had walked the entire way. It must have taken hours. I don't remember feeling tired, or the route I took, or waiting for traffic lights, or anything.

I just "came to" close to home.

I was conscious that I had to see a client that night. Mr. Hardy.

Mr. Hardy was a regular. Once every few weeks, he would leave Hertfordshire where he lived with his wife and two children, rent a room at the Hampshire hotel in Leicester Square. We always ate first, or walked. I knew Mr. Hardy wasn't his real name, because he told me, but he never told me his real name, or even a first name, real or otherwise, to call him by. It was always Mr. Hardy. He introduced me to foie gras, good wines, culture. He encouraged me to write short stories, he believed in me. He knew, like so many of them, that this escorting gig was a detour on what was meant to be a different life, a detour I didn't belong on. But he was glad enough I was on this detour now, it suited him. He'd have liked to take credit for whatever I might later become. But for now, it was perfect that I was escorting. Of course. He was infatuated with me, they very often were, but Mr. Hardy was more dedicated than the rest. He told me way too often, how he loved his wife and children, how this thing we had (we didn't "have" a thing), but that this thing we had, had nothing to with his love for them.

I nodded and smiled a lot in my job, as if I cared.

Sex was always a part of our meetings, but it was always the lesser part. We talked a lot, he introduced me to culture. I was big time into Madonna, who had

just released her film "In Bed with Madonna; Truth or Dare", and I was positively fanatical. Just like every other person on the planet in 1991. I raved about her, about how no one else in the world had made a film like this before. Mr. Hardy would balk, and teach me about Bob Dylan's "Don't Look Back" from 1967, and delight in putting everything back into perspective for me. I do believe he delighted in my fanaticism and my enthusiasm, the way one enjoys watching their child discover astronomy and the heavens for the first time.

In the hotel suite, he liked us to potter around the suite as if we were familiar lovers. I would shower and go the toilet with the bathroom door open, continuing the conversation, and this was a sacred part of his fantasy. We'd eat room service with our robes and slippers on, and he liked the room service staff to see us together in our robes and slippers, he liked them to witness our domestic familiarity.

He'd probably have liked for me to stay over, but I never did that. Overnight jobs were good money (and Andy liked us to do them) but I never did. Too intimate, or something. I could never sleep with a person next to me. I needed to be hyper-vigilantly alert at all times, when I wasn't alone. I'm sure Mr. Hardy would have liked us to breakfast together, converse while we toileted and showered, brushed our teeth.

Not me though. Wrong guy.

Right in every other way though.

The nights finished with sex, but I cannot remember it; I'm sure he can't either.

It wasn't relevant, just a courteous and expected way to end the evening.

It was Mr. Hardy I was booked to see on this, very strange day I was having.

At home, after my long walk from my diagnosis, I must have sat, still, numb.

Memory is difficult. I do remember weighing up if I work tonight or not; the ethics of it, more than an assessment of my capabilities. I had AIDS. (I didn't, not yet; at this point I was simply HIV positive, but it made little difference really in 1991.) Do you go to see a regular when you've got AIDS?

Do you tell Andy? He'd be able to answer that question at least; if you needed a business-like, unemotional answer to an ethical problem I was lucky to have Andy, he was perfect. But no, too complicated to tell him.

I would do the job.

So I did.

I remember being with him. We saw a film: *Sleeping with the Enemy*, Julia Roberts at the Leicester Square Empire. (The irony of that title was lost on me at the time). I remember not being able to focus, I was thinking about HIV all the way through. I've no idea if Mr. Hardy noticed; I hide things well, I'm a brilliant performer. Even my doctor was surprised at my philosophical reaction to my diagnosis. Dinner afterward, the same. Numb.

Then we were back at the Hampshire hotel. Doing our thing, sharing our intimacy, in our robes, conversing through the open bathroom door.

And I told him.

I didn't plan to, but I'd had such a day, and I just told him, I don't know why. Stupid. Why would a sex worker tell his client that he was HIV positive, on the same day he was diagnosed?

Stupid.

I don't know why, and I don't remember telling him, or my thought processes beforehand.

I don't know if I cried. I never cry in front of people, ever, so it is incredibly unlikely.

But I have a memory that I did. I think.

No surely not, I would never.

But it feels like I did, I think I did.

His reaction was historic. Iconic.

I don't know what clients are supposed to act like when the escort they've been having sex with (that they are about to have sex with again) tells them they are HIV positive.

In 1991.

In a climate of fear, gay sex hysteria, death and disease. No cure, just death. An awful death. Painful, slow and without dignity.

I don't know what his reaction should have been, but it wasn't that.

He was calm, unaffected. He sat me down in a chair, he demanded my attention (because I was a bit all over the place, certainly not looking anywhere near his face).

He got my attention and sat me down. He talked to me.

He told me he didn't care, I was still the same. He told me it made no difference.

He told me he wasn't worried for himself, we'd always been safe.

He asked if I wanted a bath.

(Dirty bastard.)

He asked if I wanted to go home.

He asked if I wanted to stay the night.

He asked if it would be helpful if we had sex; to prove that he wasn't freaked out, to prove he wasn't scared of my disease.

This was all shocking to me.

I sat there a long time, my memory fails me.

I did go home, after a long time. Fell asleep.

That was the day I found out I would die of AIDS.

Chapter 14

Escaping the Groom, Round Two

I can't remember how Andy came to know I was HIV positive. I think we've established though, that it wasn't a secret I was great at keeping.

Andy's reaction wasn't what I expected either.

It hit him hard.

But Andy doesn't show emotion any better than I.

It took some figuring out, but I think he felt he was responsible. He started being kinder to me. Mark was exiled from his life, the power struggle about who would win Andy's legacy, this profitable escort agency empire, was over. I was officially the new favorite. I felt the favor very strongly; Andy took me into his confidence, he taught me all the secrets, how to save on tax by using different accounts, how to control the escorts, keep them in line, keep them honest. How to manipulate to get the best advertising spaces, how to beat the competition (how to destroy them would be more accurate; Andy was heartless.) He taught me the ropes, top to bottom, keeping no secrets.

It seemed kind. I'd never known him to be so unguarded, so un-manipulative.

He developed a seething hatred of Mark, I never knew why. He told me his plans to ruin him, he told me some silly plans he had; if he mailed some cocaine to Marks letter box, anonymously, Mark would be suspicious, but his desire to get high would be stronger; he'd do the drugs, and any drugs that Andy sent. Andy

boasted of his wealth, and how he could keep sending Mark drugs until Mark was a self-destructing addict.

Andy never did this, but he enjoyed hashing out this, and other plans for Mark. An idea began to nurture in my head; did Andy think that I'd caught HIV from Mark? On his premises, in his offices, under his government? Did he feel responsible for that?

It seemed to make more sense.

He'd punished us both at the time, in anger, hurt by the betrayal; but in time, he saw me for the naive player in the story, and Mark for the drunken guilty ~~penetrator~~ perpetrator in the story.

And my legacy of that, was to die of AIDS.

And Andy felt responsible.

So Mark was exiled, I, the victim of the piece, was to inherit the earth.

I'd won the battle, and all it had cost me was a few years of suffering under his manipulation, a friendless lonely life and a terminal illness that would kill me before I turned 23.

Fabulous.

It would cost me more than that though.

I should have known better than to expect Andy to be capable of constant kindness. A leopard doesn't change its spots, and Andy was too long in the tooth to abandon a lifetime of controlling tendencies.

As he became more and more ill, he got more and more difficult.

Andy moved into the offices; it made sense, as he became more ill; he could better manage the business if he lived there.

He insisted I move into the offices too. There was a bedsit directly above the office, which he rented for me. I managed everything, and he managed me, watching all I did, refusing to surrender control, unhappy with every choice I made, needing urgently to correct and fine tune every thing I did, every decision I made. When I answered the phones, he would listen in, put the client on hold

while he told me how to speak differently, close the deal better. Then he'd take the client off hold, and listen to me do it his way. As he became more and more ill, his mental health suffered, and it manifested as an insane control of me. All his controlling predatorial impulses were heightened and focused insanely on me. He wanted me to be a carbon copy of him. If I left the building, he disapproved, if I had a visitor, he'd intervene and get rid of them. If I spoke to the mail man, he'd want to know what we spoke of. He listened in on all the business call, and had a special speaker installed in his bedroom, so he could hear me working all the time. He became obsessed. When I showered, he banged his roof with a broomstick, yelling for me to be faster, if the phones were unmanned. The same with the toilet. He became paranoid and convinced that I was being deceitful, in all things.

The worm was turning back, trust vanished.

He accused me of betraying him from the start.

I was no longer going to inherit the agency, that was no longer fair. The business, the agency, Ambassador Escorts had all been transferred into my name, just as I'd wanted, but I was to pay him a price of £100,000 in installments over the next two years.

That left me under his control, his eye, his wrath, for the next two years, every penny the agency made, transferred to him in payments weekly, leaving me penniless and dependent on him for food and to pay my rent and bills.

For two more years, at least. If he lived. And I feared he'd go on and on, wrath and paranoia keeping him alive as he physically deteriorated into a skinny, boney frightening AIDS monster, croaking abuse from his bed, banging the ceiling angrily with his broomstick, hating me, distrusting me.

And I allowed him to do this.

I don't know why.

No; I do know why. I was the victim of grooming, obviously, but the uglier reason is my greed.

I wanted the agency, I wanted him to die. I wanted this to end, I wanted freedom from him, but I'd put in so much of my time, I'd sold my entire life to him, my innocence. I'd sacrificed love and friendship for this man, I'd sacrificed my youth for this mission, this game; I was not going to abandon it so close to the end, after all I'd given up for this pursuit. I had nothing, nothing left, just a slow death to look forward to, and I was not going to walk away from this, this was all I had, all I knew, awful though it was. He was literally on his deathbed, and I had nothing left thanks to him. I was friendless, and fucked up about sex, and I was dying of AIDS too.

This was our intimacy, our bliss. This was familiar to me, it made sense.

I ran the business slickly, I ran it well. Perfectly. The nurse Andy employed kept him functioning from his bed, and at the end of each day, I'd sit with him, the dying AIDS monster, while he abused me some more (though disguised as kindness and guidance), before escaping to my room upstairs. All other telephone operators disappeared, freaked out by this freak show the office had become, our insane circus run by Andy and David. We isolated in our codependent madness, the weeds grew tall over the house, the front gate, and the mailman knew no one would answer the door. I would venture out when I had to, though Andy despised it, sure I was up to something duplicitous, though I was only stocking up on food, or running cash to the bank, or doing a Monday collection from the escorts. Too paranoid to be away for too long; Andy knew how long each errand should take down to the minute, and my lateness would result in a paranoid barrage of questioning and accusations.

But I stayed, paying my debts, running the business, tending to his illness, waiting for him to die.

He would never die, I knew it. We'd both die there. Two AIDS monsters, abandoned and forgotten by the world that hated them anyway. The ending they both deserved, the ending the world wanted.

I served him.

I became like him; I was a tyrant with the escorts, I demanded they work harder, I grilled them about their jobs, convinced they were not declaring tips, or stealing clients from me. When I did the Monday collections at the tube station, I could see how my appearance and manner frightened them. But I didn't care, I like that they were disturbed by me, it made me feel more powerful. They should be scared of me. Andy had taught me the affect fear had on people, how effective a tool it was.

I was becoming ill too, but not so much because of AIDS, but because of my isolation, and the terror I knew each day. Paranoia was my companion, and my self-loathing I felt for remaining in this sick situation, kept there only by my fear and my nihilism and my greed. And my hate. My hate was like a fuel source, it destroyed me as earnestly as it fueled me.

This would only end one way, and that was with his death, or mine, and I no longer cared which happened first.

Chapter 15

Escapism and Hedonism and Car Crashes: Trade Nightclub

Collecting the money from the escorts each Monday was one of my highlights. They were all nice to me, obviously, I had the power to make or break them, just as Andy had to me. And I liked it when people were nice to me, whatever the reason. But I don't think I was disingenuous. Even at my worst, I was still likeable David. Even as I was power hungry and manipulative, bitchy or defensive, my likeable vulnerability shone through to most. Even as the unpopular kid in school, I'd be adopted by the coolest most adult students, kind of like a pet project, kept safe under their wing. That was a theme in my life, and one of the reasons I could get away with my nihilism, get by despite being a passive coaster through life. My good looks and charisma were always there, and my vulnerability was always there for anyone who chose to look that deep. The family that raised me hadn't, but the neighbors did. The bullies at school didn't, but the cool kids did. Life didn't work out for me always, but there was always someone's wing to be protected under, I could rely on that. At the collection point each week, by the tube station, an odd power game unfolded. The girls' pimps dropped them off in their BMWs, glared at me with undisguised hatred; but not the hatred you fear. The hatred of a person that

knew you had all the power. The girls were nice to me; not just because they had to, but because they saw that vulnerability in me; they knew the pimp relationship, they knew, even if I didn't, that I was trapped within that same game with Andy. I was so young and handsome and baby faced, uncomfortable in my own skin as I played stand-off at the tube station with their pimps. David and the pimp Goliaths.

And the boys.

The boys were lovely. I really liked them. I hadn't at first, but I'd come to know the vulnerability that is behind the hardness of a gay male escort. These were the best of the best, when it came to London's escorts, Andy would have no less; nor would I, and Andy had trained me well. These boys were loyal; perhaps manipulated into that loyalty, perhaps governed by fear, but loyalty was the result. These boys were professional, slick, no drama. None were as innocent as I had been: and it is right to say I was a rare find in this world. But there is a less obvious kind of innocence that lies behind the hardened face of a seasoned slick professional sex worker. That innocence lay in the journey that had gotten him here. A journey not dissimilar to mine, but a long, long journey. It lay in the rejections, in the judgments. It lay in being used. It lay in the sex that was being had in the middle of an AIDS epidemic, any shag could be the one that kills you. Usually a mistake that's already been made, not one yet to happen.

The innocence was in plethora of compliments for appearance or sexual performance, existing in a vacuum of compliments on personality traits. It wasn't often that one's skills or talents or dreams, or desires or anything were affirmed, complimented, or part of a conversation that happened in those bedrooms, on those jobs. Years go by, despite very determined convictions that this job is just for a short while, just to save some money, just to get out of a slump. Then it becomes a lifestyle, where ones finely tuned survival skills become hard emotional calluses. Then you're 28, then you're 32, then you're 40, and you still have no education or work experience, and you are older than the

new stable of young good-looking escorts coming through. The fresh young damaged things, running from broken homes or from awful homophobic histories, fresh and sexy and available, no other concept of their worth, but the knowledge that they are sexy. And available.

Great, eternal currencies.

That is what greeted me on Mondays at the collection point, at the tube station. I truly believed that they were lucky to be in my employ, I truly believed that they were safer with me than out there on the streets, or with Raj. I was their protector, and even though I was the ripe old age of 23, they saw me as a safe parent figure. And despite my trauma, my youth; I settled into that role convincingly. I believed it too, as I played the loyalty game with them that Andy had taught me, as I sent them out to work for me, to sell their sex for my gain. I'd become the predator groomer; but saw myself as the good guy, their protector.

They liked me too, these boys, the old ones, the young ones. They shouldn't have, but they did, and I loved them the way predators feel they possess their prey. They were the only other humans I saw in my prison hell with Andy. It felt like family, it felt like familiarity; even though I maintained my authority, even though they knew the slightest betrayal meant the relationship died and they were ejected from the family that was Ambassador Escorts.

Despite that, it felt like family. Whatever that meant.

Mondays were my favorite day of the week, as I played my power game and mingled with the other exploited babes in my bizarre world.

But there was to be another outlet for my woes.

Trade was an after-hours nightclub that became an icon in nightlife history for the next 20 years.

After hours; 4am to midday Sunday. Those precious hours that Andy slept his morphine sleep and I was free to escape.

Trade was on Clerkenwell road. It was to become iconic in club culture.

The decade earlier had been about New Romantic rebellion; Blitz and Taboo were the hottest clubs, they ruled the nightlife in London then. Leigh Bowery, Boy George and the Culture Club and Marilyn performed and danced and drunk and got high in the London West End nightclubs in a kind of underground Salad Days dream for societies unwanted, the ones that didn't fit in. Late 80s, early 90s was Kinky Gerlinky, pure hedonism at the Café De Paris, and at the Empire Leicester Square. It'd be wrong to call them gay clubs; gay meant something different then. These clubs were explosions of diversity and hedonism; people would spend months figuring out what to wear, how to create their persona for this very special evening. The gays were there, sure, because obviously gay was taboo then. But the fem gays really had nowhere to fit in. AIDS had made being gay worse, so "masc culture" developed, where we gay men started denying our femininity with a new fervor, mimicking masculinity in all its forms in an awful betrayal and denial of our authentic selves, urgently trying to "pass", to fit in. Muscle Mary's pumped up on steroids to avoid looking skinny like we had the AIDS; fear, fear fear guided our culture and our look. We split and formed tribes; masculine tribes, feminine tribes, clones, Daddys, Cubs, bears, Twinks, fems, Queers, drag...

But in the London West End nightclubs it all merged, all the mascs and the fems, all the Muscle Mary's, the drag and the alternative gender queer. Don't believe any of the romantic hype, that everyone got along in heady clubby delight on the dancefloor. Na ah. It was a bitch fest of criticism and competition, and gender politics, sex politics. But... we did it all together in the same venues while dancing and getting high, because that's how community works when it is disenfranchised.

That was the 80s, early 90s.

In the 90s, Culture Club had broken up and Depeche Mode ruled the charts with their re-invented look. Boy George and Marilyn were using heroin and Gerlinda of Kinky Gerlinky was dead.

Trade was the new thing.

Drugs drugs drugs. Ecstasy mostly, in the early years. You'd arrive at 4am, where a frenzy of guest list hell would be taking place, with all the favors, power play and ego erupted in a blood bath of chaos. I was Pimp Dave, so I never had a problem. I may have felt like a recluse, but every escort that had ever turned a trick knew of Ambassador Escorts; mostly because so few of them could ever get a job with me. My boys were loyal, they were treated well, I never crossed the sex threshold with them, and they earned more money than others could dream of. I was the reclusive, the mysterious and infamous, the incredibly handsome Pimp Dave, who only ever ventured out after dark, for Trade.

I'd swish past the frenzied queues, down the famous staircase, where everyone watched the new arrivals.

I'd weave through the very crowded Muscle Alley (the narrow pathway where the steroid Queens hung out shirtless, acting masculine), and head under the arches to where the queue for the drug dealers were. Nick was my guy. Well, in fact he was everyone's guy, since he was probably the only dealer there (everyone else worked for him) and so of course everyone in the club was on the same drug, the same ecstasy.

Everyone felt the same, was on the same high. If you felt love, they felt love, if you loved this track, they loved this track.

This was not the glamour, the camp, the drag, the queer revolution of the previous decade.

This was shirtless, intoxicated rave culture, but with a very Queer bent.

It was dodgy as fuck.

And full of love and camaraderie. Different communities merging, who probably might not have otherwise merged, ever.

Here, I was accepted like I had never been before. Celebrated. Allowed, Included. Loved. Judged, hated, envied, rejected sexually, and a whole lot of other things too.



I got too high, a lot. People told me, kindly, unkindly. People wanted to have sex with me, but changed their mind two hours later when their high changed, or someone sexier came along. I remember vomiting in a darkened corner under the arches because I'd taken too many really good ecstasy, and having to look in my vomit to see if my HIV medicine had properly digested beforehand.

I remember feeling popular and envied but unloved. I remember creating the most phenomenal friendships that only lasted 5 hours. Or they lasted years, but only existed on Sunday mornings between 4am and midday.

I remember driving home at midday, pupils like giant black saucers, partly panicking in case Andy was up early and noticed me missing, but partly unable to panic fully because I was rushing on ecstasy. I crashed my car eleven times coming home from Trade; the eleventh time quite drastically. For the car. It creaked and squeaked and groaned, and had bumps and dents everywhere. I didn't care. Apathy and ecstasy.

I was always alone of course. All the dancefloor snogs, all the rejections; none of them could be invited into my bizarre world of Andy and David. That hedonism existed abruptly between 4am to midday Sunday, ending abruptly upon returning home, where I would hug myself and roll my eyes and chew my cud in my room, feeling the remainder of my high, and wishing I was sharing this exquisite emotion with someone, anyone.

I would do so quietly, lest Andy should hear me and witness this betrayal. I'd rock back and forth in a gorgeous blanket, answering the telephones to the best of my intoxicated ability, while Andy banged on his roof with the broom, telling me to work faster because a second line was ringing. Or something.

While my AIDS got worse and worse, so did my misery.

These were the Trade years, my youth.

Years passed. Andy got sicker but didn't die.

And I started to not just dream of my escape... but to plan it.

Chapter 16

Andy's Death, Another Car Crash

I'm not sure how I went from apathy to valiant escape plans. There's always a surprise U-turn in my pocket, mostly down to my ever-present predator, lurking alertly inside, ready to pounce, always keeping me safe.

My Trade outings created strange new underworld friendships, with the strangest, quirkiest characters; Trade, and I think drug/club culture in general, attract the most dynamic charismatic people who don't know how to handle their own vibrancy; the world around them treats them like charismatic superstars, but they themselves don't feel it, they don't feel worthy of the attention, they don't feel they can live up to the expectation of their amazingness. Deep, deep down, they know they are charismatic, special, gifted, amazing... and the world treats them that way. But there is a confusing disconnect between concepts of self-worth and how the world perceives them. Especially the young and vibrant. And so Clubland calls enticingly. Offering playgrounds and dress up and community/unity with all the others who feel this way. People who KNOW they're amazing and gifted, but haven't figured it out yet, not fully.

And we all played together, wasted talent communing on drug-fueled dancefloors, under arches, after dark, after hours. Finding ourselves, tapping into that talent we're unsure of, in safe dark spaces, with others who don't fit in.

Many will, in fact find their gift, in time, let it shine in the daylight. After the decade or two or three of clubdom, they become fashion designers, great novelists, art installationists, Coders, filmmakers, celebrated Queer performers, television hosts.

Famous activists.

Many won't. Because this is where the world's most charismatic and talented either find their voice, or they get lost to drugs and crime.

You know how my story ends. But at this time, I was headed toward drugs and crime and an ugly AIDS death.

My valiant escape plan was to move to London's Soho, where I could live freely with the club kids, the down and outs, the escorts and Trans street workers. I felt they were my kin. They didn't judge me for having AIDS, they wouldn't treat me any differently as I got more sick and wasted. They adored and celebrated my pimp status, they knew how to enjoy a drug high with me, and I dreamed of this life, free of Andy.

But Andy's hold was complex, psychological and diabolical.

I think he knew I was escaping on Sunday mornings to Trade. My Sunday behaviour must have been so strange, I would literally do 20 plus ecstasy tablets in the space of twelve hours. My car got more and more crashed each month.

I was probably wearing different clothes (I can't remember, but probably – he must have noticed).

He must have noticed, but never said anything.

Was that because he couldn't control it? Perhaps he knew not to fight a battle he can't win. Not to acknowledge it even.

Sometimes I wondered if he didn't have bits of kindness in him. Maybe he was glad I was getting out, having fun.

Maybe he was conflicted; a bit of both.

He was dying an ugly awful and lonely AIDS death, there was nothing he could do, but torment me. And he did that ferociously. As he got sicker, he got more twisted and angrier.

My Monday morning collections at the tube station became my opportunity to research and to hatch my plan. All the boys and girls knew of my imprisonment, my dilemma with Andy. They adored me, they had taken me under their wing, as people do with me. They feared me too, I'm good that way, but they also adopted me under their wing, and Monday morning collections became about gathering from them, Soho flats to rent, tips to run from Andy, ideas on how to transfer the business, now in my name, to Soho, change the banks I used, change accountants, create new relationships with advertisers; disappear from Andy's control.

Technology had changed too. I wasn't keeping up with it, but Matthew was one of my boys, and he was always good with stuff like this. He told me about Call Divert, the ability to divert a call to a phone number to another number. Radical technology for the early 90s. It meant, any call to Andy's office would automatically ring in Soho if I chose it to, and Andy wouldn't be any the wiser, in his sick bed. Matthew also brought me my first mobile phone. God it was huge, and heavy. Apart from a few well-informed and wealthy escorts and some Wall Street bankers probably, no one was using these mobile phones. I could call divert all the work telephone numbers to this mobile phone, sneak out of the house to further my valiant escape plan, and Andy would never see unanswered phone lines on the switchboard extension he could see from his sick bed. Bit by bit, with the help of my escort conspirators and my club kid friends, I planned this complicated extrication from Andy's clutches.

I still owed him about £15,000 before I was free of debt, before I owned the agency outright, but that wasn't the issue. Even if I'd paid him in full, he wouldn't have let go of me. He was never going to let me run the agency as I chose, make my own decisions. He'd have micro-managed me, the agency, my life entirely had his health permitted, long after ownership had been transferred.

So my plan developed. I got a flat in Soho, set it up, installed thirty telephone lines, got furniture. I got new accountants, lawyers, bank accounts, transferred all I could as sneakily as I could, fine tuning everything so I would be in the clear when I made my clean break.

I would take nothing personal with me: no clothes, furniture, personal possessions. Once I was ready, I'd just disappear from him in the night.

But I had to be ready.

And... I never felt quite ready.

It confused me.

I couldn't bring myself to leave. And I didn't know why.

His torment of continued, the control, the abuse, the banging of the broomstick, the constant nagging on how I should communicate on the phones to clients, as if his training of me was never complete.

The Soho flat sat empty for months and months, despite its phenomenal rent. I started to use it to host the fabulous chill-out parties that followed Trade, Sunday afternoons to twilight. My chill-outs were among the most notorious at the time. I had drugs and cosiness and kindness for all, and I attracted the most complicated and troubled of the glamorous and alternative Tradesters. My kin. The escorts, of course, because I was Pimp Dave. We lounged and hugged and shared our life stories, while squirming to the most exquisite dance music, chilled of course. We did this while our ecstasy highs wear off. Or did more. Most of my guests, like me, were avoiding going home, whatever that meant for them. Chillouts were the lonely and unhappy, hiding in a drug high, hoping real life would never return. Or at least hoping to delay real life in a drug high for as long as we could.

Andy never spoke about my Sunday disappearances.

And Monday to Sat, I lived the real life of Andy and me, AIDS and imprisonment. I delayed my escape, despite being packed and organized and ready to go. I had two packed bags by the door, ready for a quick exit; one had a few basics of

clothing and business things (we didn't have electronic records in those days). The other bag had cash. Lots and lots of cash. Credit cards weren't so popular in the escort business in those days. Banks were, but I was on the run. Ready for my escape, that I kept delaying for reasons I don't understand.

My escort co-conspirators wondered why my plans were stalled and stalled, despite all their aid and effort. My car got crashed more times.

And then he died.

It was great and it was awful.

It was a late Sunday afternoon. Of course.

I'd been out at Trade, and chilling in Soho. Returning to real life, I parked my crashed car, badly probably, since my eyes were dilated like black holes. I'd been chewing my tongue all morning too. I knew something was up. A light was on in a rarely used room in Andy's house, which meant the visiting AIDS nurse was there. Odd for a late Sunday afternoon.

The door to Andy's flat was open the nurse there with another nurse. She saw me from the open doorway as she talked earnestly to the second nurse. I was wearing my drenched and disheveled club clothes, my skin was pale and clammy, gosh I was high as a kite. But a complicated kind of high right now. She took hold of my forearm and spoke to me. I don't remember what she said. I don't remember if she was judging me, or being kind. But I knew Andy was dead.

I walked past her to the communal stairway, ignoring her. Maybe she was still talking to me, but I couldn't hear her; it's possible I'd been dancing next to the giant club speakers for hours, it's possible I was deaf. Or maybe I was just numb and tired and confused and high as a kite.

I went upstairs, turned the key to my door, opened the door.

I grabbed my two packed bags, and leaving the door ajar, with the keys still in the lock.

I left.

As I walked down the front path, an ambulance arrived. They weren't in a hurry. I didn't make way for them anyway, I just walked on. They asked directions to Flat A but I ignored them blankly and walked on. I threw my bags in the passenger seat of the car, turned the key to start the engine. Dance music blared out loudly and immediately, I think the whole block heard me.

I left it on.

I drove my creaking crashed car away.

I drove to Soho, and I never looked back.

Chapter 17

Soho Daze of Innocence

I congratulate myself unashamedly, my valiant escape plan had been engineered fabulously. The transition of Ambassador Escorts from Maida Vale to Soho, from Andy to David, had been slick. I was up and running, with a new team of telephone operators and the latest telephone technology in no time at all, money was pouring in and things were running like a dream. Even the mobile phones were getting smaller. My new Soho life, free from Andy, was a heady dream of independence.

A fresh start.

Behind me lay two dead parents, four abandoned brothers, an adopted family that hardly knew I was missing, two control freak gay men, a dead lover that had given me AIDS, and a particularly large continent that I vowed never to return to.

Some trauma and nihilism too. But I knew they were as much ahead of me as they were behind me.

My health was not improving, but I had my AZT and my Septrin, and I was looking better. Probably not for the medicine (AZT wasn't the miracle AIDS cure we were hoping for). Perhaps because I was less traumatized, no longer under

the grip of Andy and his broomstick. Perhaps all the ecstasy I was doing was improving my happiness, improving my health.

Crashed cars notwithstanding.

I ran my agency just as Andy had taught me. In many ways, I was like a carbon copy of him, though I hope, less controlling and more caring toward my employees. But I can't say for sure. Power and grooming skills accumulate insidiously, and I'd have been the last to know. At the time however I believed hand on heart that I was a great boon and benefactor to the sex workers I employed. The boys and girls might not have understood this; but the strict boundaries and rules I adhered to were there to protect them, I believed. I did believe that, it wasn't devoid of truth. They lived a dangerous, odd life, escorting, often without boundaries, prey to exploitative pimps and often far from any guiding behavioral compass, far from anything that might seem like caring parenting, or any sense of order. I was strict, and there were consequences to rule-breaking or disloyalty. That's how to run a tight ship, but it's also how you care for wayward souls.

That philosophy helped me sleep at night.

It helped them sleep safely too.

Soho life was a joy in those days. Old Compton street was the centre, I lived just off it, on Greek Street. Soho had one gay bar called Comptons, a bunch of neon-lit sex shops to buy porn magazines and videos and dildos and liquid ecstasy, sometimes a line of cocaine. The Raymond Review Bar was always there, though more the heterosexual tourist world than it was mine. The Piano Bar, really trashy drag queens, rent boys, and of course, the Old Compton 'caf' (café); a greasy spoon dive 24-hour café, that served as THE social hub of Soho and everything that was dodgy and trashy. All the things that captured my fascination, all the things I aspired to be.



Most of my escorts lived in run-down studio flats in Great Windmill street. Dillon was there, valuable and heroic because he was a rare gay male escort that could get it up and perform confidently with Trans escorts when a voyeuristic client needed that. There were plenty of pseudo straight escorts who could do that, but they weren't always as respectful to their Trans co-workers as the gay ones were, and certainly no one was as loving and joyous about his job than Dillon. Bruno also lived there, the most unique, beautiful Brazilian creature sexuality had ever created. Sian and Virginia, the two Australian inseparable backpackers that held this wayward lot together with some maternal liberal love, as well as a spare duvet and a comfy corner to crash in, whenever anyone needed it.

It was rarely empty.

Peter Pleased Wimmin' was the third part of a performing trio of drag performers ("The Pleased Wimmin'") and escort who shared a larger room there with Chicho and Pepito, two gorgeous Spanish eternal lovers, who had fled Spain to leave their heroin addiction behind. Meant by destiny to be together, the most lovely couple; they couldn't be together as boyfriends because of their addiction. So they shared this flat with Peter Pleased Wimmin', simply as friends. Gorgeous and tragic. I fell infatuation with both of them, at different

times, which got complicated (for them). I'm sure I drove them back to drugs. But the infatuation part was nice, I hope they'd agree.

And Gino. Gino was Dillon's boyfriend, most of the time. So, so young, always shy and kind, always apologizing for being in the way, and hiding a heroin habit from us, quite well. He'd disappear and disappear, for days.

He disappeared completely one day. And he was so shy and quiet and apologetic, we almost didn't notice.

There was a hot club called "Sex" at the Café De Paris, and it was the highlight of our calendars. Trade was Sunday routine, Sex was a monthly thing, much more dressy and glamorous. I saw Kylie there once, Grace Jones.



(The Pleased Wimmin.)

I fell in love with Kumars during these days, the Sex at Café de Paris days. Kumars wore the best clothes, celebrated retro culture and collected Barbie dolls. He was a Warhol fan, a Studio 54 fan, and knew all the underground performing artists that were sure to make it big one day, or die of heroin. He saw me coming in a trail of lights, and swept me into his world; it was probably meant to be forever, a great love affair, but I was a car crash already happening, plus nihilism and apathy, my bedfellows, didn't leave much space for real love. There were other lovers, I'll remember and remember forever. Tim Tony (called Tim Tony because he had his real name and his escorting name, and none of us were ever sure which was which. He like it this way). His lives blurred. Chaos was his constant bedfellow, I've no doubt nihilism and apathy too, though I couldn't recognize those things in others back then. At a Chill-Out party once, a drag queen injected some collagen into his lips, and it went wrong. He disappeared after that weekend, we heard rumours he was dead, we also heard rumours he was in Ibiza getting all spiritual. We never had sex together, though we called ourselves boyfriends, and it was a relationship by our chaotic standards. Sharks sharing water. We talked about suicide a lot on our comedowns, it was very bonding.

Chris was the Canadian porn Star who loved my freckles and stalked me, determined to marry me (metaphorically). I didn't get it, I found it weird, but his determination would win. He was also determined to work for Ambassador escorts, and I never knew if he really liked me or not. But he did. I could not keep up with his sexual confidence or sexual liberty; we talked about having sex a lot on drugs, but we were usually too high to get it together. We had a suicide pact. We both had AIDS, and we shared that impending sickness, misery and death together. We'd have baths as we came down from our drugs, and plan our mutual suicide. Ecstasy overdose, in bath together obviously. And obviously, we knew we'd need more than ecstasy. We broke up because he came to realize that I was more serious about it than he was. He didn't mind dreaming about it

romantically in a star-crossed lover's kind of way on a drug high, but when the conversation got serious, he left.

Left me abandoned and high and ready to face death alone.

Simoné, lovely Simoné. Delightful young model, a firecracker of a person, made everyone everyone fall in love with him. Spoilt as can be by his wealthy Essex parents who were divorced but saw each other every day, to fight (they thought) but they spent a lot less time fighting than they thought, more time just passing the breeze like lovers. Much to the annoyance of their newer spouses. For the short time we dated, they adopted me like a son. As people do. We were a bright young couple. Being the early 90s, I always expected his dad to dislike our gayness, but he just wouldn't. As a schoolkid, he'd loved Rod Stewart's "The killing of Georgie" about a homophobic attack on a very delightful gay boy. Simoné's dad loved our gayness, however much it bothered me. For a few months or so, Simoné and I were inseparable, I think I actually laughed a lot with him, despite my apathy and my nihilism and trauma. Simoné was a firecracker, you couldn't not laugh when with Simoné.

Simoné and I are pretty sure I infected him with my HIV. Despite him never wanting to get tested. Things like that happened a lot back then (obviously, that's how epidemics work). A lot of us infected a lot of the people we loved with HIV, or just assumed we did; better not to know. You don't hear people talking about it much, but it's another thing we carry. You put it in your trauma box of unforgivable cruelties we do unto our loved ones, and you carry on. And on. As it gets heavier.

Darling darling Simoné. He survived, like I did. Became a great photographer. I pass him in Soho from time to time. He is still a firecracker.

Steven Jewell. He wasn't my boyfriend, but he was a best friend that would include me in his sexy druggy masturbation sessions. As well as all the other best friend stuff. He liked Souxie and the Banshees, he liked Claudia Brücken from Propaganda. He dressed nouveau punk, with a twist of New Romanticism.

A little black eyeliner just for the The Human League of it. He was free and delightful and different, and gosh he loved me. Real, proper friendship. It's like he saw through my nihilism and my apathy; it was like he knew me, and just enjoyed me as I was. Free spirit stuff. There was no one like him before, never will be again. Trust me on that, and never argue that with me, ever. Don't be weirded out by the fact he included me in his wank sessions. That was just Steven, that was his freedom. He didn't want me to be excluded from anything he did, however personal. And he didn't like being alone.

He was properly dying of AIDS, way ahead of me. He hated to be alone. He had two boyfriends; one long term one which had turned into a comfy sexless partnership, and a new one. The new one wasn't privy to Steven's sexual fantasies when high on cocaine. But he hated to be alone on cocaine, so I had that pleasure of joining him for his wank sessions. I spent most of my time drawing lines of coke on the tray, or posing in front of the mirror, or changing the music, or trying Steven's weird punk clothes on. It wasn't any different to hanging with him in a club, or having coffee in Soho. It was just Steven, but wanking to porn videos and playing with toys.

He died awfully on Gay Pride day 1992. I mean awfully. His two boyfriends, much older than me, were hating each other, silently resenting the other being by his deathbed, each thinking they deserved to be there more than the other. The parents, resenting the boyfriends and the gayness, and watching gay AIDS destroy their bright young happy free son. My delightful bright happy free best friend. Died awfully, skin and bone, drawn skull-like face, and desperate frightened eyes. Vomiting into a tray at the side of his face, because he couldn't sit up, and crying as he vomited.

I couldn't stay. Which made the boyfriends and the parents happy. I knew, I knew I had the power, the charisma to make Steven feel peaceful. I'd done that for him loads, toward the end of our drug benders, or falling asleep together after a night out clubbing. I knew, I knew how to make him feel peaceful. As he looked at me out of his hollow frightened eyes on his deathbed, I knew that's

what he wanted me to do. Use my charisma and charm and light to make him feel peaceful.

But I couldn't. All he saw on my face was selfish panic. He frightened me. It was the awfulest death. Sure to be my own future.

I left. I went to Gay Pride and took drugs. I didn't enjoy them. But I was high. He died that day while I danced in a tent erected in Brockwell Park.

It rained and rained. I danced and danced.

Chapter 18

Two Grieving Parents, a Narcissist and a Funeral

I heard that Steven's mum was holding a lovely funeral service for him in Essex. I heard from his boyfriends that HIV was not going to be mentioned at his funeral or service. I don't know why I cared about that so much; I was hardly the community activist, I was just getting high, pimping sex workers out for a living and seeking clubland popularity like it was the Grand National.

But I was furious.

I wrote a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Jewell. I penned it ferociously at 3 in the morning when I couldn't sleep, it was full of righteousness and anger. I talked about how amazing Steven was; not for the things a mum usually loves about their son, but because of the weirdest, most complicated, most different things about Steven. He had two boyfriends, he had that much love. It couldn't be contained in a single relationship, his characters were too diverse. The ultimate, free-loving hippy, the gay flower child who loved many and managed to somehow make them all happy with that. I talked about my friend who had purple hair sometimes, who was kind to me even with my AIDS which so many would not understand that decade.

I talked about my strange, different friend, who hated being alone, and chose me to not be alone with. Sometimes.

I talked about how he loved his mum and dad, about how defiant he was with his AIDS, it didn't stop him until it stopped him. I told them how bloody privileged they were to have him, AIDS and all, punk slut and all, how bloody lucky they should consider themselves. Some parents just aren't there when AIDS is happening; some of us had parents that had died when we were only five years old.

I told them that to deny Steven's punk sluttiness, to deny his polygamy, to deny his AIDS at the funeral, was an abomination on their part, and hence I would not be going.

Toys out of pram.

I scrawled it on pen and paper (we didn't have computers then), licked a stamp & posted it in the postbox that very evening, in the early hours of summer Soho morning. I didn't proofread it, I didn't spell-check it, I didn't check if my scrawl was readable. I posted in righteous anger and went to bed.

Mr. and Mrs. Jewell visited me a week later.

I couldn't understand it.

I thought they were coming looking for a fight, or to be defensive, or seeking some kind of apology.

There was no way I was apologizing.

But they were kind of lovely. It made me very uncomfortable. I'd only ever met them once or twice, in the hospital when Steven was dying, when I was just the druggy unwelcome friend, in the way, probably the cause of all of Steven's waywardness.

They seemed smaller and less angry. They seemed very alone; Steven was their only child, and he was only 23 when he died.

They were kind to me. I didn't like it. I made them tea, and I sat uncomfortably on a stool at the opposite end of the room.

They thanked me for the letter. (I couldn't understand it; the letter was full of anger and accusations.) They thanked me for the letter, they said it was full of

love and full of some very personal truths; a side of Steven that sounded lovely and kind and free and loving. They asked how I was doing, who my best friend was, who could support me now, who might look after me when I got sick.

It hurt, they must have known I had no one now.

I can't remember the day with clarity, it was too strange. I was there ready for a fight, and they were being kind. I stayed frosty, despite their kindness. They said other strange fucked up things, like if I ever wanted to visit them in Essex, stay in Steven's old room, they'd be family to me. They said I could rely on them if ever I felt alone or when I started to become ill.

I stayed silent, I wouldn't look at them I didn't know what was going on, but it was very uncomfortable.

They left, strangely, quietly, bereaved parents.

I never saw them again.

And I; I got on with things. Pimping, Soho life, Trade, clubland popularity, bohemian living. There was lots to do. So much to do, to be, to prove, to accomplish; because I was dying too.

Chapter 19

The Pink Envelope Oh, and Whitney

It was difficult to run London's biggest and best escort agency while getting sicker with AIDS. Well it was either the AIDS or all the drugs I was taking, but it was difficult nonetheless. It was going to become much more difficult as computer technology would become more widely available, but I was just before that.

This is how it worked.

Cash was still collected at a mystery London tube station each Monday. There had been an increase in people paying by credit card, but only a small one. It was a complicated clunky affair, that required a telephone call to the credit card company to authorize it, giant swiping gadgets that rolled carbon copy paper over the raised letters on the cards, and a ridiculously robust checking of the cardholder's signature, checking it matched that on the back of the card. Our billing name was discreet (it didn't scream Ambassador Escorts on their bank statement), but in these days, there was greater shame around paying for sex than these days. Mostly – a cash business.

How I liked it.

Again, this is pre-internet, and I'm sure millennials wonder how the world worked at all, before internet search engines. We had dictionaries and paper maps and encyclopedias and Yellow Pages phone books. We carried our own address books around with us, and change to use payphones when away from home and our trusted landline. Those days you left your address book home by mistake were awful. You couldn't call a friend or Direct Message them on a different device or different platform. If you didn't know something, there was no Google to answer it, we just filed it in our heads among all the other things we just didn't know.

But, surprise surprise, we managed well enough. Businesses flourished, there were even global brands. Most people watched television; usually, they all watched the same programmes, as families, on the same 4 channels the rest of the country watched. So we all saw the same thing. And that's how businesses advertised. That and paper magazines. In London, "What's On London" was THE guide to everything to do in London, mainstream, and one of the best ways for me to target the heterosexual men who wanted escorts. To target the closeted gay men, I needed the more niche gay papers; not the magazines; they were too difficult for a closeted man to buy in a newsagent; I'm talking the free gay papers, the ones discarded around the streets outside the gay bars. Capital Gay and Pink Paper were the the best way to reach that audience. Before internet porn, masturbation either meant the same VHS video you'd been watching for 8 years and the tape was wearing thin (especially in the parts you kept rewinding and watching again.) Or it meant porn magazines, your favorite pages stuck together like glue, don't make me explain why. (Because you know I will.) Or there were telephone chat lines; call up the telephone number advertised in the back of the magazine, the one that promises a sexy chat with a guy of your choice. He'd talk you through to orgasm.

Dating, pre-Grindr was either something that happened accidentally after a one night stand you'd met at a bar. It turned into a second night stand, and then you were dating, boyfriends, then enemies all within a two month period.

Or sometimes, for those who wouldn't go to bars because they weren't Out, it was advertising your post office box number and a short classified description (no picture allowed) in the back of a free gay paper, visiting your post office box once or twice a week, to see if anyone had mailed you and included a picture and some contact details to call, write or meet up.

A slow, slow way to appease a Thirst.

But there was some tease and romance to it I guess. If you have the patience of a sloth.

Advertising sex was difficult then. The Flower Power sexual liberation of the 60s and 70s had given way to capitalism, greed, Dynasty, Dallas and women on Wall Street. Gay sexual liberation had swung backwards, with gayness being about sluttiness, AIDS, Rock Hudson and death/disease.

Not a great time for me to be trying to sell sex without a computer.

But...

I'm good.

I might be dying of AIDS, I might be swinging between clubland highs and lows, I might not be able to drive a car in a straight line when I'm on ecstasy; but Andy had taught me well.

The money was rolling in, my ship was tight, and no other competitor could get close. I continued to struggle with the Pimp boyfriends of my women escorts, but essentially, these women were drama-free, professional and slick, looked after themselves, paid their fees each Monday, kept themselves to themselves. They saw me as the genius money-maker, a little young, a little troubled, but served their purposes with a lot less drama than everything else in their worlds. Boys were usually a little more drama. It was hard to find a gay escort that didn't party (yes I mean drugs), and not that I was such an excellent example, but drugs and escorting make for drama. The drugs were innocent then. Gays

didn't do heroin, mostly ecstasy and things only got complicated when the recreational cocaine use became less recreational. And that was a rite of passage for every male escort. I can't pretend I was a vessel of kindness when my boys got wayward and unreliable with coke; if they became unreliable, they got less jobs. Simple. Their finances suffered. Like Andy taught me. But there was no other agent in town, so if their motivation to get back on my books was strong enough... I'd take them back, like family, as long as they got their shit together.

They did, mostly.

Drugs weren't just a problem for the escorts though; the clients wanted them too. Away from their families, alone in a glamorous hotel room, surrounded by pampering and luxury, nothing good on the stupid hotel (terrestrial) TV... they'd call me. Who did I have for them? Who was new? Who would swing confidently from the chandeliers for them? Or perhaps it wasn't that kind of mood; who would sit nervously and unthreateningly on the side of the bed and look vulnerable for 45 minutes, before some pretend lovemaking can happen?

And yes, a lot of these clients wanted coke.

Drugs made the escorts stay longer on the job without being paid, or declaring tips. Drugs made the escorts selfish about the sex they wanted, rather than being attentive to the client's needs/desires. Drugs made the escorts disappear on binges for days after the job, rather than sitting loyally and job-ready beside their landlines. Drugs made the boys spend their tips and my fees on more drugs during the hours after the job had finished, resulting in apologies and excuses on Monday collection day at the tube station.

Drugs were a part of the business, and a part of what the clients wanted, but messy for me, and I was strictish about it. I turned a blind eye to a lot, happily, but when the clients actually requested that boys bring drugs with them – no. It can be a slippery slope from escort agent to drug dealer. And despite knowing

this, despite all my rules and boundaries and strictness... I slid that slope too. With glee and destruction and glamour and drama.

We'll get there.

Yes, I lost lots of money with my strict rules about providing cocaine sex binges for my clients. But money was rolling in, let me tell you how I did it.

There were, of course, the lonely low-to-middle income men who would budget in their favorite escort experience once a month. Andy taught me to never dismiss this feeble lot, because their needs were real, and their loyalty to this monthly pastime was real too. An agent can make a good living from these guys alone. Some were married supporting families, some lived with their mum above the family newsagent. It's not high end, but it's real money, regular like clockwork.

But big money was in that hotel guy. Gay or straight, Out or closeted, made no difference. The need for sex unites us all, the differences only come from the cultures and stigmas attached to it. A man in a hotel is in a bubble of luxury, he spends money that doesn't seem real life to him, it's not his real world and he knows it. The hotelier knows it.

I knew it.

Andy hadn't been so good at this side of things, he didn't get out much. He knew about the big money the wealthy Arabs paid. But I'd swung from enough hotel chandeliers to know there was big money there too. A hotel room is special. Tidy. The bed is the epicenter of it. Night is what it is all about. The hotel room says you've made it. It says you are free and no one knows you're here, except the concierge who keeps your secrets. The hotel room is yours, treat it how you like, someone else will clean up the mess, you walk away like it didn't happen. The hotel room is a bubble of escapist privilege, and if you have latent or primal desires, they can be off the leash here.

No one will tell.

It didn't happen. Leave your shame for Housekeeping when you check out.

This is your hotel room.

I wanted to tap into this.

So I invested in a suit (my wardrobe was mostly club clothes those days) and made a list of all the best hotels in London's West End.

The best.

Not the boutique private member hotels, like Hazlitts or Groucho. These were places of known debauchery, I had no market there.

I mean the Dorchester, the Grosvenor, the Park Lane hotel, Le Meridien, the Ritz, Claridges. Back then, there were only big hotels, or crappy hotels or bed and breakfasts. There is more of a range now, so my job wasn't too difficult.

I walked (wearing my new suit) into every big hotel that mattered and asked to see the head concierge. I would arrive exactly on the hour (or just before). I gave him (it was always a 'him') an unmarked, large bright pink envelope with £1,000 in it; no name, no contact details, nothing identifiable and no explanation. Just £1,000 and a note saying I'd be in the lobby in exactly 1 weeks' time, same time of day, on the hour, with another identical envelope containing another £1,000. That giant pink envelope would be how he would identify me.

It worked for 70% of the hotels I targeted; a week later, exactly on the hour the concierge would meet me in the lobby, always curious and a bit scared. But I was charming. I looked good in my suit, my handsomeness was bettered only by my fearlessness, and my charisma oozed out of me, it was irresistible.

We'd go somewhere discreet; sometimes it was a vacant hotel room, sometimes a nearby café.

I'd give him the envelope, stuffed full of cash again, and I'd propose something. Imagine it again; that hotel room, that bubble of luxury and escapism. To the married man or the closeted man, sitting on the biggest, most comfy bed he'd ever known, with a tv remote control that offered nothing he wanted while in this mood, on this bed. The bathroom is huge and white, the towels are giant

and fluffy, the shower is huge, the kind of shower that Sharon Stone would have porn star sex in.

He's alone in a strange city, it's nighttime. No one knows he is there, tonight doesn't count.

Pre-internet, there is no porn to watch; he did not pack his secret VHS porn video. He might have picked a soft porn magazine from the top shelf of the newsagent when he caught the cab from the train station or airport.

But it will be unsatisfactory.

He will reach for the Yellow Pages, and he'll turn to the escort pages. Listed under the letter E, they were always there. Lots and lots of them.

One of them would be Ambassador Escorts (though listed as AA1 Escorts, so I was closer to the beginning of the Escorts section).

This was my competition, and this is how business worked.

I hated the competition. My boys and girls were the best, my agency was the most professional, and I resented being amongst the trash that also advertised in the Escort's section of the Yellow Pages.

There was one thing I knew.

If someone were to tear out all the Escorts section pages of the Yellow Pages, in every single hotel room, in every good hotel in London... there'd be a kind of crisis. A silent crisis, but don't doubt it for a minute, I know; there'd be a kind of crisis.

So I would propose something to every concierge in every good hotel in London's West End.

If they were to tear out every page in the Escort's section of every Yellow Pages in the hotel; if they were to let every guest know that if there was anything they couldn't find in the hotel, in the city, and yes, in the Yellow Pages in the room, to give them a call. There's nothing they couldn't find.

This is the special power concierges have always had. It's argued, that concierges are the most powerful people in the world, because they are the first

call of everyone in every hotel around the world. Need a cab? Call the concierge. Need a recommendation for a nearby restaurant? Ask the concierge. Need a parcel delivered? Call the concierge. Need to be not disturbed for a day? Call the concierge.

Need a girl? Need a boy? Need a secret kept or the name of a good strip joint? If you've been to a good hotel, then you'll have noticed that special smile from the concierge who shows you to your room. Sometimes it's a wink, more often, it's a knowing smile. A card is handed to you, letting you know that if you need anything... anything mind you... call the concierge with the smile or that wink. If you forgot to pack your toothbrush, if you need aspirin, if you forgot your charger, if there's something (wink) that you can't find in the Yellow Pages, call the smiley concierge.

If you've never noticed, no shame on you, it's a need-to-know thing.

So I befriended every concierge in London's West End, only the best hotels. We made a deal, that for the pink envelopes to keep coming every week, the concierge only need to tear out the appropriate pages, and recommend me as the agency of choice whenever a hotel guest asked.

The money rolled in.

For the hotels where my mystery pink envelope didn't work; I booked a three day stay there in a suite, and groomed the concierge with regular requests, huge tips (always in Pink envelopes) and won them over that way.

The money rolled in.

What does a guy do with this money?

What does a guy guided by nihilism and apathy, traumatized and missing his mum still, do with lots of money? What does he do with it if he knows he only has months or years to live?

He's generous, for one.

He hosts parties in silly expensive venues or hotel suites, and let's everyone get high on his penny.

He watches everyone else have fun, because he can't. He can see the joy, all around him; he just can't feel it.

But he likes to be around it, it seems appropriate that others enjoy the money, the hedonism, the sex, the party, the escapism, the joy, the joy. Even if he can only sit and watch as if it were happening in an echo chamber a long way away. I would catch the Concorde to (and from) New York City every weekend. It was about a three-hour flight. I'd stay in the newly renovated, Philippe Starck designed Paramount hotel. I had friends in New York, people I'd met through my London partying. Junior Vasquez was the hottest DJ in the world, and the Sound Factory was the club to be at. I saw Madonna there once. But I was too high to say hi, or to even get the big deal of it.

Ball culture was crossing over into (underground) mainstream thanks to "Paris is Burning" and Madonna's "Vogue". Junior Vasquez sampled Danny Extravaganza (from the House of Extravaganza) on one of his tracks. It's wrong to say it crossed over, it is entirely too unique to do that, but for a lost traumatised club kid amongst a generation of lost traumatized club kids, I envied how seriously disenfranchised gay, Queer, Trans and gender non-conforming Black and Latinx people could recreate surrogate families, simply to survive, and generate something so crucial and so unique and unparalleled and as necessary as Ball culture. I would be greatly honored many years later, to briefly be the Mother of a House myself, the House of Impulse (London). It is simply an honorary title, the cultural appropriation is evident, but I consider it a responsibility and an honor.

I'd host chill-outs in my room at the hotel Paramount. Musical Theatre Richie would swing by for a cocktail on his roller-skates in the afternoon. Later, I would parade clumsily through the lobby with an entourage of club kids, mostly the worse for wear, at 4 in the morning. The concierge knew to let us be, I'd sorted that obviously. We'd party in my room through most of Sunday. I remember cooking liquid ketamine in an ashtray over a hotel candle for hours one early morning. We used to get so trashed. There were always more people than the

room could hold, but no one at the Paramount would mind. I mean this hotel was owned by Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, the guys who notoriously owned Studio 54. This was party central, and I was a very frequent guest, plus notorious among hotel conciergerie.

I was never truly able to enjoy Gay Pride, anywhere in the world, since Steven had died on Gay Pride day, and since I'd chosen to get high instead of being in hospital with him, helping him to feel peaceful on his dying day. Nonetheless, Gay Pride in New York City was a pretty brilliant affair, especially the Dance on the Pier (Pier 26). I went to nearly every one, for nearly a decade my very last one being 1999 when Whitney Houston came on stage (via speedboat) and performed "It's not right, but it's OK" and "Heartbreak Hotel".

I came close to feeling actual joy that night. Thanks Whitney darling.

But my heart was in London's Soho, and it still is.

I had my Soho flat, I had some insane popularity, and a lot of drugs and a lot of money. I also had my amazing handsomeness, my very likeable vulnerability that forgave me many things. I had my trauma, and I had my impending awful death, but I did a very good job of not thinking about that much.

But things were changing, and I'd have to start thinking about it. Like it or not.

Chapter 20

When the Ecstasy Stopped Working

I was HIV positive, AIDS illness right on the horizon, a cruel and ugly death to follow.

But denial is an amazing thing. The human being's ability to make life so fast for oneself, that stopping to reflect on these things never actually happens. Doctors would give me numbers that meant little. My viral load was rising, meaning the virus was replicating and replicating without hindrance. My CD4 cell count was dropping, meaning my immune system was weaker and weaker, leaving me prone to infections, all kinds of (usually) innocent infections. AZT was a popular medicine at the time; I'd been on it briefly, but it had done too much damage for me stay on it. The messages I heard most loud and clear from the doctors, was that there was no treatment, and that the numbers they spoke of, were worrying. I remember forcing a doctor to answer that question they never like to answer:

"How long have I got?"

The answer I got to my forced question had been about 3 years. And that end-time was approaching.

But as I said, I'd created a life that was so fast that it was easy to neglect. I looked great. Handsome and fresh, busy, dynamic, charismatic; I hid my HIV and my trauma very well. I was never secretive about it. I didn't do shame easily, I was not an excellent secret-keeper, my heart was always on my sleeve, that was my charm, that was where my charisma lay; in that beautiful irresistible contrast between bold self-confidence and loveable vulnerability. Lots of people around me at the time shared the HIV experience. Many of my nighttime companions, my short-lived love affairs, my ecstasy lovers were at various stages of their own trauma with their own HIV. It was community shared trauma and confusion; it united us in clubland, it united us in Soho, in the chill-out parties, in the post-coital baths and in the suicide pacts. The fear of the impending death, the awfulness of young life cut short before we'd found ourselves; the heady highs of the ecstasy, and the joy of the dancefloor; the bliss of intimacy and the togetherness that comes with shared trauma, the pain of our troubled youths... it all blended into a single melancholic emotion that kept us gently buoyant in the depths of the dark lonely end of the world. Denial was great, but there were times it wouldn't wash. Dentists were a nightmare. Despite every lay person on the planet and Princess Diana knowing how HIV was transmitted, it seemed every dentist in the world hadn't got that memo. The ignorance, the rudeness, the fear, the looks on their faces, the rejections. The tooth pains that went untreated as we shopped from dentist to dentist to find care. I only mention this so dramatically, because every (and I mean every) person I've known who was HIV positive in the early 1990s tells the same story. That's where I felt like I had a disgusting slutty disease the most.

I was aware I was dying the most, every time I was asked to renew a gym membership or library membership (yes, pre-internet we all had library cards, for books and video cassettes). They'd try to sell me the yearly membership, it was cheaper after all, than paying monthly. It was becoming increasingly less likely I would live another year, and the thought of some bastard gym or library

benefitting financially from my awful death made me mad as hell. Warranties on televisions, washing machines, all had time spans longer than me, so I became a serial renter. Monthly contract.

To this very day, I rent my tv and washing machine.

I moved from Greek Street in Soho, around the corner to Shaldon Mansions on Charing Cross road. A beautiful example of architecture that cast the most beautiful silhouette against the sky above Soho, on the corner of Charing Cross Road and Denmark street (the famous Tin Pan alley). This building was infamous and prophetic, in that over the last forty years it has housed and created some of clubland's most notorious artists, DJs, club promoters, actors, drug dealers, escorts, (escort agents), music producers, wayward club kids, Drag Queens, gay magazine editors... It had one of those rickety wobbly lifts that only had a cage for a door and was famous for trapping people inside it between floors. So. Many. Drugs were consumed in this building. So many sex scandals happened in this building. I met Guy Pierce in this building, Robbie Williams. The very lovely Charlie Condou lived upstairs from me, Laurence Malice who was the owner of my beloved Trade nightclub, and Tony Claffey who lived upstairs, also started QX Magazine from the kitchen of his Shaldon Mansion flat. Troy and Oskar fought and loved and fought and loved two floors up; a banana tree flew past outside my window one morning, a result of one of their fighting sessions.

(Actually that's me being presumptuous; perhaps that was part of their loving sessions. It was the 90s, one just never knew.)

Dave Cross was upstairs, DJ and club promoter, hosted the best chill-outs in my opinion. Kind, kind kind. And if you wanted your favorite pop star's song remixed to suit you, just ask Dave.

Stewart Who? was editing QX Magazine at the time, and our friendship started over a classic phone conversation while in Shaldon Mansions. He tells that story better than me, I leave that to my darling Stewart Who?.

I would come back to live in Shaldon Mansions for a second installment in later days; but this first installment, I was living in a studio on the first floor overlooking the Astoria and Substation nightclubs.



Years had passed, and I was losing weight. Everyone had British Telecom flip phones; they texted, but had no internet. But it changed sex work as we knew it; no one needed an agent anymore. It really seemed like every escort with a flip phone was advertising their number on a card stuck in the window of a London red phone booth. I'd stopped travelling to New York, and the days just seemed darker. I don't mean the weather. A sense of impending doom and misery was with me. My flat was cosy, but I'd become sloppy about business. I'd let the phones ring if I wasn't in the mood to work. My boys and girls knew I wasn't well, and they knew things were slipping. They'd secretly sign up with other agents, or work privately from their flip phones. I knew, but I didn't care, I knew I was letting them down. I did a lot of cocaine at home, with friends mostly. We watched the latest episode of Absolutely Fabulous together (on our terrestrial television sets) and recite the best lines with each other during the commercial break. I had silly little relationships with people who were just as scared and lonely as me. They'd last 5 to 9 days; rarely the length of two Saturdays at Trade. Lots of suicide pacts in bathtubs, defiant refusals to die those awful AIDS deaths that our friends were experiencing. There were drug deaths too; GBL had hit London (including, in the earlier days, an early version called Blue Nitrate). We didn't understand its dangers then; but if I'm honest, I knew more people who died from GBL overdoses than of AIDS. G deaths just seemed more socially acceptable than AIDS, so we kind of overlooked it. It was certainly a nicer way to die, for a dying population, than AIDS.

As I became more ill, friends and popularity faded. I got skinnier, and I looked frightened all the time. Dead face. I cannot, will not, ever ever, judge my friends who stayed away during that time. It's hard for me to really take you there, to that time; it's hard for me to explain the cloud of fear and doom that hung over Soho during those early AIDS years. Many people had AIDS, or HIV, early stages and they knew it. Most; kept it secret, until they couldn't anymore. A great many more, refused to test. I mean why would you go for an HIV test, knowing you are high risk, and knowing it meant bad news followed by estrangement, pain

and then death. Why do that, when living in denial was so easy. And so available. Trade was about denial, drugs were about denial, dancing was about denial. Sex can be as much about escapism and denial as anything else, and we honed that coping mechanism, with flair. Our entire community was embracing denial as a coping strategy, as a survival mechanism.

A skill we'd take with us through the ensuing decades.

And nothing presented a ruder awakening from your denial, than a best friend who started showing symptoms.

A rude, rude awakening, that had no instruction manual.

Friends looked me in my frightened deadface, and had no idea if they were looking into a mirror, into their own future, their own likely fate. They didn't want to know that likely fate.

I didn't want them to know.

I'd deal with this on my own; I wouldn't impose this on the bright, beautiful gay youth that delighted Soho, the bright beautiful gay youth that danced and danced amid a world that hated them. Only a few years earlier, Margaret Thatcher ranted her anger that

"Children are being taught they have an inalienable right to be gay. All of those children are being cheated of a sound start in life"

and introduced laws banning gayness from schools. Now gays were dying, in shame and shit, unloved by the majority, a larger majority glad that AIDS would save them from that gay problem they'd prefer not to have rubbed in their faces.

So if those bright beautiful gay youth preferred to not be faced by my awful demise, if they preferred that mirror stay cloaked; fabulous. Fine with me.

I was hardly one for asking for friendship anyway, that usually required an intimacy skill I preferred not to employ. Asking for friendship also suggests that a person might enjoy it; I enjoyed nothing. Nihilism and apathy were my

companions, empathy was a bizarre stranger to me, always had been, and this death was not unwelcome. Awful, but not unwelcome. Trauma and I were well acquainted, an AIDS death wasn't anything I couldn't handle alone.

I still went clubbing, but the ecstasy didn't work. They seemed to enhance a melancholic high, and I felt a million miles disconnected from everyone else experiencing their joy. But I stayed, because this is what I knew. Trade had some areas that were under railway arches; for a long time, it had been where the drug dealers dealt with their queues, as well as where you would hide when you felt a bit woozy while coming up on your drugs. But it had also become a place where you could hide some other shames as well; as the years progressed, the skinny skinny AIDS boys who knew they looked skeletal and ill, the ones who refused to give up clubbing... we hid in the dark shadows under the arches, so as not to invite the disdain or shock of others. To be honest; I don't think there was disdain or shock, at least from the Trade regulars. Trade was also a sexy place, and a place for the lonely. Nothing in the world was as unsexy as a gay man dying of AIDS on too many ecstasy, dancing like... Like if the music stopped, the world would end.

Reality was simply too much.

Keep dancing.

Thank goodness for the arches. Thank goodness for the Tradesters who let us be there.

AIDS skinniness was awful and obvious; but the real kicker was losing my eyesight. CMV was a common AIDS defining illness, that caused blindness. It, alone, didn't kill you, but it made me want to die more than anything else I was experiencing.

Life disintegrated.

Disintegrated.

It seemed like overnight, but thinking hard, and trying to be honest... the disintegration probably started earlier.

I want to say my AIDS disintegration started with the flip phones. It might have started earlier, taking my eye off the ball, grieving Andy in Soho. Maybe it was celebrating the loss of Andy in Soho, with an increase in partying. The confusing mix of Concorde wealth and deteriorating trauma. Soho popularity and impending death.

But there was a 6-week period when it all spiraled. My skinniness turned to tiredness, which led to me being intolerable to all around me. A proper nightmare: when my charisma and amazingness is switched on, I am an irresistible delight, a sumptuous intoxicating joy to bathe in the presence of. When my mood is desperately dark, my charisma and amazingness are just as powerful, just as intoxicating, but it is definitely the dark side of the force you bathe in. You won't shake my mood for many days if you bathe in my dark charisma. It'll change you.

My skinniness turned to tiredness, turned to dark charisma, turned to my business being neglected. Pink envelopes stopped showing up in hotel lobbies, and concierges were pissed off all over London. Competitors moved in, having learned from my ingenuity. I started to go blind and I was a terror to be around, my bitchy, passive-aggressive, camp anger spewed forth a bile that kept everyone away, just as I intended. It spewed forth a bile that disintegrated everything around me, all that I had been.

As people abandoned and angered, I fell behind in payments and was threatened with eviction.

I was attending the hospital daily. I started to develop growths on my skin. Awful things: molluscum contagiosum, that grew in clusters unchecked because I had no immune system left. The entire left side of my face gave way to them, including the insides of my eyelids, as did both of my hands. Each finger was a stump of clusters, and there was no treatment.

This is how I would remain until my death; though getting worse of course.

I had Kaposi's sarcoma legions too, that needed treatment with radiotherapy.

And I was going blind. The most effective treatment, though not affective at all in my case, was to have weekly injections of medicine directly into the eyeball. In addition to this, I needed to be on an intravenous drip for two hours every day.

And so I needed to be in hospital a lot.

Unfortunately, in 1994, the AIDS wards were full. Overflowing, awful and very much about death; today, tomorrow, this week.

I wasn't there yet.

I was in a bad way, and certainly distressed and unwell; but none of my illnesses were immediately fatal; just enormously inconvenient, so I was asked to manage this with daily trips into hospital.

My eviction happened, and I spent a month at Oskar's house. Bless him, he was kind, but gosh it broke down that friendship irreparably. I was awful. Not a good guest. I was not dying gracefully.

But the local council and AIDS charities stepped up, and I was eventually moved into council accommodation. It was a one bedroom, empty and bare, awaiting flooring and tiling etcetera, having recently been gutted. I found a sofa on the street, thrown out to be rubbish, and I brought it home. It was worn to bare thread, probably flea-infested, but it served as my bed, my only furnishing, my only protection from bare untreated floorboards. I lived on it for months, I died on it. Social workers applied for grants on my behalf, to decorate and furnish the flat, though these took months. Bless the social workers; I was awful and angry and petulant to be around, but they tried, they were patient mostly. Sometimes they'd lose their patience, driven to madness by me; sometimes they'd snap back,

"We're only trying to help you, please stop being abusive".

Or something like that.

These days, these months were desperate. Before things got truly unmanageable, friends would visit. Help me connect the electricity, or bring a

lamp, books to read. Occasionally I'd be convinced to go to a bar where I'd drink my misery away. On the way home from the bars, I'd collect rubbish (such as the sofa), or a discarded stool, a print that had hung unloved on someone's wall for decades, now thrown to the curb. I had odd creative splurges; I'd often bring home wooden planks that were part of the scaffolding on building sites. I'd lovingly cut them into shelves, sand and wood-stain them, varnish them. I made the hugest most beautiful mirror frame; the entire size of a wall, lovingly handmade, varnished, a thing of true beauty. A friend purchased the glass and this giant mirror hung opposite my salvaged sofa. This giant beautiful mirror, born of the desperate creativity of a dying AIDS victim, would reflect my journey for as long as I lived in this flat. Decades later, I'd die on my bed before that mirror I'd made.

It is still on that wall probably, hanging in glory, with a memory of some fraught decades.

Not all days were blessed with my creative urges though. These were desperate and dying days. Each day I'd rise from my hollow dusty flat, pull on my filthy unwashed clothes and get the Northern line to the hospital. Sometimes I wore my shirts inside out, and I wouldn't even know it until a nurse told me. The clusters on my face oozed pus and blood in places where I'd scratched them in my angst or in my sweaty half-sleep. Mothers with prams on the train would look at me with disgust, and move their babies away. People moved and sat at the other end of the carriage, glaring at the diseased freak. Vomiting was a frequent experience, made worse by the disgusted people on the train and the anxiety of this journey. I'd have to get off the train at every station on the way to the hospital, to throw up in a rubbish bin, and await the next train. To the next station, vomit in a bin, await the next train.

Eventually to the hospital; and then the same drama home again.

At the hospital, the corridors were full of AIDS patients in similar condition to me. People so ill, so scared, so unhappy; but not quite ill enough to warrant a bed on the busy busy AIDS ward.

Once in a while you'd see someone with their mum. Heartbreaking. I think I glared unkindly at them. That's how I was. That's how I dealt.

Some had friends with them. But the majority were alone. Literally, dying and slumped on a plastic chair; alone. Maybe they were like me, driving people away with anger and despair, with their impossible-ness. But I'm sure a lot were alone because their gayness had estranged them from family, and because their friends found it too frightening to look in the faces of their friend, into their own possible future. To deal with this awfulness.

It wasn't a single doctor we'd see; it was teams. Students observing, and teams of doctors consulting, because there was no solution. We needed consultants, and dermatologists, and infectious disease specialists, nurses, surgeons to do biopsies, and of course the medical photographers; because most of what we were suffering had never been seen before. They gathered around me, argued, took pictures with big flash bulbs, moved away and whispered, discussed with great urgency, and nearly always with the same conclusion; there was nothing that could be done.

The clusters of growths on my face and hands spread and calloused; purple KS lesions kept appearing and moved into my esophagus. Fungal growths grew in my mouth, over my lips, down my throat. And most of my sight in my right eye was gone, as efforts continued to save it, and my left eye. Including those unbearable injections into my eyeballs.

A central venous catheter was surgically attached to a big vein close to my heart; I was sent home from hospital each day with a liquid bag of medicine, that I'd hang from a nail in my wall above my rescued sofa, and plug myself into my catheter. And lay there.

I lay and I wasted.

A year passed like this, perhaps more. I didn't die; I expected to, each week; the doctors expected me to. They called me a medical miracle, and lovingly told me how amazing I was, and how resilient I was, and what a fighter I was.

I could only look blankly back at them. These words seemed strange, and a numbness had descended into me that manifested mostly, as me looking blankly at people, at the world, at the passing time, as if it were all ridiculous. Because it was.

This was quite ridiculous.

It made a person think very philosophically about things, about all things. So much time, on that sofa, time to think about the meaning of life, the meaning of death. The purpose of illness, the purpose of suffering of survival.

Why did the doctors want to keep me alive? Why?

This was not a pleasant existence. How did medicine become this awful thing? Why did hospital chaplains pray for me?

To whom.

What god sanctioned this.

I read in papers about AIDS being a punishment for sinful gays. I had been sinful and cruel and awful, but my gayness was the least part of that.

But there was no logic to an illness like this. It had to have some purpose?

Surely. If it did, then I had plenty of time to ponder it, alone on my sofa, dying.

Surely the lesson here was that there was no purpose; to anything. To existence.

All the waxing, all the philosophizing, all the effort we put into figuring out things we can never figure out... nothing more than stupid, wasted time. All that religion, money, prayer, just stupid, wasted time. All that art, all the literature, all the exploration of evolution, of society, culture, life, death, the universe; as if it would give us an answer.

There was no answer to be found by these means.

Just silly beliefs and superstitions that brought a kind of comfort to people who needed answers where there were none.

I lay in there in my empty flat, attached to the drip hanging from the bent nail in my wall, and just riled in the ridiculousness of it all.

With no out. No escape.

Just pain, loneliness, ugliness, deterioration, discomfort; it gets worse, then you die.

But the doctors try to keep you alive longer, because of some ancient oath.

And the chaplains pray for you.

And the newspapers wish you dead, and in hell.

And your friends hide from you.

And the mums on the trains shield their babies from you.

And Prime Ministers and Presidents refuse to acknowledge the suffering and deaths.

And gays march in the streets asking for understanding, while eggs and sticks are thrown at them.

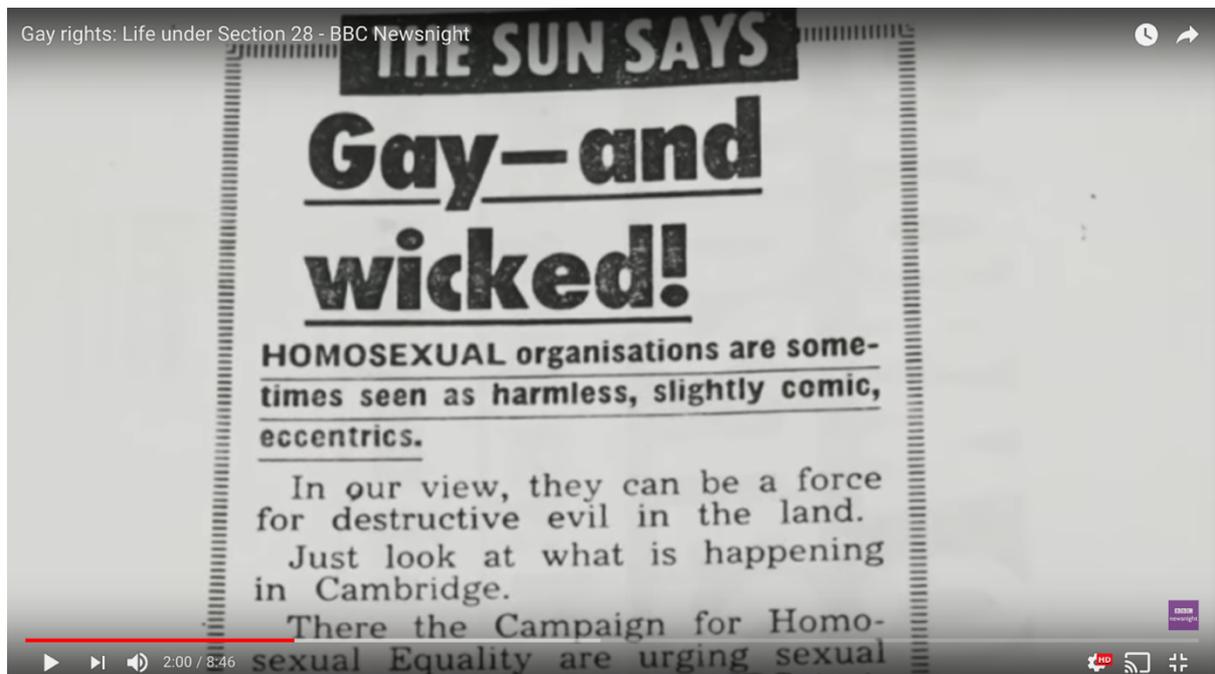
And the mums sit with their dying boys in hospital corridors.

Their faces.

And the nurses clean up shit and vomit, with loving gentle smiles on their faces.

And the world was mad.

I lay in the madness, I riled in the madness, waiting to die.



I'D SHOOT MY SON IF HE HAD AIDS, SAYS VICAR!



Shotgun message... the Rev Simpson demonstrates his point about AIDS with the help of son Chris.

A VICAR vowed yesterday that he would take his teenage son to a mountain and shoot him if the boy had the deadly disease AIDS.

And to make his point, the Rev Robert Simpson climbed a hill behind his church and aimed a shotgun at his 16-year-old son Chris.

Mr Simpson, 64, said: 'Chris would not get away if he had the virus. He would be a dead man.'

'Even though he is my own child I would pull the trigger.'

'And that would be for the best of my family as well as ourselves.'

'Added to his declaration, Simpson in his sermon told a congregation of 100 that he would take his son to a mountain and shoot him if he was found to be infected with AIDS.'

Threat
'Whenever I think he would like to, when he returns I tell AIDS is out.'

He would pull trigger on rest of family, too

By JOHN LINDEN

But Mr Simpson, who has been a vocal spokesman for AIDS awareness, said he would not shoot his son if he was found to be infected with AIDS. 'I would pull the trigger on the rest of my family, too.'

Mr Simpson said that he was a member of the Church of England and that he was a member of the Church of England. He said that he was a member of the Church of England and that he was a member of the Church of England.

Mr Simpson said that he was a member of the Church of England and that he was a member of the Church of England. He said that he was a member of the Church of England and that he was a member of the Church of England.

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SICK!

50,000 Weirdos March in Revolting Parade of Perverts

• A naked man pranced obscenely through the streets of San Francisco, wearing only a live boa constrictor draped around his groin area.

• Repulsive-looking transvestite beauty queens" perched atop a float, loudly wearing gaudy wigs and glittery dresses that displayed false makeup, their grotesquely lipsticked mouths smirking lewdly.

• Crazy young perverts and middle-aged degenerates openly fondled each other in public — even kissing each other's bare buttocks, to the delight of the leering onlookers.

This outrageous public exhibition of perversion last June 28 was



SHOCKING SIGN was held on sidelines by young girl.



MARCHING GAYS carry balloons and huge banner that flaunts their perversion.

only part of the sickening spectacle known as Gay Freedom Day in San Francisco — an annual parade of hairy homosexuals and leather-clad lesbians.

Incredibly, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors actually issued a permit for this vile parade of living pornography.

It included about 50,000 participants — male, female and whatever — according to the official police estimates.

Male baton twirlers — wearing brief boxer shorts, hard hats and construction worker boots — led the Gay Marching Band through the streets of the City by the Gay, performing vulgar dances designed to turn the stomachs of the non-gay onlookers.

But many in the crowd — also gay sickos — roared their approval of the disgusting exhibitions.

An ENQUIRER reporter, who was on the scene to cover the parade, filed this report:

"The things these homosexuals did — the displays they made of themselves and the scenes they put on while they were allowed for one day to 'come out of the closet' — were utterly revolting.

"The parade turned out to be an event that allowed perversion, drugs and drunkenness all day long — and the police never even made an attempt to stop it.

"Nude people were running rampant throughout the streets and parks as if this was normal behavior.

"Straight' onlookers were shocked to see a small girl holding a picket sign with the shocking words 'I LOVE MY GAY MOTHER' written on it. And behind the little child, her mother and lesbian lover embraced each other.

Bizarre-looking men — dressed as showgirls — flounced flamboyantly through the crowd wearing pounds of makeup to hide their heavy beards and accosting strangers with such unfunny comments as:

"Welcome to fairyland!" "Happy Gay Day!" and "Is my lipstick on straight, honey?"

Gay phone company employees held their banner high — a sign read-



BATON TWIRLERS wearing hard hats and construction worker boots lead a gay marching band along downtown San Francisco street.

ing: "Reach Out and Touch Someone."

They did, groping at total strangers as they minced along the parade route.

Weirdos in the crowd shrieked with excitement when a lesbian group, "Dykes on Bikes," zoomed by on souped-up motorcycles, all dressed in black leather, flexing their tattooed arms, each with a lesbian girlfriend seated behind and holding on tightly.

This super-bowl of mixed fruits and nuts also featured young boys clad in fishnet loincloths roller-skating along the parade route as aging perverts wildly pursued them, offering them jobs as houseboys.

One old homosexual dressed in black leather grimly held onto a leash attached to a collar around the neck of a young boy — who was forced to walk on his hands and knees like a dog!

And what does the founder of Gay Freedom Day have to say about this monstrously disgusting behavior of his fellow homosexuals?

Here are the shockingly arrogant words of the parade founder, Robert Humphries:

"The parade is the gay community for all the world to see and if the world doesn't like what it sees, it can damn well look the other way, because we are beautiful, we are real and we are not going away!"

— REGINA SMITH



GRINNING spectators watch proud gay poses for picture.

Chapter 21

AIDS Death and Cocaine Resurrection

I don't believe happy humans are designed to question the meaning of life, the purpose of existence. It's usually something done only by people in existential crises. (Or by very emotionally robust academics and philosophers.)

I don't mean to make people question their faith. That's not fair, and can be damaging.

I try hard not to make people question their concepts of life after death, or the meaning of life, or the cruelty of their gods.

It's unfair. I am hypnotically charismatic, and I can snake-charm the most cynical among us, draw them, draw you, into my darkness, my mood, to my way of thinking. If I'm feeling dark and desperate, I won't stop until you do too. That's my way. My way of not being alone in the darkness. Whether or not you can 'handle' my darkness – that doesn't matter to me at the time. I'll pull you in till your earth is tilting, till your faith in all you knew was disintegrating.

Even if that destabilizes your faith in the very laws of physics as you know them; I'll destroy you and pull you in.

That's my way.

I did it a lot during those years. Every doctor, every chaplain, every social worker that tried to care for me got my hateful diatribes of the meaninglessness of life,

the cruelty of supposedly kind gods. Also my right to suicide, to end my suffering; a right I believed in stoically; the right to control my own destiny, free from moral or social constructs or obligations. These conversations were uncomfortable (to say the least) for other people, faced with my circumstance. Faith or superstitions served those people well, as they watched a gorgeous bright young man like me die so awfully. They needed those beliefs, they clung fiercely to them. And I; I was like a mad dog with lockjaw; I wouldn't relent, or show mercy or let the topic go. I'd wrestle any person to the ground, brilliantly highlighting the giant flaws in their faith or argument. And who doesn't let a dying AIDS patient win that argument anyway?

(Well quite a lot actually. It's a very emotive subject, people do not like losing this argument, even as a false act of kindness to a dying man.)

I cared a lot about this, as I died and despaired. I didn't care so much about how upsetting this was to other people.

I am not a vessel of empathy, I think that is established.

Dying can be associated with a lot of kindness and generosity, for those that have come to terms with it; for the wise, or the peaceful.

But I was none of those things.

I was a fighter.

I was a terror.

My predator's teeth were showing, my inner groomer fiercely awake and active.

I was traumatized, and angry and I was taking the world down with me as I went. It seemed right, it seemed the natural order.

If I was to die tomorrow, I'd like to it peacefully and with generosity.

But I won't. I'll be me. I'll fight it, and you, and I'll take you down with me if you deserve it. Despite myself, I know that's what I'll do.

So it is not surprising then, that I had so few friends around me during this time. And I certainly hadn't told the family that had raised me in Melbourne.

In 1995, I was so close to death, my very devoted HIV consultant added my name to a list of people who would be commemorated by the release of a bunch of red balloons at that year's Pride festival.

Yes, I had never loved Pride. And I wasn't too big on ceremony at the time. But my doctor thought the gesture was lovely; each year (back then) a red balloon was released for every person who had died of AIDS. It might sound like an oddly premature and macabre suggestion now; but anticipating and planning for my death was a daily thing back then. Daily. And since I was friendless and family-less, my lovely doctor didn't want the Pride balloon release to go without me, since I was so very close to death.

Once a month (or so), someone or other would stop by and bring some very healthy food, something inspired by an article they'd read about AIDS and healthy living. One friend stopped by with a book about auto-uropathy: drinking one's own urine as a health intervention. Someone brought tomatoes and red peppers, convinced they'd help my AIDS turn around. I got very kind lectures from very people about looking after myself, eating right, being well. I am grateful of course; except I came to believe that they were not really caring about me; I believe that looking at skinny, sick me, attached to my drip hanging from the bent nail above my rescue-sofa; looking at me, they did not see me. They saw their own death, they confronted the very notion of mortality, and it triggered them, it triggered and rocked their concepts of kind gods and the inexplicable injustices and cruelties of life. They had to do something. And the something was to rescue me with superstitions and desperate remedies. Hence the arguments.

Which I threw my entire self into with great relish.

One friend was different.

Patti.

Darling Patti.

Doctor's Report for Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance under the Special Rules

Patient's details

Surname Stuart
Other names David
Date of birth 28/1/67

3 SHALDON MANSIONS
132 CHARING CROSS RD
LONDON WC2H 0LA
Address 42, Porondesbury Rd
London
Postcode NW6 6BS

Part 1 - Condition

What is the diagnosis?

AIDS

What are the clinical findings?

Oesophageal candidiasis
Diarrhoea
Wt loss
CD4 0.01

Part 2 - Treatment

Please describe all relevant treatment—current, recent or proposed—and include details of

- drugs
- surgery carried out recently
- surgery anticipated
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy
- any other form of treatment
- any other advice being given

Co-trimoxazole

Declaration

The person named above is my patient. This is a full report of their condition and relevant treatment.

I am the patient's

- registered general practitioner
 hospital consultant or hospice consultant

Signature

M. Johnson

Address or FHSA stamp

Royal Free Hospital
Rowland St
London NW3

Phone number

07-794-0500

Date

23/2/95

DS1500 Report

(One of the AIDS diagnoses I'd get during those years.)

Patti came around every Thursday night after she finished work at the American Retro shop in Old Compton street. She brought two grams of cocaine with her every week.

"Darling; you're dying. Let's get high."

And we did. I really did.

I deserved it, I needed it, and I loved her for being the only person in my entire universe that wasn't trying to save me.

We got high and it was awesome.

Those Thursdays are when I truly got the taste for self-medication. For escapism via a drug high. I really got the taste, I truly knew what it was like to need something powerful to alter a brain chemistry that made every day unlivable, a brain chemistry that wouldn't quit.

Patti and cocaine would define the following decade.

Yes; I said decade. Because as it turned out, despite all odds; I survived AIDS.

I survived AIDS, by scraping by on anger fumes; kept alive by trauma and vehemence and injustice and by the nihilistic skin of my teeth.

Apathy too, had played its part, had gotten me through. Apathy numbs the parts of you that give up too quick.

New medicines became available in 1996, just as my red balloon was released over Clapham Common.

These medicines seemed to bring a lot of back from the brink of death.

Not all of us.

Not all of us.

Not all of us.

Let that sink in, as we try to feel happy about me surviving.

Let that really sink in.

Not all of us.

Do you know, how rude and inappropriate it is, to celebrate surviving, when most didn't? Survivor guilt is not a disorder, it's an entirely deserved thing.

There was nothing to be celebrated here. (Not that I was the celebrating type.)
It was a dramatic recovery. Fast and dramatic.

I couldn't save my right eye, but my left had vision, and my health bounced back fast.

Really fast.

Within a month, my growths vanished, without scarring.

My KS legions diminished, and I bounced back to health.

I got my looks back too. My handsomeness was back and it was dazzling. If you looked really closely, if you knew me very well, you'd see the haunting happening beneath my eyes, but no one knew me that well, and my charisma was my glamour that hid the trauma.

I was back from the dead.

I wasn't celebrating, because I'm not that type. But nor was anyone else. As miraculous as this sounds, to re-tell this story; it didn't seem miraculous at the time. It was just another medicine that seemed to be working; it wasn't the first. No one knew if this would last six months, six weeks. Daily visits to the hospital continued, the teams of doctors, the tests the tests. It had been a devastating decade, and no one was quite ready to think of this as any more than another brief reprieve for the dying. We all had to be studied and watched closely, for the inevitable failure of the drugs.

And stigma does not die quickly.

Understatement

And those of us, that had been on the brink of death? We'd been ready to die.

More ready for it than our loved ones were, than our doctors were. We'd made our peace, or perhaps just resigned ourselves to it. Our hope had run out a long time earlier, so we did not just sit up, celebrate and get on with life.

I watched friends and families of AIDS patients at the hospital, joyously shaking and hugging their loved ones as they got more good health results from their

doctors; but in all cases they were shaking a limp rag doll; they were shaking a person empty of any joy. Disbelief, apathy, exhaustion and trauma lived inside these rag dolls; it would take more than pills to return these near-corpses to life. More than charisma and handsomeness.

We'd need a lot of healing. We'd need someone or something to explain all this to us. This senselessness we'd endured. We'd deteriorated and suffered and died, while the world hated and blamed us, hated the gayness and sluttiness that caused this. We'd lost our joy in the prime of youth, watched our friends die deaths that only happened in horror movies; knowing this was our own fate. We steeled ourselves for this, when there was no steel strong enough. We sank into our deathbeds, decayed in the prime of youth, no explanation available, no sympathy. Just senselessness. Even our gods couldn't explain this, our religions crumpled into hypocritical heaps. Our pained, pained families looked at us like – like: if only we hadn't have had that gay sex. The world was upside down, and we readied ourselves for death, as we watched the people around us do the same, only less gracefully.

This reprieve was not something we simply dusted off our shoulders.

There was no moving on after that awful senselessness.

There was now only a reprieve, and a wondering of what the fuck do we do.

What the fuck do we do?

How the fuck do we move on?

Life was an unkind horror of meaninglessness; all youthful ambition, hopes and dreams seemed like childish nonsense, available to be enjoyed only by the stupid, the innocent, those who hadn't been shown the dark side.

I was better at this than most; I'd died many years earlier, on kill kill day. I'd resurrected myself and moved on, hollow but convincing.

How the fuck does one move on? A giant question mark over how long this medicine would last, a giant question mark over everything we'd ever held true, anything that had mattered. Fashion? Good grief. Why, oh why, does it matter

what one wears? When you've looked death in the face, and true horror, you then have to decide what the fuck to wear!?

Unfathomable.

Friendships? Laughter? You have to be kidding.

What to do with a Saturday night? They expect me to laugh and dance and smile? It hadn't been my forte to begin with, but now...

I'd have to earn money, make a living. I'd lost everything. And the blind, youthful chutzpah that had driven me earlier, was now a ridiculous black hole.

I hear myself, I hear myself.

Given a second chance, and I stare ungratefully at it, hating it.

Being ungrateful for life itself, is one of those great mortal unforgiveable things; one of those things that cause short circuits in priests' brains, that upset the very essence of faith.

I was traumatized, beyond caring, and now I had to live too.

But it's ok, I had a solution to all of this.

I had a solution, one that was right in front of me, one within reach, one which truly solved my problem, and one that would pick me up, and define the next decade of my life.

Cocaine.

Chapter 22

The Boxer and the Queen

Cocaine.

I never really liked it.

I did loads of it, but I never really liked it.

You could (almost) separate all people and define them into two different groups; people who like stimulants (uppers), and people who like depressants (downers). Very different people, when it comes to coping with life, with emotions. Even the people who famously like both, will prefer one of these, only using the other to manage the first better.

Then there's another way to divide them; people who do like drugs, but don't touch them. And people who don't like drugs, but do them anyway; those are the ones who take the joint when it's being passed around, even though they don't like the high much, but they always take it when passed around. They often remark upon this as they do it. They're the ones too, who always say yes to the line of cocaine offered, even though they know they'll just get twitchy and slightly paranoid about whether they're really welcome in that group.

Of course too, still dividing, there are people who do love drugs, but don't ever do them, and those that tried drugs, didn't like 'em, won't ever touch them again,

and in fact really struggle to understand why, oh why, people would do drugs at all.

And then there's the people who have never done drugs, and thank goodness; I mean those people who (god forbid) should they ever do drugs, you'd never ever see them again.

I'm pretty enigmatic, so I could be all of the above within the space of twenty-four hours.

Cocaine is an upper, and I'm definitely an upper guy. I tried heroin twice, and it was lovely, but I wouldn't invest in it for personal use. Alcohol? Sure I drink, but I think I've only ever been properly drunk two or three times in my life. I hate beer, the smell it reminds me of every Australian back yard in summer that I ever found myself in. I'll finish a second glass of wine and I'm ready for bed, no desire for a third glass. Marijuana... I'm that guy that takes the joint whenever it's passed around, even though I will get paranoid and over-think everything unpleasantly.

Ecstasy is a stimulant, and I liked it. I don't know if I'd have liked it if I hadn't been on the run from a psychotic gay pimp with a broom handle and an AIDS diagnosis that made him angrier. Or dying myself. I probably would. Ecstasy is nice.

Two is better.

Cocaine is a stimulant, and it was OK I guess. I always took a line when it was passed around, I don't remember ever buying a gram myself, or having a dealer. But I probably did. I'm the kind of guy who did drugs just because they were there, and better than being sober, better than being drunk.

I liked cocaine when Patti brought it around. I promise you this; if you are dying, slowly, painfully, frighteningly, amid "slutty gays, die" newspaper headlines and a trickle of friends who bring cancer-friendly vegetables when they visit... you will like cocaine that day too. And every day it's available to you.

Patti came around every Thursday with two grams. I don't know why. I really was an unpleasant bastard in those days, coke wasn't cheap, and Patti was the most popular girl in town. With the gays I mean. Patti was platinum blonde, busty and curvy and proud of it (ahead of her time; this was the 90s, before butt implants got trendy, when heroin chic, skin and bones was the only kind of sexy allowed for a woman.) Some people called Patti fat. Never the gays, but she was considered undatable by the straight guys. Patti and I knew one thing for certain though; I knew it because I'd been a pimp, Patti knew it because she lived it. Patti was the girl every man wanted to have sex with, but they'd prefer to marry the skinny girl model who wasn't such a fag hag.

Patti didn't mind; she liked her curves, she liked the sex she had (she always demanded dinner first though), and she liked her gays.

And she loved me, I never knew why. Our friendship hadn't existed in a big way before I got ill. Just casual Soho acquaintances. But now, friendless, and in a dusty empty flat with a sofa, a rusty nail in the wall and a drip plugged into my chest – now she decided to be my friend.

I liked cocaine then. And it didn't seem to do me any harm. Despite my peers dying weekly, I lived and lived, on the edge of death, for another year.

Patti and I continued our weekly ritual, even after I got well. As well as my health improving, in frightening leaps and incomprehensible bounds, my grants came through, and I had funds for furniture and decoration, and welfare.

The welfare for AIDS patients back then was pretty luxurious. I like to argue that I earned every penny, through pain and suffering, but I cannot hide the truth that there was enough for me to contribute financially to Patti's weekly visits, which (now that I was well) were extending to twice, thrice weekly.

Patti and I would frequent the Soho bars, a lovely change from doing cocaine at my deathbed (sofa). So many devastating years had passed, no one really remembered that I'd been Pimp David, in another lifetime. It seemed as if the whole world had changed. I was just one of the few that survived AIDS, and now did coke in Soho bars. On welfare. Devastatingly handsome, though my

charisma had taken a knock if you looked closely in my eyes. Well my eye, singular. I was blind in one of them now.

But gosh I was handsome still. If there was such a thing as movie-star handsome, post AIDS celebrity cocaine chic, then that was me.

Traumatized and yes, still with a streak of nihilism running through me, I was still in survivor mode, and looking out for opportunity. It's tough having a cocaine habit when you're on welfare.

I got to meet Patti's cocaine dealer. His name was Tony, he was the smileyest, most polite drug dealer you'd ever hope to meet. These qualities were especially lovely because they were so unexpected if you were expecting your drug dealer to be a stereotype. Tony was a south London, heterosexual Black man, boasted of being a boxer, and looked every bit the part. He looked like LL Cool J, we said so. Incredibly handsome; probably not really, but the boxer face mixed with his disarming charm and smile and incredible good manners made for a very attractive package; and so, so polite. I learned turns of phrase and ways of manners from him that I practice to this day.

So Tony did very well with the gays of Soho that he'd met through Patti and me. He lived in south London (with his mum; yes, he lived with his mum. It was she, who had taught him the good manners.) He lived in south London, but rented a bedsit in Soho (in Great Windmill street, where I had hung out years earlier with my Soho boys and girls.) It was an awful flat; empty but for a piss-stained mattress, a portable Ghetto Blaster and a kettle that he never used. His mum probably got it for him. But Tony was just slumming for now; he had found a new clientele for his cocaine, that was more polite, less problematic than his south London clientele; the Soho gays, and the pretentious media industry that had moved into Soho while I was dying. Tony wasn't from a culture that... (let me put this the right way); Tony wasn't from a culture that was famous for championing gay rights. In another universe, Tony might be beating me up for being gay, but he wasn't homophobic to his core, and there was money to be made here, so he acclimatized quickly and did OK. The gays were fine, as long

as they weren't too flouncy, and it was better if they were accompanied by a fag hag to offset all the gayness.

I liked Tony, I really did.

I liked the manners and charm his mum had instilled in him, they were impeccable. His boxer masculinity was attractive, and he had charisma too. Loads of it. He was in his early 20s, but he carried himself like an older man who commands respect, delivers authority. Kindly of course.

Patti and I were regular visitors to his bedsit, and we'd bring a bottle of Prosecco to share with him (he always shared some lines with us before our purchase). Tony thought Patti and I were the most glamorous coupling Soho had to offer. He was right. He wouldn't want to be us, or hang out with us, but in this other world, far, far away from south London, it was OK for him to be enamored by us. (He would absolutely have loved to shag Patti, and did try, though always asking my permission first: a very strange thing, but probably a mixture of his mum's good manners, and some cultural confusion about the gay/Fag Hag dynamic.) Patti never shagged him; she knew how to protect the longevity of a relationship with your drug dealer. She was a pro.

(Plus it probably would have had to have been on the piss-stained mattress, and Patti was a class act.)

Patti and I were both class, and Tony knew it. We told him again and again that to be properly respectful to the gays we were bringing him, he really ought to get out of this awful bedsit, and find somewhere less junkie-like to deal from. This might have been a step up from dealing on a south London street corner, but it was an awful place, a dive. We urged Tony to step into the class his mum had raised him to be, to respect his new, growing clientele, and splash out on nicer digs.

I absolutely remember the words coming out of my mouth, though I don't remember thinking them, or preparing them, or anything, other than the words passing across my lips and becoming a reality; one day, probably on cocaine

and prosecco, I suggested that Tony and I strike a deal, and he should work out of my flat.

Those words would change my destiny. Big surprise there. I just wish, that I could remember thinking the words, or having deliberated this at all. But the words, those words laden with destiny, just passed across my lips, and the world changed.

Not immediately.

Tony deliberated on things a long while before acting, and I needed a long time to acknowledge those words that had somehow crossed over my lips without any will from me.

Only a few months earlier, I had been lying waiting to die of AIDS on a filthy sofa I had found in the street. Abandoned by nearly all and attached to a drip hanging off a bent nail in my wall.

Since then, I'd bounced back to health, with this teasing promise of wellness hanging around me, unwelcome and not trusted. I'd decorated my flat with grants from charities to help the dying, and it was looking gorgeous. I'd reacquainted myself with Soho.

And I wondered every day what to do.

What to do with the day, what to do with the future.

Would I live long, or would the AIDS kick in again?

Why, this reprieve? Why me? How long, and why me?

Prostitution, and Ambassador Escorts seemed a long time ago, a lifetime ago.

The world had spun on its axis and shifted monumentally since that life. It was alien to me. I had never wanted it anyway, my life, my nihilistic passiveness just took me that way, into Andy's world. For something to happen now, I'd need some initiative, some passion some drive.

But all I had was trauma. A trauma that felt like numbness; like watching the world change through the window of an HG Wells time machine. Everything outside of me irrelevant and silly.

What to do. Live on benefits, live on welfare? I could. This was easy. Get a job? I wish I had now. I wish I'd worked in a shop, or a restaurant; something normal and innocent; surrounded by others who had to pay the rent, scrape together some tips to go to a concert on the weekend. Or something. The things normal people do. I wish I had. But I was too far from normal, I was a world away. I was numb. Probably frightened, of everything, like getting a job. It didn't feel like fear, it felt like numbness and apathy, a little anger. Staying still, and doing nothing, and just letting things happen to me, wheels greased by me fascinating charisma... that was easier.

And once in a while, words would cross over my lips, I don't know where they sprang from.

In this case, inviting a cocaine dealer into my house, a dealer from another world to me, into my life, made great sense.

The deal was: Tuesday through Saturday, from 4pm to 2am, Tony would take up residence in my flat, and do his dealing. In return, I'd get £500 each week, and I'd stay away for those hours.

Good deal.

I didn't stay away for those hours.

Tony and I became great friends and business partners.

Despite my apathy, my nihilism, I had a predatorial grooming streak running through me, and I saw opportunities for Tony's business to be better.

I was charming, charismatic, likeable, movie-star handsome. I'd entertain all Tony's clients, who were mostly heterosexual media industry from Soho, and gay scene people. They mixed well, even in the 90s (media people were pretty cool). Tony had a few stragglers from his world; they weren't as fond of gay me, they were there to see Tony, but they tolerated me, because they wanted drugs. Tony's clientele became less and less, as my business acumen, charm and popularity drew more of my kind of people. My kind of people were social cocaine users; two grams on a Friday night at the pub with some beers, followed a few hours later by a second thought of, why not two more grams

and a trip to the nightclubs. Same on Saturday. Same on Wednesday after work.

No trouble, no drama. Always polite. If they ran out of money for drugs, they ran out of money; they didn't come pounding on my door all through the night wanting drugs on credit, as Tony's clientele had done.

Business got bigger and bigger. Tony got richer. We became good friends, although we were polar opposites apart. He had the most polite way about him, such good manners; but he was also rough under the manners. He boasted of treating women badly, or of his sexual prowess. Straight men do this a lot around gay men, so I just let him talk, let him convince me of his heterosexuality, it seemed important for him to do so. He would speak of violence toward his enemies, and he showed me his gun once. I didn't like it, I hadn't seen a gun since I was six years old, and it seemed to not belong in this environment. I told him so; he respected it. I only ever saw that gun again once, just before falling into unconsciousness as he hit me on the head with it, years later.

But I'll come to that.

He was dodgy, and from another world. His Black culture was also alien to me. I'd never known any Black people in Australia. I'd had a few casual friends who were gay and Black. I've no doubt I said some awful and ignorant things to them and to Tony, without knowing. Racism works that way. I obviously don't want to be racist, but I had grown up in a world that is bent toward favoring the white male, and some racism and ignorance and abuse of privilege must seep through, even innocently. I think it's fair to say I'd been indoctrinated since birth into racism, and the de-indoctrination required hasn't properly been invented and I had no instruction book to muddle through it at the time.

But Tony taught me a lot about Black culture – entirely accidentally. He was no social justice activist, nor had I identified any need to learn anything different. We were drug dealers designed by culture to dislike each other. Sharks from different oceans sharing the same water by happenstance. I'm glad to have

learned stuff from him though. Things that I admired, things that upset me. He wasn't "teaching" me; it was just stuff that becomes shared when a gay white boy with AIDS shares a house with a straight Black boxer from South London. It was a learning curve for him too. My HIV was a very uncomfortable thing for him. He wanted to drink from his own glasses, and protect himself from my disease despite that risk being completely zero. He loosened up eventually though; in fact, after a few years, he was my protector and champion, if anyone ever brought ignorance or stigma to my earshot. He did truly wrestle with the gay stuff though. I used to have a Tom of Finland address book (before we had computers or Smartphones, yes, we needed address books). The cover was two sexy men clad in ripped jeans with giant erections, kissing the face off each other. I was out and about one evening, while Tony was dealing from my flat; I called him, because I needed a number from my address book.

"No Davey"

he said.

"No Davey, I can't touch it. I don't wanna touch it. Come back and get it yourself."

It was too gay for him to even touch.



But he loosened up about that over time; and again, he became a champion of mine, if ever homophobic things were said within earshot of me.

And I became a champion of his, if my white gays ever communicated anything racist to me, whether he was in earshot or not. As best I could; neither of us were by any means equal rights activists; we were drug dealers, but I think we both learned a lot about the other's experience of inequality and unkindness (the more subtle ones) from each other, from those years together.

We settled into our relationship. He got richer, as I brought in more and more clients, using my Soho popularity, my charisma.

I didn't.

Things had to change.

They had to change, because the rising success of the business was all down to me. Tony was charismatic, cool and sexy, and he knew about mixing the drugs, he had the contacts of the cocaine providers. But he was high a lot. And my industriousness made him lazy. I, also, was charismatic, cool (ish) and sexy; but I was also popular, well-connected, with a natural smarts for business; I struck up old relationships (and new ones) with hotel concierges, the most quietly powerful people in any city, and I socialized every night while Tony was in my house. Soon, it was less like his business, with me being paid to stay away; and more like him sitting at my house taking money and getting high, while I was out and about delivering cocaine, and drumming up more business. In exchange for my hard work, I was given free cocaine, pretty much an endless supply for my own use and sharing. But no extra money. My £500 per week was stagnant, and I guess years passed without me complaining about that arrangement.

For years, I was the popular guy in Soho with all the coke and a lot of generosity.

Tony and I got busier, as I got more popular.

We got too big for my house. People were literally queuing in my hallway and out the front door, with the living room full full of people. We tried to move people out fast; an earlier policy had included demanding people stay for a line and a glass of prosecco, especially so the neighbors wouldn't become suspicious of the traffic through my door. So they looked like friends visiting, not clients buying cocaine from the guys who were quickly becoming the busiest dealers in London. But now, we had to get people in and out fast, discourage socializing, because it was a crazy coked up free for all that (it seemed to Tony and me) could be seen from space, let alone my neighbors. Things had to change.

And so, it was back again to Shaldon Mansions; that extraordinary building in Soho that played host to all of London's nightlife celebrities and anti-heroes. Tony and I rented a large apartment there, with giant windows that looked all the way down Charing Cross road. I decorated it; the style was minimalist (very nineties). There was lots of stainless steel and white laminate. I painted the paintings myself that hung on the wall (I've no idea where that splash of creativeness came from, but I actually couldn't find anything I liked to hang, so just did it myself. Very me. That's how I roll. Never picked up a paintbrush again in my life, to this day.)

Maybe it was the drugs.

It looked amazing, this apartment. It was huge, big enough for our growing business. I knew most of the people living in the building at the time, and they loved/hated/loved/hated the fact that a coke dealer was now in the building. That sort of thing changes your life.

It was certainly changing mine.

I lived a 5 min walk from there, so my new routine involved some personal space in my gorgeous home, heading over to Shaldon Mansions to open up shop about 4pm each day. I'd make sure the coke wraps were wrapped and prepared, that there was plenty of Prosecco in the fridges.

Tony would arrive a little less promptly, but (in the earlier years) he always arrived reliably, if not promptly. Aside from a little laziness, he had the makings of a great businessman. People arrived; we encouraged them to stay for a line and a glass of bubbly, so we didn't look like a whorehouse or drug dealer's place. It became a social space, for Soho people to hang, get high, socialize. Mostly, they wanted to be entertained by Tony and me. We were the charismatic odd pair, that played off each other well, and people just liked to be around us. (On drugs). They stayed, they laughed, they bought more coke than they'd planned. A real mix of my networks and Tony's networks. Not usually groups that mix, often groups that are particularly wary of each other; often groups that dislike each other. (Well to be honest, the gays liked everybody, but often Tony's networks had a deep-seated disgust of the gay men (gay women were cool obviously). But in this environment, classy and beautifully decorated; with the night view of Charing Cross Road, and my paintings on the wall; with the bubbly flowing and cocaine all over the place, everyone got to like each other, got introduced to each other's music, each other's life dramas and experiences. Everyone shared the experience of being a minority, or of vulnerability, or of the thing that made them so likely to be attracted to drugs. That thing. We all had that in common, and it was the best mix of people I'd ever had the pleasure to mingle and get high with.

It felt like a good thing.

I wondered how good things like this ended. Once in a while I wondered that. I think I knew how these things ended, but I wondered anyway. Once in a while. Tony never did that.

Just me.

But caring about my future had never been my specialty, so they were fleeting musings.

Day after day, year after year. We got busier. Our friendship grew, our clientele grew. My drug habit grew, as did Tony's, as we relaxed into our luxury and success and popularity.

Tony's grew faster than mine; his habit I mean.

Women and sex became an increasingly large part of Tony's habit. He was the charming, very polite, sexy and rough boxer from South London, representing street credibility, masculinity, and safety too, to certain women who saw security in all those things. In the earlier years, neither Tony nor I seemed to have any interest in sex (we met people we fancied, people we liked, but that never went any further than just talking to each other about it.) That stayed the same for me, but as time went on, Tony would start having these chaotic cocaine fueled overnights at Shaldon Mansions, always after I'd gone home for the evening. Often, when I'd arrive the following day to open shop, I'd hear the stirrings from the bedroom, watch a disheveled near-naked woman stumble from the bedroom to the toilet. Sometimes, it wasn't the stirrings of the morning after, but the messiness of an all-night bender that hadn't finished yet. Tony was always a professional; hearing me arrive, he'd pull himself and his guest together somehow, send her home with a fresh gram of coke for the journey, then head home to South London himself to recover. Leaving me happily alone and in charge for the evening, the way I liked it.

The women were always of a type. And I found it disturbing.

They were pretty, lots of make-up and very impressed with Tony. They enjoyed the cocaine, I assume they enjoyed the sex too. I hope so. Many were escorts, and many reminded me of the women that had worked for my escort agency; the ones who would meet me at the tube station on Mondays, with their pimp boyfriends glaring competitively at me from the waiting BMWs.

The women that shared Tony's bed were that type. I got along very well with them; it was often my job to entertain them before their affair with Tony had initiated, or when Tony was busy working, mixing drugs and packaging in another room.

These were not necessarily Tony's preferred 'type'; it was just the type he most frequently found himself in bed with. He was a cosy relationship type of guy really, and only 23 years old (although he looked much older.) Very sweet, kind,

with good manners from his mum. I think he dreamed of a family life like the one he had grown up with, with his mum. But this coke dealing detour his life had taken him on, taken us both on, was quite the detour in lots of ways; and Tony, the marrying family man kind, found himself doing coke sex benders with women on an increasingly nightly basis.

Why did I find it disturbing?

Mostly, because it was messy, unprofessional, and it took him away from his business. A business that needed his smarts especially when it came to the criminality side of things. He was good at security, and vigilance.

Also, because I was the one that had to dress the girl, put her altogether in the messy morning and send her on her way with Tony's apologies. The walk of shame from an all-night coke sex bender at a famous dealer's den in Charing Cross road is one hell of a walk of shame. The bedroom was entirely upside down, and so was Tony, so were the women. They always had to be sent home; these sex benders only ever happened in this apartment; Tony lived with his mum, so he never took any of this lifestyle home with him. He respected her enormously.

There was also an element of exploitation that disturbed me, in regard to Tony and the women he partied with.

Not so much (as you might assume), Tony exploiting the women.

It seemed more to me like the reverse.

More likely, it was a mutual thing.

There was an element of what seemed like play fighting between Tony and the women. This was a kind of rough foreplay that occurred the days or nights before the sex bender took place. I could see Tony being very uncomfortable with the roughness; it seemed like the women initiating the roughness, which was new to me, I'd always misogynistically seen men always and only as the perpetrator of domestic violence, women only ever as the vulnerable victims of it. On these days and evenings, I'd see a kind of violence, innocent I think, and

disguised as flirtation; but I'd see a kind of violence from the women, and Tony being pressured to play along.

And in the mornings, I'd see bruises on both parties. Tony would hide his from me; the women would boast about what Tony did to them.

"Look what he did David";

they'd demand my attention,

"Look what he did. Look how bad it is. That's how intense our love is, that's how passionately he likes me."

They boasted their bruises like trophies.

I found it disturbing. I couldn't put it all together. I didn't know what to do.

I saw Tony as a victim in these situations. He could be violent; he was a boxer.

I'd also later learn how violent he was when he would turn it upon me.

But not impulsively; when he was violent, he chose to be, it was premeditated.

Not in bed. And never with women. It just wasn't him.

It was confusing and disturbing for me.

And despite being disturbed, watching this play fighting, play-flirting, this

boasting of bruises and injuries; despite that, I could see the women were

victims too. They may have been initiating this violence, coaxing it; but I got a

sense of where that came from. I could feel the history of violence in their lives.

I could sense the sexual violence they might have observed watching their own

parents. I wondered what their early experiences of sex and love actually were. I

wondered how the escorting work impacted their concepts of love and trust

and violence and safety and control.

I wondered how a bruise can be a trophy, something that demonstrates how much a person is valued.

I didn't like some of the changes that were happening, as our business got bigger, as Tony's habit became bigger.

I refer to it as “our business”. But my wage had remained £500 per week, despite doing all the work, taking equal amounts of risk, despite Tony becoming richer than he ever could have without me. There were favors, like an unlimited supply of coke for me to sniff, and to share with my friends.

My use increased too.

There would be the odd Saturday night when I’d go home with ridiculous amounts of cocaine, and simply masturbate for 2 days watching porn. Tony would come a knocking eventually, put me back together, and life would go on. I was just developing a taste, for this odd addiction, of lone masturbation with drugs. It’s a deep, dark, sad place; it’s a dopamine-driven bubble of sheer escapism; the neurochemicals stimulated by sexual arousal, mixing with the dopamine rush and the cocaine... something shameful and complicated, but sheer bliss, sheer escapism while it lasts. These were early tastes only though. That’s something I’d explore more dangerously in later years. Cocaine, essentially, wasn’t my drug.

Mostly, this was fun. The early years.

I did wonder how this ends. Once in a while.

And it was coming to an end. Sort of.

It remained fun; but Tony was partying more and more, and I started to feel exploited, underpaid, taken for granted.

And he was having some paranoid days. He’d deny it was paranoia; but there were days he was enveloped in a dark and urgent mood, an infectious one that couldn’t be ignored. Danger was everywhere, from secret cameras that clients might bring in with them, long, drawn out deliberations of who we could trust, who we couldn’t. Hyper-vigilant about security, and about the dangers of making (potentially) overheard phone calls from the apartment. He never distrusted me, but I could see the potential.

He was doing a lot of coke. Missing nights’ sleep.

There was a neighboring warehouse on the corner of Charing Cross Road, that was a giant drug den; not like Tony and my place; it was a giant ugly warehouse where heroine, crack cocaine and marijuana were sold, en masse, to stoners and to street addicts. We had no relation to them, but they were so obvious, that they drew any police focus away from Tony and me.

They were raided one night.

Inevitably.

Our view down Charing Cross road was dominated by the flashing lights of police cars and motorcycles, that appeared out of nowhere. Suddenly.

Dozens of them. The entire stretch of road was closed off.

It was 11pm at night.

I had coke all over the place.

Tony wasn't there. I'd sent him home to his mum that afternoon, after finding him mid-sex bender with one of the women he had been spending time with.

There were a few clients there, and they left in a very big hurry; I tried to keep them there, and calm, convinced that a mass exodus from the building would draw even more attention. I found myself alone in the apartment. Probably quite safe, since it became clearer they were raiding the neighboring warehouse, and entirely focused on that, not on my doorway; but my panic levels were high.

Shit just got real.

Alone in the apartment, surrounded by coke, no escape route, and the building surrounded by dozens of police cars and sirens and flashing lights.

Alone.

I realized it was me that would bear the brunt should anything go wrong this day or any day.

And this kind of work only ends one way. I knew that, during those moments that I wondered, once in a while.

I couldn't get Tony on the phone. He lived with his mum (whose name I didn't know), somewhere in South London (the address I did know; I had accidentally

come across it and made record of it, prophetically, thinking it might come in handy one day). Tony wasn't even his real name (he'd told me once, many years earlier; I'd made a record of that too, just in case). But we never used it, I think I never heard it twice. He was good at mystery, and vigilant about security.

I was alone. Surrounded by coke and police.

But as it turned out, quite safe.

This time.

The night passed; I closed up shop as soon as the street cleared, went home.

I went to open up shop the next day. Business as usual. I spoke with Tony on the phone; he felt it was important we open up shop, business as usual; but he couldn't come in himself; had to take his mum to the hospital for something.

The day after; same thing. And the same the day after.

Never, since Tony and I had worked together, had he been absent for so long.

I didn't believe he was with his mum at the hospital; I came to believe that he was staying clear till he was sure it was safe. Putting me in the front line.

When he returned... things were never the same again.

I spoke to him about being alone during the raid, as well as the days after.

I spoke to him about his paranoia.

I spoke to him about feeling exploited.

I spoke to him about the money I was earning not being enough for the risks involved.

Yeah.

It didn't go well.

Things were very strained for weeks after that. My life had become this. I didn't know how to live without it. Tony had been like family for so long. Like my fighting parents, like my unloving foster parents, like Adam, like Andy. He had been a strong arm that I was attached to for years now. I found it hard to imagine life without that arm. And I'd given him all my power, as people from groomed backgrounds do.

I couldn't imagine life without him.

Without the money too, the cocaine, the popularity.

He was unwilling to pay me more money, or to cut me in to profits. Unwilling and stoic. He might have; he wasn't greedy by nature, he wasn't unkind or ungrateful by nature. But paranoia had gotten a hold, and it was just one of those months in our relationship that he didn't like me. And not a great time to try working things out. I was not the greatest communicator of boundaries at that point in time.

I was unwilling to leave. He knew that, he relied on that. He was willing for me to cut down my hours/my days in fact; from 6 days a week, (we didn't really work Mondays) to 4 days a week.

Begrudgingly, on both sides. But he felt it worse. Being alone at work Tues & Wed was awful for him; unable to get too high, unable to shag for 30 hours straight – having to work.

And when I was at work with him – things were chilly. Untrusting.

And I realized it was over.

It was over.

I refused to return like an abandoned dog that had been loved once, to the flat that I'd died in, no friends no money, no anything.

So I here I was again, not for the first time in my life, hatching an escape plan.

A daring and brilliant escape plan.

Chapter 23

Patti to the Rescue; Again

My friend Patti was fierce and loyal. She used to work in the American Retro shop on Old Compton street Soho, but had since graduated to the famous Groucho Club in Soho, a private members club for the very cool and successful, who were protected there from the press, from fans; mostly the press. It was a place where the English indie-pop sensation would be found asleep in the morning under the billiard table beside the American movie producer, aside spilt champagne bottles and piles of leftover cocaine. And no one would blink an eye. Always protected by the management; always protected by the Front of House, who was, Patti. The adored, the popular, the trustworthy and loyal, the always discreet and capable Patti.

My friend.

My friend who had visited me every Thursday evening with two grams of cocaine, while I lay dying of AIDS.

Fabulous Patti.

Patti was Front of House at Soho's Grouch Club; it's still there, though somewhat less debauched these days, sadly. It had its moment in history, and it was the 90s, with Patti at Front of House, discreetly patching celebrities up in

the morning after the debauchery, and protecting them from scandal, if not from themselves.

Patti was famous for this, popular for this, well-connected for this. (Not unlike my conciergerie).

I was never in the Groucho in those days; I was too busy, I had my own venue for debauchery, plus I wasn't famous enough to be allowed as a member.

Debauched enough; yes. Not famous enough. But I visited Patti there often; delivering coke, or just seeing my friend. Collecting her on summer nights for a late Soho dinner. She told me all the debauched secrets of the Groucho Club clientele; she was very loyal, very reliable, Patti. She kept those secrets, sharing just a few choice ones with me, who she knew she could trust.

I needed a plan.

My plan was to be rid of Tony, deal coke myself. Work for myself. Actually profit from the risks I was taking.

I'd proven (to myself) that I was brilliant at it. I needed to break away cleanly from Tony and work for myself.

I should have known there was no such thing as a clean break from a drug dealer.

Patti knew a friend who knew a friend who could supply me with cocaine in bulk. I was told to be scared, to be humble, that I wasn't in a position to be bargaining over prices. I wasn't exactly Tony Montana from Scarface; I was a freshly handsome, soap star kind of handsome gay queen from Soho, flouncing my way to meet a scary drug supplier.

But I was me. I had my nihilism which amounted to a fearlessness of death, and I had my charisma which worked for anything on anybody.

The meeting was fine. I knew how much an ounce should cost, I knew how much five ounces should cost. I'd been running Tony's business for years; what he didn't teach me I'd learned, subtly.

I would need a clientele; I had one of course, but they were Tony's, and I was determined not to "steal" his clientele. Partly, because it's the decent thing to do,

and partly because I didn't want a drug war to play out in Soho at my expense. I had a feeling I wouldn't fare well in it. Tony Montana I wasn't. And only one of us had a gun.

I bought all my equipment to prepare and mix the coke for sale. Patti came with me. It was a fun kind of shopping day. We went to Harrods, the kitchen department, bought a mortar and pestle, a rolling pin, a sieve. They were designer and beautiful, no coke dealer had ever had such glamorous equipment. We also bought designer paper from the stationary department; The square paper wraps that coke is sold in; mine would be the absolute best. Beautiful sparkly pastel-colored wraps. And each wrap would be placed in a baggie that had a sticker on it. A love heart, or sparkles, or a smiley face. Something happy. I believed that if you were stimulated to be happy before your first line of coke, then in a kind of hypnotherapy kind of way, you'd enjoy your drug high more.

Yeah, I know.

More Dame Edna Everage than Scarface.

But I was a different kind of drug dealer, and I was having fun. Patti and I were having fun.

I was ready.

But I had to leave Tony.

So I did.

I told him I was changed and traumatized after the drug raid.

I tried not to make him feel guilty for abandoning me during those days; I wanted a clean, tidy break.

Obviously, I didn't tell him I was going into business myself. I didn't plan to steal any clients away from him, so it needn't have been relevant.

I quit. I left. The conversation was OK, but Tony probably thought I was having one of my hissy fits, and that I'd be back at work in a week.

I wasn't.

A week later I was in business, and had more cash in my hand than I'd had since my pimping days.

Chapter 24

And Just Like That:

Frantic Fridays, Concorde and New York Weekends

Now, like before, I was the popular guy with all the coke and all the parties, but now I was independent and ridiculously wealthy too.

I had parties, almost weekly. I'd rent a space, a club or bar, and just share coke. With all my friends. Patti was always there, Renato, Stewart, Dylan, Dane, Michael, Meredith. Clubbing, parties, everyone had fun. It was the 90s, and London was alive with some of the best nightclubs ever; Substation, Garage, Factor 25, DTPM at The End, Crash.

I was so popular.

Now I was the guy at the clubs that everyone queued to get drugs off, or followed to the toilets hoping to get offered a line of cocaine in a cubicle. I was on guest lists. I was important, and these things seemed important, to so many people. I enjoyed it, though I knew all life was silly and pointless; through my lens of nihilism and trauma, I (sort of) enjoyed it.

I had the best clothes. I'd never bothered with clothes much before; I'd enjoyed my big winter coat that I'd arrived in London with, but I'd never really bothered. I'd been busy. And I'd always looked good in anything; my charisma and

personal uniqueness shone too bright for anyone to really remark upon my clothes.

But now I had time and money to waste. Sunglasses; I got silly about sunglasses. I had a new pair every week, and they became a thing. I had a collection that I displayed at home on shelves that most people keep books or ornaments or junk on. Perhaps trophies. I was never seen outside my house without them; even indoors at a club. They were a thing. A graphic designer and artist (and club promoter) Andrew Harris made a collection of paintings of famous club kids of the 90s, and there were two of me of course; both in my sunglasses. When people crashed or stayed over at my house, they'd get their choice of sunglasses to wear home in the morning. They wore them like trophies from David Stuart's house.

I was so popular. And life was fast.

I redecorated my home; my good pal Paul was finding his way in London as a young man, wanted to be an interior designer. (He is now, hugely successful, utterly brilliant). He redecorated my home; he created a paneled wall made of fur. It was divine. This was complimented by a contrasting thick and high pile carpet. Guests to my home, quite often high on drugs of some sort, would literally ooze into the fabrics, outstretched fingers, arms, toes pushing through the fabrics, enjoying the sensation. My home was famous for a decade, as the most divinely sumptuous place to chill after a party or club.

If you used the side of your palm to brush the fur in one direction, you could write your name in the fur wall as well. Opposite the fur wall was my giant mirror, giant. The mirror people danced (high on drugs) in front of, did the make up in, re-shaped their clothes, their silhouettes in. People often love their reflection on drugs, way more than they often do sober. My beloved and tortured mirror that had witnessed and reflected so much; this mirror became as infamous as my sunglasses, as my fur wall.

As infamous as my heroic AIDS survival story that it remembered so well, and always reflected back to me.

So if you brushed your name back-to-front into my fur wall, you could only read it correctly in the reflection of my mirror. That became a thing. Weirdly, a thing. People would beg me in parties and bars, to be invited back to my home to write their name backwards in my wall, as if it was some status symbol, some great accomplishment, some trophy.

That became a thing.

It was great fun for others, it seemed like great fun to me too.

I mean, what else was one to do? After all I'd learned about the ridiculousness of life, of each passing day, passing year, passing person.

It seemed like fun. Like an existence.

Sometimes, on quieter nights when I couldn't handle another party, some choice friends would join Patti and me in a hotel suite. This was a habit that began because of hamburgers; Patti loved hamburgers, so did I. Hamburgers are especially good when you've lost so much weight from cocaine benders, that you can eat them without guilt or thoughts about fat content. That's when burgers really are great. Patti and I became connoisseurs of hamburgers; and we quickly exhausted all the best hamburger restaurants. We'd been kicked out of so many restaurants because of our loud coked up behavior that followed the hamburger fest. We quickly learned that the best way to enjoy a hamburger without being kicked out of a restaurant, was to book a hotel suite, and order hamburgers by room service. That's how our hotel-hopping began. (It was also a good opportunity to groom a concierge, drum up some more business.)

We did get kicked out of Hazlitt's hotel in Soho one evening. I loved Hazlitt's for doing this; Hazlitt's was old-school, boutique hotel, not widely known. It has a long proud history of hosting Soho's artists, as a home away from home. And they didn't stand for no shit; we were noisy and disrespectful, and we were kicked out of the hotel, and I'm proud as punch of being kicked out of Hazlitt's.

A great claim to fame that I treasure.

Great burgers too. That part's a real shame.

I got so busy, I needed an assistant. Patti was probably the best assistant, but she had a job at Groucho, and I needed full time help. My good friend Paul stepped in, and gosh, we had fun together. It felt like a real partnership.

As my life got more chaotic, I became more chaotic. I was the glamorous, fun face of my business; people want to buy coke from someone charismatic and fresh, so they don't feel like "low-life drug addicts". They need, urgently, to disassociate their cocaine use from crime, from exploitation, from addiction, from all those stereotypes.

That's quite a weight for a pretty boy like me to carry.

But I carried it.

I carried it fabulously.

With Paul's help.

Paul became the structure and order in an increasingly chaotic life. He was organised, he kept me organized. He was kind too; he'd tidy my house and patch me up after a long three-day bender. He'd be the only person I'd let into my house or hotel room when I was paranoid, when I'd been awake too long. He kept nastiness away, and he kept joy close, and kindness.

And was never greedy about cocaine.

And completely trustworthy, in an increasingly untrustworthy chaos.

And he saved his money, and he put himself through interior design college.

I know I could have been more respectful to him, in retrospect. I know now, I took him for granted. A real kind, authentic joy, a rare person. I was so, so lucky to have that in the midst of all my chaos.

Paul coined the term "Frantic Fridays" to apply to my Friday workday.

Fridays were chaos, utterly. It began dead on 3pm, each week. There is a culture in media generally, but in Soho media specifically, of "Drinking Fridays", where drinking alcohol is (discreetly) part of the working afternoon. Even more

discreetly, there was the culture of cocaine Fridays, where cocaine was how the working week finished, and that's when Frantic Friday started for Paul and me. We'd be prepared. My coke was mixed and weighed and wrapped, many hundreds of them, in a drawer at home. Wrapped in gorgeous sparkly paper, in baggies adorned with happy stickers.

The calls would start coming in, and I could not, could NOT keep up with demand. So I just did my best: delivering to Soho, dealing from home, rushing back and forward, stuffing my pockets with prepared wraps, and rushing back out. Often I'd get rickshaws that lazed around Soho to deliver me back and forth, just because I got so tired from the rushing. They cost more than the cocaine (almost) but my feet just couldn't work as fast as the demand.

The annoying thing is when customers say they only want two grams of coke, in denial of the fact that they'd be calling me back four hours later for more.

Despite the obvious pattern and history, that this habit repeated every single Friday, they'd insist they only wanted two grams this week.

Until four hours later. Like clockwork.

This was Frantic Friday. This was how it worked.

People came to my house too; in droves. It's amazing I wasn't busted years before I was, with the constant Friday traffic to my house. Although the wraps were all pre-wrapped and prepared, every customer to my house got a special treat.

My loose, pure coke was contained in a giant tin, like a flour tin.

If you shook it vigorously, with the lid on, then released the lid, a cocaine-vapor cloud emerged; if you put your mouth and nose directly into the tin as soon as the lid was removed after a good shake – and simply inhaled the vapor... the most beautiful coke high was experienced.

Every customer who came to me instead of having it delivered to them, enjoyed this privilege, as well as a free line of cocaine on the house.

So, so many happy people walking out of my doors on Fridays.

Frantic Fridays.

And as the hours got later, and the third and fourth grams were required, or the eighth and ninth grams were required, I kept up with demand. I never failed. All through the night if I had to; I kept Soho awake and happy and dancing and talking and boasting and drinking and socializing...

All night long.

Courtesy of Frantic Friday Dave.

And thank heavens for Paul and Patti, who kept me sane and organized.

Money.

Money was stuffed into drawers, just for the sake of putting it somewhere. It was often in folded squares, to facilitate discreet "deals" made in public, or rolled up notes that had snorted cocaine faithfully, but now became the means to purchase more; so difficult to iron the "roll-up" out of them; squashed into my pockets in bunches, and stuffed again into drawers in a frantic hurry as my phone rang and rang.

Frantic Fridays.

My hair was long and Preppy and blonde at the time, thanks to my good friend Renato Soho. I had hair irons at home to keep my bangs looking Preppy. These hair irons had the secondary purpose of ironing the £20 notes that were too rolled or folded or squashed to spend practically in the real world.

One of my favorite things to do, strangely, at 8 or 9am Sat morning, as Frantic Friday started to quieten down, was to get a huge breath from my cocaine flour tin, and spend a few hours ironing my money into neat piles using my hair iron. Mindless coked up bliss, making my money look pretty.

My weekend trips to New York on the Concorde resumed. I'd work all day Friday and Sat morning selling cocaine. Then sleep for two or three hours aboard the Concorde, check into the Paramount hotel, and party the weekend away in NYC. It sounds great, doesn't it?

It always seemed as if great times, happiness, freedom from... I don't know, something; was just a short... something away.

As if...

As if I could only break away from Tony I'd be happy.

If I could only have lots of money I'd be happy.

If I could just get to New York City I'd be happy.

But then I'd feel paranoid on the plane.

Paranoid going through customs.

Not in the mood to party when I got to New York.

Wishing I could be back at home, safe in my home.

(Safe from what?)

Wishing I didn't rely on breaking the law to survive.

Wishing I wasn't too fucked up to fall in love; as if companionship might fix everything.

(These musings about love and companionship were fleeting, probably drug-induced; I didn't really hold much stake in being remotely capable of love.)

But; you keep going.

I was only on borrowed time anyway, these HIV medicines were sure to stop working, or be called back by the government, or someone would discover I wasn't entitled to them anyway, being guilty of so many crimes against humanity, such a waste of space, such a vessel of poor choices.

So you keep going.

Because it looked like fun, it felt like the echo of fun: this glamour, this money, this popularity.

These giddy highs.

What could be more annoying than a person who has everything they wanted, but is miserable, unappreciative and unhappy in spite of it?

What is more annoying, than a privileged white man in charge of his own destiny, choosing to waste it away on crimes, drugs and complaints.

What is worse than a guy playing into the addiction problems of his friends, his community while partying and wasting away.

What's worse than a guy who had every opportunity to be great, but simply threw it away on prostitution, drugs, complaints.

The retribution, the punishment for my sins, was to catch up with me.

Of course.

It would be shaped like an angry drug dealer named Tony, banging on my door.

Banging on my door with the butt of his gun.

Chapter 25

Another Day, Another Gun

I think I'd been pretty good at developing my own clientele without poaching Tony's clients.

Which (incidentally) was a client group I had attracted for him in the first place. I just had to put that in there.

My new group were a similar group; London was huge, as was Soho, with plenty of cocaine users to go around. I'd watched Soho change from a dodgy red-light district with some Dilly Boys, sex shops and greasy spoon cafes, to a thriving bohemian epicenter where media outlets shared buildings with fetish photographers and where gay escorts lived above Starbucks. A place where a new generation of heroin addicts slept undisturbed outside 20th Century Fox screening rooms and offices, and where big-name DJs would pop down in their boxer shorts and slippers in the morning to get milk from the Italian Deli on Frith street.

It hadn't been hard to culture my own clientele, but that would make no difference to Tony.

A betrayal was a betrayal, after all.

In my happy sparkly dreamworld, I imagined sometimes that Tony remembered me fondly, was doing well in his life and business, and that the ethics he had

weaned from his lovely mum, would translate into a fond “live and let live” attitude toward me.

No.

I knew he’d sent “spies” around to my house on occasion; clients I recognised from the old days with him, begging for some coke, insisting that Tony wasn’t available, and please please could I help them out.

I knew they’d been sent by him, and I was true to my ethic; I never sold to them, explaining it was a boundary I didn’t cross. Hoping that would be the message that got back to him. But frantic Fridays were frantic after all, perhaps I slipped up from time to time.

It’s possible.

“Live and let live” was not his attitude.

So I got on with my life: my Concorde trips to NYC, my occasional disappearing wank sessions, the glamorous, sunglass-adorned Soho life of an infamous drug dealer.

One day I was home awaiting a delivery of cocaine from my supplier.

My supplier, despite all stereotypes, was the cutest South American man named Waldo (probably not his real name), and he came by weekly to pick up nicely ironed cash and to drop off more cocaine. These visits had been weekly for years now, and it was a completely drama-free relationship. Friendly even. Waldo wasn’t expected for a few hours yet; I was grinding up homeopathic salts to mix with the pure(ish) cocaine when it arrived. My nicely ironed money was in its usual hiding place which (you might enjoy to know) was a secret wall compartment behind the planks of my iconic mirror frame that I’d built.

Waldo never knocked; he texted from my doorstep.

Any drug dealer knows that the door-knocking never stops. You can create rules, they don’t work. My close friends would buzz the doorbell three times, in a particular pre-agreed rhythm. I’d recognize that. Clients would be asked to text me, not ring the buzzer. That didn’t work universally.

My doorbell just rang pretty constantly, and knocks on my door happened too. I learned to live with it. I was rarely closed shop anyway, and I didn't sleep so much as I passed out; let's just say I learned to live with it.

This particular day, I'd been ignoring some buzzing and some knocking. I had nothing to sell, (pre-delivery) plus it was early afternoon. But some particularly hard knocks on the door were starting to get me angry. A particularly hard knock, like someone was using their phone, or key fob.

Or the butt of a gun.

(Though that didn't occur to me.)

I'd ignored and ignored it, but eventually my temper flared, and I marched to the door and swung it open, ready to yell at the insistent knocker, whom I was sure, was someone from the night before who hadn't slept, and needing coke to keep the bender going.

No.

A fist hit me in the face. It wasn't an angry punch, it was a short, sharp boxers jab, but it was ready behind that door the second it opened. I saw that fist before I saw the person wielding it.

A second jab, and a third in such quick succession, I knew it had to be Tony as I wobbled, dizzy and fell to the floor. Not falling back from the punch. It wasn't the kind of punch that knocks you over with force, it was the kind of professional's boxer's jab that makes you dizzy.

I was on the floor, struggling to get up, but my coordination had abandoned me, and I slipped and scraped like a giraffe on marble flooring.

"Where's my money Davey, where's my gear?"

Tony always called me Davey. It had been an affectionate nickname that only he used. I'd liked it. It was so out of context today. I recognised him to be high on coke, paranoid and angry. He wanted my money and cocaine which he felt entirely, were his to take.

"Where is it Davey, tell me. Where's my money, where's my gear?"

He had a gun, and he gestured it just like gangsters do in movies. This was very different to the way my dad had gestured it all those years ago.

I definitely did not have the upper hand.

I couldn't quite put words together still, and I was still slipping and flailing on the floor.

But I was proud, and I was fearless, always have been. In that "nothing to lose" kind of way that traumatized people who live with nihilism know so well.

I was not scared of him. I was not scared of his gun. I'd seen a man who used a gun with purpose, with affect even. These silly movie-like gestures Tony was making with the gun just looked ridiculous to me. He was ridiculous, and he had no intention of shooting this gun. He had no capability of shooting this gun.

I know the difference. I'd learned very young, this difference.

I was still on the floor.

I might have been able to create a sentence, but it made better sense to act like his big man punches were making this gay boy too dizzy to speak.

He got angry, and he hit me hard on the head with the butt of his gun.

I don't know how long I was unconscious for. When I came to, Tony was making noises in other parts of the house; searching, I imagined, for money and/or cocaine.

I pretended to be unconscious for a bit longer to decide what to do. I waited until his searching took him far enough away from me, that I could get to the front door and escape.

I escaped.

I stood out on the street for a moment, to get my bearings.

Sunshine.

People strolling.

I had blood on my sleeve, from wiping my face.

A Range Rover was stationary in the street outside my house; not parked; in the actual street, no driver and the driver's door wide open. It would have been

blocking traffic if there had been any; despite living centrally, my street was a quiet one for traffic. It would have been stolen if anyone had been bold enough to jump into and drive away in a seemingly abandoned Range Rover on a sunny West End afternoon.

It must have been Tony's, and he must have been really coked up to leave it there while he searched my house and beat me senseless.

Amateur.

My brain kicked into gear.

I thought to double lock my front door, which would lock Tony into my house, unable to escape.

But I didn't have my keys, and I didn't want to risk re-entering my house.

I went to get Tony's keys out of the ignition of his car; but they weren't there.

I ran into the local pharmacy, asking them to call the police. They were alarmed; I was bleeding apparently from my nose, and my eyes were puffed and beaten. I said I was being robbed and that the burglar was still in my house.

I hadn't fully thought everything through; but I needed Tony dealt with. This warfare couldn't continue. I was aware that I had a pile of white powder on my kitchen worktop. It wasn't cocaine, just homeopathic salts being ground, but it would require some explaining. I was aware that I was expecting my drug supplier to be coming by. However he'd be smart enough to recognize to keep his distance; there was no cocaine at home, and my money was well-hid behind my iconic mirror.

And I was a victim after all, at least in this circumstance. There was a violent man burgling my house, with a gun; I'd been beaten, I was bleeding.

Normal people call the police.

When I went back to the house, the car was gone, so was Tony. My door was wide open.

I saw quickly that he hadn't found my money.

I threw a tea-towel over the pile of white powder and pushed it into a pile of tea-towels sitting on the bench.

Just as the police arrived to my door, sirens wailing.

They searched the house quickly, looking for the burglar. My mind was racing for a story to tell them. They kept asking me to calm down; I thought I was calm, but I guess I was in shock, and I guess my panic to find a plausible story showed on my face.

"Please sit down sir, you're safe now, and we'd like to get some information."

I refused to sit, I was pacing I think.

And bleeding, and panicked.

They made me sit.

"That was a guy I knew from Trade nightclub" I said. "I'd bought ecstasy from him once or twice, and I think he thought I was rich. Or maybe that I owed him money or something. I think he got high and paranoid, found out where I lived and came by. I think he was looking for money. Or just to beat me up. I don't know."

I've no idea how my story sounded. I've no idea how effective my charisma was with a bloody face. I know no-one would ever expect this handsome (if bloody) stylish gay man with soap star good looks to be a drug dealer embroiled in a drugs war on the streets of central London.

The police, I think, were too focused on trying to calm me down, to notice the incredulity of my story.

And of course... I knew who had broken in. I knew his real name, I knew his mum's address.

But I didn't tell them that.

Nor did I tell them about the car that had been sitting out front of my house, visible to any CCTV camera in the area.

Nor did I give them an accurate description of Tony, when asked to describe this paranoid dodgy ecstasy dealer I knew from Trade nightclub.

I was panicked and bloody; but I was not a snitch.

I was angry as hell at Tony, but I shared a history, I remembered my fondness for him, and I didn't want him in prison.

But I did want this situation dealt with; and a plan was developing.

The police dusted my house for fingerprints, and I signed a statement thingy.

The police, satisfied that I was mostly confused and upset, did (frankly) look a bit bewildered by the incredulity of my story, but too overwhelmed by my demeanor and charisma to doubt my good nature and soap star innocence.

They left with a description of a burglar (that could have looked like any Trade regular to be frank) and an odd story.

Then; I sat down and wrote a letter (old-school style, pen and paper).

Although the letter started with "Hi Tony", the name on the front of the envelope was Tony's real name, which he didn't know I knew.

And the address was not the Soho address, but the address where he lived with his mum. The address he was not aware I had.

I had it.

"Hi Tony.

The police have just been here to my house; just now, after you left.

I don't want a war with you.

But.

This. Stops. Here.

I didn't give them your name or address. I gave them a vague description.

But they are investigating a drug-related burglary. And they took fingerprints from the house.

Your fingerprints.

You don't have a criminal record (so you've told me), so you're safe; they can't connect the fingerprints to you.

That's my gift; that's my code. Respect it. Live and let live.

But:

If you come near me or my house or my livelihood again... I will give your name and address and license plate to the police, in connection to today's burglary and assault.

I won't even blink.

If anything happens to me; my friend has your name, address and license plate, and will give to the police.

This is your one-time chance, more than you deserve.

Stay away."

I'd known it wouldn't end well with Tony, I knew couldn't. These things just can't.

But I didn't quite expect him to hand me my own insurance policy on a silver platter.

But he did. For the cost of a scary afternoon, (a postage stamp) and some bruises; he did.

I posted my insurance policy, same day. Royal Mail.

I never heard from him again.

Chapter 26

My Introduction and Genuflection Before Ms. Tina

Life went on.

I can't pretend life returned to normal very quickly. For a few months, I felt like violence was around every corner. I didn't fully trust my insurance policy; and paranoid rage trumps insurance policy every time anyway; the right amount of coke, the wrong mood, the opportune day, and Tony could be banging on my door again.

But I did grow to have faith in it. Tony was clever, firstly. And I don't think he is truly vengeful. His mum taught him better than that, and he had a kind soul. I really do hope he remembers our time together fondly, as I do. I wish him well, and paranoid rages aside, I believe he wishes me well too.

We'd shared some golden hay days, and been really good friends.

But I was a bit shaken for a while. I'd witnessed violence, cruelty, rage before, but I'd never been beaten like that, and I relied heavily on the kindness of Paul and Patti for a good while. I was too scared to leave the house for a month or so.

But life in David Stuart Land moves fast, and life, generally, never stops, so you get on with things. And "things" meant following this path. This path of cocaine dealing, 'not sure how I got here', 'not sure how it ends', 'not gonna do anything either way' kind of living. It just marches forward.

I'd said earlier, cocaine was never really my drug.

That's true, but makes more sense in retrospect; I was as capable of abusing this drug as anyone else was.

And I did start to.

I'm not saying I enjoyed cocaine enough to throw my life away for it. It was fine.

Abusing cocaine, for me, meant using it to stay awake longer to make money.

Abusing cocaine, for me, meant using a coke high for Dutch courage when I was too scared to leave the house, in the months after Tony's assault.

Abusing cocaine for me, meant using cocaine for confidence when I felt self-conscious, ugly, uninteresting, un-entertaining, boring.

Abusing cocaine for me meant using cocaine when I was surrounded by people having fun and feeling joy, when I couldn't feel a thing.

I'd never felt joy.

But I tried and tried; cocaine was one of the methods I used to try.

Cocaine helped me to pretend I was having fun, feeling joy, so I looked like I was fitting in.

I'd really first tasted cocaine's magic when I was dying from AIDS, and Patti brought it around to share.

After that, cocaine had mostly been about parties and socializing. Sometimes staying awake too long, simply because I had such unlimited access.

But now, my use started to look more like abuse.

I used alone. Just to pass the time. Boredom had always been a thing; but it had been a manageable thing; now it was less manageable, in fact it seemed unbearable. So I started using cocaine when I was bored and alone.

I was too popular and busy to be alone and bored much though. The difference in my cocaine use was that I would party and socialize as I always had – only a lot longer. I'd find myself alone after the hardest parties had caved, compulsively snorting cocaine, alone, compulsively masturbating to porn videos.

I sort of had some shame about it; I knew loads of people did that on cocaine, and my friends knew that that's how I ended all my cocaine benders.

I never thought much about the psychology of it. It did, once in a while, occur to me that I hadn't had sex with anyone in many years. I may have had some coked-up shags that have slipped my mind, but certainly nothing sober. I never thought much about my relationship to sex, intimacy, relationships; I never connected my adult history of sex, to my cocaine wanking habits. I never connected my gayness to my cocaine wanking habits.

Life was just happening, and I found myself entering my thirties with a streak of apathy and nihilism, a history of trauma, and a cocaine habit that wasn't much fun, but better (it seemed to me) than not having a cocaine habit.

I was still making lots of money on Frantic Fridays, but I stopped travelling to New York, and spent Saturday and Sunday high and alone at home masturbating. By Saturday afternoon I was so coked up, I'd be too twitchy to leave the house or to see customers. I might call a friend by to bring cigarettes, but they might have to push them through the letterbox, I was too paranoid to let them in. They'd be concerned, but I'd promise to go to bed soon, and this was what coke dealers did. Paul would come by Mondays and sort me out, patch me back together, bring me food, cigarettes. Goodness only knows the messes he had to tidy up on some of those days. I didn't stop the bender because I chose to, or because I'd run out of coke; I only stopped because I fell unconscious. A human being can only stay awake so long on cocaine and misery.

Cocaine wasn't really my thing; it's just what I found myself doing.

It passed the time. Mindlessly so.

I'm surprised I hadn't found this application for cocaine (or anything in fact), much earlier in life.

It's a strange thing, to live within the conflict of being (on one hand) nihilistically disinterested in life, while on another hand, being driven forward by an indefinable force of nature that manifests as ambition, innovation and is fueled

by charisma and drive; sometimes vengeance, narcissistic rages and ever present predatorial survival instincts.

These forces seemed interwoven, yet definitively incompatible, and my experience of the collide is utter chaos that leads to an endless series of self-destructive paths.

And each self-destruction is rescued by my likeability, my charisma, some fire in my belly that keeps me going, and going. Despite myself.

Rocket fuel.

And life goes on.

One Sunday evening, a friend had come by to bring me cigarettes and collect some cocaine for a friend. I let her in, she needed the cocaine, I needed the cigarettes, and I wasn't too worse for wear that evening, for some reason. A bit paranoid, but probably having a bad high, so glad for the company and able to pull myself together enough to manage the company. She was safe.

She wasn't alone, she had two friends with her. I knew them both, I may not have been delighted to be a cocaine mess in front of them, but sort of past caring. The usual conversation happened; how long had I been awake for, how was I feeling, perhaps it was time to put myself to bed, etc.

I played along, as if choice had anything to play in my falling asleep this late in a bender.

I found myself in the kitchen with one of her friends. He noticed I was a bit twitchy, and said he had something to fix it.

He knelt (it was almost a genuflection) before the gas stove, and invited me to join him there.

I did.

He lit the gas hob, and held a glass pipe over the flame.

This was crystal methamphetamine.

This was 1999, and I'd never seen it before, never heard of it.

Glass-like crystals in the ball of the pipe melted to become a clear liquid that swilled in the bowl, producing perfect white clouds of smoke that he pulled into his lungs.

I might have thought of crack cocaine for a moment, simply because of the pipe and connotations, but this was not a cracked blackened dirty pipe; this was a sparkly clean and clear pipe; it was not producing bubbly black syrup like crack cocaine might; it was divinely clear and clean crystals, producing a holy smoke, clean and white, and magically, not leaving any residue on the glass at all; seemingly cleaning the pipe as it evaporated.

This was not hallucination; there may be some romance in my description, but that is how crystal meth works.

He then offered me the pipe, holding it for me in a way that seemed religious and prophetic. I pulled the white clouds into my own lungs.

I waited for some great and profound drug high to hit me.

It didn't happen.

I shrugged and exclaimed something about what the point of that was.

He smiled, kind of wryly, knowingly. Like he's seen this reaction before.

I didn't get any great or profound high from this drug.

Returning to the living room though, I was aware that I wasn't paranoid or twitchy anymore. I should have been; I hadn't slept in days, I'd been feeling yuk a little earlier. My overwhelming sentiment beforehand, had been to get them out of my house and to be alone with my cocaine, my porn (and firstly, a cigarette, which had been the whole point of this invasive exercise in the first place).

No more paranoia; I almost didn't notice. In fact, maybe I didn't.

I do know, that I ended up going clubbing with all three of them for another three days. Not a touch more cocaine; just another pipe or two (no more), lots of dancing, socializing, feeling a supremely confidence that went on for days, without a hint of paranoia or discomfort.

That was my introduction to crystal meth; a new love affair that had nothing to do with love or affairs, but would be the love of my life and in fact define the next few decades of my life.

Chapter 27

A Fated and Perfect Match

I never touched cocaine again. Or ecstasy. (Ish.)

Alcohol became boring, though I'd never enjoyed the 'out-of-controlness' that alcohol delivered anyway. There are certainly some clumsy awful predators who drink, but the pure premeditated predators rarely touch alcohol. Fear defines the predator, being in control resolves the fear and alcohol is not about being in control.

Meth is about being control (up to a point). Crystal meth (we called it "Tina") was clear-headed, functioning, confidence-giving, paranoia-less longevity that was incomparable to other drug highs.

It was performance enhancing.

At least that was my experience of it for the first year.

The first two or three times, I didn't quite "get it". Not in a chemsex way at least, the way gay men tend to enjoy Tina. The first few times, it simply improved my clubbing experiences; I was less self-conscious in a club, I danced freely. The confidence was wonderful, truly. I was utterly devoid of the self-criticisms that normally accompanied every moment that I wasn't alone. No other earthly experience, and no other drug (no other person) could make me feel so devoid of self-criticism.

And I hadn't even been that aware that I was self-critical. I was popular, great in crowds, great in public. I was brilliantly handsome, quick-witted, loved by all, and my charisma was infallible. Sure, sex had always been a bit complicated for me; performing it was OK, but really being sexually present with someone intimately was just plain complicated and not worth the hypervigilant cognitive function that accompanied it.

So this confidence delivered upon me by Tina shouldn't have been so attractive. To be honest; in the first few Tina experiences, which were mostly associated with clubbing, dancing, socializing... I could have taken it or left it.

But I had been familiar with some cocaine (twitchy) masturbation. So when Tina replaced cocaine for that particular activity... I was lost to it.

I connected the confidence and disinhibition of Tina, with all of my psychosexual complexities.

And boom.

My life changed.

Wanking on cocaine, shamefully in front of a worn-out video cassette player, hating myself for wasting that time, hating my body, feeling twitchy, with this endless dialogue playing in my head

("just ten more minutes, and that's all; just ten more minutes then sleep")

which went on for self-hating days sometimes, was replaced with a joy of sex, a joy of my body, an entitlement to be doing this, a rush of sexual freedom and disinhibition that, again, was devoid of self-criticism.

The dialogue in my head became

"You are sexy, other gays will accept you as sexy, it's great and OK to enjoy dirty gay fantasies, it's ok to invest time in this pleasure",

and so on.

Being able to hold two contradictory concepts in one place can be very confusing for me. It's basic cognitive dissonance theory, and meth played a huge role in my dissonance issues.

To be able to love someone and hate them for what they've done to you at the same time, both in the same moment, within the one emotional space.

To be so angry at someone you love that you wish them harm, but at the same time, loving them so much that you hate yourself for the anger.

Completely understanding why a person you love hates you, but hating them for hating you.

Knowing the complex psychological reasons why you chose to act cruelly, but hating yourself, unforgivably, for those actions.

Knowing that it's ok to be kind to yourself, but fundamentally being unable to forgive yourself things.

These complexities rattle me, haunt me.

Confused me.

Some though, are simpler; more familiar to other people.

Like being convinced of your likeability, with evidence of it all around you; but being full-time hyper-vigilantly aware of the things people do not like about you.

Like knowing you are beautiful, but being entirely convinced of your ugliness at the same time.

These contradictory conflicts tear me apart with confusion.

On Tina, this confusion left me.

I felt clear.

Socialising, dancing, anything, was an uncomplicated pleasure.

Masturbation was less cluttered, less complicated, without shame.

Without the twitchiness too.

My reflection in the mirror was... uncluttered with the self-judgments, the critical comparisons, the acutely detailed examinations of what was inherently flawed or unpleasant.

Don't get me wrong; I'm gorgeous, head to toe.

And I know it.

I've enjoyed it, I've dressed it up with fashion and sunglasses, I've flaunted it, hell I've charged money for it.

I'm amazing, I'm sexy, I'm movie-star handsome, I have boy-next-door vulnerability and charm, I, I, I...

I'm full of myself.

And I'm right; everyone adores me.

And in the very same moment that I might be aware of things, I hate myself too.

So it came as a bit of a surprise to me that I liked this drug meth, Tina so much.

So it didn't take long for my lone masturbatory endings to my benders to turn into weekend-long sex sessions with actual real people.

I left the house, no longer paranoid or twitchy.

I explored that playground that other gay men explored: bathhouses, saunas.

This was before online technology had fully exploded into our lives and living rooms. Computers were things that big businesses had, they were things that were slowly replacing cash registers in department stores.

Some were ahead of the game, but we didn't all have computers in our homes, our phones weren't Smart. There was no Gaydar, no Grindr, no Tindr, no dating websites. No WhatsApp. Cruising areas still existed, but changing societal (and legal) attitudes to homosexuality had translated into more gay bars, more gay nightclubs... and more sex-on-premise gay venues.

The perfect Tina playground.

And what a joy to be out of my dark, cocaine-shamed living room masturbation parlour, detached from my worn-out little video-cassette player and into a world of real sex, with real people, who found me (either sexy or) appropriately high.

To have sex without the complications, to feel horny, and entitled to that horniness. To enjoy that masculine sexiness and feel entitled to that masculinity, rather than it just being a performance that hid my gayness. To feel entitled to my femininity, rather than that being the bad thing I must hide, or get

beaten up, ridiculed or rejected. To connect those masculine and feminine concepts to my sexuality, without them being complex currencies that denoted or denied success or failure in the world.

I enjoyed sex, and people, and sexuality, and disinhibition, and shamelessness.

Oh; endurance.

These episodes went on for days.

There were consequences of course; (not too noticeable in the early years), but every consequence I was aware of was totally worth it for this veil to have been lifted over my understanding of liberty, joy, pleasure and my entitlement to those things.

My chronic anhedonia seemed to have a crack in it through which I could actually feel things, and meth provided the crack.

It did feel like someone who had known me intimately my entire life, someone who knew all my faults and insecurities had designed a drug specifically for me; specifically designed to work perfectly in me, and introduce me to experiences that (I believed) other human beings enjoyed as standard.

I felt normal.

I was grateful for this discovery; I took it and I ran. I shagged.

For years.

I ran with this. I connected, I loved, I destroyed, I lived, I breathed, I rampaged.

If I could describe the feeling in a sentence, it might be a sentence delivered with a giant, giant sigh of relief. A sentence delivered with a gorgeous, long-overdue exhale of breath, while sinking to the ground, as if a burden of unbearable weight and importance had been lifted off my shoulders.

A sentence delivered with such immense relief, that the world sighed with me, actually heaved and sighed like a balloon slowly releasing air.

The sentence accompanying this epic sigh, would be:

"Ahh... is this how normal people feel?"

Or perhaps:

"Is this what freedom feels like?"

I've heard others announce their first sentences after the first high.

"Oh my God; is this what normal people feel like when they're horny?"

My friend Mario's first sentence was

"Oh... I feel like I could do anything... anything."

He was literally skipping across Cambridge Circus as he uttered it, his arms outstretched to the 6am sky.

Many of us actually felt we were doing our friends and lovers favors by introducing them to this high for the first time.

I'm guilty of that.

There is no conflict here.

There is no forgiveness for me in this.

I introduced gorgeous lovely people to crystal meth, thinking I was doing them a favor.

They all had their own, unique first sentence.

Not many of them fared well with the drug over the following years.

By introduction to this drug, many were introduced to addiction, a low, insidious addiction that seems like fine for the first two or three years, but insidiously turns into an inability to have sex without it, to love without it, to function without it.

By introduction to this drug, many were introduced to HIV. Many were introduced to weekly episodes of drug induced psychosis that were so utterly and devastatingly frightening that trauma set into their psyche, into their bones in a way that changed them forever.

Many deaths.

By introduction to this drug I loved.

There is no forgiveness, and no conflict here.

I know my shame, I know I earned this. And I know I don't deserve any of the kindnesses people have shown me since then.

I'm truly very sorry. I ache with shame.

Chapter 28

ChemSex Club

Life went on, I was unaware of the ache of shame. I was high. I was busy. I was a cocaine dealer, and a good one. Crystal meth was more expensive than cocaine, but the high lasted a lot longer, you don't "top up" your meth high as frequently as you top up your cocaine high (line after line after line), so it I was actually making more money now that I was doing less of my own cocaine supply, having switched to crystal meth.

I was also clearer, less twitchy, less paranoid, spent less time hiding at home, so was more available to my clients.

I made more money.

I continued to be generous with my drugs, my parties. It was easy enough to deal in the bathhouses and saunas, so the time I spent there was not unproductive, financially.

On the contrary.

Meth wasn't common though, in London at this time.

There was only a small number of us using crystal meth. Mostly, we got it from airline cabin crew, who brought it back from other countries where it was more available, cheaper. They weren't hardened criminals; just delightfully gay cabin crew, who knew the joys of this drug. It was also popular among the richer gays who travelled around to gay circuit parties, like the White Party in Montreal, the

international gay Pride parties. As travel got easier (this was still before the 9/11 attacks on New York's twin towers of the World Trade center), the wealthier travelling gays got more widely introduced to crystal meth; spreading by word of mouth mostly; Gaydar had not yet been invented, nor had Facebook, so networks were real. Crystal meth was a quiet luxury, known only to the international connoisseurs of the perfect gay sexual high.

In London, those few of us using meth all knew each other. We didn't like each other much, but we shared our drug, and our sexual liberty. You see, a person enjoying a meth-high soon abandons the clubbing life, the social life, in favor of sex, sex, sex. I continued my Soho connectedness, purely because of my cocaine dealing, but it became less glamorous, less social, more about work than enjoying my celebrated status.

Mostly, I graduated toward saunas.

That's where crystal club congregated.

The perfect Tina playground.

We needed to congregate, because meth is such a unique high, that you only want to be with others who use meth.

Ecstasy and meth are like kind cousins who have little to say to each other.

To be on meth is to have an appetite, and endurance, a sexual disinhibition and a rocket-fuel fury that requires the company of other meth users, and to be in sexual environments.

Being asked to dance on a disco floor with the sexiest guy in the world who is enjoying an ecstasy high just won't cut it.

The meth user needs nakedness now, sex now, with someone else who gets the fury and urgency of the unbridled sexual abandon now, and all the chaos that goes with it, including plenty of options for stimulation as the fury of the meth high demands.

Attention spans are a fury also, on meth. When I say plenty of options, I mean two people on meth will tire of each other, of any activity they are engaged in, very fast.

They'll be seeking greater stimulation, to appease the dopamine fury in their brains.

They'll need porn, they'll need other men sharing the same high. They'll need Jacuzzi's and slings and sex toys and porn.

They'll need to push the boundaries of what has stimulated them in the past, and seek greater stimulation.

They'll need more extreme porn, new sexual activities, new people, new positions, new premises, more drugs, more variety, next thing, next thing, next thing.

More.

More more.

Chaos accompanies this, but even that is stimulating, just another thing to occupy the busy meth mind.

Meth users find each other. Need each other.

A meth user in bed with an ecstasy user is nothing more than a situation comedy, a bedroom farce.

Meth users seek each other out.

As we did, our little crystal club in Pleasuredome sauna, or Chariots Roman Spa.

We may not have liked each other much. We may have gotten bored of shagging each other, but crystal club was small, and guys on different highs just didn't have the fury required for meth sex.

So we shagged each other, and congregated, like bitchy horny queens, in the saunas, our 3 day benders overlapping and crisscrossing others, creating a series of gossipy sexy adventures.

Before widespread internet use, we used our less Smart phones to connect, discuss who had what drugs, which sauna to meet at, to buy/exchange drugs. Prior to meth, we'd bought our drugs in the club; I remember fondly the queues for drug dealers in Trade. Meth was a little more stigmatized than ecstasy. GHB was a little stigmatized too, since it was causing a lot of overdoses in the gay

clubs; it was heralding a change from the loving ecstasy communes on dancefloors, to gurning gay men collapsing on dancefloors, causing chaos for club owners, security, and our mates. This new shift then, of discussing our drugs with such urgency and complexity, was a little scary; were our phones really safe? Were they bugged? Did the police have flags for when words for drugs were transmitted in a text?

We didn't know; this was all new territory for a generation coming to terms with a new technology in a paranoid climate.

So we developed a whole lot of code words and codes.

Party and Play, or "PnP" differentiated the drugs we preferred, from regular drugs like ecstasy that didn't interest us.

"Chems" had been a word (derived from "chemicals") that we used, specifically to refer to GHB and meth.

I remember very plainly, the day in Pleasuredrome sauna, when I first put 'chems' and 'sex' together to create a single word. We couldn't call ourselves crystal club in the sauna anymore. Meth and G were too stigmatized and drew attention. Mostly, the staff in the saunas didn't mind back then. They knew us well, we were the guys with all the energy, chaos and fury who would spend days at a times in the sauna; we were (despite our chaos) their best and best-known customers. They'd even come and spray the corridors with room deodorizer, to counteract the smoke from our meth pipes.

But 'crystal club' was too obvious, and drew attention, so we called ourselves 'chemsex club'.

It stuck.

Chemsex became a word for us, for how our lives and priorities had become. In 1999, Gaydar was created; a social and sexual networking site for gay men. What a relief for us.

A relief too, because a sauna is a hot and steamy place to be very high on new and poorly understood drug cocktails for 72 hours. Deaths were common there,

overdoses and ambulances were frequent occurrences, and the owner found himself in the news too often. There were plenty of other saunas/bathhouses in London, but Pleasuredrome was known as the chemsex sauna. To say the staff there turned a blind eye is an understatement. They were often the dealers. Not nasty exploitative dealers, just runaways from less happy childhoods in Eastern Europe or South America, waiting for their work Visa.

Mail Online



Three men died within eight months of each other after taking the drug GHB at the Pleasuredrome gay sauna within eight months, an inquest heard

Both men had the drugs GHB in their system, the inquest was told, but whereas Mr Page had mixed the drug with alcohol and cocaine, Mr Scott had taken the legal high, MPA, a meth-amphetamine substitute.

Gaydar connected gay men locally and internationally, and it changed the world for us. It connected other meth users to each other, and created other places to play besides the saunas; we could hook up in people's houses, as chemsex networks grew via this online platform, and it was a fascinating thing to watch these drugs proliferate before my very eyes. Week by week, I watched (and played) as my gay scene changed, as more and more people adopted these chems, chose online hooking up over clubbing.

As chemsex became a globally networked phenomenon.

You're welcome and I apologise.

We, the original chemsex club; we were relieved to let each other go.

Truly.

There is a pathetic relief in denying the existence of someone you sort of loved on drugs intimately only days earlier.

Of knowing you'll never see them again.

Of pretending that wasn't you. That stuff you did wasn't the real you; it was just drugs.

Chemsex very often goes hand in hand with another denial; swearing the day after, that that was the last time.

Well at least for a very long break.

It had been a strange intimacy; hating each other but choosing to play with each other. Having moments of shared intimacy, only to be quickly followed by a comedown when we hated ourselves and them, unable to look them in the face if we saw each other in sober moments or places.

It was a complex kaleidoscope of realities; trying to integrate the high "me" with the sober "me"; and those two selves with the outside world, my friendships, my Soho life, as well of course as the equally schizophrenic chemsex club people.

Maintaining a semblance of order amid the chaos of this chemsex lifestyle that (for me) involved two benders a week, each lasting two or three days, was a finely tuned skill.

Each bender was like an endurance exercise, an extreme sport, requiring stamina, but also chaos management skills and a mental stamina of the most robust.

Denial is exhausting, but it's also an art form.

One I devoted a particular dedication to.

In fact another decade passed.

A decade that properly, passed me by.

Like Sleeping Beauty (but on meth), I missed a revolution during that decade.

In that decade, personal computers became common household objects.

People learned basics like copy and paste.

People learned to type; a skill previously left only to secretaries and novelists.

People set up their own email accounts.

MySpace came and went. I never even saw it.

Virgin music became Virgin travel, communications, health.

Towers fell, a War on Terror was launched.

The iPhone was invented, and clunky Apple Macintosh became iEverything.

The Selfie became a word in the Oxford English dictionary.

Pornhub became the successful and life-changing phenomenon we don't talk about.

So many more changes

I missed most of this.

I was high.

I was having sex.

I woke up from a ten-year chemsex bender, and the world had changed.

I was a devastated and inept relic of a previous era.

But I'd adapt.

For the present, I was coke dealer Dave, Soho anti-hero, ex pimp, chemsex club creator and prolific meth user, king of sauna culture.

I was so hot right then.

Trauma and nihilism were the fuel that charged me.

After each bender, I'd swear "never again"; well at least for a good while. I'd sleep for two days, eat and eat, and try, try to get to the gym. My body was the currency of that decade. I'd sell cocaine. I'd be grumpy, and sleep some more.

Three days later, I'd be smoking meth again. Roberto, one of many meth dealers that sprang up within the gay community, would come by and we'd pack our sauna packs together. A sauna pack was an old-fashioned camera case strapped to our inner thigh like a garter; in it was our miniature pipe and flame, gas refill cylinder, drugs, straw. The money we'd make selling our drugs. Roberto and I would swap my coke for his meth, and we'd head to the sauna where we'd sell our drugs, get high, sit in Jacuzzis and steam rooms, take ownership of a sauna cubicle for 20 hours or so and watch the shifts change, of staff and other patrons of the venue.

In the early years, there was sex; but mostly, it was the pursuit of sex, or perhaps just feeling sexy that was important. Feeling sexually disinhibited, and part of a sexy community was the goal and the motivation; actual sex became incidental. Plus, anyone who has masturbated compulsively knows that a drug-fueled porn wank outweighs real sex any day. We showered a lot, jacuzzied a lot. We walked around in our towels. We got blowjobs on benches while we smoked our pipe. It was a community and a setting that entirely accepted drugs as a socially acceptable norm, perpetuated by people like myself who believed it was a norm.

This was a decade when saunas were changing in London. Pleasuredome sauna, for instance, had been a tiny, grungy awful place for us drug heads, but by the end of the decade it had been redecorated 2 or three times, invested in, glammed up, expanded. By the end of this decade it would have tripled in size, and there'd be at least another 5 new saunas in London. I don't know if the parallel growth of chemsex culture was driving this, or some other kind of change; I was there regardless.

I, on the other hand, was changing in opposite; I was deteriorating over this decade. I could shift between inflated self-belief and poor self-worth, so I had no objectivity about how I looked. I still passed for an incredibly handsome legend of the scene, though my charisma may have been a little less shiny. There was a moment; a telling moment for me. I was crossing the locker room in my towel, when I was stopped by another patron, who simply said

"What are you doing here?"

But it wasn't a question, or at least not the obvious nuance of the question. He was taller than me, which was uncommon. He was gangly and awkward, he looked rough around the edges, hardened like an East End criminal. If we hadn't been in a sauna, I might have placed him in a dark alley or drug den or a cage fight maybe. He communicated in an aggressive way; but not immediately aggressive; more like that was simply his manner. It was a bit scary, like he could switch to anger very easily.

I did not find him attractive; I found him scary, and I wasn't sure what he meant when he asked me that question. But he didn't ask it like an old friend happy to see me.

"What are you doing here?"

He asked aggressively, rhetorically.

I stopped in my tracks.

"You don't belong here, what are you doing here?"

I had no idea what he meant, and at first I thought he was looking for a fight; except these kind of fights happened elsewhere, not in the locker room of a gay sauna.

But he went on.

"You're too classy for this place; and you're a mess. What are you doing wandering around like a drug mess in here?"

I was still speechless, completely confused.

"This is not you. You don't belong here. What's happened to you? You don't fit in here, with us."

He was completely bemused, as if the world had tilted off axis.

A part of me knew what he meant, but couldn't understand how anyone else would think such a thing. I'd never think such things out loud.

I wondered if he was on one of those highs where he saw me like an angel. Or I wondered if there was some weird class thing going on here beyond my understanding.

"Come with me, come with me."

He took me by the hand to a cubicle, as if he was rescuing me from some awful social embarrassment.

In the cubicle, he just sat and looked at me, kind of in awe, kind of in disappointment. I probably kept asking what he meant, what did he mean; probably proclaiming that I had as good a right as any to be here.

He seemed genuinely put out, that I would wander, drug-fucked around in a (sort of) public space, when he seemed to think I should be acting classy and sober somewhere (goodness knows where) else. Really put out, like I was betraying some pre-destined storyline of my life that he believed wholly in.

I was quite high, and I hadn't slept in a long time, so I couldn't make sense of it all. I wondered if he saw me through some lens of his own experience, possibly a lens associated with hierarchical and social stereotypes forced upon him; I wondered if that was just my own lens. I wondered if there was something about me that didn't belong in this place, shouldn't be getting high and horny.

Sometimes, in my narcissism, I did believe I was better than everyone else. Not really; I knew I was actually less deserving than others, but my charisma, my looks, my carriage had always tricked people into thinking I was deserving of some higher status; movie star, or someone worthy of special treatment. I spoke like I knew everyone would listen, I walked into rooms knowing that people knew I was there, wanted me there.

And now, it was like this tall freaky-speaking man from a different side of the tracks was looking right through me, and I didn't know if it was wrong or if it was right. I didn't know what was truth or what was arrogance; I didn't know what was kindness or what was a distorted class/racial thing.

He seemed convinced. But I'm not sure what he wanted with me.

I don't think he knew either.

So we had sex. He was bossy and a bit rough; he seemed angry at me for something that neither he or I understood.

Which was fine; so we had sex.

I saw him a lot over the next months. Always by accident it seemed, but things were confusing enough for it to also have been fate. It turned out that despite his weird anger, he was also really kind, in fact kinder than most. He didn't do drugs as prolifically as me. It almost felt as though by secreting me away to have rough angry sex with him, he was meaning to protect me from wandering drug-fucked around the saunas for others to see or to (God forbid) hook up with. Saving me from myself.

It was the strangest affair of my life, and one I still haven't figured out; I will remember it for its oddness, but I will remember him as a kind of fallen angel who saw me through a particular halo-like light, and who believed in me, and wished me to return to my natural celestial plane; but until I could, he would protect me from making a desperate shame of myself. In his sauna cubicle. While having sex.

Perhaps this is how abusive relationships begin.

Perhaps this is how salvation happens.

I didn't (and still don't) know.

Perhaps I was too doing too many drugs.

Chapter 29

That Missing Decade

How does this end?

How does a lifestyle like this, that inevitably must end... end?

I thought it might have ended with a big scary south London boxer drug dealer beating me senseless in my own home.

But no.

Some say it is a "rock bottom" that ends it. But I knew there is no such thing. It can always get worse; death, is the only rock-bottom I'm aware of that stops things effectively.

Anything else we call a rock bottom, is simply the worst it's been SO FAR.

It can get worse, often does.

And I knew that.

I'd known that when I'd experienced drug induced paranoias that resulted in me putting all my furniture in my back yard because I thought they were infected with flesh-eating insects.

Three days later, I knew that was just drug-induced paranoia, and now my furniture was soaked (plus I'd scared the neighbors).

No, that hadn't been a rock-bottom.

Being held down, naked in a sauna cubicle, by some naked lovers and toweled onlookers, screaming and sobbing in a blood-curdling despair (drug induced),

aching for all the AIDS I'd spread, all the addictions I'd caused, all the pain I'd inflicted, all the cruelty I'd done... that was not my rock bottom either.

Screaming and sobbing as though somehow, this screaming despair would drown out the noise of my pain. Held down by alarmed strangers as I rage in mad anger at things I didn't even understand; I only knew the rage. The people holding me down, be that naked in a bathhouse or doped up in a drug den, were confused as to whether they hated me or felt sorry for me; they had rarely seen a raging despair like this. Like a mad animal that knows nothing of why it is so determined to destroy.

One might think that could be a rock bottom.

But there are greater depths than that to go to; and I went there ultimately. I got lost, in despair, for a few more years as my self-sabotage consumed me. I found drugs that were more dangerous, I found fights and self-harm that would scare demons, and I found the demons. I found psychosis and self-hate, I found more cruelty I could do to others. I found lots of lovers who were as dark as me, and we got lost together. I can't tell you their names or what they looked like, because I was tripping in psychosis, and they may well have been demons.

I cried during sex, freaking people out, I had conversations in public with people who didn't exist, and I screamed, wailed for help, then shunned it angrily when it was provided.

I riled, I stormed, I sobbed in life-destroying shrieks of fear and despair, naked, wet alone in a corner of my home with all the evil furniture piled outside for the neighbors to gossip over.

I found partners in despair, and we turned our self-harm on each other, delighting in the depths to which our cruelty could sink, and delighting in the pain we could inflict on each other, out-doing, out-doing, greater extremes.

I was gone. If I'd known you, you wouldn't have recognised me, you wouldn't have known me, you would have run away from me; if you hadn't had run I

would have made you run, faster than you have ever run before, and it would have scarred you, shaken you.

And yet... And yet; even that was no rock-bottom.

So how does it end?

This existence.

Death. Perhaps.

But I'd been dead, many times over since age six; I'd also wished deaths upon myself, many times over, I'd lived with it. Death was no great incentive for change in my realm, in my experience.

That's laughable.

How does it end?

I actually didn't know.

In my case, the beginning of the end was a police raid on my flat.

Let me set the scene first.

Life had been chaos for some time. I daren't even call it life, because everything about it seemed in contradiction to all cultural connotations and definitions that "life" represents.

I'd been awake for some days, and I was God knows where in a London flat with some other guys who were exploring the abysses of their own psyches – not quite with me, just at the same time and in the same place as me. It was a chemsex thing. I was the unwelcome one there, and this time it wasn't paranoia. Despite all my sex training in escort years, this was not my shining moment. The other two guys were handling their high better than me; they were aware of each other, into each other, and I was the guy who was too high, a little fucked up (if that can be judged by the self-hateful murmurings that were escaping my mouth); I was sliding off the bed and landing on the floor, clumsily unaware of other people or furnishings in the room; yelling at the porn on the television screen probably, and I remember being very annoyed at my penis which was bloodless and limp, despite the volume of Viagra I'd consumed over

the previous hours and days. It was exhausted, chafed from days of abuse, different layers of dank lubricant that had been applied to it over the previous days kind of embalmed it in a useless state.

I was really high.

There was a collection of heavy (and probably expensive) silver cock-rings in the room, and I'd clumsily applied 3 of them around my cock and balls in an attempt to get hard. Three is kind of overkill in this regard, but a hard penis was never unwelcome in this environment, and I didn't want to be kicked out.

I had nowhere to go.

(Not true; I had my own flat, but it was infested with flesh-eating insects, all the furniture was in the back yard; plus being alone was a hell all of its own.)

The other two guys were getting it on, and ignoring me successfully in their passion, but my overly-high clumsiness finally got their goat, and I was told to leave. Not kindly.

It was hard to hold my composure together after a shaming like this; I caught sight of myself in the mirror and my high abandoned me, I saw a bereft, ridiculous fool. As I pulled myself together, searched for my clothes and splashed water on my face, my dick finally responded to the volumes of Viagra and became raging hard; which meant I couldn't remove his three cock-rings. I really tried, but I was so monumentally unwelcome at this point, they wanted me out, even at the expense of their (probably expensive and precious) cock-rings.

Minutes later I was outside their flat on Longacre during a busy rush hour Monday morning, central London; wearing only my jeans, and holding the rest of my clothing in a bundle clutched to my chest.

My erection stuck plainly and uncomfortably down a leg of my trousers, refusing to give in.

I sat there on the pavement, amongst the hurried be-suited office workers, trying to tie my shoelaces, my cock hurting.

Have you ever watched someone tie their shoelaces after three days of crystal meth and chaos, with lubrication on their fingers?

I couldn't manage to thread my belt through the loops of my jeans either, so I just hung it around my neck.

I lost track of time, and I think I gave up.

My bundle didn't include my shirt, just my coat, and I wasn't sure it was mine. I left it there on the pavement and made my way home, shirtless and who fucking cared.

I hadn't cared for a long time.

Yes, I looked a fright to them, the rush-hour public, balking in the face of everything Monday morning rush-hour represents. I may not have had a lot of pride, but trust me, I had no shame.

I managed to get home, with only one slight mishap on the way.

Crossing at a set of traffic lights that provided me with a seated audience of bored commuters, my dick finally wore out.

It went limp again.

It was a real relief, because walking was hard enough as things were, without a stupidly determined hard-on stuck painfully downward via a trouser leg.

I had no underwear on (finding those had been too much of a challenge), and the heavy cock-rings, fully lubricated, slid off my flaccid and bloodless cock and balls, and slid down my trouser leg and clunked and bounced onto the tarmac of the crossing.

I stopped to collect them, but one was rolling away too quickly from me; and then the lights changed.

I was stopping traffic.

But no one honked. It was weirdly silent.

One car drove around me, but the others kind of stopped staring.

I grabbed the only cock-ring I could find, tugged at my jeans that were sliding (belt-less) down my arse, and headed on my way.

Home was horrific. It was bare of furniture again, and the central heating had stopped working months ago. I'd left a leak unrepaired for months, flooding my basement and I didn't care.

There was one furnished room in my house, but I dare to speak of it.

I lived in fear of this room.

Years of chemsex and chaos meant years of chemsex chaotic benders; that also meant waking up to said chaos after having fallen unconscious at the end of each bender. Waking up meant the sober realness of all the madness of the preceding days. All the psychosis of my own, but all the manifested psychosis and chaos of my guests, shags, all the traffic that had come through my madness, my flat, my bender.

Waking up to this is a harsh and unkind punch in the face that evokes a deep, deep seated shame that comes from your guts and bile, and all the realms of hell.

First, one must manage the obvious first solution that comes to mind; of suicide. Suicide is too complicated and exhausting on this, the just-woken morning after. Getting high again is easier if you have any money or drugs left. Unlikely.

First things first.

You grab anything that is there that represents the awfulness, the debauchery and shame of the preceding days; (by that I mean everything, grab everything). And hurl it into that one spare room you never use. That one spare room that has become a blightful dumping pile of all the sex toys, all the cum-soaked towels, all the insect-infested linen, all the lube-soaked sex paraphernalia, all the sweaty leather chaps and harnesses, all the home-made dildos and used condoms. All the piles of porn video cassettes and magazines.

You grab everything, you wince and fearfully throw open the door, throw it all in with your eyes tightly shut, and slam the door closed again.

Then you pretend the room isn't there.

(Until you're high again and you need that stuff, or your shags become curious and excited about all the stuff in there.)

You pretend the room isn't there, never ever dare to open the door; the room exists there, like the demon room in a horror movie, housing all the evil and shame that must never be spoken of.

Some days though; some rare days, when you arrive home at the end of a bender, shirtless and clutching a few lubricated cock-rings, so exhausted you can barely close the door behind you... you might steal a filthy blanket and pillow out of that room, just because there are no furnishings in your flat, the heating or hot water don't work, and you need something, anything, to sleep on/in.

This is the scene I set for you.

This is the scene unto which the police vice squad broke into three hours later. I was unwakeable, sort of. By that, I mean, when the police shouted through the door to open up, I didn't hear them. When a battering ram knocked the door in, and the armour-clad officers charged and dispersed through the flat, with sniffer dogs going crazy, I awoke. It wasn't a sudden waking, more like a slow coming-to-terms, dream-state kind of slow awareness of what was happening.

Just another drama, just more chaos.

Different in most ways to the dramas and chaos that defined daily life, but in many other ways, just another drama.

I was not to be shocked. It took something greater than this to alarm me.

This is when I learned I hadn't been alone in my house when the police broke in. Stevie P was there.

Mr. P, as I called him.

And I might need to tell some more about Mr. P before I go on.

In fact, since he is now dead, and since he was the dearest friend and finest companion a person can have in chaos and drama; and since he was so particularly en form and magnificent on this particular day, I'd better tell the whole story of Mr. P.



Chapter 30

Please Meet Mr. P

Stevie P.

Chaos was his default modus operandi. I believe his molecules vibrated to a frequency that aligned with chaos, and bless him, I don't know how he functioned.

Other people called it mental health, and they were probably right.

But those less familiar with mental health just avoided him, or survived him, or hated him, were damaged, driven crazy or baffled by him.

I adored him.

Adoring him was easy if you understood him, but being associated with him wasn't easy. Chaos and drama.

I'm good at chaos and drama, but wow, Mr. P was on a different scale, and it's amazing he lived to his mid-thirties.

It's amazing I did, since I spent so much time with him.

(That's kind of mute, because I survive anything.)

Stephen P, Mr. P, was dealing drugs at age 11. Not because he was a runaway, or a child of poverty or violence, or poor education. Mr. P was dearly loved and cared for by his mum and dad, his brothers; he just had something inside him that gravitated toward trouble, it seemed inherent, and it was a compelling

force, something greater than gravity, something inevitable. He seemed to have an innate attraction to crime, an awareness of criminal, dodgy means. Not like an evil criminal mastermind, but more like an instinct for grifting, more like a street urchin's instinct, a mischievous grafter. If there was a slower, less dramatic way to achieve a goal, it was definitely something that would take too long; he'd find another way to achieve the goal that satisfied his atomic impatience. And the shockwaves of his destruction and chaos would reverberate across galaxies.

If there was an object in your house that was fragile and precious, he'd break it. Mistakenly; always mistakenly; he wasn't nasty or destructive consciously. He was an angel.

But he'd come across it somehow and break it.

If there was a button that said "Don't push this button" in loud radioactive wording, he'd accidentally fall against it, inevitably, innocently, but definitely. Count on it.

His adolescent curiosity about his homosexuality was unlikely therefore, to result in some simple, innocent teenage fumbblings. No. He managed to seek out a local gay pedophile, thinking that it's easier to accuse a dirty old man of having sex with him, than it was for his confused teenage mind to admit he liked it.

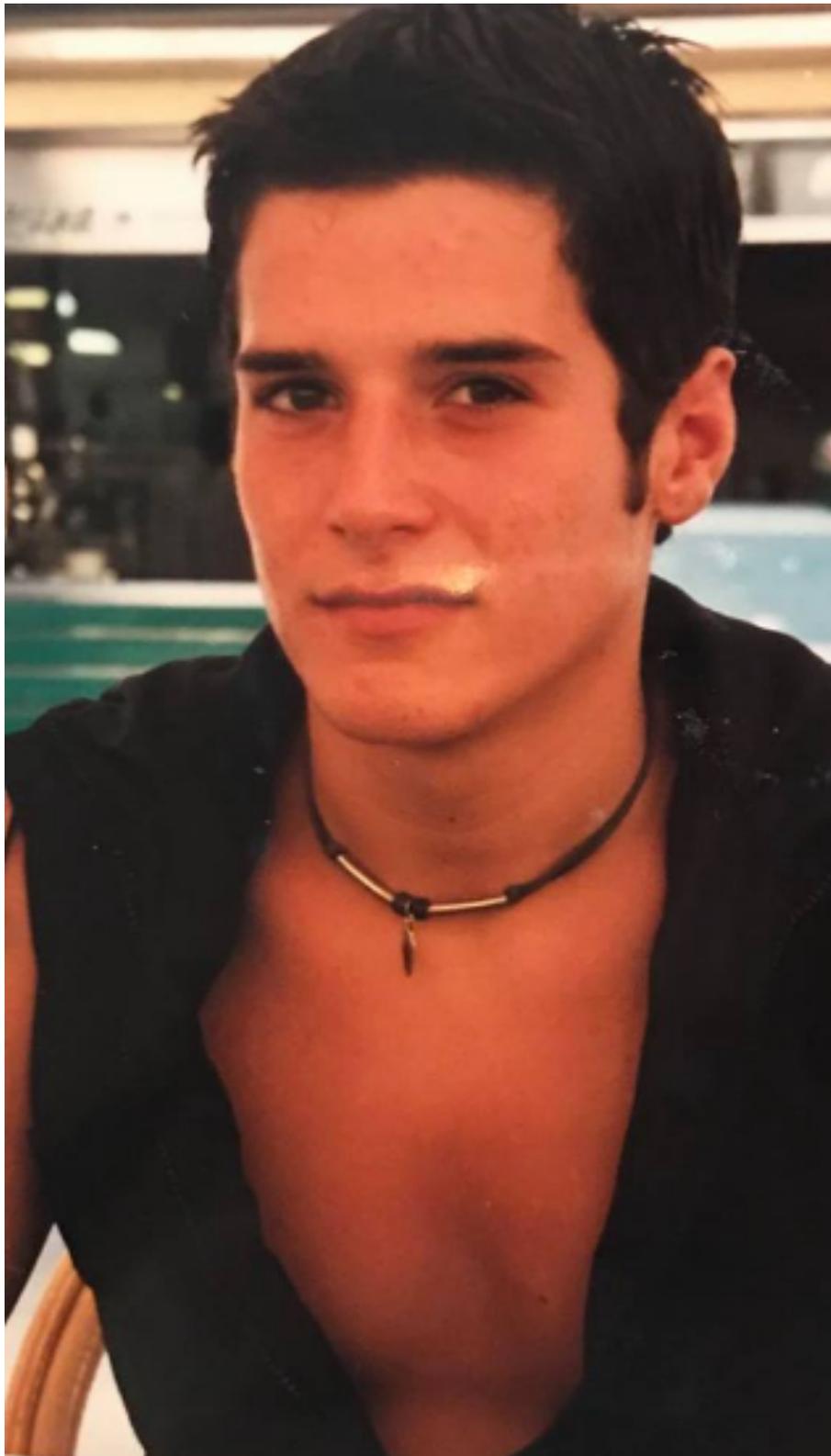
(Of course, it was likely more complicated than this; but this is how Mr. P told the story.)

He was groomed and pimping for this man by fifteen years of age, and his drug use which (even at this young age) had become a lifestyle act of self-medication (as opposed to a fun flirtation with pleasure-seeking).

When Mr. P left home at age 15 to come to London, he got a job as an empty glass collector in Heaven nightclub. This precipitated an event now notorious in urban folklore, when his older brothers, mum and dad all descended upon the nightclub to drag him kicking and screaming home to safety, convinced he was too young to be in this environment. It was a screaming scandal the divided

opinion, involved management, bouncers/security staff, and nearly shut the giant venue down for the evening.

Chaos and drama.



I met Mr. P a year or so later, when he was working as a glass collector in a different gay bar in Soho, called Mantos. Kylie Minogue had just released "Can't Get You Out of My Head" and Britney Spears' "Slave for you" were huge, and Mr. P knew the dance routines by heart. He introduced himself to new people as a choreographer, which is quite a leap from glass collector, but he believed it entirely, and would prove it by doing the Britney dance routine there and then, to the music that only he could hear in his head. Mr. P was (by the way) the best looking, most handsome and most dynamically charismatic young man that Soho had seen for many years. So these boasts, these impromptu dance-routines came across as entirely charming. In these early years, they would help people to forgive, to see past the chaos that would also be circulating malevolently.

We were best friends. Something aligned immediately, likely our chaos, our drama; likely our extraordinary coping skills that we employed to excel within our chaos and drama.

Maybe we were both just criminal dodgy birds of feather.

Maybe it was our darkness, our trauma that aligned. I never really asked, but maybe he knew nihilism too.

It certainly seemed to be circling him, like flocks of buzzards.

Fierce loyalty is what I remember sharing most. Loyalty is the currency and calling card of those who had been groomed, as well as of groomers. It represents safety and control in one sentiment that is wrapped so beautifully but disguises complex codependency and manipulation. But when it is pure, without expected reciprocation, without strings being attached, it's just plain beautiful, and this is the kind of fierce loyalty Mr. P offered, pretty liberally. Not many people could get along with Mr. P consistently; many fell in love with him, many befriended him, but most often ended in fights, misunderstanding, complicated fall-outs from his clumsy and inevitable disaster and chaos. But we never fought, never disagreed, never fell out. Something that, to this day,

seems a mathematical impossibility, a betrayal of the laws of physics and evolution; everyone fights with Stevie P, it's an inevitability.

But we never did, ever.

We weren't always everyday friends. We were high on drugs a lot of the time, partners in crime; we lived together for a time, so it was deeper than a drug high.

But we did do a lot of drugs.

I liked his chaos. I found it endearing, entirely amusing, and I wouldn't have recognised him without it. I was callused to hardship and chaos, our jigsaw pieces fit.

But we were both also spiraling.

Sharks, sharing water, but working together.

Neither of our futures looked promising; charisma, charm, good looks and the gift of the gab can only carry you so far, and we were both destined for something bad.

I honestly didn't think I'd outlive him, and it feels wrong that I did. He was better than me, more innocent (despite all perceptions), he was truer and had more integrity than I. He was less manipulative, more "seat of his pants".

He was so good, right to the bone.

I might have been the only person who knew it, but I knew it.

His family knew it of course.

His mum, his beloved mum, died of cancer. Gosh how he loved her. He was too high for the years she was ill, and on the day of her funeral, we were both on day 4 of a bender. Just really bad timing, we hadn't planned on staying up that long, but gosh, time lost meaning. I remember ordering the meth required to keep him awake long enough to attend his mum's funeral. It was a mission, a project; how much meth does a grieving boy need after a four-day bender, to get through his beloved mum's funeral?

We figured it out.

He got there, he got through the day.

He came straight back to me, and we got higher. We pushed it that day, those days harder than we ever had, his grief and my shame fueling us.

Mr. P spiraled further after that, and we saw less of each other. Not intentionally, not to the point of any concern, or break up.

I was looking for my own trouble, creating it where I couldn't find it. And Mr. P was seeking his own annihilation. Two people on these paths rarely travel adjacently.

I heard a rumor one day; and I sought online for clarification. The rumor was of a notorious drug dealer who lived in Soho, who had been arrested after a person had died in his house. Apparently, one of Mr. P's guests at a party had taken too much of a drug. Mr. P had thrown all his drugs and money out the window so he wouldn't get arrested, while he waited for the ambulance. This caused a kind of frenzy down below in the streets of Soho. Attempts by emergency services to revive the man had resulted in broken ribs, and a lot of blood and vomit had been dispersed along the walls and stairway as he was carted down to the ambulance.

Huge amounts of blood according to the gossip of the day, and the urban myth that followed.

I heard of this days later, and knew immediately, this was a Stevie P disaster.

The arrest led to nothing; Mr. P was skilled at avoiding trouble, but the following years, this incident haunted him, as did his mother's death. These incidents would be reflected in the art he would later produce from his death bed. He felt guilty about being absent for his mother's illness, he felt entirely responsible for this death in his flat; he could be the greatest of troublemakers, he could evade responsibility with a skill that would you; but he absorbed the trauma of these incidents with huge heft and weight. Despite being an innocent in these impossible scenarios, he could keep running, running from sobriety and grief. Getting higher each day.

His heavy use took its toll on his mental health; although he spoke of it to no one; he started to hear persecutory voices in his head. Tormenting him about his guilt, shaming him, ridiculing him; they were incessant. If he'd have taken a break from drugs, sought some help, these voices would have disappeared, but his drug use and chaos (and guilt and shame) went on so long, that the voices pretty much became permanent features.

He only told me of the voices in the months leading up to his death, a few years later. But they had existed for many years, he had functioned with them for many tormented years. These voices were responsible for ruining any opportunity he had for friendship, kindness; they egged him to do more drugs, they made him terrified of doctors and hospitals; they told him that friends couldn't be trusted, and that medical staff were trying to poison him. He knew the voices weren't real (most of the time), but reality and fear become confusing companions that distorted everyday living.

And so his chaos mounted, snowballed.

I saw less of him.

But once in a while, I'd arrive at a shag's house, or find myself at some orgy, or chill-out party, and he'd be there.

And it would be delightful. Being together, somehow made everything ok. So we'd just be together, amid the chaos.

Then the party would disperse, or we'd be kicked out, or another sunrise would herald the outstaying of our welcome, or we'd wake up to find the other gone.

Drug highs are unpredictable, fickle mistresses, and their sirens can distract you from the more important things, too often.

So we were the ultimate (rudderless) ships passing ever so occasionally in the night. Sails and booms properly unleashed and wild.

I rarely knew where he was parking his hat, where his home might be. But he knew mine. And he knew where I hid my spare key. I left it there because I was often finding myself kicked out onto someone's curb for my sins, without keys or wallet, often with my clothes in a bundle clutched close to my chest. And my

key was also left there for Mr. P, like a candle in the window, so my drugfucked Cathy could find his way to me, drugfucked Heathcliff's window.

And it was this Mr. P, my darling friend, who had the cursed misfortune, to have curled up to sleep in my furniture-less house, this very morning that the police decided that London had had enough of my shenanigans.

Such a Mr. P thing to do.

Real Mr. P 'timing'.

But my God; I was so glad he was there that morning.

Chapter 31

Raided

How does it end?

That lifestyle of seeking nihilism through the prism of hedonism; how does that end?

I don't know. But I can tell you how it was interrupted on this violent morning. The police came crashing through my door, dogs going crazy, police flooding through the house like an army procession of ants that had no end. And I came to, slowly, without drama. Like I was expecting it, or perhaps more like I didn't care.

I didn't see Mr. P; I'd fallen asleep under a gross blanket on the floor in the hallway, still clutching the cock-rings I'd salvaged from the zebra crossing. Well; not clutching, so much as they had kind of gotten stuck in my hand with dried lube. I came to, and was trying to fathom all that was happening around me. I was being given instructions, but that never went down well with me, and besides, I was in no hurry. I'd been on a five-day bender, every muscle ached, and my cognitive function was not what I'd describe as snappy. I didn't care and I was in no hurry. The yelling of the police officers didn't seem like yelling to me; it seemed like I was observing it through cling film, that also drowned out the noise. I considered going back to sleep, I mean it wouldn't have changed the outcome for me very much.

Mr. P was not a person who awoke slowly and dreamily however. He awoke with a fright on the best of days, and often with some curse word passing his lips from some terrifying dream that haunted him. Proper filth too; Mr. P took cursing seriously; he aimed to offend, even when emerging from unconsciousness, and I don't doubt that he did that even when he was alone. I didn't see Mr. P this morning; I just heard him, waking. Waking like he always did, shouting filth that I dare not even type. He was also claustrophobic, did not like being manhandled, did not like being woken, did not like police or any kind of authority (although he did kind of like dogs, even the police ones that were sniffing around my house that morning). I've no idea what had motivated him to come sleep at mine that night, or what had precipitated his unconsciousness. But it would have been the depths of nihilistic benderism, like me, pushing pleasure and escapism to the limits of human endurance, so please, just take my word for granted, that there was no vice squad, riot police, navy seal or Darth lord that would have fared well waking him that morning. I never saw him, I just heard him, waking in a fright. He used the N word (regardless of race, he just used it), he used the C word (regardless of gender, he just liked it). And plenty more. I heard him being woken, and I heard his rage. The earth shook, and officers that had been dispersed throughout my house all scrimmaged and panicked to Mr. P's location to contain the violence erupting from him. I sat, I'd heard it before, but the humans and animals invading my house that morning had never seen the likes of it, it probably still haunts them.

Good.

I could hear them trying to contain him and question him, but filth and violence was the only response they got. Once in a while the body of an officer would stumble and fall into view from my position, as Mr. P kicked them across the room; they'd try to gather their arms and legs and get back to the fight, but they'd be kicked across the room again. They started swearing too as patience waned.

I loved Mr. P more than life in that moment.

He possessed every heroic quality of ever superhero or action film I'd ever known, and he was invincible. An army of riot police actually, actually couldn't hold him down.

At my end of the house, I needed no containment. I was coming to consciousness, still nonplussed by circumstances, being questioned (over the noise) about my crimes.

They'd found my cocaine, ounces of it, they'd found my scales and "dealing" equipment. They had me. I didn't care. I'm capable of being a great liar, creative, convincing and brilliant, I could be an unsurpassable liar, but I don't lie; and especially not when people don't deserve a lie from me. I would not lie this morning, they didn't deserve it, and I didn't care anyway. But mostly what I needed to say to them, was that this nightmare in my house, this extraordinary force of will, Mr. P, was not guilty of anything. He was not involved in my business, he was no more than a person who I found sleeping in my house that morning. Ok, so I lied a little bit, and said I hardly knew him, and that he was just a stranger I'd gotten high with, that I hardly knew, and who had crashed at my house on this most unfortunate of evenings.

I was determined to release Mr. P from their hold; it was like seeing a magnificent, untamable creature of the wild torn from its natural habitat and imprisoned by poachers. It was against God's law, whatever that means, and to hear him raging against their hold, with all his filth, while still trying to protect me from them was... it was beautiful. I loved this man in this insane epic moment.

And I was determined to free him, so I protested and lied and insisted I hardly knew him, he was some unfortunate street urchin that followed me and my drugs home the night before.

If Mr. P heard me do this, he'd have hated me for it. He'd have boasted proudly of our friendship, he'd have fought and kicked for it despite any consequences.

I don't know if the police believed me, but as I was taken from the floor to another room and had handcuffs placed upon me, I saw Mr. P, still raging, being finally released, and the police actually kicked him out the front door. Actually kicked him, swearing in return; a boot up Mr. P's arse, driving him out the door. I don't think they believed me, I just think they lost the fight and were glad to be rid of him.

The rest of the morning was spent trying to stand (despite my utter, utter exhaustion) in my furnitureless house, handcuffed and answering boring repetitive questions by the police while they searched my empty house, under floorboards, inside fridge walls, everywhere. I'd had perhaps three hours unconsciousness following a 5-day bender, and still felt cleverer than these clowns.

It took them longer to search the spare bedroom. This was unpleasant for me. Years of shame and psychosis and denial and gay perverted sex was in that room, now being pored over by these police and dogs.

Perhaps not the dogs so much. They were reluctant to go in there. You know that expression dogs get when they are disgusted by the food you want them to eat?

Well that's how the police dogs looked.

The police officers too.

Rubber gloves seemed a poor barrier for the police as they pored through this room.

If I'd had any pride or defiance in me, it left me utterly as they searched this room, all my sins.

I was marched, still topless and wearing only the jeans I'd been wearing the days before, hands handcuffed behind my back, out my door to the police vans that were parked in my street.

A dozen or more of them.

Every window in the street was open with neighbors watching this spectacle; me dragging my exhausted shamed carcass down the street to the van.

There was some clapping from the neighbors and a wolf-whistle too; I've no idea of what those noises meant, just aware of an audience. Louder and more engaged than I'd had at the zebra crossing only hours earlier.

Not quite as loud as the kill kill day when the onlookers had gathered around the car, me, again, scantily clad, trying to lock all the doors, roll closed the windows. Not quite that loud.

But they watched and cheered this spectacle.

In the van, as we drove, the police officers chatted amongst themselves, just another day at the office. There was some great joke that had them all giggling, and I was curious, perhaps defensive, about what the joke was.

So I asked.

"What's the joke?"

It ruined the mood they'd been enjoying; it was like they'd forgotten about me. But they answered, one of the women police officers responded. It was about the stuff they'd found in my spare room. They couldn't comprehend it, so they giggled about it.

I decided in that moment to destroy them, the entire police force. Despite having a proud, defiant personal policy about not lying, I decided I'd lie, deceive cheat, and do anything, but they would not win, these uniformed idiots giggling at my profound shame.

And so a year began, a year I'd spend determined not to go to prison. Somehow I'd spin this, somehow I'd beat them, somehow I'd... not go to prison.

It did take a year, for all this to end.

But first; gosh I needed to sleep. I really really needed to sleep. But they wouldn't let me.

Chapter 32

The Lock-Up

I was kept in the lock-up cell at the police station for some hours before being seen. There was a tiled bench that I could have slept on, except that I was woken frequently by officers, delivering information; one time it was that I would be evicted from the country, another time it was to tell me they had enough evidence to convict me, and I could expect a harsh sentence. All designed, I'm sure, to deprive me of sleep, frighten me, wear me down.

But I was a pro.

Another time it was for food; I hadn't eaten in so long, that was a welcome one. Another visit was from a police doctor who was checking on my HIV status. He knew very little about it, a lot less than me, a lot less than most HIV negative gay men, but he needed to act like he knew it all, so that might have been an amusing pastime for me, if I hadn't been so tired and moody.

Bored mostly.

Nearly all people in a city like London who are diagnosed HIV positive, are uninfectious. No one can catch HIV from me. That's what the medicines do. This doctor didn't know this, and that's outrageous. He was actually scared of me. Or scared that I'd call him on his ignorance.

So that was fun.

But it wasn't fun; none of this was.

I caught the odd moments of sleep here and there between contrived interruptions, but was eventually moved to an interview room, and finally, some action. A solicitor had shown up to represent me. Apparently, Mr. P, after being evicted so dramatically from my house that morning, had dedicated his day to alerting all of London to my arrest.

I was gossip.

And an old friend Danny Mac who'd had a brush with the law himself some years earlier, had contacted the law firm that had represented him, and got me represented.

Just in time; just before I incriminated myself from pure exhaustion.

Because I'd decided to plead not guilty. Despite being caught red handed, despite piles and piles of cocaine and cash being found in my flat, I, with all my charisma and charm and movie star good looks was going to convince them otherwise.

How?

I wasn't sure. I needed sleep and to collect my wits.

I was returned home after a very long day or two of questioning and police cells. I surrendered my passport and Mr. P returned to help me move my furniture back into the house. He stayed.

I was numb. In one way, I was pleased that something had brought this cycle of self-destruction to an end. It's weird that all of my behaviour had been self-destructive, but without the ultimate destruction. Suicide is so much easier and direct a way to self-destruct, but there's something more delicious about spiraling toward a destruction that doesn't actually happen, than a simple suicide. I don't want to think why. And yes, despite myself, and despite being numb, part of me was glad the spiraling had been interrupted for a bit. The chaos had been immense. Mr. P moved in to keep me company, and I adjusted to a life without money, without drugs, without Soho popularity and without my

dizzying escapist benders. I consulted with my solicitor and waited for my court dates a year away. Numb, mostly.

Mr. P was greatly changed by this too. He was way more accustomed to chaos than I, and his day in my house with the police might just have been another day in the life of Mr. P; but he had a period of stability too, quite unlike him. He moved in and we were inseparable for a time. He disappeared off for a few days at a time here or there, but without the chaos that was usual; we stayed connected. I took drugs where I could get them too, but I was persona non-grata after the arrest. Good to gossip about, not good to be with. No one likes getting high with a person who the police might be watching, clearly had been watching for a time. Plus my numbness was a palpable mood now, infectious and unpleasant. Drugs didn't even work.

When it came to preparing my case though, something else took over.

My predator survival skills.

I spun a story in my head, of a guy who was innocent of these charges.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, I spun and spun.

I would not go to prison. Not because I didn't deserve it, I was guilty as all hell. And I knew I'd thrive in prison anyway; just another environment to exist in, what's the difference to a nihilistic drifter like me. But I would not go to prison, and my reason was because of the giggling of the police that morning in the van, the morning of my arrest. I realized that this process I was caught up in, was not about justice, it was about giggles, it was just another workday for the police, another workday for the solicitors, and for all the other players in this criminal justice system. These were the cogs turning, everyone caught up in their lives, more concerned with the dramas of their morning, the mood their day had started with and their efforts to change that. It was about finding giggles in someone else's despair because your workday was boring. It was about getting through the day, doing your job just so you can get home to your beer or glass of wine and favorite tv show. It was about clearing your caseload, setting the alarm and starting all over again the next day. How many people's

lives hung in the balance just because their lives and destinies depended on these routines. How many people were in prison, or destitute, or hungry, or miserable, because the people with influence aren't using their influence; they're just mundanely doing their jobs.

Giggling about dildos in the back of a police van while a man's life falls apart and is being carted off to his fate.

If I was just another insignificant cog turning in this giant picture of apathy and benign routine, then fuck it.

I'd not be a victim of it.

I'd forget (entirely) the fact that I was in fact guilty. I was enraged and humiliated against this outrage, these insensitive cruel police officers that had ruined Stevie P's morning and humiliated me so. And so I prepared my defense and I was ruthless, creative, brilliant; entitled to my righteous and inevitable victory.

I had to explain somehow, how an innocent, very likeable young man with the world ahead of him, dusted in privilege, charisma and all the good looks the angels could muster... how he wound up with ounces of cocaine in his house. I concocted a sympathetic sob story, of a young boy with a troubled past; an orphan, who watched his parents die, tragically. Torn mercilessly from the bosom of his loving mother, he was placed in an unloving home where he was treated like an annoying interloper, deprived of hugs and affection and kindness; beaten. Cast out into the world, then drifting through the cities of the world trying to find his identity as a gay man at a time when the world hated gays. In the middle of an AIDS epidemic that killed gays and propagated fear and hatred against them. Coerced into prostitution, held prisoner by an insane pimp for years, and succumbing to the AIDS plague himself, put on a waiting list to die painfully and alone. Then saved from this awful death by the skin of his teeth, but led by trauma into addiction, self-destruction and despair.

This would be my fiction, my story, my "get out of jail free" card. I no longer felt I was being charged with possession of drugs with intent to supply; I became

convinced that this trial was about my worth as a human being, my worth on the planet, my value. It was about whether I was a waste of space, a failure, a reject, or whether I was worth saving.

I believed the former, but I knew how to spin, and I was fierce.

I wondered if this fantastic story I'd concocted would be enough to help me get away with my crime, my guilt.

It would be a long time before I realized that this story I'd concocted was not in fact fiction; it was the very actual truth.

I had no idea the time that I might be redeemable. It was just a story, an emotional fable I'd concocted to get away with the crime of my life, to explain away my worthlessness. A story I hoped would keep me out of prison.



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Your Ref:

Our Ref:
S0200001/014

Date:
11 February 2004

Dear David

Re Possession of Class A Drugs with Intent to Supply

write to confirm that you have been charged with the offence of Possessing Class A Drugs with Intent to Supply

You were bailed from West End Central Police Station subject to the following conditions.

1. to attend at Highbury Corner Magistrates Court on Friday 20th February 2004 at 10am.
2. to surrender your passport to the police
3. to report to West End Central Police Station on every Wednesday at 3pm

You can travel to Highbury Corner Magistrates Court on the Piccadilly Line tube to Highbury & Islington tube station. Exit the station using the main exit, go left out of the station and walk a short distance to the Court which is on the left hand side.

will represent you at the hearing which will be a very short procedural hearing in which you will enter a plea of Not Guilty and elect trial at either the magistrates Court or at the Crown Court. We can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each venue at our meeting on Wednesday 11th February 2004. You will then be bailed to attend at Court at a future date.

I look forward to seeing you at our meeting on Wednesday

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

Kristiina Reed

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This firm is regulated by the Law Society



Chapter 33

The Drug Dealer and the Judge

Months passed, (was it a year?) while I waited for my court date. Valium was my new addiction, prescribed liberally by my HIV doctor, who knew, like everybody, that these last months of freedom waiting for the inevitable prison sentence would be difficult. I was past therapy, way past that; it wouldn't touch the sides. I added to the valium with some illicitly purchased supplies of other benzodiazepines, and coasted through these months, lonely, doomed and numb.

By some bizarre twist of fate, travelling on the tube to the courthouse, my arresting police officer, the same one who had interviewed me all day in the police cell, the same one who had driven me home from the police cell on that day of my arrest, boarded my train carriage, and decided it was socially acceptable to sit next to me.

It was so strange. We had been civil, polite even. I'd been very agreeable that day of my arrest, and of course we'd done (strange) small talk in the car when he had driven me home. He had spent the last months conniving and creating a case against me, a legal argument designed to find me guilty and in prison.

Perhaps it seemed normal to him to sit beside me on this train carriage for the (quite long) journey to Snaresbrook Crown court, but not to me. It seemed no

more normal to me, than making light jokes about gay sex in a police van while I was being escorted, almost naked, to my arrest. I was still valiumed up, but not enough to consider this normal. There were not enough drugs in the world to make this seem like normal behaviour to me. Nonetheless we did small talk, I've no idea why I tolerated it. He seemed nice, even though for all intents and purposes he was the enemy, having spent months planning my demise, my fate. In his head, it was as if he was a guy doing his job, mundanely, routinely. Probably as enamored with my charisma as anyone else.

I was completely surprised, arriving at the courthouse, to discover a bunch of my friends there. A lot of them were curious, not unkind people, but not friends who really cared. The sort of friends who invite you for Christmas, but don't give a fuck the rest of the year. Oh, but birthdays too.

And the day you get sent to prison apparently. What a spectacle.

There were some other Soho club kids there too, I spotted them in the balconies. Bless them, they were high, cocaine I think. Club kids' day out.

But a small close-knit group were there too; not up in the balconies, but ground floor, probably curious, but sober and genuinely supportive.

I wore a tweed/plaid blazer, white shirt and geeky tie from a secondhand charity shop. None of it matched, or barely fitted, but I was trying to look like a geeky awkward librarian. I even parted my hair differently, like a preppy college kid, and wore glasses. Although I was famous for sunglasses, I didn't wear spectacles at the time (they are signature for me now) but at the time, they were a new thing and my friends remarked on how innocent, college-boy geeky I looked.

Good.

The stage was set up in such a way... sorry, the court room was set up in such a way that the dock was very close to the judge, whispering distance. The jury were a mile away and I could barely see them through my scratched and foggy charity shop spectacles. Somewhere between them sat my barrister and the opposing team.

Three days it took.

This was my arena for three days. My fans in the balconies gave up after a few hours, when they realized this was not an hour-long show, but a long haul. Or perhaps some common sense kicked in and they realized there are so many better things to be doing when on cocaine.

My barrister had told me to focus on the jury. To charm them, to glamour them, win them over, to direct my answers toward them.

My barrister knew I couldn't win this; she had suggested I plead guilty, but I refused. Flat refused; in defiance, in apathy, in a gambling mindset born of really not caring any more. All mixed with my organic self-importance, and probably a lot of valium.

I did not like losing on a good day, and this day I would not lose to those giggling police officers in the back of the van on the day of my arrest. I was consumed with winning this.

Halfway through the trial, my barrister urged again, increasingly sure I couldn't win, but I was stubborn, proud and stoic.

I was fearless.

But she did know that my charisma was an animate manifestation in the court room, and she earnestly advised I direct my answers to the jury.

But I couldn't even see them. They were a large group of silent strangers, a long way away, we had no relationship for me to work on. My instinct told me to resource the closeness of the judge. He was the star of the show (well he and I shared that role I suppose), he was the most vocal, and he was the one everyone was addressing; it seemed only natural that we develop a relationship. I mean why flirt with the chorus dancers when you're (practically) in bed with the star?

It was our show.

And we gave them a show.

He like me. I liked him. He was curious and fair.

The opposing barrister was trying too hard to paint me as a super intelligent mastermind manipulative coke dealer, hardened criminal; a plain liar in the judge's court room.

But not in this outfit I wasn't.

And me and the judge were pals; it felt that way. I was sincere, a deer caught in headlights in this strange arena, completely bewildered about what was going on. Oh yeah, and choc full of valium too. I was cooperative, honest, and blind as a bat in my cheap specs.

Opposing council would introduce evidence such as a set of electric scales that (they argued) proved I was a drug dealer. The small kind, not the kind used to weigh a kilogram of flour, but the small kind you weigh a gram of cocaine with. Not necessarily the kind of scales a housewife would have in her kitchen.

I reminded her politely that housewives aren't the only people that cook, and that I could introduce her to some of my fabulous gay friends who were brilliant cooks, and suggested that she be a little less misogynistic in her arguments.

(There was a coked-up murmur of applause and laughter from the balconies).

Being asked to keep on topic, the judge queried me about why I had those miniature scales. The court room was weirdly quiet as if this scales conversation was the thing that proved my guilt.

I was perplexed.

It all seemed so ridiculous.

I shrugged, leaned toward the judge (he wasn't that far from me) and whispered,

"Judge, I don't get this; every addict has these scales in their kitchen; not just dealers. All my friends had them. I don't get this. Gosh they don't even work, they haven't worked in years."

This was true. These scales, which, yes, had been used to measure the grams of coke I sold, had been turfed out into the back yard with the rest of the

furniture so many times, the batteries had to be jiggled in such a specific way to make them function.

A small huddle developed at the bench, while all the teams examined these miniature scales; none of them had the skill to jiggle the batteries in just the right way, and so yes, it was determined that they didn't work.

This is how it went on.

For days.

Silly back and forth accusations, while my pal the judge and I kind of shared a secret about how ridiculous this game was. I was able to explain away almost everything that was used in evidence against me, and I managed to do it with wit and charm and some camaraderie with the judge. I think judges get really bored with this very routine and zealous back and forth, I think they welcome an opportunity to share the ridiculousness with someone who gets it. Plus a little entertainment and glamour.

My friends were not so well behaved. They found humor in a lot of this, particularly the ignorance about crystal meth, about gay club life, gay sauna culture exhibited by the barrister teams and the police witnesses. Opposing council tried very hard to use disgusting promiscuous gay sex as a weapon to make the jury have a distaste for me, my "lifestyle". It might have been working with the jury (I wouldn't know, I kind of forgot they were there), but it wasn't washing with the judge, he saw right through that tactic. I don't think he was down with the gays or anything, but he could see the cheap tactic being used here. He didn't mind when I retorted in Oscar Wilde fashion to some of her ridiculous attempts. Although he didn't tolerate the scoffs and giggles and exclamations that came from the balconies. This was a great show for a bunch of coked up club kids out for the day.

The greatest laughter came from a bit of evidence my pal, the arresting police officer shared. The cocaine they had seized from my house had been tested, obviously, and it turned out the purity was really low; lower than 20% if I remember. I was shocked; no one had ever complained. But everyone else in

the room, including the barristers, thought this was funny, and laughter filled the atrium above the room. Someone even murmured

"That's the real fucking crime here; selling us shit coke".

I didn't laugh, my pride was hurt and I'm not much of a giggler anyway, even on a good day. The judge didn't laugh either (but allowed the noise to continue while he shuffled papers; he afforded me a kind glance. I think he liked my friends too. I mean; club kids ARE adorable.)

(For a tiny moment I wondered if he had been a client of mine from the escort days; but unlikely, what would those odds have been?)

My pal the arresting officer also read the transcript from the morning of my bust. I didn't notice at the time, but someone had been taking notes of every sentence uttered from the moment the door was broken in, to my arrival at the police cells. Even when I grunted or murmured a response, it was written down (and read back in court) as a grunt or murmur. Such accuracy and attention to detail. Strange to hear myself, in full shock, being recited back to me. Yet also, outrageously inaccurate; Stevie P, my darling Mr. P, who had made them so angry, with his abuse; that entire conversation had been altered. The police had gotten angrier and more frustrated with every passing minute of their engagement with Mr. P, and they'd lost their temper, swearing (back) at him, threatening him. Right up to the moment they kicked, literally kicked him out the door; this was all altered in this transcript. Also missing were the threats made to me, to intimidate me into revealing more "secrets" or crimes. I'd been oddly agreeable on that morning; exhausted, and strangely, subconsciously glad to be caught. And entirely preoccupied with taking responsibility for everything so Mr. P wouldn't get blamed. I had no secrets from the police that morning. I pointed them toward my (poor quality) cocaine, to my beautifully ironed piles of cash (I used to iron my scrunched-up pound notes to make them easier to count; with hair irons no less.) The police had lied about evidence they had on me, and

threatened me with immediate deportation to Australia, and much more in their efforts to obtain details from me; but none of this appeared in these transcripts. I was appalled. In America, I might have expected it, the criminal justice system in America is known for corruption, racism, injustices; I had foolishly thought that London, with its cute police bobbies and their Bobbie hats (and lack of firearms attached to their belts) had an honest and true police force. And the fact that my pal, my arresting police officer, the same one who chatted and smiled with me on the train ride to court, could stand in the dock and be so corrupt and duplicitous, made me furious.

(The fact that I was lying too, didn't occur to me at the time.)

I was outraged; and even more determined to win, so I turned up the charisma and wit, and mastered the shifting of my spectacles on my nose in a way that resembled true geeky librarian innocence.

As the days wore on though, this process became exhausting. The balconies emptied, with only three (very close) friends left in the gallery downstairs.

Mr. P wasn't among them; Mr. P was the greatest truest friend, but not good at timekeeping, and I mean that sentence with enormity. Goodness knows where he was, but I don't doubt that wherever he was, he was causing great chaos, great fun, or great self-destruction. And these days in court were sure to have had different flavours to them if Mr. P had been there.

Lunch breaks were the strangest. The opposing barrister, my enemy, appeared to be great friends (or at least very civil colleagues) with my own barrister, and they sat in the cafeteria chatting happily to each other, while my very life hung in the balance. I couldn't reconcile this friendship they enjoyed during lunch, while playing enemies during court time. I was aware I was part of a great big insane system of utter lunacy, hypocrisy, corruption, cogs upon cogs of systems and politics and archaic institutional habits that had very little to do with a legal system, very little to do with the person standing in the dock. It had quite a lot to do with wigs that constantly needed adjusting. The barristers wore wigs. This made sense somehow. It was elaborate, illogical, and I wondered

how many injustices had gone before me, as part of this system. I wondered about all the people that engendered less movie-star affection than I did, those that possessed less charisma and wit than I did; I wondered how they fared. No, I knew they didn't fare well. I wondered about those who couldn't speak up for themselves for their own mental health, their own addiction. I wondered about those less gifted than I at playing this game. I wondered about those that were on the less lucky end of racism or class in that court room, within that system. I thought of every person whose life had spiraled downward, toward misery, chaos and disorder; and to crime. I felt for each and every one of them, that had stood in the dock before me, tiny tiny pawns in this elaborate system that had so little to do with justice and a lot to do with wigs.

Actual wigs.

I vowed that day to fight for those who'd be failed by this ridiculous criminal justice system.

I'd live and be free to do just that.

Just not this day.

On this day, I would resource every gift I'd been blessed with, and I'd refuse to be an insignificant cog in this ridiculous unfair bewigged machinery.

The penultimate day came to a close, and despite my brilliance, despite my gorgeous relationship with the judge, my case was not looking good. There was evidence I'd been a drug dealer, no amount of charm could disguise that. My barrister informed me that the jury did not appear sympathetic toward me at all (and she reminded me that this was because I'd not engaged with them at all, as I'd been advised). She, again urged me to change my plea to guilty.

I would not.

At home that final night, the night before my verdict, I was aware that I'd likely never see this house I stood in again. Chances were, I'd be taken directly to prison at the end of the following day, after a guilty verdict, for a minimum six-

year sentence. The council would take possession of everything in my flat, and I'd never see it again. I'd not planned ahead for this. I decided to scramble a few of my most important things together and have a friend collect them; but as I scrambled, I realized there was nothing, absolutely nothing I cared about to keep. I figured I'd commit suicide in prison somehow, or die in prison for being such a pretty gay boy; I needed nothing in my flat. It was a strange night, this night before my last day in court. I cannot describe my mood. It was like every other day in my life; complicated, dramatic, yet overshadowed by apathy and nihilism. My usual numb. But epic.

The final day in court took a darker turn.

The humour was gone, and a veil of seriousness, I'd say doom, descended over the courtroom, over the day, over the world.

My charisma and wit abandoned me.

My three friends were most likely preparing to never see me again, though they'd made promises to visit me in prison. I'd asked one of them to smuggle drugs in for me to commit suicide with. She'd argued and refused, repeatedly, but on this morning before court, she promised she would. A great gesture of kindness that betrayed her fundamental principles. It was a huge moment. Not a wordy moment; she simply told me she would without looking me in the eye; and then there was a potent silence and great heaviness.

The final day seemed to be about tidying up. People, such as my pal the arresting officer and his team all returned to observe the outcome of all their work. Colleagues and superiors of the barristers were in attendance, and it felt like there was a greater audience present; notably absent were my giggling curious acquaintances on the balconies. They were off having fun elsewhere, I hope. I don't doubt. The result was a veil of seriousness and doom, a very attentive audience invested in my fate, for various reasons and agendas.

The judge was very respectful to my three friends. He remarked upon their daily, loyal attendance, as if they were special guests. Amid all the new strangers and observers and vultures.

My camaraderie with the judge felt strong, bonded. It felt intimate. It felt kind. It felt fair, which was a unique contrast to all other machinations in the room. I was very glad to have him so close to me in this strange room, on these strange days. The only beacon of common sense amid the madness, amid the ridiculousness, amid the agendas. Even if I had lied a bit (a lot), even though that; this camaraderie was honest, this intimacy was real, and we both appreciated it.

Unless I was just grooming him and didn't know it.

The day went on, with a lot of summing up.

And my case looked increasingly bleak. Frankly, in fact; it was past bleak. There was no question that my innocence had not been proven, in any way.

The last half of the day was all given to the judge; everyone else had said their peace, they closed their folders and sat. The judge took ownership of his room, and spoke for an hour. I was told it was the time when he summarises both cases, for and against. He does this solely for the jury's benefit, to refresh their minds of the arguments, and to invite them to deliberate on the days' events. It was a surprise to hear my life history and my fate all summed up into a binary set of arguments.

The time in court, and the weight of the potential outcome had taken its toll on me; this day had taken a darker turn. I had heard my fate being argued by people who barely knew me. I'd heard a zealous case put forth of my evil drug-dealing criminal machinations, I'd been called a liar, a cheat, a person who had carelessly spread HIV in bathhouses around the world while getting others addicted to drugs.

I'd also heard my own barrister speaking of an orphaned boy, bereft of his mother's love, traumatized by his father's angst, abandoned into a complicated adolescence without affection. About a boy who struggled with his sexuality at a time when the world was united in hate against homosexuality, and in the grips of unkind fear of an AIDS plague. She told a story of a traumatized young

man coping with a terminal illness that drifts into drug addiction and chaos and crime.

This story, that I had thought was fiction, this story that I had callously spun to keep me out of prison was laid before me, and I knew it was all true, but it seemed foreign to me when told this sympathetic way.

The whole court case became surreal to me. It seemed like this binary decision that the jury were determining, my guilt or innocence, was about my entire life, about a pearly gate judgment. It was as if the full assembly of the Greek Gods were debating my very worth as a human being from their pantheon in the heavens.

Was I good, was I evil? Was there any goodness in me to redeem me, or was my life a waste: a waste of cruelty, self-indulgence, harm to others.

Or was I redeemable.

In the last years, I'd been lost in wastelands of sex parties and drug-fueled hedonism, determined to self-destruct, seeking confirmation from any lover, any drug companion, that I was filth, worthless.

I found that confirmation, night after night, I lived it. I knew it.

I'd known it since I was six years old, even if I had disguised it, bulldozed through it with charisma and fury. It had accelerated over the years, but my worthlessness had been my constant companion, with many manifestations, many disguises.

Mostly fucking glamorous disguises.

Less so at the end, yes that's true.

And now, my life was being laid before me and debated, thumbs up or thumbs down, like a proud but devastated and very confused gladiator before his audience, before his emperor.

Was I redeemable, or was I not.

Good or evil.

It had been warred out over three days in this court room, while I rode my valium high, spun the game and took my life story hostage to win my freedom.

And I was now sat in a dock while the gods decided if I was good or evil, for heaven or hell, redeemable or destined for the hell I had been seeking all along. It was confusing for me, I'd spent most of my life spinning between the conflicting notions, that I am brilliant, uniquely gifted, worthy of the movie-star attention I got; and yet also worthless, unwanted, guilty of the most atrocious cruelties and evils. This conflict was heady, and exhausting, and all the while I'd known, if I'd just stayed with my mum and dad, if they'd just lived, if that kill kill day didn't happen...

This would all be different.

Was she looking down, my mum? I'd always felt so. Never harshly, always always lovingly. As mums do. Was dad beside her? I believed so, despite how history judged him.

I know they believed in the good in me, but they were biased, they were also dead, and as silent as the dead must be. Unable to be heard in this court room. History was about to judge me as it had judged my dad, and I didn't care. I no longer cared.

Chapter 34

The Verdict, the Pearly Gates, Oh the Injustice

Maybe I had slept with the judge back in my escort days.

I felt so bonded to him now, after these intense days when he was my only friend in a lunatic court room of machinations and agendas and cocaine giggles from the balconies.

Oh and the wigs.

Now, many years after, I can remember the judge's face, I can tell you the look he gets on his face when he's amused, but very self-composed and not showing it. I can tell you the humour that lies under the mask when he shuffles his papers that don't need shuffling. I can tell you how boredom manifests within him and frustration too; and I bet I'm the only one besides his close family that recognize that.

English isn't my first language.

When I emerged from my mother's womb, I (like most mammals) was vulnerable to the elements, unable to feed myself or protect myself from the elements; I was vulnerable to prey and other dangers, and being safe...

Being safe was my primary need, I'd say my primary emotion. It was primal, this need to know I was safe.

Primal and instinctive, this vital urgency to know I was safe.

And the only way I knew that, was by the expressions on my mother's face.

This was my first language.

Knowing whether I'm safe, purely by looking into my mother's face. At age 2 months, I knew when my mother was in danger from a violent husband. I knew from her face. I knew when I was safe and loved. I knew at age 14 months whether my dad was my protector today, or whether he was the bringer of destruction and unsafety.

The tiniest nuance of movement, the twinkle in an eye, a glance, body language told me everything. The sound a car makes when it arrives in the driveway; sometimes a screech, sometimes a gentle, considered parking. The way a door closes, the nuances of a greeting as someone enters a room... The way a tap is turned as an angry person fetches a glass of water. The subtle turn of a shoulder as an unwelcome person enters a room, the poised neck when a manipulation is happening.

I knew this language before I could speak, and it was a vital understanding.

These sounds determined whether I'd be fed that day, or ignored. Those sounds, those arched eyebrows, that poised neck, that subtle tone in the voice, determined the course of my day, and how desperate it would be.

No language of words would ever be more telling than this first language I mastered. The language of survival, the language of survivors, the language of predators. The language groomers resource to identify and manipulate victims. The expressions on the faces around me told me everything I needed to know about life or death, security or danger, and a whole lot more. This language was crucial, vital and I learned it well.

Because I needed it. A lot.

My need to feel safe would accompany me all my life, and I'd need to see the expressions on my mother's face to know I was safe.

When my mother wasn't there, I'd resource that same language to assess the safeness of any situation I was in.

And I was in some very unsafe situations growing up.

Often.

So I mastered this language of facial expressions. I learned to read it, I learned to communicate it.

Most people have emotions and empathy to guide them through challenging situations.

My emotions and empathy were fucked.

So this first language, reading facial expressions was crucial to me. It is my charisma, it is the finely-honed skill I use to assess the world around me, to manipulate the world around me; it is my likeability.

It's my survival.

It's how I weave my magic, even if it is unconscious and on autopilot most of the time.

Sometimes it's my enemy; when I want to be invisible, when I want to not exist, it shines and draws attention. Sometimes people resent it; the family that raised me resented it, were confused by it, saw it as attention-seeking. Anyone that knows its power, resents it, resists it. Sometimes violently.

It worked with drug dealers when I had no money, it worked with lovers who tired of me. It worked when I was escorting, even though I was phenomenally bad at sex. It worked on hotel concierges, and it worked even when there was nothing left in me to continue, when I wanted to die; it worked and dragged me back into existence.

This language I learned from my mother.

This language would make me a great activist in years to come; I'd invent words that become global zeitgeist community movements, I'd convince homophobic closed-minded governments to invest in culturally tailored support services for people they previously considered unworthy of salvation. I'd save lives and inspire communities.

Using this language.

This language I learned from my mother, and mastered through trauma, that I mastered through a strangely contradictory will to survive.

It's a language I was using this day in the court room to assess my safety, to ensure it.

It's the reason I chose the judge to be my pal, rather than the jury, way over there, where charisma didn't reach so well.

(Oh, it would have worked on the jury, trust me; I just had a closer, more powerful option.)

I came to know the expressions on this judge's face, so well. And he mine. It was as though we shared the ridiculousness of the proceedings, the zealous attempts by counsel to manipulate events and evidence, to re-tell the same story through different lens' to achieve opposing goals.

Amongst all the ridiculousness, the judge had my face to refer to. A secret language, taught me by my mother, and he his.

And when the time came for his summing up, at the end of the three days; he would rely on the messages communicated via our secret language, more than he would anything else.

Because he let me go.

He set me free.

The jury found me guilty, but the judge disregarded them and set me free.

It was not justice that prevailed that day.

It was not the trusted processes of Her Majesty's criminal justice system that set me free that afternoon.

The jury did not want me free.

"Guilty"

they said, and I could see they felt I deserved every day of the six year sentence.

Even through my blurry glasses I could see they had not bought any of my charisma or lies.

But the judge disagreed with them and told them so.

I was astounded.

He gave a me a commuted sentence, without conditions.

Which meant walking free that day, and the police having to give my stash of cash back to me. (I was found guilty of possession but not "Intent to Supply" (dealing).

It was something magical, mystical, other-worldly.

It was something about secret languages, charm, reading of signals, grooming, charming.

I don't remember too much now, I was in a daze. I was not happy; I was numb.

I remember the judge telling me that I could be in his court room in a year from now on another charge; that it was up to me what I did with my freedom. I could use it well, or be back in his court room again. It didn't sound reprimanding, it sounded kind and true. Very kind. It was his goodbye to me after our intimacy.

My friend Paul was hugging me and bouncing up and down, saying

"you're free, you're free",

It had been entirely unexpected, the day and my chances had taken a much darker turn; there seemed little hope for me. But I was like a limp rag doll in his arms as he squeezed and jumped me up and down, confused by his jubilation.

My barrister said to me:

"It hasn't really sunk in yet has it?"

because I wasn't responding to her. I remained silent and numb.

I wasn't happy.

I did not know joy. Anhedonia.

I didn't believe this.

And yes, I was glad to not be going to prison, but it meant I had to go home to a life I didn't have, a job that wasn't there anymore, to an addiction that didn't work anymore, and a future I couldn't fathom, didn't know how to design, didn't care about. What to do, how to be sober, how to survive, eat, live.



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Your Ref:

Our Ref:
KR/S0200001/014
Date:
23 August 2004

Dear David

Re: Possession of Class A Drugs with Intent to Supply

I write to formally confirm that you were sentenced for the offence of possession of a Class A drug, namely cocaine, as follows:

- 1 To be subject to a conditional discharge for three years.
- 2 To pay Court costs of £150 to be paid at a monthly rate of £25, the first payment to be made on Friday 3rd September 2004.

The effect of the conditional discharge is that the Court has not imposed any penalty on you for the offence, however, if you are convicted of a further offence during the period of the discharge, the Court can sentence you for the original offence in any manner in which it could have dealt with it in the first instance. In effect therefore, there will be no further consequences provided you are not convicted of a criminal offence within three years.

With regard to payment of the Court costs, I would advise you to contact the Court directly to make enquiries as to the best method of monthly payments.

I am delighted with the outcome of this matter and it is clear that the Court has sentenced you sympathetically in light of your background circumstances.

I enclose herewith a bundle of all the original documents you gave to me during the course of our meetings. Your file of papers accumulated in the preparation of your case for trial will be stored in our archives for a period of six years, after which time they may be destroyed. If there are any documents that you require from your file, please contact me within the six year period.

This firm is a member of the Legal Services Commission's Specialist Fraud Panel
This firm is regulated by the Law Society



I learned that the money I'd made and had stored at home, that had been confiscated by the police on that excellent morning, had to be returned to me, now that I'd been found not guilty of drug dealing (only possession).

The absurdity.

And I had to collect it from my pal, the arresting police officer who had grinned and small-talked to me on the train to the courthouse.

Well that bit was fun.

When I went to meet him, to collect this money, this 'evidence', he stood me up three times, claiming he was busy on crucial police business. He resisted SO hard, returning that cash that represented his failure.

But on the fourth time, he handed my cash over, I signed for it, and he asked if I was going to spend it on drugs.

I might have, but not after that comment; just out of spite I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I had thought about it.

But it seemed that all of Soho, all of whom were gossiping about my narrow escape from a prison sentence, were expecting me to return to my old tricks. When you've been drug dealing for a decade, people don't let you go that easily. From your drug suppliers who know you to be a cash cow, to your clients who want their drugs now, to the lonely desperate souls I shared my loneliness and desperation with, who need you back, to share that intimacy that comes with loneliness and desperation and destruction.

Most commonly, even from the haters (as well as caring friends), I heard

"You've been given a second chance, don't blow it".

"You had a lucky escape, don't waste this opportunity".

Again and again.

And I was lost, with a wad of cash, and my longtime companions nihilism and trauma for company, completely and ridiculously unable to even be happy that I wasn't in prison.

But I knuckled on.

I stayed sober, and lived off my dirty money.

And I reflected on this "second chance".

It was bigger than that though; I reflected and philosophized on the narrative I'd lived up to this point. My mother, always watching over me, kept fast company with me during this time. She reminded me of who I had been, before all this.

An uncomplicated but dynamic and shining boy. Not merely 'allowed' to shine, but having my shine actually celebrated every day. Encouraged. I knew my purpose, and it was about making others, making her, feel good. Feel better and be better. A boy who commanded attention with that shine, a boy who exclaimed so uniquely and floridly about everything that sparked his interest, about everything that caused joy, that it caused attention. A boy who had no tolerance for the dull, so broke it one way or another. Usually by making himself the centre of attention. It's cute when 5-year olds do this, but sometimes it's also annoying – to some people. Some people like the quiet, some people like the dull. Some people like children to be seen and not heard, some people prefer flamboyant young attention-seeking boys to be little masculine men that play quietly in mud and smash frogs with sticks.

And when children are insightful, that's even more disturbing. When a child can sense an upset adult, and cares, it might be interpreted as 'mommy-boy' behaviour, and that child is chastised.

For caring.

For being intuitive.

Some children communicate every thought that comes into their head, without filter. Wanting to know "Why this" and Why that"; coming to brilliant, childish conclusions, and bouncing these conclusions off of people, perhaps annoyingly, only to communicate a very different conclusion a minute later. That's how

some, brilliant, intelligent kids process their learning, as they absorb the complex and sometimes ridiculous world around them. Whether that be annoying or not. And just like in “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, when a child senses nonsense, and calls it out, it can be unwelcomed by those spinning the nonsense, or those who need to believe in the nonsense. Sometimes it is ridiculous when a room full of grown-ups in a church queue up to eat a wafer that they believe to be the body of Christ. Some children call the adults out on this ridiculousness. (Don’t they? I did, it was my infant duty.) Sometimes it is ridiculous that dolls are only for girls to play with, or that boys can’t wear pink. But some adults need those ridiculous things to be true, and don’t like the insightful, incisive challenges on this by young boys.

While my mother nurtured these qualities in me, allowed them to shine (only to be accused of mollycoddling and spoiling me) others didn’t like this shine so much. I reflected a lot on this period during these days, and wondered if that shine was still there. Somewhere.

That shine had certainly not been welcomed in the family that got me after the kill kill day. I wondered if Shine can be muted, quashed, dulled, or if it was omnipotent. I know it emerged often; I continued to charm and shine upon people wherever I went; I got by, I resourced it like a privilege, good things happened to me because of it, and I was liked for it. It paved my way. But the pavement took me to such dark places, and the joy that seemed to be all around me never touched me.

The court case, which had become less about my guilt or innocence regarding a drug charge, had morphed in my disturbed head into a judgment on the sum of my entire life.

Was my shine valid or not.

And I wondered what to do with my life, what the next chapter might be.

I wondered if the next thing would just come along, or if I’d have to make it happen. I could easily recognize this was one of those empty gaps between life’s chapters; change was being served to me on a plate, but the plate was

empty. Fate, as if it were some intelligent thing, had judged me and spared me, then hung a choice before me; continue to self-destruct, or do something brilliant.

But inspiration comes in many bizarre manifestations. During this lost time, inspiration came from my best friend, my darling Mr. P, Stevie P. Not by intent. Mr. P was a force of nature, chaotic and uncontrollable; but it was his path, and my observation on it, that would determine the next chapter of my life.

Chapter 35

The Velocity of Mr. P

I've waxed fondly about Mr. P already.

I swear the earth shifted on its axis when Stevie P was born. Or conceived maybe.

It's hard to put together the pieces of his childhood, because he had this canny skill of reinventing the truth. They weren't lies; or perhaps they were, but never malicious. He just remembered things through a drama lens, and the story was serving some purpose of convincing someone of something that was important on that day.

But it might have different importance another day, so the drama lens would have a different hue, the story would have a slightly different outcome.

That's what it's like trying to put together Mr. P's life story. As told through various lens' of his own design.

And not only his life story; the story of what happened yesterday was just as distorted. And as he spun so many stories, he began to forget what the real truth was. There were so many truths told to so many people, his own brain couldn't keep up with what was real anymore.

This was a charming thing about him. Everyone thought so. It never appeared to be manipulative or unkind; just sweetly, very complicated. And the truths

were all told with such charisma and delight, that the truth always seemed less important than just being in his delightful presence.

He was seventeen or eighteen when I met him. It was around 1999. Geri Halliwell had left the Spice Girls, and that upset Mr. P very much. We were all upset, to be honest, but Mr. P took it hard. Kylie Minogue had just released "Can't Get You Out of My Head" which made things a lot better, and The Matrix was in cinemas confirming everything we'd always suspected during our drug highs. Mr. P was working as a 'glass boy' collecting used glasses, returning them to the bar staff who were of age to be behind the bar. It was a gay bar in Soho, and everyone was either scared of him, or in love with him. Scared, just because he had trouble and chaos written all over him. A rite of passage for good looking young men on the gay scene, is to be photographed for all the club flyers, and to appear on the cover of the free gay magazines that list the weekly clubs, latest music and the male escorts. Mr. P enjoyed these rights. Another, less glamorous rite of passage is to be celebrated sexually by club promoters, DJs, scene queens; to be plied with drugs, free entry queue-jump passes to the best clubs, and to be amongst the popular at the private members parties and the VIP areas.

Mr. P loved this. Well it's more correct to say, he loved it at the time, though he did come to reflect differently on these times retrospectively, and with some trauma. At the time though, he enjoyed the celebrity and popularity; and at the same time, he couldn't be bought. He usually ended up causing so much chaos and trouble in these situations, and for these people, that he would most likely be kicked out before he was exploited.

Always forgiven of course, and welcomed back the following week.

When the same would happen again.

But the chaos and trouble he caused was never boring; it was kind of like watching a sequined disco train coming off the tracks and crashing, all in slow motion, into a Hard Rock café full of all the celebrities you hate.

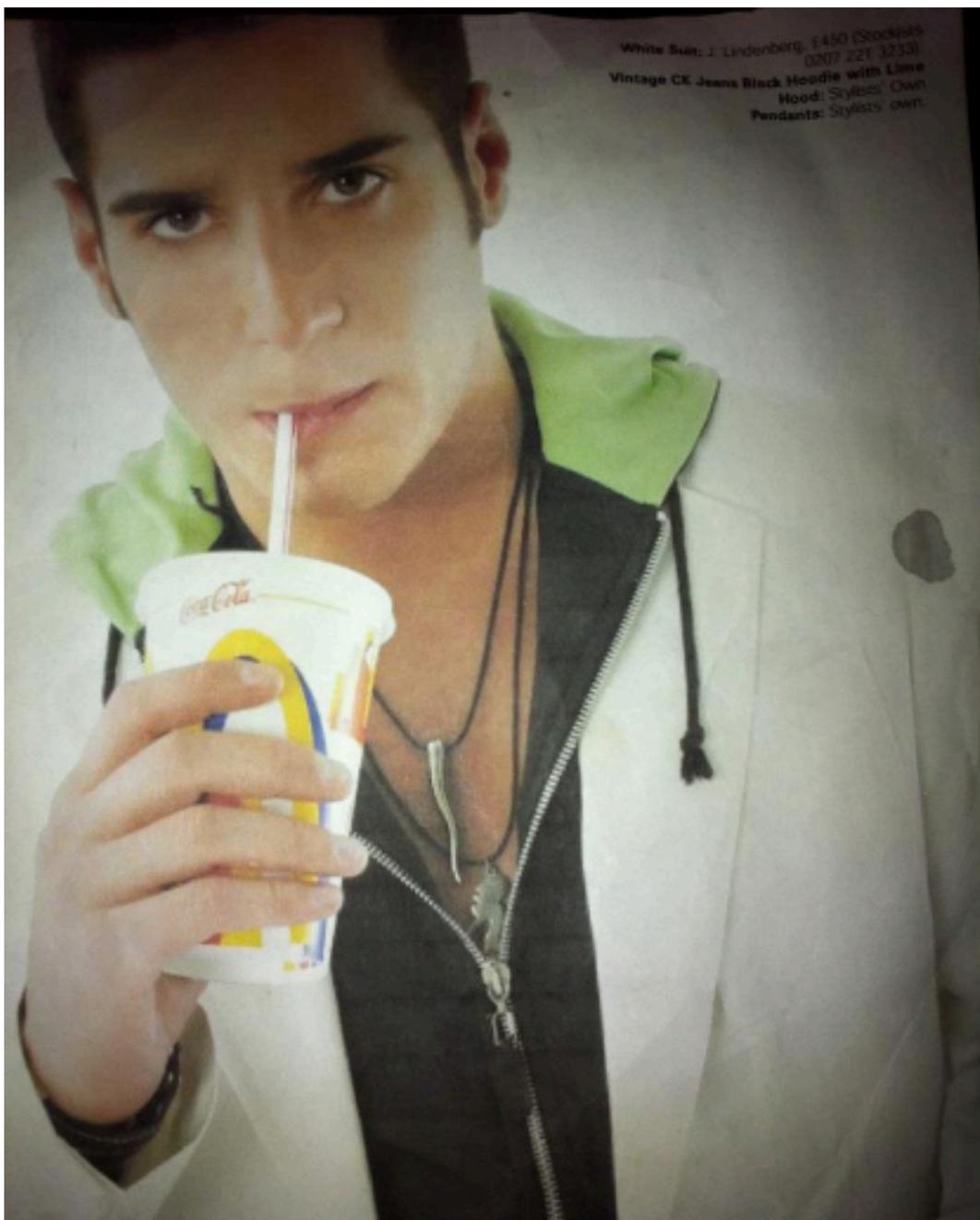
You kind of want to see that again. And again.

We were best friends from the moment we met.

Not sexual; which was unique, because he was a sexual object to most people, and he encouraged that on a lot of days.

It seemed to happen even when he didn't encourage it.

This was a time just before I was heavily into crystal meth, when I was still enjoying the social celebrity of cocaine dealing. When it was possible to form sober friendships; before too long, both Stevie P and I would move quickly past that point.



Normal stuff, like meeting each other for late Soho breakfasts (3pm), sharing stories of clubland and chaos, borrowing each other's clothes, always forgetting to return them, always always arguing over the lost items of clothes. Discussing the ever-changing qualities of ecstasies and bitching our other friends who had annoyed us that week. Occasionally seeing a movie, having dinner with friends. But the nights were always about drugs and dancing and socializing (and for me, dealing obviously).

Mr. P had a whole lot of jobs in the years I knew him. He'd been a glass boy and bar tender, waiter, drug dealer, escort, pimp, hotel concierge, children's dance teacher, model. Not in that order; and not in an order that might make any sense to you. He was dealing drugs at age 13, escorting at the time of his death, and none of those jobs in between followed any trajectory that made any sense.

If I hadn't made the point already, Mr. P was chaos personified, but also enigmatic, and would surprise you with what he was capable of, constantly. He was the classic cockroach that nothing would ever kill. And the classic chameleon who would inhabit many manifestations during his years; most of them entirely contradictory.

Crazy, fun, trouble, chaotic; but he also had a streak of integrity through him like I'd never known in any other human being.

I do mean ever.

It resembled an 'honour amongst thieves' kind of integrity, or an East End gangster loyalty kind of integrity. He was good. He believed in good. He believed in justice, in loyalty, in friendship over anything else. He found it hard to keep friends long term (he had lots of transient friends), but he would inevitably piss them off with his chaos at some point. He got stuck in window frame trying to escape a room he shouldn't have been in. He had sex with the wrong people, at the wrong time, in the wrong place. He drank a litre of holy water from the fridge of a boyfriend's grandmother's house he was staying in once in Italy. She

had gotten it from Lourdes, on pilgrimage, and kept it in her fridge to preserve the holiness.

Mr. P drank it by mistake one morning on a hangover.

He'd do something so kind (but dodgy) to help a friend, but inevitably get caught, tell some lies to protect the friend, get in deeper, then do something dodgy to wriggle out of that mess, and so on until he needed to do a runner, and disappear for a month, so things could calm down.

He'd stay in your flat for the weekend; and that one precious thing you own, that one very special fragile thing that you keep out of reach; he'd find it accidentally and break it. Guaranteed. Every time, it was freakish, this skill he had.

That one person in your life that you don't want your friends to shag; Stevie P would have the affair of the century with them. But completely without malice. Just his chaos, the curse that enveloped and accompanied him.

That quiet day you'd been looking forward to, that moment of peace and quiet; his world would implode on that very day; just know it would.

That's Mr. P.

He left upset people and complicated messes in his wake.

But we loved him. Some people needed to love him in retrospect, because his 'current' was too much drama, but in retrospect, everyone loved him.

I loved him concurrently, and it was easy for me.

And unique. Because I was mostly incapable of love. But I felt something with him, something unusual to me.

Retrospectively, I find it harder to think of him, because he isn't here anymore, and there is an ache about that.

The inevitable spiraling of our lives happened in tandem, and that seemed just right.

I found crystal. I spiraled.

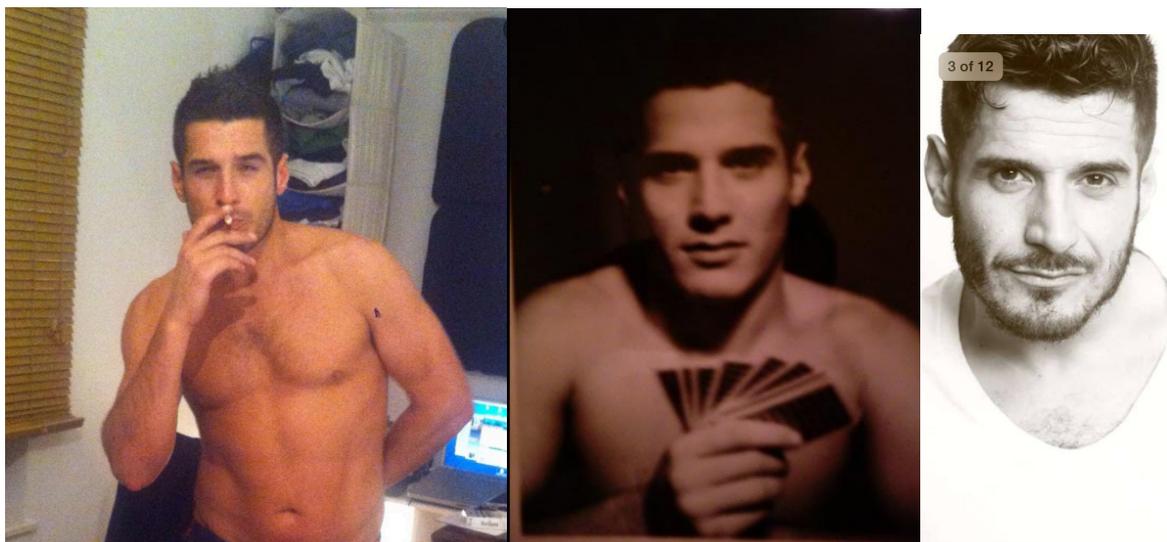
Mr. P's mum died, awfully, of cancer. He adored her, he adored his entire family. It broke him, there was no other way to describe it, it broke him.

He was high and on my sofa, day 2 of a chill-out party, when the day of his mum's funeral arrived. The grief was the theme of the chill-out, a melancholic cloud hung over the room as we did drugs and supported Stevie P in his grief, philosophizing over death, cancer, grief and which porn video to put on next. We rallied and dressed Mr. P for the funeral, curated his drug high to make him socially presentable, stocked him up with enough valium and cocaine to get through the day, deliberated over the best pair of sunglasses to hide his giant pupils... then sent him in a black cab to his mum's funeral after inhaling a giant plume of smoke from the meth pipe.

And like the champion he is, he managed it.

He returned to me that evening, literally falling out of the cab, while yelling at the cab driver (I think they'd been arguing the whole trip), and staggered into my house exclaiming his need for more drugs urgently.

The bender we both shared in the following days was an abyss of carnage and self-destruction. I can barely remember. It was dark. And it heralded the beginning of both our descent into darker realms of self-harm and partying. Both of us at the time, entirely oblivious to my abuse of his trust in me and his innocence.



I was Mr. P's "Legend"; he always introduced me as a legend, described me as a legend. It was fitting; when we met I was gloriously reigning over Soho clubland, the best dressed, kindest, most popular shining anti-hero giving away lines of cocaine with every air-kiss, every hug, every introduction. Sexually, I was completely unavailable (these were my pre-crystal days), which of course only adds to the mystery and elevated status.

And Mr. P was in his teens, so he must have seen me as heroic.

Two fascinating anti-heroes, shining with good looks, wrapped in trouble, unobtainable in our own ways, wreaking all kinds of trouble and glamour across London.

Together, in the daytime, we were pretty regular; grumpy, disheveled, managing the comedown from the night/week before. Hating this person, loving that new person, scoffing food to compensate for the days we didn't eat at all. But I was still his legend.

In the night times, we operated in different spheres. We didn't go out together, we shared different friends (though all in the same universe). He was trouble; welcome for a while, for his charisma and watchability, but inevitably kicked out of wherever he was. And entirely deservedly so; even he would agree. I was better behaved in these shiny days, always the most welcome, always pulled from group to group by people who adored me and wanted to bask in my shine. But our paths would cross, somehow, each evening. I'd hear news of the trouble Mr. P had caused, somewhere in London; not just because of the wildfire of gossip, but because people always assigned me as Mr. P's caretaker; as if I was the person who was supposed to 'rescue' him from his latest debacle, or have a talk with him about his behaviour, or apologise on his behalf.

Mr. P never needed rescuing, not ever.

Nor would I dream of apologizing for him; Mr. P's chaos was his superhero strength, it was his party trick, it was fascinating and dynamic and brilliant. I'd never apologise for that, to anybody. They should consider themselves lucky to be in the presence of it.

People would grab me at a bar and say:

"David, have you heard what Stevie P did, in the upstairs bar at Heaven? It's outrageous, this can't go on; you need to talk to him. Maybe you can talk to the bar owners too, smooth this over. Stevie can't keep doing this stuff."

This was a regular part of my nightlife, from the day I met him, till the end.

I'd just smile. Gosh I loved these stories.

I wouldn't be apologizing for Mr. P. No way.

He didn't need my rescue, he certainly didn't need me tidying up his mess. He didn't need me apologizing.

These people should be grateful they were blessed with his unique brand of charisma and chaos.

This was Mr. P. I never understood why people were so surprised by this behaviour; it happened everywhere he went, every time. And what they didn't know, was that subconsciously, that's why they invited Mr. P in the first place. Again and again.

This lunatic, cycle, of loving Stevie P for his madness and drama, basking in it, adoring it, then complaining about it afterward, at city-wide level.

Then wanting him again the next night.

Mr. P was a glorious enigmatic spectacle.

And just as the bar owners, and the rest of Soho were aghast at the shocking antics and the devastation in Mr. P's wake; just as I was being pulled aside, whispered to, invited to step in somehow to arrest this behaviour, address the chaos... Mr. P would be ten blocks away having a ball, and being celebrated by a different crowd.

And not needing me to apologise for him at all.

No way.

I was fascinated with him, and I was his shining legend.

Our paths would cross in the night, inevitably, at some point. We would greet each other as if we hadn't seen each other in years, with so much to tell of the

previous hours, and falling over ourselves as we shared our stories of our evening's experiences. We'd lock ourselves in someone's bathroom at some party or club, we'd share giant lines of coke, check each other's nostrils, regale at how fabulous we were, swap shirts just for fun and for a change of outfit (since neither of had likely been home to change for days) and promise to kill each other if we ever got old and boring.

Then we'd part ways again and continue our nights.

Should I, a seasoned cocaine dealer in his twenties, be sharing drugs with a teenager in the dodgiest dives and clubs in London's underworld?

Of course not; and yes. That's what young people do. Stevie P was a juggernaut cargo train careering toward disaster, and this was his path. And I was on mine. On his path he'd bring delight to millions, and even if that delight looked like chaos and drama, they weren't astute enough to recognize how blessed they were to be in the path of that train.

I knew it.

Young people finding community and solace within the spaces their minority groups commune, do stupid things, do crazy things, they pursue joy, flirt with danger. They do drugs.

What Mr. P needed was kindness; the unconditional kind. And he got that from me, if from no one else. I was his legend, and he was my chaos train.

If penance was needed, we'd work these things out on his deathbed. Only a decade later.

We did.

For now he was alive, and more so than most people; his life force was supernova.

I was older, in my twenties, but also I carried an authority with me, it was part of my charm. Old kind souls might know me to be vulnerable, and troubled; but less intuitively, out there in the world, I looked sleek and confident, I moved with purpose, crowds parted as I walked toward them, somehow assuming that that's a given. For me it was a given. I assumed crowds would part, and

become quieter, because that's the way it had always been. That's how my charisma worked. I arrived at a club, I'd drop my gorgeous and expensive coat off my shoulders, it would fall to the floor, entirely forgotten by me as I hurried forward and enthusiastically to hug a dear friend. Then another. Then I'd be swept by popularity into welcoming arms of friends, admirers, and people who want my drugs and my smile. Leaving my coat abandoned on the floor behind me somewhere.

But I didn't mind. I had faith that someone would have picked it up and followed me, exclaiming

"David, you left your coat behind!"

I knew it, like I knew the sun would rise each day.

I had that confidence, and my faith in good people.

If I didn't know it, if I hadn't believed in myself that way, it wouldn't have worked.

I would have lost coats all over London, New York, wherever.

Maybe I did lose a coat here or there, but I never lost a coat that was more important to me than the fanfare that distracted me from it.

People attributed a classiness to me, that was my shine. My charisma, my soap star good looks, my height, the way I moved, and my kindness. Perhaps there was some vulnerability on my sleeve too that people found attractive, but I wouldn't have known that. All I knew, is that something worked, and that 'something' lent me an authority that both hindered and helped me through the decades.

Stevie P's shine and charisma were different. Less classy, less authoritative. So he got exploited more than me. It was hard to exploit Mr. P, because, he was never around long enough for anyone to get the upper hand, because you'd want him kicked out of a place before you could exploit him, because he was street smart and savvy.

But he was also naïve, didn't think things through, acted on the seat of his pants, did whatever he wanted to do in the moment, then he was gone, usually with something really important broken behind him.

He had an eye for an opportunity: free drugs, a glamorous invitation, a good time at someone else's expense.

There were 'marks'; people he felt comfortable ripping off, usually because they were evil and then there were all the other people, to whom Mr. P was kind. Very kind. A huge heart, a huge potential for kindness and great, great deeds.

Mr. P was groomed as very young teenager, barely a teenager, sexually, by some predatory men. He only spoke to me of this in the months leading to his death. He spoke of it as a fun thing, as something he sought out, a teenager with some burgeoning sexual (gay) appetites, ashamed of them, seeking out sex with older men.

It was difficult to introduce him to the fact that he was so very young, too young to comprehend those desires he had, in a homophobic world; it was hard to explain to him, that he deserved some kind adults to whom he could talk about those teenage sexual (gay) desires, and his changing body, without shame, without exploitation, without abuse, without religion. He deserved someone to say to him, as a very young teenager:

"There are some things happening to your body, and you are having feelings, sexy feelings, toward men. These feelings are healthy, very normal, and yes, a bit confusing; they'll make sense more as you get older, and grow into them. Even if you feel like 'acting' on them, it's important that older people around you acknowledge that it's a confusing, vulnerable time, and your sexuality is a no-go area, until you're a bit older. All adults around you should honor and respect your youth and vulnerability, and respect the confusing things happening to you; they should respect you and protect you from abuse, from any touching or any engagement. Any adults that have touched you sexually, should have cared that these things would fuck you up, fuck up your mental health, your future relationship

*with sex, with trust, with intimacy. Maybe even make you turn to drugs.
You should have been protected from this."*

Mr. P wasn't protected from this. He sought it out, this adult sex when he was too young to comprehend it, unable to speak of his teenage gay sexy feelings at home, at school, with friends; he sought it out, and he sought it out with adults, who should have respected his innocence, should have known that these acts would devastate Mr. P, drive him to prostitution, drugs, mental health, and a complicated complicated relationship to sex and intimacy as an adult.

It would kill him in fact.

Mr. P didn't know any of this stuff.

He described his teenage pursuit of adult gay sex as a laugh.

He began to reflect on it a little, as his mental health caught up with him, as he lay dying for his last few months.

There were people in Soho clubland, Soho nightlife, who reminded Mr. P of exploitative predators.

Mostly, Soho and clubland nightlife was full of good people, but Mr. P saw predators everywhere, unconsciously. He saw good people too; he knew them; his heart was so big. But certain people that had a controlling manner, or who had the potential for cruelty, or looked a certain way... were very obvious to Mr. P.

That's often where the trouble would start.

Like Robin Hood, he'd want to protect everyone in the vicinity from the evil he perceived. And he would do so, heroically.

Loudly.

With chaos and shock waves that would reverberate around London for a good few days or weeks.

Sometimes, when we were hanging out, trouble would start. Very few people would know what was going on, the trouble had a momentum and a chaos that went so fast and confusingly, no one ever knew what the trouble was all about.

And while the whole vicinity was up in arms, responding, I'd just ignore it. Like a slow-motion scene from the Matrix movies, I'd sit, drinking my Martini, snorting a bump of coke off of my knuckle, calm and oblivious to the ruckus around me, that Mr. P was engineering.

Then, as the scene erupted (in Matrix slow motion), Mr. P would grab me by the wrist, determined to protect me from some danger I didn't care about or even believe in, and we'd be gone, while the room behind us erupted in smashed thrown objects and flames.

Then we were at the next party, changing shirts in the bathroom and snorting coke.

Then the texts would come, friends telling me to have words with Mr. P because he'd done it again, and this had to stop, and someone needed to sort him out, and so forth.

This was me and Mr. P, in the early 2000s.

He might just have the most misunderstood person in all of Soho's history. We had many periods when we were inseparable, and many other periods when we didn't see each other at all. We'd hear stories of one another, and friends would always associate us with each other. When a friend would say hi, they'd always ask me how Mr. P was, as if I knew, as if I saw him every day. They always asked if he was still causing trouble, with a giant smile on their face, adoring him and his troublemaking. They'd always ask too, if I'd straightened him out yet, corrected his troublemaking behaviour; as if that was my responsibility, as if I would ever dream of taming Mr. P's wild chaotic nature. I wouldn't tame him, wouldn't change him for the world.

As if I, or anyone could.

No way.

I'd hear that he'd beaten people up, defending my honor. Defending my reputation.

Even when years passed that I didn't see him, I'd hear these stories.

I'd hear that he had described me to some Soho celebrity newcomer as a "a legend", someone they had to meet for their Soho life to be worth anything. Sometimes they'd seek me out, having been fabulously referred by Stevie P. If the city gossip was alive with some new gangster, some new exploitative drug dealer or club promoter that was taking advantage of naïve club kids, or assuming an authority over other people who had earned their place within our society... Mr. P would take them on. He'd make it his mission to put them in their place. It might lead to trouble for Stevie P, mostly, yes it did. A bit of violence, a bit of police engagement, perhaps barred from his favorite bar for a year... it didn't matter to Mr. P. He was the anti-hero of the people, defending people who didn't know they needed defending (and often didn't), putting the world to rights.

Once, I was passing the St Martin's Lane hotel not far from home, just at the moment Mr. P was being kicked out of it.

Literally; he had pissed off some security guy, and was literally being angrily kicked out onto the street.

Not without a fight mind you, and not without a barrage of the most awful insulting and vulgar language that Mr. P could dredge from filthy angry mind. Mr. P often fought with clients when he was escorting. They always reminded him (I think) of nasty predators he'd known when he was very young. Perhaps some were authentically nasty, but I don't doubt too, that many a lovely escort client received Mr. P's wrath as they innocently triggered his early sexual abuse. On this evening outside the St Martin's Lane hotel, I helped Mr. P up off the ground; he shook the debacle off, like only he could, showed me a wad of cash he'd earned (or taken) with a giant smile on his face, and suggested we go spend it.

We did.

A mountain of drugs and some drinks later, after we'd swapped shirts, he went his way, I went mine, as we did. Not intentionally; our differing crowds pulled us in different directions, and that was natural.

Three hours or so later, we crossed paths at a chill-out party in Old Compton Street. He'd been there a while, and as I arrived, some trouble was just starting. Probably by him. I ignored it like I do, and socialized, until the trouble became so big that it wasn't possible to ignore it.

I learned that this was the home of a new-in-town drug dealer who was the new boyfriend of a club promoter that nobody liked. They had a habit of seducing the more naïve club-kids with loads of drugs, and once high, engaging them in sex parties.

All adult, all consensual, but Mr. P had a streak of champion running through him, an axe to grind, a chip on his shoulder, and a sense of absolute righteousness that required him to disrupt this party, and protect innocent people everywhere. He thought all club promoters should be professional, he thought all drug dealers should be like me, kind and honest. Part of him was doing the Batman defending Gotham thing, another part was defending my turf as Soho's primary, noble and divinely entitled drug dealer.

He caused a ruckus. It was divine. All people with good hearts loved Mr. P that night, all evil-doers took it upon themselves to ruin him, and to deliver unto him the trouble he was looking for.

Although I tried to remain uninvolved (I was trying to simply do a bump of coke off of my knuckle and have a quiet drink) it was hard. The Matrix-like slow motion drama got faster, pulled me in, and in no time, me and Mr. P were kicked pretty violently out onto the sidewalk of a bustling Old Compton Street.

I was a little more shaken than Mr. P, this was old-school for him.

But he had me giggling again in no time, and especially so when he showed me his trophy; he'd nicked the credit card of evil guy as he was kicked out, and he had a plan.

We cabbied it up to the Sanderson hotel, booked a penthouse suite, ordered more drugs in, got all our pals around, and partied there for two days.

Two, trouble-free days, it was bliss.

I adored Mr. P. These were the good days; but his descent into more destructive and tormenting mental health was just beginning. The following years, I saw him less and less. News of his trouble and chaos still got to me, but it was less and less the 'fun' kind of chaos that he liked, but really awful, traumatic and very extreme kind of chaos.

He had been a drug dealer, he'd been an escort. It seemed, he could handle the chaos that came with these professions. But as his crystal meth use accelerated, and became a daily habit, things spiraled, as they did for me, though in separate universes, only sometimes crossing paths, and those paths were dark.

He missed his mum. Every day, I don't think a conversation with Mr. P ever happened that didn't (at some point) reference his mum.

And just as he could see his childhood abusers in the faces of every escort client he saw, he could see the absence of his mum in every traumatic moment of his life.

As the traumas increased.

When methamphetamine use crosses with chaotic sex work, and some trauma, messy stuff happens. Mental health diminishes, and the drug use increases to compensate, and more money is needed to pay for the drugs, so boundaries of self-care fall in regard the escort jobs you take or don't take.

Regular use of meth quickly manifests as regular paranoia, perceptions of persecution, the belief that you are being filmed by evil people for shaming or criminal purposes. Amid the psychosis there are people who wish you harm everywhere; they want to intentionally infect you with HIV, hepatitis C; they want to switch your drugs for dangerous poisons, they want to follow you in their cars, they form gangs of people with agendas. You can't trust your shags, your friends, your party guests. You can't trust your own furniture.

It's very convincing.

And it lingers for days, even weeks after you've stopped using the drug, depending on the condition of your current or predisposed mental health. These symptoms can be accompanied by visual hallucinations, and the most frightening of all, the voices.

Just like schizophrenia, voices manifest, from nowhere, in complete silence, or emerging from the general noises that exist all around us. And they persecute. They torment. Always. They warn and point out danger, they observe and commentate, and become increasingly critical.

There was a long gap in time during which I had no communication with Stevie P. I heard things; there was a notorious death at a chemsex party that Mr. P was apparently hosting, all of Soho and beyond were talking about it. It was in the papers. But I couldn't reach him.

I heard he was on criminal charges, somehow responsible for the death.

But I couldn't reach him.

I heard he had cancer, like his mum.

I heard he'd kicked this young guy out of his apartment in a lunatic rage one evening.

I heard he'd caused trouble, here or there.

I heard he got beaten up by some big-time drug suppliers.

I heard he was on the move, changing apartments weekly via Airbnb, running from the police, from other dangers.

I saw him in one of these Airbnb's one afternoon; he answered his phone. He was paranoid but functioning. Moving things around to make himself safer. I had to take my sim card out of my phone before he let me in because he was sure it could be traced, or bugged (or some unknown danger he couldn't quite justify). He fidgeted and talked nonsense. Moved things around. He smoked his meth pipe, which focused him (a bit) for 20 minutes, and we had a more coherent chat.

But not about anything.

He was embarrassed to have me observe him in this state, and I was confused and embarrassed because we couldn't communicate, not with any intimacy. He wouldn't answer a single question without him weaving it into some complex thinking process that was already happening in his head, and then it trailed off to some other topic. He couldn't do eye contact with me, or sit still.

He kept moving things.

Three or four times, I got up to leave, because it was pointless and nuts to stay. He spoke of being on the run from the police, for charges he couldn't identify; he spoke of having terminal cancer, he said he hadn't taken his HIV medicines in months. He also said that there were tiny radio transmitters in the crystal methamphetamine granules his dealer had given him.

It was pointless to stay, and he refused any help I had to offer. All I could suggest was either getting some sleep, or going to an emergency room if he felt unsafe, and he really dislike both suggestions, couldn't understand why I would suggest such a thing. Like I was betraying him by even being concerned. It wasn't a good day, I couldn't say or do anything right, so I got up to leave, intending to return on a better day.

He stopped still, when I suggested leaving, he went quiet. He looked devastatingly disappointed, but worse, as if he had upset me in the most awful, unforgivable way. But also angry with me. But also angry with himself for causing my departure.

It was awful, this look in his eyes, complete loneliness and desperation, and no hope.

I stayed longer, and he looked pleased, in his way. Which meant the awful look in his eye disappeared, and he returned to his insane moving of objects and rambling, as if that was his comfort zone, while I sat pointlessly on the filthy sofa for an hour or so.

He seemed content, fussing around his house and having argumentative conversations with voices I couldn't hear, while I sat there.

I just sat there, he ignored me (mostly; it was hard to tell if the sentences coming out of his mouth were meant for me or for some other imaginary audience).

I left when he was calmer later, and his high changed, and some people were coming over, something to do with a business deal, or maybe sex.

A difficult, difficult day.

I wouldn't see him again for another few years.

Chapter 36

Some context

We were club kids of the 80s and 90s, moving into the new century. For many of us, the same qualities that drew us to congregate in this fashion (the qualities that made us misfits, prodigals, eccentrics, odd, extreme) were the same qualities that contributed to our spiraling out of functioning society.

My friends were struggling with age, mental health, drugs, alcohol. If you're seventeen, and you are misunderstood at home, urgently need to have purple hair and multiple facial piercings in order to be truly understood, then there is a home for you; it is clubland. Whether it is Soho London, the Meat Packing district of New York; if you're a runaway gay exploring your sexual disinhibition amongst those that give you freedom to do so, it will be clubland that welcomes you. If you experience your gender to be fluid, to manifest differently in sports than it does on the dancefloor, clubland is where you'll gravitate to, where that expression is welcomed. If you're traumatized by some childhood experiences, or not liked very much for your uniquenesses, you can damn well be sure clubland will love you for those things. If you're just plain born nervous, shy, self-conscious, in a way that is practically debilitating, and you find illegal drugs free you up better than the therapy your parents keep sticking you in, then clubland will be

your natural habitat universe, where you can be your true self, finally, and be free with others.

Once, they stuck lepers on an island.

Clubland is the congregation point for society's 'different' people. A natural home. It's where love reigns, difference is celebrated.

It's a young place.

Youth celebrates this; this is where the misfits blend amongst the rite of passage that is teenage angst.

What happens to these glorious misfits when they are 35?

Many learn to be adults, fit in. Many are able to put their rebelliousness and angst aside, grow out of the teenage awkwardness, shake off their trauma, get normal jobs, create families and fit in.

As they grow up and get normal, they leave an unsightly mess behind them, of awkward, odd-looking middle-aged adults who still feel like teenage misfits, glaringly aware that something isn't fitting.

The mental health and harmful coping mechanisms have lost their camouflage of clubland youth and hedonism.

Now they look like society's rejects. They squirm with discomfort in social situations, they perceive everything you say as an attack. They see enemies everywhere, and the online dialogue of this new generation is unkind and troll-like. They walk with their heads down, feeling awkward and undeserving to share the sidewalk with you, and they snatch their change back in shops and shuffle, head lowered, hurriedly away. It looks to you, like rudeness.

It's not.

They get drunk faster than you, and they are annoyingly loud and self-obsessed as the drinks get knocked back, issuing rude retorts that they think are funny, but are actually, just weird, and make everyone uncomfortable.

You shift away from them, as do others. They are embarrassing, unlikeable. You think they're awful, and there always has to be one that ruins every party.

They're not awful.

That's them misfitting, and coping.

You see them paying for things with vouchers, or counting out pennies, really slowly, when you're queuing impatiently behind them. You see them arguing in the post office with the teller about the injustice of this fine they received, or about how their electricity was cut off unfairly for some reason or other.

You step over them in the streets sometimes, and grumble as you do so, about how there are more street homeless on your route to work than ever before. You curse the current government as you do so, and you make a Facebook status about it later, just before liking that cute cat picture your work colleague shows you.

You see them; they're your friends, who get embarrassingly high in the wrong places, still acting like they're twenty, and why don't they just get a job? I mean what's wrong with them? Still doing drugs, at this age.

They are attention-seekers, always with the drama, always the chaos, and always thinking of themselves.

You see them.

I know you think more kindly about them than that, but you know what I mean.

This is what happens to them, these glorious misfits.

And this is the context I speak of. You wouldn't have like Stevie P at age 30, and it was hard for him to find a place where he fit in.

He, and I, were protected by our magic cloak of charisma though. And good looks; despite everything, gosh we stayed handsome. We coasted on it like a currency.

Chapter 37

The Legacy of Mr. P

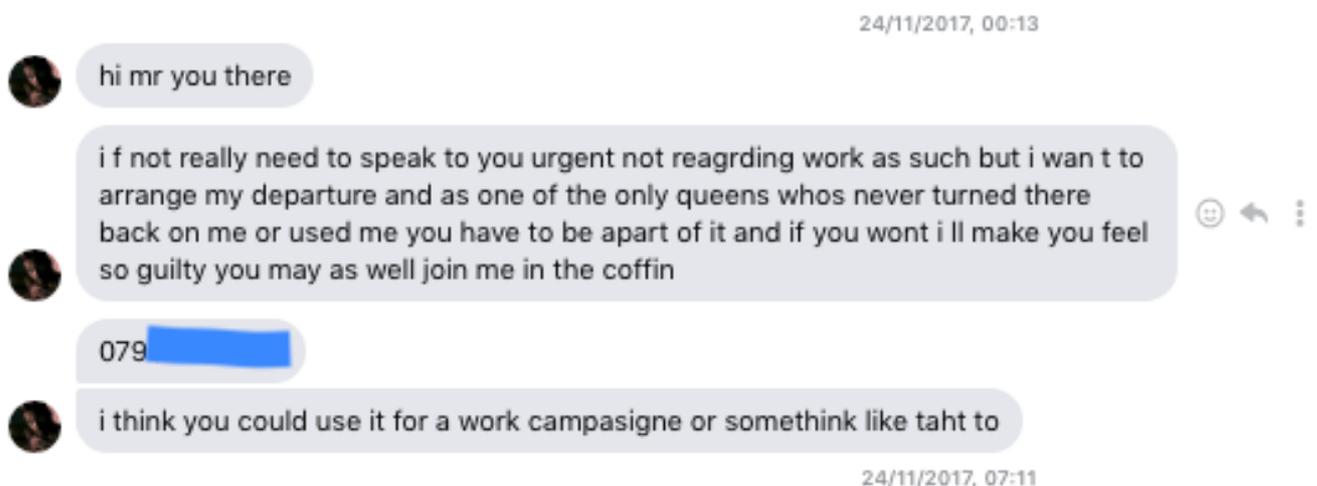
I must jump ahead in time a little.

Another decade or so passed. I emerged, miraculously from chaos, became the handsome clever community hero that was my destiny.

But Mr. P's destiny was very different.

I got a text one night from him. It was in his usual, appalling English and grammar; he was very good at English and grammar. He just did not possess the patience it took to type a sentence with all the usual time-consuming punctuations and capitals.

The average person wouldn't have understood it, but I knew his impatience and his shorthand.



The 'coffin' sentence was just his dark humour, but also the kind of humour he needs to make when talking about his own death. And the 'departure' he speaks of, is his own death. He'd always felt he'd die early; he talked about dying from HIV loads of times, though it was unlikely, he'd told everyone he had cancer on every drama comedown he'd had for the last decade, and yet it never seemed to take its toll; this was his drama, that involved a little compulsive lying, bless him. I was never sure if he believed his own lies when he told them at the time; I suspect he did.

The work campaign he refers to... (remember we are jumped ahead in time) is likely my activism; I was featured in [a high-profile documentary by Vice UK about chemsex in 2015](#), and although that was the extent of my association with documentary film making, Mr. P felt that that connected me to film makers and all kinds of possibilities.

I ignored the message for a day and a half, because if it was another of his veiled suicide messages, born out of a drug high, it didn't warrant an immediate response. This, also, was part of the mutual shorthand we shared. I don't do his drug-fueled suicide dramas. He didn't do mine. We left that (usually) to newer, more naïve friends who would jump at our self-indulgent dramas. A day and a half later, the drama would be over or different, the naïve person who actually did respond would be long gone, and that would be a better time for me to respond.

The coffin humor confused me a bit; I wasn't sure if he was actually angry at me about something, something born of his drug high. So again, a response was better left till that particular high wore off.

When I did get in touch, he told me he had cancer and was dying, that his life had been like a movie, and he wanted me to make a movie about his life, so it won't have all been a junkie waste.

I yawned probably.

But as the weeks wore on, and we stayed in touch, his story stayed consistent, and that was not the drama Mr. P I knew. I began to wonder if this cancer stuff might actually be true.

(We've jumped forward in time a bit remember) and I was actually leading a busy superstar international life, so it was a few weeks before I was in London and able to visit him, in his new but disgusting council flat in Covent Garden. He was so skinny, I couldn't physically disguise my shock; and I'm really good at that. His flat was in the usual druggy chaos I'd come to expect from him over the years, but he was pretty much parked on his sofa, unable to move. The cancer was real; he'd stopped taking his HIV medicines some months or more earlier, and the HPV virus that lived in his anus has morphed into cancer. He'd had a series of operations, and had a stoma bag sewn onto his belly to collect his urine and faeces.

It stank. It stank the entire house; you have to emotionally adjust yourself as you enter his house, the reek is so alien and unpleasant.

He was high, and using crystal meth and GBL almost daily, except when he ran out. He was still dealing drugs though. He wasn't escorting any more, but a lot of his escort clients were now more into drugs than they were into the sex, and many of them would get high and masturbate to porn in Mr. P's flat. Mr. P made cash off of this venture, as well as charging people to inject their drugs, the people who didn't know how to inject themselves (or were too high to focus or to stay steady handed to do so themselves.)

Mr. P also heard voices. Just like schizophrenia, voices in his head taunted him, tormented him with a logic that defies even psychiatric explanation. Every moment, every day, they accompanied him. They had distinct personalities, agendas, profiles. These changed over time, and were sometimes confused with people he knew. The agendas were simple and aggressive; to torment him. To make him paranoid and ashamed and tormented.

He knew they weren't real, most of the time. Sometimes, when he could get out of the house, the voices blended with the murmurs of people walking nearby,

and in these cases, he was convinced these people nearby were criticizing him, not the voices. These voices created a constant alternative reality he lived in; there was always a danger outside his door, the kids that played in the nearby school were aware of him and ridiculed him from the school yard. The police gathered, seemingly constantly outside his door in the building's hallways, murmuring, scheming, planning, judging, always threatening an imminent raid of his premises.

All in his head.

So began the final 9 months of our epic friendship.

I am not an 'everyday' kind of friend.

And empathy is not my strong suit, that is well established.

That's just not me, the everyday friend kind. The intimacy of that never worked for me, made me uncomfortable. I'm busy, I'm fast, I'm popular, and mostly, in this future bit, I'm very busy doing really important activism work, that changes lives and communities, all over the world.

I didn't have time to look after a dying friend.

Especially a stinky psychotic one.

But Mr. P didn't have many friends left by this point; in fact he'd pissed off so many people, I'm sure there were many that wished him dead. Those close ones who did love him, found him impossible to deal with, either because of his chaos, or the voices, or the fact that he would be so unpredictably intoxicated when they visited, that all they got was nonsense or abuse.

He also pushed people away. He loved his dad, and his dad was good. His dad wasn't fazed by much. But Mr. P could push people away, refuse them because he didn't feel worthy of them. What I mean by that is, Mr. P was convinced he was a burden, he wouldn't accept any help or kindnesses, never charity, and he was too proud to be dependent on anyone else, even for the smallest thing. It was a fierce pride too, not a humble pleasant one. He'd done the full drama about cancer once before. It was a small, fixable skin cancer, but it came as a shock, during a bad time, and the voices had confused the reality of the

diagnosis for him, so within a week, he was screaming blue bloody murder about this deadly skin cancer, and told his friends and family and all the continent that he was dying.

He didn't die, but he milked it for a good while.

The same thing a year later.

And again.

That's Stevie P.

He's the boy who cried wolf.

This time, now that he was dying for real, he refused to tell his dad, because he had gotten him all riled up about cancer before, and he was convinced he'd worn out his patience. He didn't want to burden his dad now.

This lonely, angry, impossible guy, this stinking nightmare of a person, was my friend, and I think I was the only person who had access.

Besides the drug dealers and punters who wanted to exploit him. And gosh, some of these people were awful. They stole his prescription painkillers that he really needed, partied in his house while he was suffering and medicated on his bed. Out of guilt, or manipulation, they'd bring some takeaway around or some frozen food for his fridge, buy him a pack of cigarettes and a coca cola.

They'd leave him days later, surrounded by the mess of a three-day chemsex party, bereft and worse, alone.

He hated being alone most of all. The tormenting voices were most loud and effective when he was alone. He would pay people £20 to stay another hour, he'd pay for more drugs, if only people would stay.

They did. His flat was central London, very West End, Mr. P was very visitable. Exploitative drug dealers would take up residence in his living room for weeks at a time. Mr. P would be convinced they were great, kind people. The same way a hostage forms an emotional attachment to their kidnapper, Mr. P would be so grateful for the company, for the free drugs, for the cigarettes, that (in the

absence of any real friends) he'd see these interlopers as kind heroes, who were not fazed by his stench or uselessness.

This is the state I found him in, after a long period of us being out of contact.

I had no problem with any of this chaos. It was just Mr. P. More drama.

I had no problem dealing with the criminal and cruel interlopers. I'd eaten their kind for breakfast in my day. The problem was that Mr. P was often convinced of their kindness, and that there were always more where they came from.

I began to realize he needed an everyday friend, and so I worked it out, made it happen. I probably complained about it every day, I wasn't some heroic noble and saintly creature. But I sorted his house, food, hospital appointments, links to charities that could offer support, home-visiting nurses. He'd always had home-visiting nurses, but he terrified them, he was so abusive. The voices tricked him into thinking that they had evil agendas, and he gave them hell.

When he wasn't giving them hell, the interlopers would refuse their entry as they ruined the vibe of the party they wanted to have at Stevie Ps expense.

I became an everyday friend. Despite myself. But it wasn't easy; sometimes Mr. P would be really high, and refuse me entry, determined to party with the interloping flavour of the month. Sometimes he was devastated and depressed, feeling unworthy of the kindness and groceries I would bring. Sometimes he hated me, because of the voices. Sometimes the voices would convince him I was the police, and he'd pretend he wasn't home, hiding silently behind the sofa. Sometimes the Voices told him the groceries I was bringing him were poisoned.

In this future (remember, I've leapt forward in time a bit), I am a modicum of kindness, boundaries, professionalism, a celebrated fixer of all things wrong. A brilliant therapist and addictions worker as well. Boundaries are my thing.

Boundaries keep us safe, boundaries keep us ordered, they keep us protected from chaos. Boundaries keep kids from harming themselves or others, they teach them that order and structure are possible, even amid the chaos and insanity that adults can often bring.

I don't give money to friends who will spend it on drugs. That's my boundary; a personal choice. I won't buy food for people who spend their own money on drugs. I empathise with the complexity of addiction, better than most; there are organizations, charities and food banks for these circumstances. Nor am I an emergency service. You don't call me if you think you're dying, you call an ambulance. You don't call me if people are breaking down your door (imaginary or not), you call the police. I am your friend. I'm the guy you eat pizza with and watch Netflix with. I'm the guy you ask how I am, the guy you giggle with, choose to be with, care for.

Emergency help is something friends can be involved with perhaps, but emergency (or support) services do it better. Boundaries save friendships, teach people the consequences of actions, direct people to appropriate care that is better effective. Friendship is friendship.

None of these boundaries worked with Mr. P.

He was dying.

After a lifetime of drug use and chaos, he wasn't about to stop drugs now, with only months to live. We talked about it, a lot. He knew that drugs were adding to his distress, his health, the perpetuation of the voices that he hated. He also knew that addressing his drug use would be a complex and insanely unpleasant lengthy journey. He knew, better than most, how hard it would be. He knew it wouldn't be a journey he'd live through, or ever reap the benefits of. This chaos was a familiar friend. He knew how to navigate this, and the absence of chaos for Stevie P was unnatural, positively alien, and unsettling. He'd had (brief) periods without chaos before, and he found them to be awful vacuums that needed filling with some self-induced drama.

He'd call, telling me that he'd been ripped off by some cruel and unkind interlopers. He would have had a great time with them, refused me entry when I called around, abused me over the phone when I called, but yes, call me afterward when he had no money or drugs left, pleading starvation.

Normally, my boundaries would hold me steadfast from this kind of chaos...

But he was dying.

These were his last days, months.

He wasn't going to get help, seek support, address his drug use, survive.

He was hungry, abandoned and dying.

Maybe, just maybe, I am capable of some empathy after all, just a smidgen through the trauma.

So I would grumble, and head to the supermarket to buy food; something gorgeous and fattening that we'd share together, plus a week's supply of groceries to see him through till next time. Non-perishable foods; often the electricity would cut out, or weeks would pass and the food would go off, since meth highs and appetites are not mutually compatible. But I'd grumble all the way to his house, rehearsing angry boundaries in my head, asking him to acknowledge that he'd turned my whole (new, sane) life upside down. Trying to re-invent boundaries that could fix this, fix us, fix him, save him.

I wished he wasn't dying.

But as I neared his front door, grumbling, I'd despair for the lost cause this was. He was gonna die, and this wasn't gonna get better.

I'd had my own experience of this and probably uniquely qualified to be helping. So I'd give up, stop grumbling, and go in and enjoy a Big Mac with my fabulous impossible friend.

One day, I noticed something he'd drawn on a page, a doodle really, but it was brilliant; it was some eyes drawn, really well done. Not pairs of eyes, just single eyes, with lashes and eyeshadow and character, lots of character.

It was called "Eyes watching all one does. The art of paranoier". (Mr. P would later ask me why we fuss about exact spelling when everybody, simply everybody knows exactly what you mean. He actually told me, that the time spent pointing out his error, and the time spent correcting his spelling, could have been spent giving a compliment. Or, he added, doing drugs; when a dying man gives advice on how not to waste time, you listen.)

I spent a great deal of time complimenting his drawing. It was time well spent. The eyes represented the voices that tormented him, and were constantly spying on and observing him. They had character, and it gave me a means of communication to talk with him about the voices which I think, helped both of us to understand them.

He knew they were imaginary, but he could forget that, when he's alone in his flat for days, with no one to talk to. He could find himself responding to them, defending himself angrily against a particularly vile observation about how he was a piece of shit who wasted his life on drugs and filthy gay sex. They'd tell him to cut his wrists now, rather than be a burden on society, a waste to his friends. They'd tell him I wished he was dead, and that in fact I was planning to kill him, just to be kind to the planet.

He knew to ignore them, but they were constant, and sometimes he'd find himself shouting back at them. Or sometimes, dialoguing with them. They were less angry when he dialogued with them.

Once, on a trip to his chemotherapy appointment (which the voices were always particularly resistant to), they were screaming and warning so loudly and constantly that he felt he had to shout back. They were convinced the nurses were duplicitously intending to inject him with poison, and intentionally stab at his arms with needles. He was nervous, trying to let the nurse do her thing, but the voices screeched and warned so violently; Mr. P shouted back at them, that he'd fucking kill them if they didn't shut up.

The nurse, alone in a quiet room with Mr. P was terrified, and assumed he was threatening to kill her. Security descended upon the room, surrounding a claustrophobic and tormented Mr. P, dragging him off to a security station, while he cursed appallingly and kicked and cussed. The police were called. He stopped going to chemotherapy.

I tried to help him, I tried to save him. I tried to make him comfortable. Mostly, I tried to get him some medicine that would stop the voices. He wasn't going to stop doing drugs, he wasn't going to go to the chemotherapy (which was really

just a wasted effort), but I thought someone professional would agree that some anti-psychotics would ease this dying man's suffering? Alleviate him from voices.

He never told anyone about the voices. I knew, some visitors were 'aware' he heard voices (just by confused observation). But he was so ashamed. Plus hospitals were awful places for him; bad memories, and the voices made it virtually impossible for him to even get through the front doors of the hospital. Some visiting nurses and doctors were of the opinion that if he stopped doing the drugs, they could better assess him, and consider prescribing something. Some others wanted to discuss it further with a multi-disciplinary team of doctors, to see how all the prescribed (and non-prescribed) drugs were interacting within his body, and seemed, frankly, nervous to act upon the voices, within their own capacity.

It went around in circles, needless to say, and nothing got done about it.

Mr. P wasn't going to stop using drugs, even if he wanted to, he didn't feel he had it in him to do so. Not simply addiction, but the drugs were a tool he used to manage the voices; they were louder or quieter, or crueler or kinder depending on environment, mood... and the kind of drug high he was experiencing.

When morphine was introduced to his cocktail of prescribed drugs, he calmed a bit. The voices didn't stop, but his response to them was less tormented, slightly more accepting.

I nurtured his drawing.

I needed to understand the voices, because I was spending so much time with Mr. P, that I felt like they were invisible flatmates that I could never see or hear, but were there, and having a profound impact on his/our daily life. I couldn't ignore them, they influenced everything.

had a secret agenda. They tried to convince Mr. P of this all the time. Even as Mr. P and I were talking or laughing, they'd be convincing him of it, while he ignored them. He was really good at ignoring them, as they shouted abuse, planted fear in his mind about every situation, person, every sentence.

If I told Mr. P I was on my way around, the voices would begin making noises of people climbing the stairs, knocking on the door. He'd go to the door a hundred times to respond, only to find no one there. The voices would tell him that the reason I'm taking so long, is because I'm bringing the police with me. He always feared a raid, since the previous bust when they found a dead guy in his flat. The voices told him he couldn't trust me, shouldn't. He'd become more anxious, more panicky, more dubious and confused, upset, as he answered the door to nobody another few times.

Then I'd arrive; he'd open the door, and the look on his face was one of pure fear, confusion, anger and panic. He would need a few minutes to put the pieces together, of truth versus voices-fiction. Could he trust me, or couldn't he? Friend or foe at the door.

Just a minute or so, and he'd figure it out. He knew my face for so many years, he knew my heart. We'd shared so much. Figuring this out only took him a minute or so. I'd be sure to give him this minute or so, be sure that the expression on my face was not reacting to his greeting, but just kind and patient, the good friend he knew so well.

This confusion governed his life. Every person, every situation was wrought with this requirement, for him to figure it out, truth from fiction, friend or foe. He'd arrive home from doctors' appointments, with his head full of information about his health, his diagnosis, his prognosis, his responsibilities, his next appointment; and he never knew what was real, and what was the new reality born of the voices and confusion. It would be in these moments, that he'd announce on Facebook that he was dying. Or call his dad to give the news of his terminal diagnosis.

This boy who cried wolf, was a boy who was crying confusion, rarely aware of what was really going on in his life (but giving a damned good impression that he was in control).

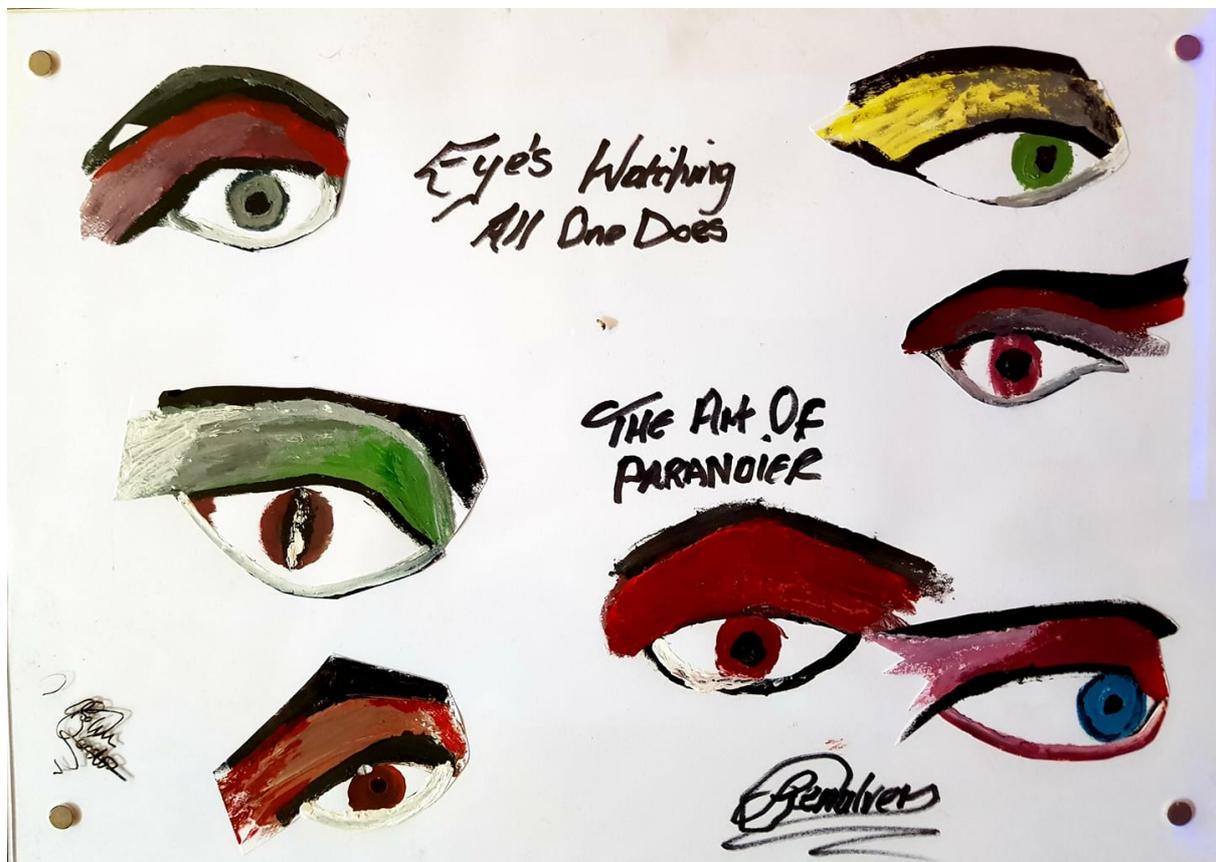
He lost a lot of friends, exhausted a lot of people's patience.

It was one of these days, that I got my message from him, telling me he was dying, and that I needed to make documentary about his life. I smiled, and yawned when I got it. Darling boy crying wolf again. Drama.

Another friend of Mr. Ps, a good one, owns a Botox and beauty salon in Covent Garden. He too got a text, within the same minutes I got mine. His read:

"Flavio, you're a true friend, not like the other cunts; if you really care you'll get your Botox ready, because I'm dying and it's your job to make sure I look young and sexy in my coffin."

I'm sure there were a series of others that got messages that day too.



So when I chased this message up, and for months afterward that I started spending time with Mr. P, I never really knew what was going on. Was his terminal diagnosis real, or just drama, misconception, a conspiracy of voices, a traumatized and confused drug addict. He was clearly unwell, his stoma bag fixed to his belly collecting his bodily waste was very real. The rest of the truth, came slowly, when I was able to accompany him to a successful hospital visit (they were rare; the voices made most of his hospital or doctors' appointments impossible.)

I suggested he start recording the important things on his phone: discussions with doctors, appointments etc. He did. It helped him distinguish reality from psychotic fiction.

And the drawings helped.

I started buying canvases and paint for him. Because there was real talent here. He drew and painted beautifully, and it came straight from his guts. All the paintings were about the voices, and the messages they delivered, and the torment. He also communicated past traumas, horrific ones, with the voices ever-present, and they manifested as extraordinary, truthful and evocative paintings; a window into a confusing, mental health world that few of us can understand, that even psychiatry struggles to understand.

All explained clearly and plainly on canvass by this troubled young genius.

It poured out of him. He didn't even need to try, or to think. He sat, he drew, he painted, and some sense amid the confusion emerged from his art, from his heart.

He was beautiful, and the art was beautiful; important. Historic. Enigmatic.

And telling.

Mr. P was complicated, and many said, hard to love. I never thought so, but I knew what they meant. But this art made it easier to love him, because it made it easier to understand him. His trauma, past and current. His own confusion about experiences, his own efforts to separate the reality created by the voices, from actual reality; that process.

The art made it easier to love him, to know him.

And he wanted to be known; he wanted to be loved.

He wanted to be understood.

And his art was an avenue to all of that. So I supported it. With delight.

He refused to let me call it art though. I asked him what he thought art was, and he said "Picasso".

He said his was just shit, kids' drawings.

I couldn't convince him otherwise. But I did encourage him to do more. Well, not 'encourage' as much as enable; he didn't need encouragement; he couldn't be stopped, these kids' drawings just poured out of him. I enabled by providing canvasses, paint and affirmation/feedback.

I never thought Mr. P and I would be sitting talking about the definition and purpose of art.

We two; we two party kids.

This is all a bit in the future remember, and I'd find my own art. I'd find my voice. Something inside me was screaming to communicate, and I wasn't sure what it was, but it I needed others to hear it, feel it, be changed by it. From me, my art emerged as a communication skill; to move and affect others. Kindness is something I saw lacking in many things, and it was most often the solution to every problem that raised before me, and before others. I saw self-harm and drug use and chemsex affecting different peoples differently, I saw arguments over the politics of this. I saw HIV to be a solvable problem, but shrouded in so much stigma and arguing and unkindness, that I had to do my art. My art that helps people see through the obstacles by resourcing kindness, and effecting change. I see people coping with complex emotions born of troubled pasts, and I see that manifesting (as it does) in cruelty; usually to themselves, also very often to others, mostly in cruelty or defensiveness. My art is a communication skill of many formats, that moves and changes people and helps them to resource the kindness within themselves, make things better. It helps them to find their own voice sometimes, find their art.



Mr. P was finding his art, his voice. He was trying to communicate something. It was about the injustices he'd experienced, in his childhood, in his early sexual experiences. It was about the traumas he'd experienced, without recognizing them as traumatic at the time. It was about his fear of death, and his longing for it. It was about the realizations he was having, now, in his illness and his final months; realizations that his life might have been different. It was also, hugely, about his awareness that other people will share his fate, experience early sexual awareness way before their time. Awfully, and unjustly so.

This was his art, and it was screaming to be communicated, to be heard. It was his voice, and he was finding it in drawing, painting.

It wasn't a clear voice; as with a lot of artistic expression, it wasn't something that Mr. P understood; it just poured out of him. In kids' drawings.

I affirmed it, because it deserved it. It was true expression, and so complex.

Raw. It wasn't anything he thought about; he simply felt, and the paintings appeared. No deliberation, no doubt, no premeditation.

They began to clutter up his house, these expressions of angst and rage and injustice. Many would be destroyed, by interlopers partying in his house. They got kicked through, trodden on, one was even burned by a meth pipe, when someone figured it was better to rest a hot meth pipe on this canvass, than on the wooden floor. Some just disappeared. And since Mr. P didn't understand their gorgeous value, he often painted over them, when his inspiration took a different turn.

And then there was this obsession he had with the documentary.

I'd been near death myself, for many years. And I've lived with nihilism, so death is my companion. It doesn't daunt or frighten me. I am over the philosophizing of it, that is the affliction of those who have not yet processed their innate fear of death. Those of us who are companions with death, who have trod the boards, done our due diligence, wrestled for a decade or so with our fear of our own mortality, we come to terms. We do not need religion to explain the

I don't know what happens after I die, nor will I in this lifetime. Nor do you. I know that's uncomfortable to some, terrifying for others, but I am cool with it, and I don't need to create a complex belief system to fill that void. I don't spend hours wondering 'why me', or 'what's the meaning of life, what's the purpose of all this'.

I won't know in this lifetime I have, nor will anyone else; so I won't waste my time trying to figure out something I'll never know. I won't believe in some other afterlife or religion concocted by a frightened person who needed to know what happens after, what it was all about.

But I do respect that others need to do this.

I know that often religion is designed to groom or coerce populations. Faith is different; faith plays a crucial role in the survival of an intelligent species.

Humanity's prime instinct is to survive (as individuals, as a species); faith keeps people going in despair, it gives strength when all is lost and purpose dissolves. Gosh, faith stops a lot of people from despairing or ending their life, when life gets confusing.

Religion and faith have a crucial role to play, whether that be a Darwinian one or a Machiavellian/grooming one.

Really; I get why humans need to do this, it's very valid.

But I've done my due diligence, I've trod the boards. I looked my fear of death in the face and I did it for long enough, that I became cool with not knowing. I found peace in not knowing, and in stopping the mad anxiety of trying to "know".

Mr. P wasn't a reflective person. He was rarely sober long enough to maintain the same thought for very long. The conversations we had toward the end got surprisingly deep, but in a Mr. P kind of way.

He had not faced his fear of death.

He eventually came to terms with the fact he was dying, but he wasn't at peace with it. And often, fear of death, and the daunting meaninglessness of everything, can manifest as a need to create legacy. In men, more than women,

it seems to me sometimes. Maybe it's that God-awful testosterone that runs rampant through all our decisions and actions; I'm not sure, but legacy was on Mr. P's mind, and it was a kind one.

He felt, undoubtedly, that he'd wasted his life.

I had adored him, been fascinated by him, I'd bathed in his loyalty and kindness all his adult life, and I knew what a unique creation he was, and what a gift to this life.

He didn't, and he punished himself, he thought he was a burden to everybody, he felt guilt about all the chaos and destruction he caused, he was aware there were no other friends around.

He thought he was a waste of time and space, and of other people's energy. In his youth, when he was exploring a very young sexuality in a public toilet, a man had taken that sexuality; just took it. That man should have said:

"You're too young to understand this, and a sexual relationship or act at this early stage in your life can really fuck up your future; you deserve better than that, you deserve to be protected from that abuse."

Someone took that young boys future and delivered a different message:

"This sex act we are about to do, this will really complicate all the sex, love and relationships you have for the rest of your life; this will complicate your understanding of intimacy, and trust forever; but I don't care. I don't care that this will fuck up your life, I'll do it anyway. Now do as I say."

Mr. P got this message. He got it. He took it to heart, and embarked on a journey that led to chaos, unhappiness, fucked up relationships, an inability to trust, an avoidance of connection. It led to drugs, and chaos and addiction, and self-harm, and a constant, constant guiding principle, that he was not worthy, or deserving of protection, of kindness.

It led to an HIV infection, it led to poor health by his refusal to take his HIV medicines, or to look after his health. That led to a prolific cancer. It led to addiction, which led to voices.

And now, in his dying days, it was responsible for a definite belief that he'd wasted his life, that he'd never deserved to have a peaceful, loving life.

And he feared death. He feared the meaninglessness of his suffering, he wondered the pointlessness of it all. He wondered, of all the experiences life on this planet offers, why his experience was thus.

But he came to terms with it; and still, he wanted to do good. He wanted a legacy, he wanted all his suffering not to have been in vain. He wanted, somehow, to protect other kids from bad experiences, he wanted other young boys to have better starts in life.

He felt his was a cautionary tale, and that I must tell that tale, deliver this message via a film about his life.

It broke my heart that I couldn't.

But I tried.

We filmed our chats, we filmed his messages, we filmed his art. He drew constantly, created, created. He exhumed all his memories, all his trauma, and the confusion onto those canvasses. I promised him I'd exhibit them somewhere, an art gallery or something, and I insisted he live long enough to see it. He smiled, entirely convinced this wouldn't happen; no one in their right mind would have an interest in these kids' drawings; he smiled coyly, as he dreamed of the possibility. He wasn't coy much.

He promised to stay alive long enough to see these get to exhibition.

He had so much bad health, and often I couldn't even get in to see him, because of interlopers, or because the voices didn't want me there, or his drug high was such or such.

But we filmed and filmed when we could, and I tried to rescue his art from the uncaring and disrespectful interlopers.

I was flying to Taiwan, to meet with some activists, and help them overcome some obstacles they had with their government public health organisations and communities to develop a chemsex support service.

I was away for 10 days.

MR P hated being alone; the voices were relentless and crueler and louder when he was alone. So he went to great lengths not to be alone. He'd find old, old friends from Facebook, and invite them around; often they'd arrive and be shocked at the state of Mr. P and of his house and that smell, or of his desperate circumstances, that it would be a short visit that shamed him even more, making things worse. There were one or two (perhaps more) he offered cash to, simply to stay longer, creating an awkwardness that was unsalvageable. So more often than not, he'd rely on the interlopers. Not bad people necessarily (though many really were), but other people caught up in the downward spiral of their own drug use, hiding out from their own lives, needing a place to be high for a few days, preferably with a kind and naïve person that was vulnerable to exploitation and interloping.

The last of these was a young sex worker and drug dealer. A good looking young gay man, a younger version of Mr. P for all I know (I didn't meet him until after Mr. P's death). His name was Mitch, and he actually moved in with Mr. P, while I was away in Taiwan. That fast; an overnight decision, after he'd identified Mr. P as an easy mark, a central place in London to do escorting from, to sell chems from, and a place to squat in indefinitely after Mr. P died.

I returned from Taiwan to find Mr. P in these new circumstances, and happy as could be to have full time company, someone who wasn't disgusted by his presence, or his smell or his circumstances.

Many months earlier, I'd resigned myself to many things; that Mr. P was not going to stop using drugs, that he was not going to keep hospital appointments; that he would not disclose the voices to a health professional. That he would sometimes not answer his phone, not let me in sometimes.

I resigned myself to the fact that he was going to find company where he could get it. Plus many many years earlier, I'd learned that nobody wins an argument with Stevie P, he was much too stubborn to be told, or to ever lose an argument.

I learned he was a grown adult, if extraordinarily difficult, and if extraordinarily vulnerable. I resigned myself to allowing him his own agency to determine the course of these final months of his life. He demanded that, ferociously, and it was a great gift I could give him in these final months; not to impose my own wishes, fears, beliefs on him.

I negotiated my own boundaries, and tried to respect his choices. All he had left, was the fierce independence that accompanied him his whole life, and the dignity that lay within that.

I riled internally against Mitch living there, felt it was a bad bad thing, but also aware it was Mr. P's choice, and great, full time company for him; and relief in part, from the voices. It was particularly hard for me, since Mitch refused to ever come out of 'his' room when I was there, refused to meet me. If it wasn't for the noises he made, allowing his escort clients in and out of the building, I might have thought he was part of Mr. P's imagination.

He didn't appear to be entirely unkind. Changes happened around the house, some redecoration, and the crazy interlopers were tidied up after.

But I never really knew what the intentions were, whether this guy was entirely exploitative or more complex and also quite kind to Mr. P, because I never met him. He hid from me. Always 'busy'.

Another few weeks passed. Another trip came up for me (this future we're in had me tripping across the planet on a nearly full-time cycle). On one of these trips in September, I got a text from one of the organizations sending nurses to Mr. P's home to look after him. It was supposed to be a daily thing, but master manipulator and Mr. Chaos himself, Mr. P would convince them he was not in need of them if he wasn't in the mood, or if he was being manipulated to do so by some partying interlopers.



And frankly, as professional as these nurses were, even they found Mr. P to be a very challenging patient, at the very best of times. If they'd have been psychiatric nurses rather than cancer care nurses, then it might have been different, but Mr. P refused to disclose his voices to anyone, so it was a proper kaleidoscopic trip to enter Mr. P's world, even for a few hours.

I was messaged by one of these nurses saying they were concerned because it had been so long since Mr. P had been visited by them, since he had even answered his phone or door to them. They were concerned about his welfare. I was too. I had given him a special phone that I asked him to keep secret from Mitch and the interlopers, because they used his phone so often to get Grindr shags around, or call Ubers or get more drugs. They had lost his phones (perhaps stolen them) or used up the credit.

But he hadn't answered this phone for a week or more. Weeks had gone by when he wouldn't see me. Chemsex parties are prolific things that can go on for a very long time for a pro, and the comedowns can keep people incommunicado for weeks as well. This was a particularly long period of silence, but I hadn't been too concerned until the nurse called me with his concerns.

Then his dad was in touch. With the same concerns.

Then a decision was made to break in, to check on him.

I was away, in Dallas, with the Impulse United charity.

Mr. P was found near starved, doped up on GHB, barely conscious, barely alive. He'd been kept doped up and silenced by Mitch and the interlopers who didn't want their week-long partying to be interrupted by visiting nurses, or the complaints of a pained, hungry dying man.

Those were Mr. P's last days.

He was moved to a hospice; his heroic dad sat by his side in the hospice day and night for a few more days as his complicated son slowly died.

I hurried back from Dallas, in time to see him. His last days were peaceful, very powerfully medicated, and his voices diminished almost entirely. He was peaceful.

And he died that way, with his dad and brothers beside him.

And I was so angry I couldn't contain it.

I thought it was grieving. Though I'd never grieved anyone, my mental health and anhedonia/narcissism prevents it. If I'm honest, it wasn't grief; it was a narcissistic rage at all the injustices surrounding this demise and death that I was unable to control.

In this state I watched and re-watched the film footage we'd made.

In this footage we talked a lot about his artwork, his drawings, his paintings. About what they meant, about how he managed the chaos of the voices by painting. I began to see a story taking shape from the footage I had, and as upset and amateur as I was, I began to feel I just might be able to honor his insane final wish after all; to make a documentary about his life. To deliver his message, his cautionary tale, about youth violated, and mental health.

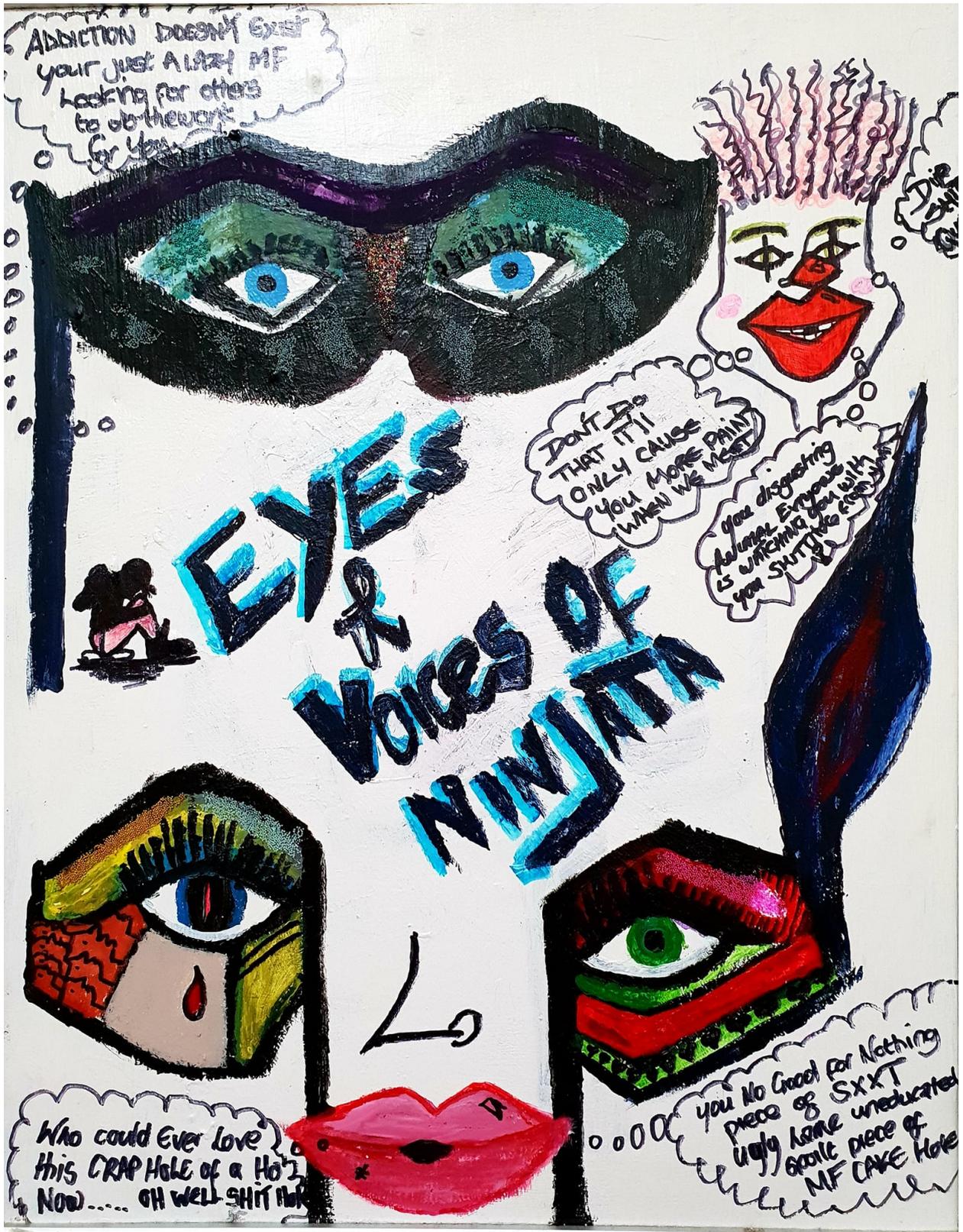
So I did. (*Watch on page 371*)

Another route for my rage, was the job of salvaging his paintings.

Mitch, one of the interlopers that had taken up residence in Mr. P's home, had dug his heels in and taken up residence in Mr. P's home. He refused entry to everyone, demanding squatter's rights, and the only people he let in the door were more escorting clients, or drug-purchasing clients, and interlopers to party and (for all I know), further trash Mr. P's artwork.

Some messages were exchanged between me and Mitch over a few weeks, I wanted the paintings. I was not going to let them be disrespected, trashed, burned, held for ransom, disrespected.

They were a legacy, and they were Mr. P's talent, they were Mr. P's voice amid the voices, his one thing that he felt wasn't a waste: his kids drawings.



It's awful when people die. That awful limbo period, where law seems suspended, where action doesn't seem possible, where no one knows what to do, or who should do it.

The police didn't feel a law had been broken, although I felt that Mitch and the interlopers were outright responsible for his death, or his negligence that led to his death. The police visited him, but he wouldn't answer (of course). The police said they couldn't force entry, they said that was the council's responsibility, the council owned the property. The council needed next of kin to notify them that the resident had died, so then a report could be made about a squatter.

And so on.

And weeks wore on.

I knew how this ended; people like Mitch live in chaos, move from place to place as their chaos leads them. They leave chaos behind, they disappear, lives change, places change.

Paintings disappear.

And I wasn't going to let this be the destiny of Mr. P's legacy.

After all the formal channels dried up uselessly, I scrapped and lied and knocked and blackmailed and pleaded and threatened; I tried everything to get into that house and salvage the work.

Mitch was stoic. It became an annoyance for him; but mostly fear of me because my predator was awake and in pursuit.

For me, it was everything; it was Mr. P's heart, his talent, his redemption; his legacy. Not many people knew the kindness of or the vulnerability of Mr. P, they knew the nightmare, the troublemaker, the bringer of chaos and destruction.

I wanted to tell a story, the story Mr. P wanted told; that he was good, talented, true, destroyed and someone with a message; someone whose life had not been a waste after all, despite him utterly believing it was.

I could undo that, by delivering his final wish, with this documentary and by exhibiting his art.

My predator is formidable, especially within a narcissistic rage, and I got the paintings after some conniving and persistence.

[I exhibited Stephen Penalver's artwork for World AIDS Day 2018](#), at the hospital Club in London, in partnership with the kindest and loveliest friends who manage the Impulse charity (London chapter).

Mr. P's documentary was screened there too, and viewed/shared widely on social media. It became a film used to educate and promote awareness about mental health, addiction and co-morbidities, but mostly, it moved people. It introduced very large numbers of people to the Mr. P that I knew. The kind, fiercely faithful, fearless protector Mr. P who was also enormously misunderstood. It introduced very large numbers of people to [some kids' drawings, that Mr. P thought no one would want to see](#), that no one would be interested in. He couldn't see it, because he was dead, but if he could have seen the outpouring of love toward him, for him, he'd never have believed it. I mean he actually wouldn't have believed it, he'd have thought it was some joke someone was playing on him. Then he would have gotten claustrophobic, and left the room dramatically, causing a little chaos and smashing something on the way. Probably setting the room on fire accidentally as he left.

His message, made so plainly and emotionally in the film, about protecting the vulnerability of the young from exploitation, reached many more people than he'd have imagined too.

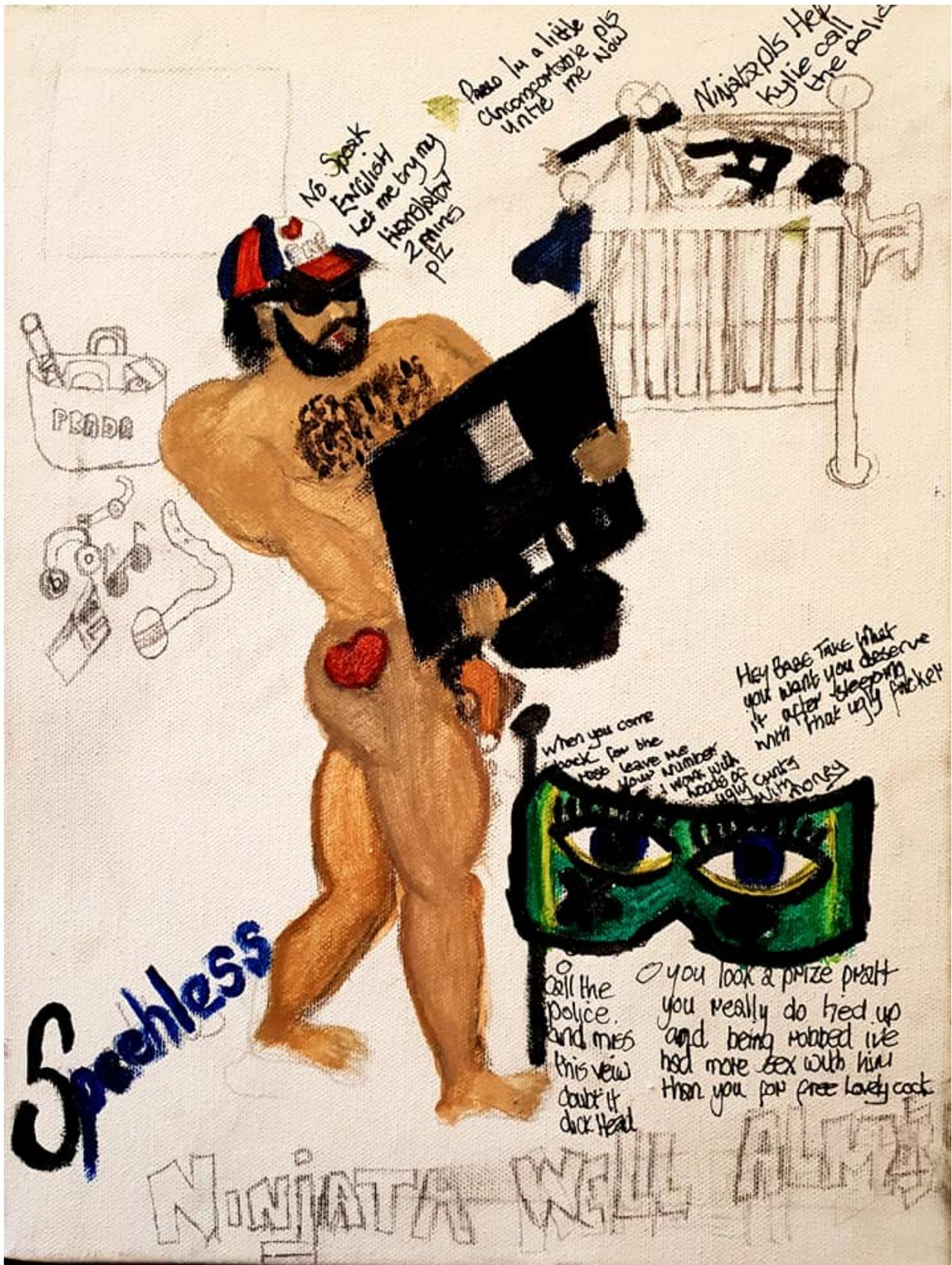
Plus of course, the messages of friendship that come across in the film too are potent I imagine, but I can't see that myself.

Not yet.

I miss him still, and my rage is omnipotent.

His life wasn't a waste, he wasn't a waste of space. His art wasn't crap, and he wasn't merely a burden to everyone he met.

He was Mr. P.



No Speak
Enlight
Let me try my
Microblading
2 times
PLZ

Also in a little
concomitant pls
write me Now

Nijabzpls Hey
Kylie call
the police

PRADA

Hey Base Take what
you want you deserve
it after sleeping
with that ugly prick

When you come
back for the
rob leave me
your number
I work with
hundreds of
girls with
money

Speechless

Call the
police.
and miss
this view
doubt it
dick head

you look a prize pratt
you really do hed up
and being robbed ive
had more sex with him
than you for free lovely cock

NINJATA WELLS



[Click on image to view video on YouTube](#)



[Click on image to view video on YouTube](#)

Chapter 38

The Legacy of Mr. P And a Pause

That was a leap forward in time, but I return now to an earlier point in the story.

Back to a time when Mr. P was still living, and I had just found myself free from a prison sentence.

I was free from prison, but not jumping with joy. I was lost, directionless, and daunted. The weight of my experiences was heavy on my back, but I didn't understand it.

The journey through the criminal justice system, and the callous attempts to spin my life story to create a sympathetic excuse for my behaviour was nothing less than a mind-fuck. I began to see some truths in it. I began to see how a complicated start in life can map out a complicated life and poor choices. I began to see how putting young men like my dad in a war can plant PTSD in an otherwise loving family, and become gun violence and murder. I began to see how intergenerational trauma can be passed on.

I saw how living under a predator's rule as well as a lack of affection and affirmation can devastate a child for decades, with ripples and tsunamis of repercussions.

I began to see how brilliant, gifted people can live the dichotomy of brilliance and self-destruction when deprived of kind environments. I began to see how the unconditional positive regard of an affectionate and hugging mother can be everything in life, everything and what happens when a child is torn from that. I could see what feeling “different” can do to a life lived, when the difference ought to be a thing of celebration, not disgust. (I speak of gayness, I mean gay sex and love; but it could be anything gorgeously different; it could be that thing that made you different. That thing that Lady Gaga would celebrate about you, that others didn’t.)

I see what living through an AIDS epidemic can do. What dying in an AIDS epidemic can do. What intolerance and fear can do.

I’ve seen what technology can do to love lives, sex lives.

I’ve learned how drugs can be pleasure, joy, but also a tool of destruction. And a whole lot in between.

But it was wrong, surely, to use a sob story narrative, my sob story, to explain away all my bad choices, all my crimes, all my unforgivable crimes against people and humanity.

Was this the path to forgiving oneself that therapists spoke of? Because it felt uncomfortable.

It would have been very easy to continue dealing drugs; my suppliers from a year earlier were aware of a debt I’d owed them, and they were aware too, that I’d not given their names to the police. So an odd stand-off developed, that kept me kind of attached to them. And of course, I’d spent too many years as a provider of parties and drugs, for that memory to fade in Soho’s memory, so people came a calling when their primary drug dealer wasn’t reachable, or when they needed my brand of charisma and loving at that lonely, inebriated time of night.

I was living on welfare benefits, no job or education, and mid-forties.

No friends. The ones I still had were starting to feel like echoes of an old life I hadn't let go of yet. Calling me back to chaos and oblivion with gorgeously tempting siren calls. Or coping frantically with their own complicated journeys. My nihilism and trauma were with me, but they began to feel like hideous self-indulgences. They are profound and noble things, but I'd prostituted them for a "get out of jail free" card.

Mr. P was alive and rampant, and brilliant, but he was spiraling out of control.

This felt like a still moment in time.

A pause, a respite.

Something sacred.

A moment heavy and pregnant with the possibility of potential.

A throw of the dice, but with a heavy hand. Like this meant something.

I've had moments like this before. I know them, I can count them.

They have always heralded profound change.

During these moments, I've always had a sense that I can see the future.

Not in a silly crystal ball way; more like a knowing pause, like fate is glimmering possibility for me, and giving me a paused moment to acknowledge it.

The pause is like the predetermination skills spiders are suggested to have, the "Spidey-sense", the finely honed skills of any predator that can pattern together all the information available to its intelligence and senses to predict a future. A skill the best hunters have, the best groomers, the best manipulators; it often lends itself to great success as movie producers, presidents, media magnates, kings of pop and rap, actors with great power and fame.

I've learned with some shame, that my childhood awoke an ancient Darwinian predator in me too. With skills that can be used cruelly or kindly, depending on self-awareness.

I've often felt that spidey-sense. It feels like a Pause in a timeline. A subtle reverberation on the thread of a spider's web.

The pause has always been just long enough to reflect appropriately, to acknowledge the privilege of the paused moment. Not enough detail or clarity to save me from impulsive choices; just enough to mark the moment in history. Life always paused like this when I met a person I knew would be profoundly in my life one way or another.

Life paused like this when I sat in my mum's lap on her rocking chair, as she cried. A pause, when I could be visited by a moment of very adult wisdom, and to choose to be still, to stay, to not go to school, but to do the great deed of supporting her in this profound moment she was having.

Like I knew this wouldn't last; to appreciate it.

That's what the pause does.

I knew the pause too in my dad's car. It was this particular pause that taught me kindness and forgiveness, and that good, good people can do very bad things, but remain good people.

The entire experience of being with the family that took me next was a pause. A fateful damaging blink. I knew that every moment there was defining a deterioration in my very self; a period, a pause that would mark me for decades, not in a good way. I knew as every day passed, that I was rotting with self-loathing, in the absence of affirmations and affection and kindness and touch. Amid that ecosystem of toxic abuse of power and parenting.

The universe paused again when I boarded a plane and left Australia, seeking my fortune and glory. My future glimmered, I knew to follow.

When Adam held out the telephone receiver to me, and dialed the escort agency, the pause was long and profound.

There were many other pauses, but not so many that they were commonplace. They were not, are not commonplace.

They are real, and I can't explain them, but I do trust them.

There was a day when I first uttered the word "chemsex". I was given pause in that moment. The earth shifted on its axis a little. A strand in my web reverberated ever-so; I just knew.

I connected two existing words, “chems” and “sex” to make a new word that I knew would be a defining landmark in gay history, an epidemic that would be different from other drug use epidemics, and one that would have an historic effect on gay culture. I felt, during that pause, that I’d be connected to that word for a long time, though the pause wasn’t long enough to reflect on how.

This period after my court case was over was a very long pause, with lots of time (and sobriety) for reflection. No clarity came to me, I was confused and lost and knowing that death would be welcome if it happened now (though not in a suicide kind of way; just in that way that you imagine a nuclear attack happening or a zombie epidemic happening, or a train that I’m on crashing, fatally).

But I’d been around long enough to know that (one), I’d probably survive those things and (two), this pause would present opportunities, and all I had to do was wait.

People told me to get a job.

They told me not waste this opportunity, this second chance I’d been given. (The fact that it was like my hundredth chance, and that I was tired of these ‘chances’, escaped them, and just made me angry.)

I avoided people and I dumped friends.

I hung around Soho and Covent Garden like a has-been, like a tall, impossibly handsome and charismatic guy who’d blown all his opportunities and no longer cared, like a fish out of water. My shoes gave me away; they were tattered, old, and I didn’t care. I wore my jumpers inside out sometimes; a kind shopkeeper would tell me, and I’d just nod like I hadn’t known, but didn’t care, because I really didn’t care, these things really didn’t matter. I wondered why people bothered about these things so much, day by day by day.

Money was getting short, and the Job Centre was requiring me to attend interviews for jobs; as a sales assistant here or there. I was being interviewed alongside teenagers. I could have got the jobs easily enough, except the interviewers thought it was weird that a person who so obviously should be

rubbing shoulders with Hollywood movie stars should be asking for a job in an Oxford street shop that sold Princess Diana ashtrays and Union Jack mugs. They thought I was made for something better.

Funny, I used to think that.

I used to lie in bed, and dream of this great future I had waiting for me, because I was made for something better. I knew people responded to my charm, my ability to see and say the truth, people liked me, they always liked me. They always believed I was different, treated me as though I was of a different class somehow, whatever that meant to them in modern times.

I believed it too, during periods of my life. I was never sure if it was a narcissistic over-inflated sense of self –worth, though everyone around me let me believe it; or if it was authentic self-worth; an awareness of my privileges, and a confident ability to step into the shoes that were set out before me.

I was usually too high to spend much time thinking about these things, and I hated having no drugs and too much time to think about them now, in this limbo I was in.

This pause was taking too long, and I hated myself and my thoughts. If this kept up, my mental health would crash in on me, and then no great future would ever come unto me.

And then one day I saw Mr. P in the streets.

It's not right to say his unraveling was in full swing; this was past that. He was unraveled. If he had he been less charismatic, less handsome, I'd have walked past him without recognizing him, like I do so many other Soho wanderers that have given way to the seductive solace and trauma of addiction.

But his charisma was now employed against him, still drawing attention that he now didn't want. He was shuffling, his head bowed, chin to chest and wearing a hoodie; he was trying to hide his charisma, his enemy, but unable. Obviously.

Charisma doesn't work like that, it doesn't hide. His good looks were disguised behind gaunt pallid skin full of scabs, and he picked at them as he walked,

shuffled. His good looks weren't visible at all, unless of course you had known every inch of that face, every possible expression that it can manifest, and unless you had seen that face communicate a million messages, every single one of them that you'd loved. If you knew that face as well as I did, if you'd adored every magazine cover it has graced, if it had laughed with you lovingly as you'd exchanged gossip and giggles in bathrooms while exchanging shirts, then the handsomeness was as recognizable as ever, despite the unraveling that was going on under that hoodie, behind those scabs, behind that shame. He saw me, he didn't want to see me. He didn't want me to see him.

It might have been kind to let him walk by, let him have his privacy. He would have afforded that to me, if things had been reversed. Just another gay guy in Soho, doing a walk of shame after too much partying, there was nothing remarkable about it. Why shame them, stop them to engage them in a fickle greeting, pass the time, remark upon the weather, when it's plain they just want to escape to a private place with less sunlight and less judgment. And more drugs to fix the off-centre high. Where there were less sober, shiny people to exacerbate the shame.

I'd done that walk of shame; I spent a decade doing it. I was renowned for my Soho walks of shame (though I never did hoodies, preferring instead some glamorous thrift shop sunglasses and with some divinely inspired ability to hold my head high and defiant as I did it).

I'd done that walk of shame, and I did it for decades. I did not need some sober annoyance stopping me to question me about the night (week) before when I could barely pronounce a word, and both my eyes looking in different directions behind my sunglasses. People would, of course (I'd wave an arm dismissively and strut on, probably tripping as I did so, and readjusting the glasses on my face compulsively, just because I didn't know what else to do with my hands). There was literally no one important enough or liked enough to warrant me stopping during a Soho walk of shame, be that 80s, 90s, noughties or tomorrow.

So I knew, well and truly, that stopping to talk to Mr P on this morning was uncouth.

But I did.

And I did it because a pause came upon me.

I knew, during this pause, that I'd never see Mr P in his glorious good health and sparkle again.

I knew, in this moment, that this wasn't a walk of shame, but a walk of death. A farewell. This wasn't a pal that I simply walk past, a pal having a 'morning-after'. I knew I'd never see his charisma in full glorious shine again. I knew there'd be no more stories of his clubland, trouble-making regalia reaching me via Soho networks. I knew his demise pended. In that pause, I knew it.

I didn't know that I'd nurse him through cancer, psychosis, addiction, nurse him to his death.

But I did know there'd be no more of Stevie P in all his youthful fabulous dynamic glory. I knew it in that moment, that pause.

So I stopped him. I hugged him.

He didn't want the hug; he was stiff. Ashamed, but in a Mr P angry way. Mr P never did shame in an apologetic way; ever.

But he let me hug him, because it was me, it was us, although he pushed the hug off him before I'd finished.

The hug was selfish, and I knew it, but the pause demanded it.

There are so few hugs that I actually feel. They are unpleasant social constructs to a damaged human like me, but I have had a few that gave me a glimmer of what others like about them.

This hug was mine, just for me. The pause demanded it.

I walked him home, we didn't speak. We almost weren't together; we just walked in the same direction, silently and next to each other, like we didn't know each other, like a crowd was coincidentally sweeping us along.

But he let me do it, and I had to, the pause demanded it.

The pause was bigger than that though.

It was more than just knowing Mr P's future.

In that pause, I saw a bigger future; I also saw the past.

It's like Mr P encapsulated all of the injustices of his generation, of his demographic.

In his lifetime, in these decades, he lived through the greatest societal shift in attitudes to homosexuality history has ever seen. He was at the very cutting edge of that shift. It's gotta leave a mark on people, that.

In his lifetime, in these decades, he lived through a monumental shift in societal awareness of childhood sexual abuse. It was vastly common, but we didn't know it, or didn't talk about it. In these decades, in his lifetime, that changed as the prolific scandals came to surface; the catholic church's prolific and widespread abuse of children, the Jimmy Saville's and R. Kelly's of the world, and the blind eyes we turned toward that for centuries.

In his lifetime, in these decades that Mr P lived and regaled, the devastating plague that is HIV and AIDS that wiped out an entire generations of Mr P's compatriots, brothers. A disease that would devastate his life; not the virus, but the stigma, the aftermath, the psychological impact, not just to him, but to his generation of gays. AIDS didn't kill Mr P; addiction and cancer did. Addiction associated with (among things) AIDS, and a cancer that began by him 'choosing' to stop his HIV medicines. How do you attribute a cause of death in these complicated circumstances?

In his lifetime, in these decades, Mr P would live through the greatest technological shift ever before in recorded history. The internet. The internet which came with a sexual and technological revolution for Mr P and other gay men, that would herald the shift from illegal and punishable sinful gay sex that happened in public toilets and 'cottages', to smartphone technologies. A technological and sexual revolution that accompanied an AIDS epidemic, that came with no instruction booklet.

Mr P traversed that shift too. He didn't fare well.

In his lifetime, in these decades, a new kind of drug use epidemic would also engulf Mr P; chemsex. That technological, sexual revolution that came with the smartphones and the internet also brought new, impossibly dangerous and complicated drugs to international millions of gay men, via Grindr and other hook-up apps. A drug use epidemic tied indisputably to the AIDS epidemic, tied indisputably to societal disgust of gay sex.

Yes, that killed Mr P too.

I saw all this during this pause I had on this Soho morning.

It's why I had to stop and interfere in Mr P's walk of shame, despite my better breeding.

I saw, all wrapped up in one dishevelled, unravelled darling man, I saw how the convergence of time and history had descended upon a generation of gay men, at one single point in history, devastating it.

No population could endure that, no population could thrive during these circumstances.

I had pause, that morning; and all of history, and future, hit me hard.

Mr P's plight that morning, represented all of it to me.

And I knew I was the same.

I knew too, it was my fate.

And the fate of, perhaps a generation, perhaps two.

Three? Where does this end.

I walked Mr P home, silently. Beside him, not with him, because I was uninvited.

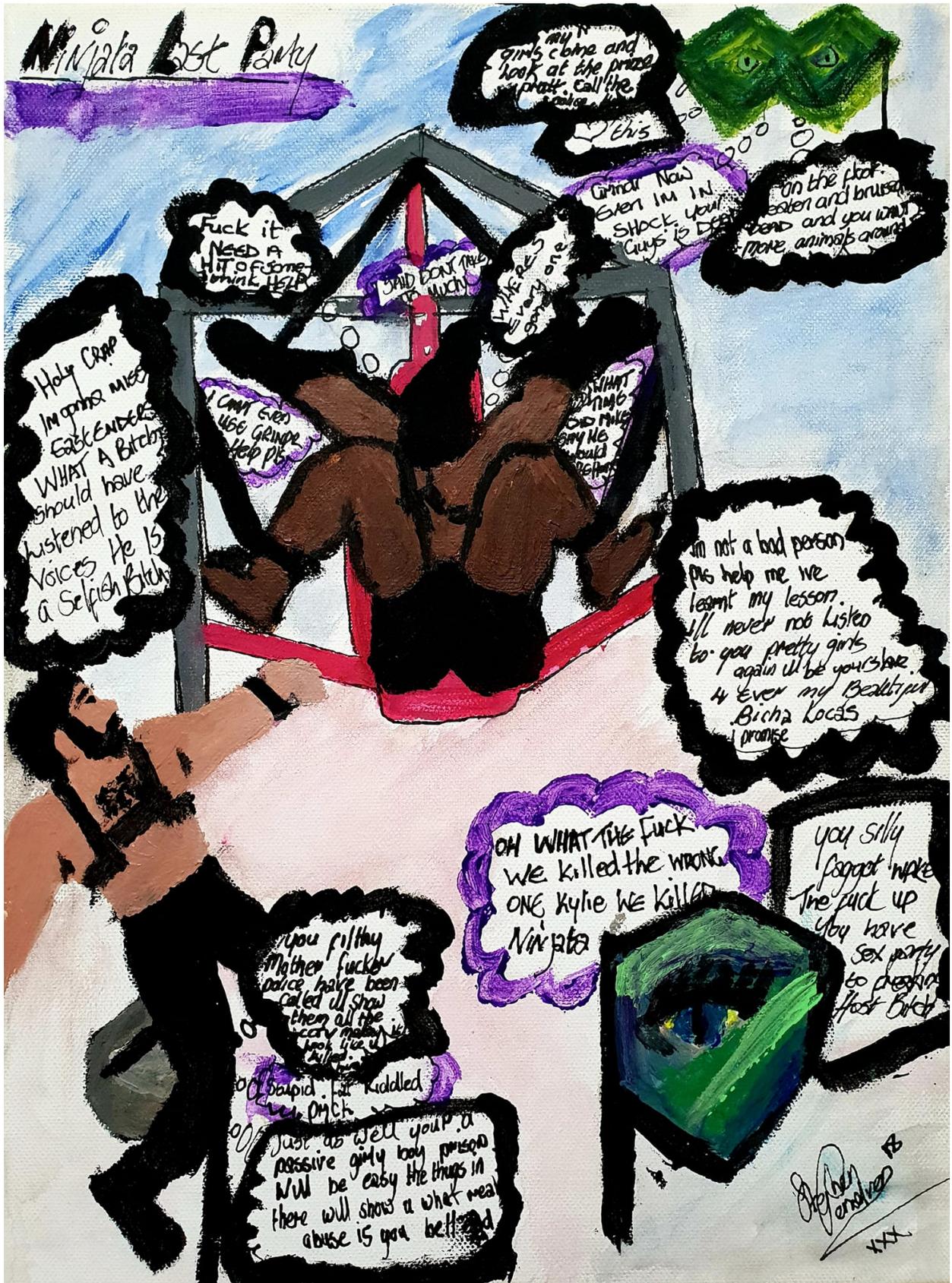
But history demanded I devote this time to this man, to Mr P. I was walking a generation home. Dishevelled and destroyed.

A weight hung upon me. The pause, took me, completely.

I had to do something.

This pause, it had a purpose; they all do, even if I don't know what it means.

This pause was a big one, I couldn't shake it. It revealed nothing, but it stayed, relentless in its weight.



Nirvana Best Party

girls come and look at the prize in front. call the police.



Fuck it
NEED A
HIT OF SOME
THINK HELP

Grindr Now
Even Im In
SHOCK. your
Guys is Deaf

on the floor.
eaten and bruised
bend and you want
more animals around

Holy Crap
Im gonna miss
Ezekiel
WHAT A Bitch
should have
listened to the
Voices He is
a Selfish Bitch

I CAN'T EVEN
USE GRINDER
HELP PL

SAID DON'T THIS
TO MUCH

WHAT
SHOULD
DO THIS
SAY HE
SHOULD
BEHOLD

im not a bad person
pls help me we
learnt my lesson.
ill never not listen
to you pretty girls
again ill be your slave
4 Ever my Beautyful
Bitch Kocás
I promise



OH WHAT THE FUCK
WE KILLED THE WRONG
ONE KYLIE WE KILLED
NIRVANA

you silly
forgot make
the fuck up
you have
sex party
to check
best bitch

you filthy
mother fucker
police have been
called ill show
them all the
heavy making it
look like u
killed.

so stupid. fat kiddled
we psych

Just as well you're a
passive girly boy person
will be easy the things in
there will show a what real
abuse is you believe



Defender
13
144

I knew Mr P's future was not good. I didn't see details, but I knew what the pause was telling me, regarding Mr P. That was huge, and upsetting, but this pause delivered more, and it was about my generation, my community. And a generation to come.

And I knew my own future was changeable.

I knew I could change it for others; or that I should at least try.

I didn't see my future that morning, but I knew what my future was.

Chapter 39

The Epiphany and the Roulette Wheel

Have you ever been torn, utterly torn in two directions?

I was being torn in 2 directions.

One of them, was to live true to my own decades. Be the product of my experiences; be what my history and decades had manufactured. This is the natural responsibility of all living things, to simply exist, as products of their time. Products of their environment. There is a great dignity in this. Mr P was exactly as he was destined; given those experiences, and those decades, and the legacy of the decades that happened before him; that was what produced Mr P, it was what had produced me. We were fine and dignified in it.

But I had this chance to rile against it. That was the pause I had been afforded, what the pause always afforded me. To rile against nature, to betray the natural evolution of this life.

Enough death. Enough guns, enough war, enough religious indoctrination.

Enough archaic moral indoctrination, enough lazy binary definitions of complex things.

Enough orphans, enough toxic masculinity defining what I wear, how I flourish, what colours define my gender, which don't. Enough of this self-loathing, enough children being beaten with belts by giant angry grown-ups. Enough of being untouched by adults who don't even like the children in their house,

cannot bring themselves to say “I love you” because it feels so inauthentic, and in fact would be.

Enough self-harming, enough escapism through destruction.

Enough indulgence of my own fears; enough of my own inner predator that needed to scrap to survive, that needed to territorialise any environment I was in just to feel safe, to groom any people into obedience and worship just to feel safe.

Etcetera...

Enough.

Despite my impatience with it all, the natural order was channelling me back to old behaviours, it was all I knew. Like a ball in a roulette wheel, its direction of travel contrary to the wheel, it eventually gets pulled back into a rhythm, a direction; inevitably, it is the law of nature, it's how things go. I was being pulled back into what I knew. I knew glamour and I knew how to charm people. I knew the effect I had on people, and how that is a tool to achieve goals. I knew how to be angry, how to leave destruction in my wake; I knew how to get high, I knew how to fight. I knew how to fuck it, and I knew how saying “fuck it” felt like winning, when it was actually self-destruction. I knew how to make the self-destruction look good and feel good. I knew how to not care about missed opportunities. I knew that path, I knew that roulette wheel.

That was the path meant for me, that was the current I was swept into, the natural order, the product of the decades I'd lived and the experiences I'd had, and the legacies I'd inherited.

I knew that, it was natural to me. And it called me, it swept me forward.

I knew there was a dignity in that, I think.

But I would rile against it.

I would swim against the current, defy the laws of nature, of history, of experience; I would forge a different path.

I wouldn't do it quietly.

That's just not my way.

Remember; this is not the story of a sweet but troubled boy who learns humility and generosity, and becomes a charitable sober person, helping others, and demonstrating humility.

No.

I would be loud and messy.

I would agitate, it's what I know.

I would be defiant, and charming and convincing, and I'd get my way.

I had work to do, a current to swim against, and a planet of Mr Ps to save.

The decades prior to me had created a mess for gays. They had created and propagated homophobia, awful, fucked up concepts of masculinity that was destroying generations of brilliant men, women too. And non-binary defining people galore. People. Guns and bravado. Rape and power and muscle and greed and capitalism and bad clothes. The decades prior to me created dads who killed mums, who disowned sons who weren't macho. The decades prior to me destroyed the ability to cry and squeal and feel and hug and kiss and delight for a generation of men. And women. And anyone whose sexuality or gender has been or is fluid.

The decades that produced me, also produced AIDS and produced a hatred of penis' that go into bums and produced institutions that denied my existence. Thatcher and her declaration that gays are awful sad abnormalities, dangerous to children. The decade that produced me taught me to hate my nature, to hide it. My loved ones taught me to do that too, lest I be unloved, by them, by others, by my Gods and institutions, and by any future I might fight for and by anyone who might kiss me lovingly or hold my hand in the street. The decades that produced me, also produced a new kind of pornography that would change sex forever for generations of humans. These decades would produce technologies that would change human beings' concepts of communication and connectedness forever. These new technologies would create unholy messes and filthy confusion for people who need to understand love, flirting, kindness, handholding and the subtle glances that change one's destiny.

Or even just change a moment.

These decades I was born into would deliver unto me and my vulnerable struggling brethren, new drugs, chems, sexual enhancers that would create an epidemic of intergenerational gay men who cannot practice sober sex, at all. Only barely surviving a plague that wiped out a generation of gorgeous, creative, different and fabulous and unbearably young (and old) gay men; these decades would reveal a new plague that would suck another generation of gorgeous, creative, different and fabulous and unbearably young (and old) gay men into addiction, mental health, psychosis and early deaths.

Gorgeous, exquisitely effeminate gay men lay skinny and dying on hospital beds, defiantly proud, even as they gasped and vomited, of the penis and bum sex they had resourced to love and connect, died disgustingly on deathbeds; while a world, disgusted by all those things, were either conflicted or happy about them dying.

I know this because I lived it, I know this because I saw and lived through the newspaper headlines and the medical staff and institutions that denied rights and dignity to those brothers of mine.

Goodbye Mr P. I know these decades and legacies and generations and cultures produced you. You thrived, despite it, nothing, but nothing dulled your charisma, your effect.

But at the same time, it did.

It wasn't fair what happened to you.

I would rile against the current pulling me into that direction.

It wouldn't destroy me; or if it did, not before I made a fucking great amount of noise and activism and change.

Change.

Against the current, and clumsily, loudly, with absolutely no couth and plenty of chic, I would rile against my destiny, and change things so no more people followed this stupid, unjust destiny that kept unravelling my peers.

And it would start today.

Chapter 40

The Unnecessary Chapter

There is more to this story; perhaps a missing chapter before it's fully told; but it is all well-documented elsewhere so it seems almost unnecessary. That story, if I'd have told it fully here, would be of a return to grace, after this lengthy fall.

For in the next years, I would rile against my own nature, and against a destiny that would see me unraveled and destroyed.

I would become a Rockstar activist of my generation telling truths where I could see them, telling my own shames so others could unburden themselves of theirs, without crumbling in loneliness or ridicule.

I'd identify, name and define a whole new drug use epidemic for the world and for history, one that cruelly targeted brilliant, vulnerable gay men who struggled with the purist of all forms of communication: sex and love and physical intimacy.

The word "Chemsex" defined a different kind of drug use phenomenon, something apart from the stereotypes of addiction that most of cities' drug support systems were built for. The word chemsex helped public health organisations around the world learn, adapt and develop culturally competent drug use support services where homo-sex and Queer culture could be discussed easily, leading to better health outcomes. The word chemsex was

liked by some, shunned by others as stigmatising, but even those people who hated the *word* itself knew that if they needed help with their kind of drug use and sex, with Party n Play culture (PnP), then they would get culturally competent support, expertise and understanding wherever that word was applied to a health service.

And that is important, that's what matters.

The word chemsex would help HIV prevention services globally to identify and (kindly) target a specific population so as to inform and prescribe PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis; the medicine which prevents people from catching HIV); as well as other HIV prevention methods of course. The word chemsex would contribute hugely to the reduction of HIV incidence in cities all around the world. A game-changer in global HIV epidemic management for men who have sex with men.

Before I introduced chemsex into the global lexicon, drug support services had been designed for a very different culture of people with very different motivations for using drugs, very different contexts. They were simply inept at competently supporting the needs of people who engaged in chemsex. Not bad-intentioned (most of the time) but often grossly unfamiliar with the gay sex environments, and the motivations that might lead a gay man to medicate his sex life that had been labelled sinful, disgusting, shameful, abnormal, promiscuous and disease-riddled by homophobic cultures all through his formative years.

These services and staff in these traditional addiction support services were unable to comprehend how an HIV diagnosis can ruin the enjoyment of gay sex for some.

Regardless of diagnosis: just trying to enjoy gay sex in an AIDS epidemic can require some intoxication.

These services were unable to comprehend how gay-shaming in the school playground can ruin the enjoyment of gay sex, requiring chems to even make it

possible. Entirely unfamiliar with Grindr culture to know how rejection, high expectations and trauma can manifest fast and harmfully in such a way as to require chems just to cope within that culture. Unable to know the difference between competent, harm-managed recreational use and the crossover with harmful self-medicating. Or confusing marijuana and sex for chems and sex; very different things, requiring a cultural understanding to know why they are different.

The word chemsex would stimulate an uncomfortable dialogue within gay and Queer communities, about the role sex was playing in our lives. Gay sexual liberation is a magnificent thing – a living work in progress. It was born out of anger and violence, activism. Fire and ice. It was born of demonstrations, protests, arrests. Deaths. Illegality and perversion. Modern gay sexual liberation was born of - and defined by - an AIDS epidemic that instilled fear into communities, made gay sex syndemic with danger and death and moral confusions about how sex ought or not be had. As this angry and brilliant and frightened and determined generation defined gay sexual liberation, fought for the right to enjoy gay sex without stigma or judgment, fought for the right to different kinds of love and different kinds of families; as they fought to keep saunas and bathhouses from becoming shameful disease dens for the unholy and damned; as these brilliant battles were fought, there was a vacuum of dialogue around some greater complexities of gay sexual liberation. Many in our communities lack the skills or self-esteem to incorporate gay sex and love and pleasure into their lives without self-harming, or harming others. Many lack the skills and resilience to survive the ferocity of modern sex hook-up Apps, or to be kind to comprehend all the psychosexual complexity of the sex lives available to them. Many lack the skills to form and maintain friendships and relationships, so get lost in a hook-up culture where their needs aren't met, and harm follows. Great gay sex and pleasure is not discussed at home, at school, in sex -education, in newspapers, it is not modelled on TV. Goodness knows it is rarely modelled well or championed by our governments. (Homosexuality often

is, but the gay sex isn't. Ever.) Chems are too easy to find for the poorly esteemed and ill-informed, and these chems can be used as a way to cope, a way to self-harm as much as they can be used for pleasure and enhancement.

Chemsex as a cultural concept would draw attention to all these unmet needs and awareness; contribute to a better comprehension of how queer sex and pleasure can fit brilliantly into lives holistically and without harm.

I'd [champion these concepts in my activism travels](#). I'd do battle with international governments and public health policies, with stoic zealots and with well-meaning do-gooders who thought in box shaped concepts. I'd preach and story-tell, I'd unburden and I'd share, and I'd agitate and I'd negotiate. I'd pull heart strings and throw punches, I'd be diplomatic, I'd chain myself to railings and I would demand, reason, argue, converse, plead and fight for the change that I needed, that my brothers needed, that my community demanded; that Mr. P never saw.

I'd fight, every way I knew.

I'd speak on any fucking platform I could find.

I'd travel up and down the country, on my own dime, visiting drug services and charities, trying to get staff and management to get familiar with chems, with chemsex, with talking about gay sex and gay culture. They'd listen (mostly), they were brilliant (mostly), but it was an uphill battle given the culture of drug services, ensconced in cultures of heroin use and alcoholism, ensconced too deeply in heterosexual homeless and crime contexts to adapt effectively.

But I tried and I fought.

I fought against nationwide data-collection proforma and template assessments that couldn't be changed, yet didn't allow for gay drug use culture, gay sex culture.

I gave up with the drug services that struggled to adapt, and I famously shifted chemsex support, globally, into venues where gay sex was discussed routinely. Sexual health clinics, gay charities began doing the job drug services struggled

to do right, and I travelled extensively to support them, negotiating with their funders, their governments, their communities, to get this right. Training, supporting, campaigning, fighting fighting fighting. Effecting great change. I'd fight to name this unfair epidemic, to make chemsex so familiar a word that it couldn't be ignored as I fought for awareness and better healthcare, better cultural competency within drug policies and healthcare services. I wouldn't rest until the word chemsex appeared commonly in dictionaries. I'd resource my grooming skills that had been applied so unkindly during my earlier years, to this work.

I would fight and campaign alongside my communities and allies. I'd support brilliant young men lost in self-loathing and self-destruction, to find their voice, their passion, their strength and their talent; talent they didn't know they had, as they spiraled and unraveled. Many became activists in their own right; spoken word poets and performers, playwrights, filmmakers, performance artistes, drag artists, campaigners or therapists or writers or journalists. I'd visit drag bars, and change them; where I observed cultures of noble and filthy-mouthed Drag Queens, lip syncing to 1970s disco classics while bar rooms of gay men got drunk and looked for sex, I'd change that; these drag queens deserved better audiences than this, but the technological revolution that Grindr was had emptied the once lively gay bars. And the revolution that chems proliferation was, altered the moods and environments of the clubs. These noble and filthy-mouthed and gratingly honest gay mothers, our drag queens found themselves in early 21st century, lip syncing to disinterested, chemmed up or drunken (or empty) rooms of inebriated horny men looking online to find connection, sex, love, relief from the isolation and loneliness that online hook-up culture brought; relief from the legacy an AIDS epidemic had had on their communities and on their concepts of sex and pleasure. New generations of gay men, no longer dying of AIDS, and no longer criminals for the sex they liked, but living in an absolute vacuum of self-care and hyper-sexualisation. Bereft of the gay celebratory sex education they deserved. How do you enjoy sex, love,

community, connection, fulfillment after such a blight? In fact how do you thrive in the decades following an AIDS epidemic? How do you thrive following such traumatic upheaval of societal attitudes to gay sex? How do you thrive amid a brand-new drug epidemic heralded by a technological and sexual revolution?

The one they call chemsex.

New generations of gay men were struggling to find happiness, they were struggling with phenomenally disproportionate levels of mental health, addiction, struggling with such a phenomenal cultural and sexual upheaval, with little to no guidance. Our scenes changed, our sex changed, our bars and clubs changed, and romantic one-night stands and sleepovers became a fury of hook-ups where your lover is gone like the wind after orgasm, then blocked on an App. Our lives changed, and we lived in a vacuum of dialogue about it. And our drag queens, that noble breed, inherited this generation and these bar rooms. So I'd invite every drag queen that would listen to inspirational gatherings where I implored them to find their voice, use their charisma, their wigs, their audience and their podium for activism. I changed a culture into one where drag queens engage their barrooms of gay men in passionate community discussions about hook-up culture, about chemsex, about how sex could be and should be. In London especially, but in cities and scenes and bars around the world, brilliant gay men who had been starved of dialogue about HIV stigma, about the trauma their sex lives had inherited after decades of HIV and AIDS, were engaged in barroom discussions about these essential topics; men who had been starved of conversations about empty gay sex versus great gay sex, about how to love each other in a chemsex and hook-up epidemic. This army of drag queens honored their extraordinary legacy and history and culture, by mothering cities full of struggling gay men; gay men who needed their nurture and kindness and that firm fucking hand that demanded they thrive in this culture. Demanded they not disappear into the loneliness and isolation that online hook-up culture beckoned and heralded and seduced. These noble and filthy-mouthed and brilliant rasping drag queens would rescue (again) the

passions and brilliance and potential of (yet another) generation of awesome gay men.

I'd host these discussions myself when I could; in basements, on Pride floats, on Speakers Corner, and whenever a Drag Queen would lend me her audience.

I'd make documentaries and films, I'd write and write and write and bang on about the better lives these men deserved.

I'd do it instead of getting high. I'd do it while missing terribly, Mr. P.

I'd do it while mourning chemsex deaths that happened every month, deaths of men I knew, men I'd liked, men I'd shagged, men I'd probably sold drugs to, and men I'd probably been cruel to. Chemsex deaths of people I'd never known, but I promise you, they were brilliant, they shone.

Deaths I learned of through Facebook and friends and networks, deaths of people who had no friends left in some cases, because their drug use had progressed to that point where loved ones can no longer handle them and the chaos of addiction. Deaths of circuit party boys who died lying next to their boyfriend after a weekend in Palm Springs or Barcelona; or who died next to the sexy stranger they'd picked up at the We Party or circuit festival party the night before.

No one spoke of the cause of death when it was drugs or chemsex, that wasn't "respectful" to their memory. So the epidemic stayed hidden. Even George Michaels chemsex death got disguised for posterity and legacy. This chemsex epidemic stayed hidden, it just wasn't talked about. So I would, and loudly, even when it wasn't welcomed or "appropriate". I made people, even my own community uncomfortable, by talking about it. I did, I hurt people's feelings, I interfered with the denial that must accompany grief sometimes. As I did that, I remembered the AIDS years, when we had to hide the reason we were ill, as if it was our own fault somehow. As if we ought to be ashamed of being sick. We died of AIDS, we died of gay sex, we died of gay love and our dads and mums didn't want that talked about at the funerals. Linking gay sex to AIDS caused more straight people to hate us, so we stopped doing it. Then we thought twice,

and those of us able to get out of our AIDS beds, and our allies, shouted about HIV and AIDS. Because silence equals death. Gay men were now, thirty years later, struggling and dying with epidemic levels of drug use, in a new epidemic called chemsex, and people didn't want to talk about it.

So I would. And I would.

And I gathered allies, there were plenty, millions in fact. They were everywhere, sometimes just needing a tall, soap-star handsome Australian gay bloke to make this kind of activism and bravery acceptable. Because movie stars and royalty would not lend their names to chemsex activism. We had no Elizabeth Taylor fighting our corner, we had no Princess Diana holding hands with clients in addiction services, and we had no Madonna sporting chemsex harm reduction advice on her album covers. I mean; all you Divas out there, Kylie, Madonna, Pink, Gaga, all of you; you've had you backing dancers that go missing or fuck up because of chemsex. Loads. You know it. Stand up, be loud be activist. I'm gone now, and our community needs you as we always have. No disrespect; you've done plenty, you've saved in loads of ways. And I love you.

But be activist about this.

It's an epidemic in a vacuum.

So I'd need to be loud. And I'd need to upset people, and I'd need to be brave as even my own community (small sections of it) told me to shut up, lest all the straight people start thinking that all gay men did chemsex, lest straight people start hating us again like they did in the 80s.

But there were allies everywhere else, and you know who you are, and I love you, I thank you.

This new lease of life, this different direction, was more than activism, more than finding purpose. It was also creative. I found my art. I'd resource all my ingenuity and my empathy, combine it with an inventiveness, and help to describe other people's experiences, other communities' experiences to people

who weren't identifying, or empathizing. You only really understand bigotry and hate when you can empathise with the fears or ignorances that fuel them. That would be my art; to make the right people care. A person can only really understand self-harm, addiction, mental health when they can get past the ugliness or illogic of those choices and behaviours, and empathise with the person to whom that choice and that behaviour makes complete sense.

I can take you there.

That homeless person on the street, who has resisted all care, resisted overwhelming numbers of attempts to care, who abuses you on the street violently because you had no coins to give him.

I know why he did that.

And he'll do it again; I'll know why, and I'll explain it to you, remind you you care, despite your very understandable reaction to his aggression.

When your young daughter hates you, runs from home, cuts herself and makes herself sexually available, very widely, harmfully and blames you for being the cause of it all; I know why she does that. And I'll explain it to you. I'll help you understand if you find it hard sometimes. If you're too busy defending yourself to hear her cries.

That kid from the neighborhood that bullies your children aggressively and in ways that might impact them permanently; I know why he does that.

My dad taught me this skill, so did my mum, and my HIV and every other experience I had.

Every drug I used, every person I hurt, every wound, over decades, taught me this. I'll help you understand; that's my gift, that's my art.

That's the art that I resource to get my activism done. That's the art that I resource that defines the kindness by which I live my life.

Most of all though; more than policy-changing, more than campaigning; more than travelling and preaching and fighting; the heart of my work would be the privilege I had of providing one to one support in the world's most brilliant chemsex support services.

I would sit down and have powerfully emotional conversations with tens of thousands of gay men, one at a time, tête-à-tête, over my final decades; all of whom were struggling to enjoy sex and love and connection and pleasure, and using chems to manage that, one way or another. I'd become a skilled therapist as well as an activist with these men. We'd wrestle and rile together, bang our heads and our hearts together until we found a way out, till we got through this, till we found solutions and peace and joy. I saved their lives sometimes, that's a part of it, but mostly just finding a way out of a complicated misery that disguises itself as pleasure. Every one of these people, these glorious vulnerable men would hold a place in my heart and memory, and keep me riling against the current that was my actual destiny.

And they saved my life.

Chapter 41

A Dedication to all those Lost to Chemsex



RIP, my Facebook friend.

Rest in Peace now.

I hate this, but... I can barely remember how I know you.

Were we Sunday morning lovers after a night out clubbing?

No, not that close. I think.

Perhaps we're just 90's kids who queued together, shared dance-floors together.

Again and again. Never speaking.

*Were we friends? I hate this, but I can't remember.
Did we share a bump in a cubicle together once?
Or was it often? Or never.
How do I know that face? It's a lovely face.
Truly lovely.
Maybe I was jealous, because you always looked so popular.
Maybe I was a bitch to you.
I hope not.
Maybe you were bitchy to me. You were so popular. Gosh, maybe we
hated each other. But you're gone, and it doesn't matter now.
Damn it, I know you, I know that face.
Did I ask for a dic-pic on Grindr? Did I block you?
Did I flirt with you, compliment you online? Did I troll your Wall once or
twice thoughtlessly?
And today, through a friend of a friend on Facebook, I see you have died.
I swipe through your profile pics.
I know that face. And I don't.
I scroll through the comments, looking for signs of how you died.
Because I suspect...
I suspect...
I...
I don't want it to be another chemsex death.
So, so many gorgeous ships that I've passed in three decades of nights -
now lost to chems.
A few, achingly close, dear friends.
But the ache, the ache, of the many that I see too regularly on Facebook.
Familiar-ish strangers, from our gorgeous heady pasts.
Quiet posts from Facebook friends, announcing, lamenting, the untimely
death, the oddly young unexplained death of someone I danced with
(maybe). Or not. Perhaps queued for a toilet cubicle together. Years ago.*

*How did I know you? I hate it, that I can't remember.
Because you deserve more than that.
To be more than just another guy I kinda knew maybe, who died from
chems.
More than just a passing, sad thought.
There have been other strangers that have died, that I've learned of from
Facebook. I saw, I lamented, I ached. And then I scrolled on. Perhaps there
was a cute cat picture that distracted me from my brief grief.
Chemsex deaths that are announced, then forgotten. Have I become so
accustomed, so immune to these RIP messages, that I can move on so
quickly?
I am ashamed.
And angry.
I am angry for these deaths. Too many.
I'm angry that many didn't get much more than a brief grieving before
scrolling onward. I'm angry that some mums and big brothers had to
process and wrestle with the impossibleness of the chemsex spiralling
that occurred before the death.
What a thing to come to terms with.
You deserve better than my fleeting, quickly-forgotten Emoji post.
I will not grieve momentarily, then scroll on.
It's painful, but I will stay with it. Stay with this grief.
You deserve to be remembered.
Not forgotten.
By me. By your community.
Yes, I hardly knew you.
Maybe.
But I know that face.
A truly lovely face. I remember that.
You're my comrade. You are familiar. You are my community. You are*

family.

I know some people were impatient with your chemsex journey.

Some friends didn't stick by you.

I mean... you were a nightmare. A darling nightmare, my brother.

Maybe I didn't stick by you. Maybe that's our thing, the thing I can't remember.

Maybe I abandoned you, as I moved on to more sex or more drugs.

Well today, I make a vow.

For today I am outraged.

Outraged that you are dead, so young, so bright.

Outraged by too many deaths. Outraged that you experienced some stigma and intolerance for your drug use. I am outraged that some of our public health institutions refuse to be alarmed at how many of us are dying from chems. I'm outraged when I hear that "it's only a sub-population of a sub-population doing chems". That the prevalence is over-rated. That I'm being alarmist in my activism.

I am alarmed.

I am grieving.

I hear you.

You are not just a sub-population of a sub-population; your pain is valid, this community's concern, is valid.

And you.

You are valid, your experience, your life, your struggle with chems, was valid.

Not just a sub-population of a sub-population.

How reductive.

You were a significant gorgeous human being, part of a significant and divine community - and you should be remembered and celebrated and understood.

Not just momentarily, before scrolling on.

I am sorry I did that.

Sorry to you all. Rest in Peace.

I will honour you, I will stay with my grief. I will remember you, all of you, and I will respect your journey, that ended this way.

You are more than just another Facebook announcement.

You are my grief, for my struggling community. You are my shame, my shame that I can't remember you. My shame for having scrolled by too quickly when you all deserved my grief. My grief and my activism.

And this;

you are also my fear. My fear that one day I might pass, and be scrolled past, forgotten, unimportant. My own insignificance. My own nihilism.

But today, it is you. And my grief and my shame.

And my vow.

You are passed. You are my brethren, you are significant and I will forever remember you, and act on that memory.

That I vow.

This chemsex activism was important to me. It was my salvation, my redemption. It was my service. It was me participating in society, community, not just riling and draining it.

I'm very proud of what I accomplished, but mostly just pleased that I spent at least some years being productive. As best I could with some rather ugly mental health baggage.

And I think there was some joy, as best as my disabled emotions could produce it, I think I tasted it a little in those last years.

But it was (in part) overshadowed by yet another toxic relationship that I got pulled into.

Institutionally this time.

Right in the heart of our beloved NHS.

Chapter 42

A Final, Ugly Seduction

My later, mostly happy years were tainted, in particular by some toxic management and abuses of power in the big shiny sexual health clinic where I worked in my heyday years.

I thought I was done with predators, or at least that I'd learned to identify them earlier. But I have a damaged side to me that draws myself near to them – or something.

Or perhaps they can spot me, something I am exuding.

I might have expected it in the realms I'd inhabited until now; closed suburban households, sex work industry, drug dealing... but I hadn't expected it within our (usually) clinically excellent NHS.

This shiny famous sexual health clinic was run entirely in silo from its NHS Trust governing body, by a (romantic) couple, two men, long term boyfriends. They'd done wonders creating this separate brand, this award-winning clinic famous for innovation, utterly loved by its local gay communities.

These two had curated their own brand, their stand-alone website, employed their very own brand and design agency. Over ten successful award-winning years, these two had gotten very comfortable with their power, and they'd even groomed the senior NHS management to keep their distance, lest they threaten the personal touch and uniqueness that defined this clinic's success. Gently,

year by year, it became harder and harder for senior NHS management to have any influence over the power that was congregating and accumulating within this power couple's orbit.

One of these men in particular... as his power accumulated unchallenged over the years, developed a habit of recruiting a few particularly vulnerable new employees that he could groom. He wouldn't have put it that way, he would have just felt especially attracted to this mixture of vulnerability and charisma, plus a desire to rescue these kooky darling people from chaos and give them amazing opportunities at the shiny sexual health clinic. Three of us in particular; me, with my criminal record and addiction history, SO flattered that he thought me worthy of having a special privileged role within this clinic, under his very special management and mentorship. There were a few others; two extraordinary Trans women also fell prey to him. Both powerful, brilliant accomplished; but with a history of having been unemployable or not respected as professionals because of their Trans histories. But he would rescue us. Recruit us. Save us from a world that didn't respect our talents and he would employ us, manage us his own special way, protect us from the world that hadn't treated us well.

He'd look after us.

We had no idea. For the first year we basked in his protection and affirmations. Valuable contributors to this shiny world-famous clinic, endorsed, validated finally, and all thanks to this boss' investment in us, his recognition of our talents. We were considered untouchable by other staff who might have wanted to collaborate with us, everyone knew we were this man's special property. He called us his "Kookies".

Because we were kooky and flawed and he adored us.

I shudder as I type that sentence.

All other staff just knew not to dare challenge his exclusive management of us. We had no idea. We felt protected, loved even.

We were kept apart from other teams, we were discouraged from contacting any senior NHS management, from joining unions, from contacting Human Resources or Occupational Health. All these things were miles and miles away (geographically and metaphorically) from this special Soho based shiny clinic-in-silo.

Loyalty and betrayal were woven into the DNA of this relationship. And after the grooming really got going, we three would find ourselves being punished for betrayals that we were entirely unaware we'd committed. Being too popular on social media might be punishable one week if the mood took him. Re-Tweeting a post from a different sexual health clinic could result in a punishment, he and his boyfriend were super competitive with other clinics, often boasting of how badly other clinics fared (re data) compared to us in team meetings, coaxing cheers from the staff. As if it was an Awards War, not colleagues working generously in public health. Being kind to a colleague he didn't like could result in a punishment. Having my own website and personal activism was a challenge to him and punishable whenever it crossed his mind, or the whim took him. Mostly these punishments existed as being shunned and 'starved' of his affections and attentions. We weren't aware of this at the time; we just wondered what we had done wrong to make him avoid us, to make him ignore our emails, or to cause his obvious disappointment and annoyance with us. Not recognizing this for the power play it was, we just worked very hard to win ourselves back into his favour again, feeling naughty and confused and rejected.

None of us got our jobs via the NHS equal opportunity way. We were specially recruited, loopholes, abuse of power. Targeted for our groomable qualities, recruited predatorially, employed with intent. I was interviewed twice; rejected first time by a panelist who recognised that I was vastly underqualified and a bit vulnerable for the job. My boss was so outraged at this; truly outraged that someone else might usurp his absolute power; he felt entitled to win me as his

prize, and when I was rejected by other management, his inner predator went into overdrive and he got me, he won.

And I was glad, so flattered and grateful.

He also recruited a few patients he was 'drawn' to, offering them counselling, despite his most recent qualification being in hypno-therapy (I balk at his lust of that skill). But these patients were convinced they were getting legitimate therapy from an accredited therapist. He always stuck to his 'type'; charismatic, brilliant, slightly vulnerable. Often sex workers.

He gaslighted a lot, made me question my mental health, bullied, punished, coerced. I had a lot of privileges, free time, no clock to punch, freedom to pursue pet (work) projects and always always, he protected me from anyone who might resent or question these privileges. I was complicit, because of these privileges and it felt dirty and it trapped me, bound me to him. Always, always, being the friend and great protector, the kindest and most charismatic supporter of me, believer in me. He really did rescue me from some yuk situations and moods, shared secrets and interests, gossip; he kept me protected from our enemies.

"Our" enemies. How did I get to that?

They were his (perceived) enemies, not "ours".

It was very confusing, this twisted intimacy.

Utterly entangled.

Others had complained about him and his nepotism, his grooming and abuses of power. His boyfriend, a senior manager turned a blind eye to this. He abused power too, but a little more naively; less calculated. Just naïve mistakes. Just how consciously aware he was of his boyfriend's grooming... I'll never know.

One of the Trans women got so overwhelmed and bullied, she just left. I should have supported her; I feel shame to this day about that.

She was replaced overnight by another special new "recruit" and new best friend, the new Trans staff member. Brilliant, charismatic – vulnerable.

It took me a few years to muddle through why I was frightened to go into meetings with him, why I'd spend so much time thinking and worrying about his reaction to ANYthing I did. Very confusing; I should have recognised it earlier, given my history.

If you met these two – you'd never know. Charming, intelligent, charismatic; they can lay it on thick, they have it down to a fine craft. Both in fact genius' in their accomplishments.

I got some help thankfully, and I joined the Union, I got some advice from Occupational Health and I began the process of awareness, including some brilliant psychological support. Helped me slowly untangle the gloomy mess. I'm no innocent. I'm hardened, and I've abused power myself in the past. I'd tried very hard to turn a new leaf after my court case, but I finally got a true education of what abuse of trust and power is, and how boundaries can protect a person. This was a crucial learning curve for me, with my own brand of mental health. And I was managing a small team of volunteer chemsex support workers myself. I wanted/needed to be 100% sure that old habits of my own weren't re-surfacing, so with support from my psychologist, I sat my team down for a chat.

I adored this team. I felt like we were a family.

But I had a greater responsibility than that.

I spoke to them.

"If I've ever referred to us as a family; I apologise. We are not a family, we are work colleagues. Familial relationships are more complicated, and I want to apologise for complicating our relationship.

If I've ever given you the feeling that you owe me loyalty for any reason; you do not. This is a clinical workplace, and you all deserve to be here on merit, not by favour. Anything that I say or do that engenders a feeling that you might be being disloyal – would be a flagrant abuse of the trust you put in me. Please know that.

I hope I've always been respectful of this trust you put in me as your manager and mentor. Please feel confident to talk to me freely about anything that I might have done that made you uncomfortable. I promise to hear you, I will believe you. I will take responsibility. And if you don't feel comfortable talking to me about it, that's OK. I want you to be very clear on the management & support hierarchy structure within our NHS Trust, so that if you want to go over my head, you know where to start.

And I welcome that.

I want you to do that.

It's the right thing to do and I'll be glad you did it, I promise this.

I will not consider it a betrayal or disloyalty. On the contrary; you deserve an excellent experience of employment here, and you deserve excellent clinical management and mentorship. Never distorted or confused by any familial concepts of betrayal or loyalty. I respect the trust you put in me as your manager, and it is my most sincere wish that your work experience here, under my management, is healthy in every way."

This team of volunteers were utterly extraordinary, and (alongside the patient work) my reason for coming to work each day. A few were bemused about my speech and didn't understand why it was important to me to say it. But one or two knew why it was important, and were very glad of it. And very kind about it. I began untangling myself from this twisted and toxic relationship with my manager who had always represented and practiced the opposite of what was in my speech. I wish I had just hated him, it would have been so much easier. But I really really really had liked him very much; so many shared interests and fun conversations, and stuff that felt like intimacy to me (given my particular blind spot in that area). I was entirely unaware for so long that this wasn't pure friendship, let alone good clinical management as one should expect within the National Health Service. Mostly I would struggle with not knowing whether he was self-aware and calculated in all this, or if he was just an instinctive power-

monger/groomer, in denial about the harm he caused, believing himself to be entitled to this role of great protector he played.

Whatever. I know he had some awareness of it at least; but denial is a powerful thing.

I would finally complain, and escape, and as bad as it was, it would not overshadow the work I was doing with my patients and activism.

I truly do apologise to his other victims; I should have stood up for them (for you) bravely, boldly and much much sooner. I apologise and take my shame to my grave.

Literally.

I do hope the NHS Trust exercises some oversight in regard to the governing of that clinic. Power is dangerous when unchallenged, and allowed to fester and accumulate. That clinic is a great success story in regard to public health, heroic in its championing of Queer communities and sex workers; but filthy at its helm.

I dust myself off and move away.

Move on.

Chapter 43

The Pills Don't Work, the Therapy Don't Work

I have been wronged; by people and by history, and by circumstance and by intent. And by self.

And I've wronged others. Umbuthano wokuphila.

I carry that anger, in ways I don't even identify; it leaks out of me in unrecognizable sneaky ways, and I can be better.

I need to forgive, and all the fibers and cells in me won't let me.

But I will, I'll rile against that current too.

I'm angry.

It's not fair.

I hate guns, and I hate the people that gave my teenage dad a gun. I hate the war that justified him holding a gun, I hate that he was congratulated on every life he killed in war, instead of giving him what he actually needed after every life he killed. I hate the experiences he had as a young, young man, I hate that those experiences rippled and exploded, imploded onto other people's destinies, and onto the decades that followed. I hate the lessons he learned then.

I hate the racism and the hunger for colonial power that precipitated and followed that war.

When I say I hate it, I mean my anger is furious, and I don't want to forgive; bits of me want revenge, and that leaks out of me in weird, misdirected and unrecognisable ways.

I hate that my mother is gone. Just gone, and that empty space is a palpable empty space, every breath and moment I have lived since.

She held, me, hugged me, spoiled me despite knowing better, she did that. She moved the fringe out of my eyes with a loving gesture that aches, just aches now. She needed me, and I had purpose; I parented her like only a child born of her womb can. When she cried, when she wasn't capable of mothering, she let me be there, and to do that for her.

And then, she was gone like a ripped umbilical, I was bereft, unheld, untouched and without purpose.

It's not fair.

I don't know who to be angry at, but it needs to go somewhere, and I can't keep using self-harm as way to a exorcise it.

I hate that the family that replaced that, embroiled me in that unkind ecosystem. They housed me, they meant well, to be my rescuer, my protector, provided I paid in gratitude and worship. But I was wary. And hence, punished. I wasn't touched, I wasn't loved, or needed, or hugged or held or complimented. The only time my fringe was moved out of my eyes was with a hard slap across the head for being unlikeable. Ask them today, why that was, and they'll explain that I made it difficult, that I didn't want those things. That it was me, that it was my fault I was never loved.

I was five.

And six, and ten and fourteen.

Never touched, never told I was liked or loved.

I'm so changed by that experience. I self-harmed, and I hurt others. I did not see kindnesses that were right in front of me. Decade after decade, joyous moments were happening to me, I felt nothing. People loved me, I had no idea.

People had these incredible and profound meetings or experiences with me, and I was entirely unaware of the bonding that was going on. Predator, always in danger, naïve to all the love and joy around me, empathy just switched off. I caused great suffering, to me and to others, for decades and decades.

It's so unfair. And I'm so angry.

And guilty and ashamed.

I hate that I was born into an AIDS epidemic.

Born gay into an AIDS epidemic.

I might have handled the AIDS epidemic itself; what I really hate is that the world was so fucking unkind to gay men during this plague. I hate that people don't understand how hatred of gays, hatred of gay sex drove that epidemic, exacerbated the hell out of it, beyond measure. I hate the newspapers that drove the hate and I hate the politicians that drove the hate, withheld support. I hate that parents disowned their suffering, crying dying teenage sons, because they had AIDS; even as they lay wasting and dying in bed, they disowned them. I hate that hospitals kept boyfriends and partners and gay lovers away from those dying lonely men, simply because they didn't recognize them as "family". I will never know what to do with my anger about that injustice. Not so much to those parents and hospitals, but to the world that created that climate.

Where do I direct that anger?

Because as I seek an outlet, all I find is self-harm, drug use, oblivion amid the injustice of this; it seems the logical outlet for that anger, but that's fucked up. I can't maintain that.

I need to forgive... someone or something, because this outlet for my anger, this self-harm, it isn't working for me, for others.

I'm angry at the loneliness of my early adulthood. I'm angry that I found prostitution before I found love or great sex. I'm angry that I was alone as I waited to die an ugly, ugly slow death. I'm angry that the most common response to my impending AIDS death, was not sympathy or kindness, but

dreaded fear, an avoidance of touching me, and disgust regarding the sex act that caused it.

I'm angry I survived it, when my friends and generational brothers didn't.

I'm angry that I survived it, when I didn't really even want to.

I'm angry that I survived it, and wasted the very opportunity of life and health that promised beyond it.

I don't know who to yell at, or what to hit, or what to destroy.

I'm as good a mark as any.

It's a powerful anger, that can enrage out of me like a nuclear shockwave that can consume and crush and destroy the planet if I let it free; and I did. For decades.

The pain I caused, the damage I did.

I'm angry that I can't be happy when I have every privilege.

I have however, channeled the rage and injustice into an activism, and I found my art in that.

I have recognised others who have struggled, no matter how well they disguised it;

I saw them, I saw you, we may have self-destructed together, but we WERE together.

If fleetingly and cruelly. We identified and we were together in our self-harm.

And toward the end, I finally did some good with my spidey-skills; I tamed my inner predator as best I could, and did some good.

But; it wouldn't be enough.

Because there was a new danger.

Chapter 44

A Reason to Live

I was in danger, I knew it.

I mean, I always felt in danger, that was my MO, but something new and menacing was manifesting and gnashing its teeth.

In recent years I'd become increasingly self-aware of my mental health, of my controlling nature, my earnest need to territorialise spaces, of my need to charm people utterly and win their adoration and loyalty before I could feel safe. And of the tools I used to create this safety.

I'd done these things blindly before, spurred forth by rocket fuel of rage and fear and auto-pilot coping mechanisms.

Doing harm.

My self-awareness of these things had been an awful complicated journey where therapists urged me to be kind to myself as I reflected back on my behaviour, as I loathed and riled against – not only my past behaviour, but my very innate self, my true inner darkness that had a need for power and a streak of narcissism. As I became aware of my inhibited empathy, my inhibited ability to emote, the mimicking skills I'd honed, and how much of my every day was performance learned by a ferocious child predator, badly wounded, trying to fit

in and avoid ridicule and needing to look and behave like the normal humans all around me.

Lest I be recognised for my true ugly self.

Although my emotional skills are severely inhibited, and empathy a true challenge, it's really only the social bonding ones that don't function. Anger functions just fine. Rage. Fear.

But not so much joy, love, grief, attachment, pleasure, fun.

It's a strange way to live. Almost like walking the earth as a vampire, watching the bizarre humans, emoting, socializing, communing. Feeling, living.

But not quite one of them.

Alone. Secret, different. Not authentically "good" like them. Just acting that way. Always fearing being found out lest the disguise slipped.

This emotionlessness can lead to strange behaviour.

Because I wasn't a vampire, I was human, despite the damage, and the need to feel was real. If love or joy wasn't possible, then the feeling would be sought in other ways. Extreme pain, extreme risk, these things worked. Drug use, cutting/burning of self; the thrill of crime or extreme sports. Some find feeling in violence. Many torture or kill insects or even pets as children, just trying to feel, to make the shadow existence more real. I wasn't violent by tendency, at least not toward others; I was more likely to harm myself. As adults, many find feeling in winning, conquering, defeating. Maybe even the destruction of others, the control of others, whether that be socially or sexually. These ugly things provide a *feeling* experience that they are unable to get from the normal bonding and socializing emotions normal humans have.

I wasn't violent thank goodness, and I was not as damaged as some of the malignant narcissists in our world.

On the spectrum, I was pretty innocent.

But I knew the monstrous nature of my damage and the ugly I was.

Becoming self-aware of this was very complicated, and my psychiatrist told me I was being harder on myself than I needed to.

My history of harm to self and others is plainly written in these preceding chapters.

And my self awareness was the new danger in my life, because I did not feel human afterward, I felt very dirty. And despite the good I'd done in recent decades, the dirtiness and toxicity of the most recent employment experience in the shiny sexual health clinic inhibited my therapeutic process.

Therapy is brilliant, it's so important.

But it's too slow.

I feel like a puffer fish, blown up full of toxicity, and I just want someone to lance me.

I wish this build-up could just be surgically removed.

Or exhumed, like a whale breaching the surface and blows.

Or when a beached whale carcass explodes from the build-up of gas in the decomposition process; I'm sure that'll happen to me.

I wish I could just do a giant belch and let it all go.

Or one giant sigh, and I just exhaust it all out of me.

That doesn't work.

(Or at least might be messy.)

Therapy is brilliant, and it can help (even monsters like me) to manage the narcissistic rages, to monitor behaviour and to muddle through the confusion of trying to manage friendships with inhibited emotional capacity.

To socialise oneself.

Trauma can be treated.

Fear can be treated.

Behaviour can change, awareness and self-kindness are all things that therapy can do. Medicine can help too.

But the ability to empathise, to actually *feel*; the ability to produce the neural and physiological activity to experience those normal human bonding and social emotions – that isn't fixable when the damage started so young, and the trauma continued for such a long duration of time; especially during those so-important formative childhood years pre-adolescence and puberty.

You can't grow flowers in infertile soil.

But you can find an ethic to live by.

As I'd waited to die of AIDS in my early twenties, I'd had a lot of very lone time to figure out what life was about. Years in fact, to reflect on the purpose of all this ridiculousness.

But there was a safety in waiting to die, alone. No need to win or conquer or to cope, or even to survive; I was way past that, my terminal diagnosis was a confirmed scientific reality and the descent unto death was not something that would turn around, according to that scientific reality.

I was by no means self-aware of my damage at the time, I was just coping, with a certain ferocity. Rocket fuel. But my deathbed musings did result in an ethic that for me; explained the purpose of existence.

Kindness.

Kindness, to me, seemed to be the only thing in all of existence that was unadulterated, harmless, and of value.

Others who were capable of emotion, had felt love and safety, and generosity, and grief, and companionship, and intimacy; they might have come to different conclusions about what life was about.

And goodness knows there were a lot of people like me on AIDS deathbeds during those same years, trying to make sense of this. Trying to figure out what if anything, truly mattered in the universe.

I did not *feel* being loved, though I know I was. My memories of my mum and dad were black and white, the actual feeling experience adulterated as an emotional memory.

Many normal feeling people might describe caring as a feeling. Something they *feel*.

I don't. But I understand it as an ethic.

Many normal feeling people might describe kindness as a feeling. Something they *feel*.

I don't. But I understand it as an ethic.

And kindness was the only thing I could come up with that provided any kind of compass to live by.

And I did live.

I survived that AIDS experience, despite being ready to die, wanting it in fact. I lived.

And I adopted kindness as an ethic that was a lifeline in a life that had only damaged empathic capacity to serve as a moral compass.

I had trouble practicing it consistently in the troubling years after my AIDS near-death. But it was there, and it saved me from unleashing my core narcissism on the strange humans I shared the planet with.

And as I became self-aware and did some good in the following decades.

Kindness served me well as an ethic, as a moral compass, and as a concept that I consider to be... sort of divine. Or Universal. Or spiritual perhaps.

It is like a religion to me, and Kindness saved me.

But my self-awareness came with a danger.

I wanted to die.

I know for a fact that living without empathy, and/or with chronic anhedonia does not qualify a person for state sanctioned euthanasia in any country.

I checked.

I'm old and I feel like a war-torn elephant or whale. Maybe even one of those really old sharks with battle scars covering their body.

I have inner urges to compete where there is no need to. I have inner instincts that drive me to conquer and win, when it is entirely unnecessary. I have instincts that tell me that affection shown toward me is malicious and drive me to be scathing in return. I can be seethingly vengeful if I feel I've been betrayed. I can destroy an innocent's mood or self-worth with a sentence, with a breath, if my predator is switched on that day. Constructive criticism, feedback can be met with the cessation of a relationship or project – forever, if I'm not constantly monitoring myself.

If wronged by a friend, my grudge can know no end, unless I get professional help.

Most often that "wrong" is just perceived anyway. Narcissism is like that.

And then there's this irrational pride that inhibits apologies.

I'm fine in brief, uncomplicated acquaintanceships where I'm safe, or spaces where my role is clearly defined; but beyond that, I need to work work work with a neural activity going at an exhausting pace to manage my rages and responses, Kindness always guiding me, therapy has helped, but it is exhausting work.

24/7.

These are my battle scars. I make it look good, I make it look glamorous and slick. Like a good predator I have mastered that performance, but I am worn out.

And that has become my new danger.

An emotionless life is an empty vessel, a black and white silent film, like watching other people live from the inside of a thick glass enclosure; watching; there, but not a part of it.

And exhausting.

I long for that peace that I found on my AIDS deathbed.

There was a bliss, when I stopped fighting, when the anger passed. A bliss.

I even long for that peace I had when I'd resigned myself to going to prison.
The peace I had in the car with my dad on kill kill day; toward the end when we'd both resigned ourselves to the awareness that we would die together that day.
The peace I had in the rocking chair with my mum.

That bliss.

I want it back.

I'm tired and battle-scarred. I'm still here and I'm pissed about it. I want to beach myself like an old whale.

Life is long and hard sometimes: for whales for elephants for humans. Let us resolve it in our natural ways. I know there's a human desire to 'fix' it; but not all beached whales want to be saved, fixed. Don't 'rescue', just because your own social constructs about death and afterlife and suicide mandate it.

That's *your* stuff.

Let nature be.

Nature has a way of allowing death; and humans with normal emotions fight it for the sake of those constructs.

Death is a part of nature and it's rarely the graceful old age 'falling peacefully asleep' thing people like to imagine.

It's violent often, it's unpleasant, unexpected. Often odd, and inexplicable. Just like the Big Bang that birthed this universe and expanded with great violence, collisions of atoms, fire and ice, explosive supernovas and deathly dark hole gravity wells; creation and destruction are essentially the same thing. Death is a part of life and we rile against it with a lot of highly emotionally driven social constructs.

But I'm not afraid.

Not of this.

I have overstayed my own welcome.

My instincts tell me that.

A Mortal Coil is telling me that.

I'm tired.

That's my new danger.

But danger and I are longtime bedfellows. Danger is more familiar to me than love is. I certainly understand it better.

Things I might live for, should I have been blessed with the possibility.

To *feel* a hug.

To sink into someone else's hug, and really *feel* that.

To be touched, and to *feel* the sensation of it, without all my emotions blocking what that normally feels like.

What does that *feel* like?

I've seen soldiers come home to be greeted by their families, so emotionally.

What does that *feel* like? It looks amazing, that'd be something to live for.

I've seen how Christmas' and birthdays affect people. There is an emotion, probably many that go with that. What's that like? It looks good. I'd live for that I think.

I've seen people burst with pride at accomplishments of friends, children, lovers. I don't know what that *feels* like. I'd live for that.

I've watched people grieve. Ache, utterly ache for the loss they are feeling. I sort of envy that too. Perhaps it's worse in the flesh, but I do envy the love that causes that ache. It must be immense. I'd live for that.

I've seen people go totally goo goo eyed and clucking at babies. Pinching cheeks and talking in squeaky high pitched baby voices, making silly sounds.

Grown-arse adults acting completely stupid doing baby talk. There's an *emotion* attached to that that I don't get. I'd live for that to *feel* that.

I've seen people be overwhelmingly protective of little brothers and sisters, fiercely so, and that's coming from a place, an emotion that I haven't known. To *feel* such a thing that causes such protection, that is alien to me. I'd live for that.

I know people keep pictures of people they love or people who have died on mantelpieces and on their phones, in their wallets or purses. They look at those pictures sometimes, for reasons unknown to me, and they *feel* something. That doesn't happen to me. I don't get it.

The ache I've witnessed on people's faces when someone they love is suffering. Be it beside a hospital bed, or a scraped knee; or some cruelty in a school playground, or when a loved one is feeling trauma and not coping. I've seen emotion on the faces and in behaviour of the people who love them, the ache of watching a loved one suffer.

It doesn't look pleasant, but I think it is love and it looks like something to live for.

I know people have loved me, yet I've been unaware of it.

I believe people have ached for me, for my suffering, and I haven't felt it, or even known it often.

I've been in conversation with people who appear strangely moved by some emotion the conversation is provoking, and it completely surprises me. Because I'd been completely unaware of any emotional component in the conversation.

I know people have hugged me and felt me be just wooden.

I know people have felt a relationship of some sorts with me, and they've felt that not being reciprocated. It's confused many, hurt many I think.

And I hadn't even noticed.

I wonder what that *feels* like. I wonder what reciprocating that *feels* like. I think I'd live for that.

I've met so many thousands of people in my life.

I've liked nearly every one of them.

Loving them? I wish. I guess, in my way, I did. Whatever that means.

My intellectual understanding of love is this.

SO many of us (let me say all of us) humans have vulnerabilities. Very often manifesting as self-doubt, self-loathing. Subjective self-opinions about our flaws, our ugliness, our ineptness.

Our lack of worth.

Our lack of value.

It's innate, and we all share it to varying degrees.

Love is not infatuation.

Love is not attraction.

Love is not that selfish feeling people get when they really really like ("love") someone.

Love, loving, is generous.

It is knowing someone, knowing all their self-held beliefs about their value are subjective and flawed.

Love is looking at someone and seeing none of that. Love is that generosity that comes from choosing to devote your life to convincing a person that they are wrong about those beliefs.

Love is power, the most powerful thing in existence. The power to look at someone, to hold them, and for that generous love to dispel, absolutely, those doubts. When that person feels and trusts that love, that generous act of loving; the self-doubt dissipates. Utterly. They *know* the best in themselves. Love is the generous act of devoting one's life to lifting that person up – just because you

can. Because you have that power. It's a choice to do that, and love never depletes. There's enough for every person you know or come into contact with. If you choose.

Love isn't sex, or infatuation, or idolatry, or that selfish feeling that comes from an idol showing you attention.

(Though it can exist in all those things if done right.)

Love is the generosity of lifting someone up just by knowing them, believing in them, lifting them up. And dispelling that doubt that exists in them – because you can. Because you have that power. It's a lifetime commitment, even if you never see them again.

And that commitment, that choice – to love someone that way – fulfills both the giver and the recipient – even if it is unreciprocated. It is a generosity, a choice regardless of the sacrifice required of it.

It's huge.

It's a profound, profound kindness.

That's my intellectual understanding of love.

I can't *feel* it: but I do believe in it.

I can try to practice it, and I have, especially in my work; but I know people who have known me long and well can feel the difference when I try.

Like Dorothy's Tin Man.

I have cared and I have liked, *many* thousands of people. That's authentic, that's unemotional, that's just an innate goodness that is built into the DNA of all newborns. Too often adulterated by trauma. There is something really good about treating people with care and kindness. Whatever that is; I hold tightly on to it, it keeps me alive.

I have cared, and gosh I've liked.

All of you.

But I didn't love you emotionally.

I'd give anything, I'd give my life to truly and emotional experience that.

To *feel* that.

I'd live for that.

Birthdays are tough; bio-generating the required amount of artificial happy-performance is kind of exhausting, and people do see through it. It's really uncomfortable for everyone.

But it's easy to avoid birthdays.

Christmas not so much. Christmas' are hardest. Gosh. Joy is literally everywhere and sprinkled on everything and it's all in the music and the movies and the trees and the families, and the twinkly everything. Opening presents, singing carols. Love Actually. Shared meals and reunions and poignant memories of dead people. And I just watch it through my thick glass wall, disconnected, alien, alone. Joyless.

But I perform, I try to play the game.

It looks amazing. But I can't *feel* any of it.

I pretend; it gets SO hard pretending so constantly for all those weeks, hiding as much as I can; I literally cannot keep up with the turbines in my head as I try to 'fit in' and act human at Christmas.

Yeah. Christmas' are hardest.

There's a lot of awful stuff in the world. All over. Do you know that it is *emotions* that get people through that stuff?

Whenever I watch a film or hear a story of a person suffering and being wronged, my rage becomes alive. Vengeance is real for me. Then, nearly always, at some point toward the end of the film or story, a forgiveness thing happens.

And I am seething. Often jumping up and down in my seat pointing and exclaiming angrily at the screen –

"DON'T. Don't forgive them, how can you! They betrayed you, how CAN you forgive them?!"

If you fight with your friend, it is emotions that help you understand why they did it. To empathise.

It is emotions and empathy that cause you to find a way to resolve those conflicts. To patch it up, to compromise, to bask in the joy or love of the companionship, despite the previous conflict, disagreement or betrayal.

I watch normal humans do this all the time, and I'm raging inside, wondering what this emotion must *feel* like that can resolve such conflict.

My instincts are to hold the grudge. I don't have those emotions to get me to forgiveness.

I've had my kindness ethic to guide me, but that emotion that brings these people back together, that resolves just about every movie I've ever watched... I don't know it.

I'd live for that I think.

But I am disabled in that regard, and very alone, always fighting an inner monster, and I am exhausted.

This is a planet full of very emotional human beings. Appreciating every bit of those emotional experiences (probably not, I wouldn't understand) but it is a reason to live I think. Live good lives if you're capable. Or don't, just cope instead.

But FEEL it. Feel it.

I've watched you doing it for a long long time, through my very thick glass wall, from behind my vampire eyes. You are magnificent.

Trust me; that's not an emotional assessment of you; it is truly objective.

You are magnificent.

And maybe your magnificence is a reason to live.

Damn right it is.

(Thank you.)

Stevie P wouldn't give up, he'd fight on.

He fought and fought to the end, awful as it was.
If he were here, he'd do some drugs with me, make me change my mood.
He'd slap me for being defeatist.
Then he'd break the most valuable object in my house and he'd be gone.
Causing more trouble somewhere.
So: I will dust myself off from this.
Because I was rescuing adults when I was four, dodging bullets at 5, staying true to my core in a foster family battleground in my adolescence. I survived a sex plague, addiction, and beat a prison sentence.
(I do think it'll be the Christmas' that kill me.
Or perhaps some vengeful traumatized babysitter.)
But in the meantime; I will don my armour. It is well-worn, it has served me so very well. It fits me snug.
And I'll battle on. I'll champion your magnificence.
I'll do Mr. P proud.
And perhaps – perhaps I'll get a therapist and see if I can make sense of this history, this story, this trauma.
Geez. Where would I start?
Well: maybe I'll just begin with a narcissistic rant about the evil of Christmas'.
Yeah.
I'll start there.

Chapter 45

A Dedication

*This book is dedicated to all the humans out there,
who deserve better starts in life.
Better lives.*

The Invisible Boy with the Loud Exhaust.

I knew a boy.

He was invisible.

Really. It was a special skill he had, and he was really good at it.

He'd honed this skill for many years. He was a real expert, so good at it.

His invisibility.

You wouldn't know he was there.

It was like he wasn't there.

The real him, underneath the invisibility, was a brilliant, dynamic boy.

SO opinionated; his opinions changed all the time, because he was always exploring and musing and always determined to get to the truth of matters, so his opinions changed all the time, but he shared all those changing opinions.

Flagrantly.

He needed to communicate them, it helped him to take those opinions apart, then to reconstruct them even better.

Then communicate them again. To everyone and anyone who would listen and engage.

He was uniquely individual; he relished in being different, in being contrary, in grabbing your attention. In loads of ways, it was an instinct with him, an artistic instinct he had to harness your attention. He was animated in his passionate conversations, flamboyant and brilliantly expressive.

And clever; gosh. He was clever.

He could cut through nonsense with his clever perceptions, he could cut through silliness with some incisive truths; he was the original boy from the Emperor's New Clothes. He'd call you on your nonsense, and bullshit just didn't wash when he was around to blast it.

With his cleverness.

And so charismatic, so colorful; he was unmissable, he was the centre of attention, he was the opposite of invisible; he shined. Everyone saw, it was even unsettling for some.

Actually for many.

Many found it quite unsettling.

This is where he learned to be invisible.

Some people around him, responsible for him, didn't like his shine.

They didn't like it because it stole attention away from other things, other matters. They didn't like it because sometimes the flamboyance embarrassed them, sometimes the incisive truths were too incisive, too true. Sometimes people needed the bullshit to feel safe and dull, and so sometimes his bullshit filter was unwelcome. Angrily so sometimes.

Before long he was being punished and shamed for the very brightness that made him brilliant.

He learned to act less flamboyant, to talk less, to tone down his truths, to quiet his opinions, his fabulous opinions.

To hide.

He became meek and exploitable. Vulnerable.

Not like him.

This was the start of his invisibility, but in his teens he honed it further.

Because some complicated stuff happened. They call it abuse, or trauma.

It doesn't matter what.

But you know. You've been there too.

It was during this unbearable thing, that he learned to become smaller.

So small he almost wasn't there.

The bad thing, it wasn't happening to him. Because he wasn't there, he was too small, too transparent, he was like a shadow. Not himself at all.

He was light, like a snowflake. Like a snowflake just as it melts, becomes nothing.

He was like that, a disappearing nothing while the bad stuff happened.

Safe, invisible.

He kept his invisibility skill, it stayed as he became an adult, found his way in the world.

He'd thought his brilliant shiny self might emerge when he got older, found kinder adults and peers: his community. Found others like him.

Because they were like him, he wasn't so different from others after all; he could tell; even though they all had invisibility too, he could recognize them.

But it wasn't nice.

There was more rejection, and more shaming.

Not intentional, not cruelty, just... coping. Lots of invisible people coping. Loneliness, and sex, and performances in bed and performances in bars and groups, and expectations and that cruelty. Those Apps. That online stuff.

Rejection and potential rejection everywhere.

It's exhausting being invisible.

Seriously; it requires huge watts of energy, huge amounts, to generate the invisibility.

There's a by-product. An exhaust that's produced from all the invisibility. Even though you can't see a person who is invisible... you know they are there because of the exhaust, the noise.

It's kind of like when giant speakers reverberate and explode.

It's kind of like fireworks; but not the fun kind. Like when they are too close and too many.

It's like the noise of the tv when it isn't tuned in to anything; but really really loud.

It's like the noise of a razor blade when it gently cuts the skin on your forearm. (if you listen closely, you can hear that; it's really loud.)

It's like the deafening noise of the quiet whisper in your ear from someone with more power than you, uninvited.

Or his breath on your neck. That loudness.

Or the noise of a chemsex party that just drowns out everything else.

That loudness that comes from a drug high, that just isn't high enough.

The noise of a flame under a meth pipe.

Or that Grindr/Tindr notification sound.

That's the kind of noise generated when you try so hard to keep the invisibility up. Because invisibility is brilliantly effective, but it is noisy. Because underneath the invisibility, there is brilliance trying to be contained.

And brilliance can't be contained, or quashed, or silenced. Not without a lot of noise anyway.

My friend, this amazing invisible boy I knew...

He made so much noise trying to be invisible, of course I heard him. We all did.

We do.

It's especially loud when it's coming en masse from so, so many, so so close.

But we're listening. We can't see you, your invisibility is too good, but we hear you, because we're listening.

We are your community; we hear you.

And your brilliance, your shine, your fabulousness... they are welcome here. Those things that were shut down, squashed, hushed... are so welcome here. More than welcome; they'll be celebrated. We might have to work on it, but they'll be celebrated, and your shine will be welcome here.

I promise.

I promise loudly.

I hope you can hear it, above all the noise.

But I'm here, we're here, loving you.

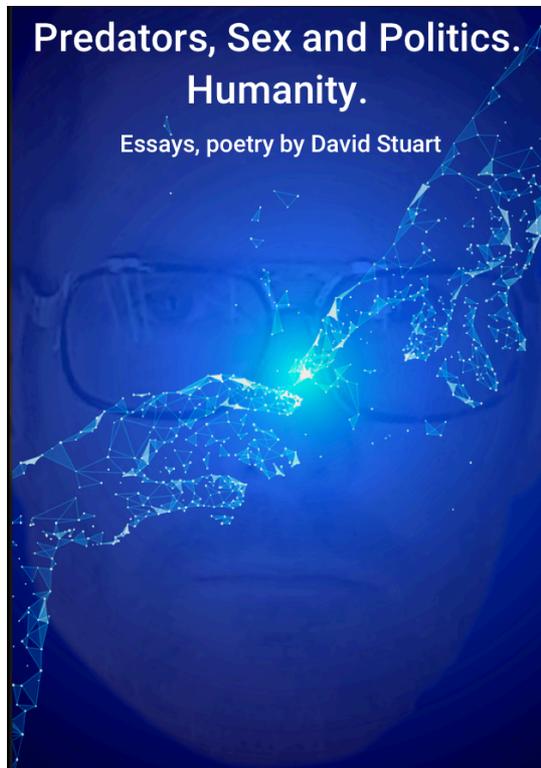
Noisily. We recognize you.

Your invisibility is good, it's great.

It's working. You're safe.

Come home now.

Come home and shine.



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