

EMMA

IT WAS JUST there. Saw it. And maybe I should say *her*, I saw *her*, cos it definitely had a woman's shape. Can always tell that shape – the curves an that. Floating in the air she was, just a bit below us, and I heard words.

We'd walked up the ridge to watch the sun come up. The sun was behind us cos we'd all turned to look back at the lake. They were all sleeping – them who hadn't already gone home, I mean; there was a couple of tents but mostly people were just crashed out on the shore, on the pebbles. A few fires still going, aye, but they'd nearly gone out – just smoke. Only a handful of people left, and only the three of us were awake, me and that scouse lad, what do they call him, Adlad is it? An that fuckin nutter, that Cowley, who was messing about with that iPod he'd robbed off one of the students. Didn't really want him there, me; he gives me the jitters at the best of times, he does, and I could feel the comedown starting to make itself known and I just didn't want him there but it's not like I asked him to come – he just followed us up, like, onto the ridge. It had been raining, drizzling lightly, for a bit and hadn't long stopped and all steam was coming up off the lake in these mad shapes. Like ghosts. An then there was this *glow*, like, this *glow* in the air, just below us it was but not on the ground, I mean it was in the air like, floating, and Adam was looking at me with his eyes all big like *what the FUCK?* and I looked and there was a woman in that glow. The shape of a woman. Not kidding. She was just hanging there in the air and I heard words: I heard the word 'bridge' and the words 'dig' and 'wild' and it was like she was talking to me, telling me something that I needed to know. I don't know; I can't explain. And it was like everything went away, *everything*, Adam an Cowley and the people sleeping on the shore of the lake, everything I'd done in the past, it was like none of that mattered anymore, it was like there was this great big bubble around me. There was

only me and what I could possibly do. My skin felt all tingly. A kind of rush went through me, it did, a million times better than the crap E I'd had which had done nothing except keep me awake, even tho it was promising to bring a crash on me. It was ... what was it? I dunno. As soon as it was over, and it didn't last very long like, the very instant it was gone I knew that I wanted it back again.

I don't remember looking at the other two. The floating thing, the shadow, the woman-shape, it just vanished into the air and I thought of Tomos and how much I wanted to see him and smell his skin and hold him so I just walked off the mountain and went home. Took fuckin ages, it did. Was knackered by the time I got home. Tom was still asleep. I paid the babysitter and got into bed with my boy, *cwttched* up and fell asleep dead quick. No dreams. Or, at least, none that I can remember.

ADAM

I JUST FELT so fuckin happy. Can't explain it, an I don't even want to try, really. I just felt so fuckin happy. Like that shite E should've made me feel but didn't; pure fuckin caffeine or somethin, that was. All it did was keep me awake. Probably for the best, tho, really, considering.

I went up the ridge because I was following that Emma one's arse, that's all. I was about to go home and crash but I saw her, in them leggings dead tight an them little boots, heading off up the ridge so I thought I'd follow her. Get somethin in the wank bank, like. Which was me plan; home, wank, kip. Everybody was asleep on the shore or had already gone home so I was gonna borrow someone's bike and scoot off home meself. There was a row of bikes, like, mountain bikes, all lined up on the shore and I was gonna take one an leave a note – honest – with me phone number on. Didn't fancy the walk, like. Miles back into the town. I was even toying with the idea of knocking at the door of Rhoserchan, down the hill, asking if they had a spare bed for a few hours, but didn't think that'd be a wise move. An besides me plan was to get home and go to me own bed and have a big long thrap to help me nod off an then I saw that Emma going up the ridge so I followed her. We'd been talking earlier, like, getting on well, so I just went up after her. And that fuckin Cowley had followed *me*, God knows why. I felt him behind me, heard his heavy breathing as we climbed up the slope, an tinny little snatches of music coming out of that iPod he'd lifted off some student lad and was arsing about with. Wicks the dick off me, that, when people scroll through an play a couple of seconds of each song. Does me fuckin head in. Not that I'd tell *him* that. He'd been standing on the shore, in his fuckin rugby top, no coat, just standing there like Tony Soprano with a skullcrop and great big dragon tat on his neck and you could see him just *praying* for someone to say something

so's he could kick off. Didn't want him around me and him farting about with that iPod was doing me head right in but what the fuck can yeh do? So anyway we gets to the top of the ridge an all this steam was coming up off the lake, looked fuckin mad it did, amazing, took the breath out me chest, no lie. It'd stopped drizzling but the air was still kind of damp and then there was this *glow* ... in the air, like, a bit below us cos we were on the top of the ridge by this time, but it was floating, this glow, in mid-air. I even thought that maybe I was asleep and I was dreaming but then that Emma one looked at me with them green eyes of hers gone big an I could see the tattooed stars behind her ear and I knew I was awake. It was like a floating glow. Can't explain it. Kind of a shadow in it, as well, a vague human shape; I mean it had a bump that could've been a head and long thin things that could've been limbs. Curves, a bit like a woman. I dunno, Christ, I'd never seen anything like it in me life. I went into a kind of trance. It was like a smack hit, that's the only thing I can compare it to. I just felt so fuckin happy. Funny how it made me feel that way, cos I mean it was just a shadow or somethin. The sun was coming up. The air was damp. Just something in the atmosphere, that's all it was. An when I started feeling, like, normal again, I looked around an the other two had gone an I was all alone on the ridge on top of the mountain so I just walked home. Took ages. Stroked me cat and went to bed and slept like a log on Mogadon. Didn't even dream.

COWLEY

FUSS ABOUT FUCK all, mun. Jes-a fuckin blob in-a sky. Rising sun or somethin, that's all. I wazen even lookin, like, I was tryin-a find some decent sounds on that fuckin machine that I found, *not* fuckin robbed, some *stew*-dent cunt had dropped it in-a rushes like, don't even know how to work-a fuckin thing, I don't. It was all some chart shite or some arty shite I'd never even yurd of, no fuckin 'Phonics or anythin decent. Every borin twat had crashed or gone home so I jes went up-a ridge with-a others, that scouse lad and that girl. Think-a name's Emily or somethin. An it was jes-a blob in-a sky, that's all it was. Risin fuckin sun or somethin. In-a cloud or somethin. Fuss about fuck all, mun. I saw fuckin nowt.

LOSING, AGAIN

IN THE EIGHTEENTH minute our attacker, our 35 million star signing, goes in the book for diving. Rounds the keeper and decides to do the death of Aida instead of putting the ball in the net. Fuck's sake. Despair, despair. It's all collapsing. This season's gonna end on a low.

Sion shakes his head at me from over at the bar. Didn't even notice him come in.

—Did yeh see that? Pony-tailed pillock.

—Is right.

—Orange juice aye?

—Ta.

—Drop-a vodka in it aye?

Just smile, Adam lad. Just smile back at him. Gallons of fuckin orange juice ... sure I'm developing a tangerine tinge to me skin. Watch a game in the pub and I leave lookin like an Oompa Loompa. Or a worker at a perfume counter back home, WAG-mandarin. And needing a piss five times a night as me body tries to get rid of the glut of vitamin C.

Ah well. Better than the alternative, I suppose. Nothing's ever easy.

Sionie puts a Britvic on the table and sits opposite with his Guinness.

—And once again our star man royally tits it up. Fuckin holy show, this.

—Holy show? What's that mean? Scouse-ism is it, aye?

—No. Everyone says it. Means making a twat of yourself. One of me ma's favourite expressions and she's from round this way originally. Never heard it, no?

He sips his pint. I know how it'll taste, that Guinness; I've heard it's a decent pint in here and I can feel it on me tongue, cold and a bit thick and steely and malty. I start to salivate. God I'm like a fuckin dog. I drink some of me Britvic an crunch hard on ice.

—It's a good description anyway. Entire team's a holy fuckin show.

I can barely watch, truth be told. It's a thing you never get used to. And of course there's always some fuckin prick who thinks that yer not quite suffering enough for their liking, isn't there? An there he is, knobhead at the bar, fin haircut and Home Counties accent, bound to be a student, wearing a shirt with '20' on the back of it which he turns to show his mates, jerking both his thumbs backwards over his shoulder. Listen to the bellend:

—See the curves on the 2? Like a woman. Oh that number. I caress her, I stroke her. Such a lovely digit, innit? I worship it. Her.

Give me fuckin strength, man. I've got a nicer number for you, dickhead: 15,000. That's the amount of 'fans' who leave before the final whistle whenever your bunch of pampered and indulged boy-men are losing at home. Buncha wankers. Not happy unless someone else is *unhappy*. There was a time I would've been *right* in the face of someone like that. And what's him and his blert mates doing in *this* ale house anyway? Should be back in town in the Varsity or somewhere. Some student pub. Fuckin prick, I'll—

The glow, lad. Remember that glow.

—Yew okay to be in a pub, Adam?

—Why shouldn't I be, Sion?

—Temptation, like. All the smells n that.

There's a moustache of Guinness froth on his top lip. —I can handle it, lad. I put on a deep, African voice: — Strong like lye-on. An besides, where else is there to watch the game? Only boozers show it, don't they?

—Aye. Altho why we're wanting to watch this cack is beyond me.

The inevitable goal goes in. On the screen I see red shirts pointing accusingly at each other in the penalty box and the goalie bending to pick the ball out of the net and at the bar I see Tit-head 20 slapping his knees, I mean he's actually slapping his fuckin knees as he roars with laughter. *Roars* with laughter. His mates are watching this performance and sniggering and

some of the people at the bar, the *proper* people like, are glaring daggers at him.

I must avoid all temptation. I must be absolutely honest with myself at all times.

I stand up. —Come 'ed.

—Where we going?

—Back room. This is doing me head in. *He's* doing me head in.

I nod in the direction of 20 who's now hanging onto the bar as if his laughter might bring him to his knees. Theatrical cunt. Christ there was a time when ...

The glow.

—Can't watch this shite. Neither the game or *that* prick.

—Agreed.

We take the drinks into the back room where there's no telly or knobhead; this is the serious drinker's room. Blokes at the bar not talking, each with a pint and a chaser in front of him. Scraggly beards and baseball caps. Bad teeth and yellowy eyes. The only food on offer a sweaty roll in cling film or whatever comes out of vending machines – peanuts or M&Ms. M&Ms! Sugary chocolate with booze? Yick. Never saw the attraction in that combination meself. And I can't see M&Ms these days without thinking of that advert where the big red M&M has a voice like Willem Dafoe: *you get in the bowl*. The feller puts him in a bowl and gives it to his girlfriend and the sweetie's legs and arms are dangling over the sides. *Couldn't find a bigger bowl, huh?*, he says. A living M&M. You'd have to take big bites out of him, eat him alive like, and he'd either be screaming in pain and thrashing his little legs and arms or he'd be making sarcastic judgments and comments as you ate him: *Whoops, don't crack your dentures, there, honey ...* Either way it'd be a fuckin nightmare. Adverts these days, God. They're incomprehensible on the one hand and fever dreams on the other.

Voices in the other bar are raised. Sion asks me if I need a smoke and I tell him I do. There's a bit of a charge off him, a little bit of shaky energy. He's a feller of a bit of a nervous disposition, is our Sionie. Harmless feller, not a bad bone in his body.

We go out into the beer garden and roll cigs. Well, I say 'beer garden' ... a placky chair and four flagstones. But it's outside. It's a nice day an I can hear seagulls an smell a briny whiff from the nearby sea.

—Benny'll be here soon. He's coming straight from work.

—Is he? On a Sunday?

—Got to unload a wagon or something. Be a load of mad stuff from Germany. Pickled herrings n stuff. Sour Krauts.

—Hope he's getting double time.

—From Lidl? Nah, not a chance. It's not even ovies, this, just a normal shift, like. No one pays more'n normal time anymore, do ey? He works over forty hours a week an he's in debt up to his eyeballs, him. Living wage is a thing of the past, mun. He spits a shred of baccy off his lip. —Got an interview meself next week. Warehouse work out at Glan-yr-Afon.

I have to laugh; he sounds so woebegone.

—What are yew laughing at?

I use the word, speak it like, cos it's a good one: —You, lad. You sound so fuckin woebegone.

—Well, wouldn't you be? Twelve-hour days for buttons, slogging me bollax off? Not looking forwards to it at *all*, mun.

—You haven't even got the friggin job yet. Haven't even had the interview.

—Kind of hoping I don't, either. Not fuckin looking forwards to it at all. But I'm skinto. An if I get it an don't take it they'll stop me dole. Mad for their fuckin sanctions, they are.

The phone trills in me pocket. It's Benj.

—Where are you? I'm in the pub but *you're* not.

—Having a smoke outside, Benj.

—I'll join. Orange juice is it?

—Nah. Sick of the stuff. I'm alright.

—Sionie with you?

—Aye.

—He on the Guinness?

—Aye.

—There we are, then. See you in two.

I put the phone back in me pocket.

—Benny?

—He's at the bar. Be out in a minute.

I'm thirsty. So thirsty. The familiar thought creeps in; just one. Just one drink, one pint. Guinness, all black and cool and creamy with condensation on the glass, drips running across the gold harp, a shamrock in the foam. Just the one won't hurt. It'll be a test, a test I'll pass, I'll have just the one and savour it and then go back on the juice, just for the taste like it would be, not the buzz at the back of the neck, just the taste cos it's utterly unique, that taste, nothing comes close, just that cool and slightly burnt taste. One won't hurt.

Except it fuckin will. It'll hurt me and everyone around me. It'll hurt everything. Just the one and it'll end in only one way and that'll be chaos and fuckin ruin.

The *glow*.

—You alright butt?

I nod.

—Yewer lookin a bit sweaty there, mun.

—I'm alright. Don't worry about it.

The door thwacks open against the wall cos Benny, hands occupied with drinks, has hoofed it open. There's a great big grin on his face and his hair's all sweat-matted with dust in it. Two stripes of muck on his cheek like war paint.

—*Boys bach! Shwd y chi?*

—Sound Benj.

He passes a pint to Sion then necks half of his own in one go. The thirst coming off him in waves but it's a good thirst, somehow, different to the thirst that hangs heavy over the heads of the drinkers in the back bar of the pub. It's like a force or something; a kind of pulse in the air around his head and body.

—*DuudDuw*. Some right arseholes in yur tonight, inner?

—'Swhy we're out here, mate. Wanted to gob him.

—Mister 20 we talkin about, aye?

—Yeah.

—Think someone's about to do it for yew. Second goal's just gone in as well.

—Oh for fuck's sake.

—Aye but yur's me just paid an I bear presents. Football be fucked.

He puts his pint on the wall an digs in his pocket. The froth on his glass has the shape of an elephant's head, the trunk craning upwards in mid-trumpet.

—Hold yewer hand out, Sionie boy.

He drops a wee white pill onto Sion's palm.

—Jes a very mild ecko, that's all. Very mild. Jester nice little buzz, like.

—Sure it's mild? Only I've ...

—Oh God aye. Had one with me cornflakes this morning, jester get me through-a shift, like. *Very* pleasant, very mellow. And for me favourite scwelsh ex-junkie ...

He hands me an ounce of American Spirit.

—Don't smoke it all at once, now.

Ah. God bless the boy. —Starman, Benny.

—Anyway. I could've gotten yew a pill too cos yewer back yewsins, now, aren't yew?

—What?

—Urd yew prolapsed, I did.

—The word's relapsed, Benny. But no I haven't. Who's told you this?

—Up at Pendam last week. Bit of a rave up yur, wasn't there? And some pills going around in which yew indulged? Or so I was told. So I've yurd, like.

—Oh Jesus Christ. Which gobshite told you this?

—Word gets round, mun. Small town.

The seriousness on his face. A great big concern in his eyes which I find touching and funny.

—What's so worth grinning about, then? If this is yew relapsed then I don't see what's so funny.

—This true? Sion says.

I shake me head. —It wasn't even MDMA. We were ripped off. Caffeine pill or something, swear down. No hit from it at all, it just kept me awake. Don't worry yerselves, boys. I'm grand. An nor was it even a rave — equinox party or some shite. Few dopeheads and a crappy sound system, that was it.

—Takin a bit of a risk, tho, weren't yew? Cos I mean ...

—Nah, not really. I mean even if it hadder been proper MDMA ... I give a shrug. —Crack n smack, now, aye, but no more, man. Never again. And the bevvvy of course. But I was never bad on the E. Wasn't my thing. Never got its claws into me like.

—Yeah but still n all. I'm finding it difficult to approve, feller-me-lad.

Ben's right, really, I should've done a Grange Hill and Just Said No. But. Just sometimes I get so fucking bored. —I appreciate the concern lads and everything and God knows it's nice to know that yis care. I put my right hand over me heart, national anthemy. —But why the worry? Youse didn't know me when I was running wild anyway.

—No but I've urd stories, I yav. Tales from when yew were up at Rhos. In that right Sion?

Sionie nods. Dead solemn.

—What kind of stories? And from who?

—Never yew mind. Benny taps the side of his nose with his index finger. A fly circles the curls on his head, them tight curls all matted and knotty with sweat and dust. —Jest urd some things.

—Cack. I was a model fuckin pupil up at Rhos, lar. Poster boy for rehab, that's me. Was more or less clean before I even checked into the place.

—Was yew?

—Aye. Hadter be, didn't I? Wouldn't've let me in otherwise.

—So why bother with it then? If yew were clean, like, why'd yew need Rhos?

—I've told you before. Yeh finish the job in Rhoserchan. The Twelve Steps. Yeh do the first six in nick.

The fly gets bored and decides to check out Sion's head instead. Gets bored of that as well and drones away.

—He's told us all this before, Ben, says Sionie.

Benny blows smoke in the air and nods. —Jes checkin, that's all. Making sure his memory's holding up under all-a pills he's been taking.

I laugh. —Sod off, Benny. He gives me a wee wink and has a drink. Me hands feel useless, flopping about like without anything in them, an I don't want another smoke so I just bury them in me pockets. There's a tingling in the soles of me feet.

—Was it good, anyway?

—What, the pill? It was shite. Just told yeh.

—No, the rave stroke party thing. Was gunna go but we were otherwise engaged, weren't we Sion?

—Aye. Women.

In my ankles now. Creeping up. —Wasn't a rave like they used to be. Just like, a fire and some music and a load of weed and these crappy little pills. And they even played 'Fluffy Little Clouds', believe that?

—In the twenty-first century?

—I know. And not in a, like, ironic or nostalgic way either. Arrested development in some of them people, no lie. Retro. It's in my knees, now, that tingle, and it stays there for a second or two before it rushes up through me body an into my head where it becomes words that I can't do anything to stop leaving me gob: — An I saw something. In the sky.

—Did yew? What kind of thing? Like a UFO?

—No, not like that. Benny's holding his drink to his chin so he can take quick little sips at it like a bird and Sion's kind of leaning in towards me, at the waist, his hands in his pockets like mine. The noise from the pub is a background blur and I can make out no individual words or voice or even types of sound. It's just here, around me. This beer garden, beer yard, beer square or whatever it is has become a bit too small. Too small for the three of us. I know that there's blue sky above me probably beginning to get a bit less blue now but that doesn't seem to be enough at the moment.

—A plane or something? One-a them jets?

—No, no.

—Paraglider, Sion says. —Get them on that mountain a lot. Cos-a the winds, see.

—No, it was nothing like that. It was a kind of shape, a a glow. Like a shape *inside* a glow.

—The sun, then.

Benny nudges Sion in the ribs with his elbow. He's smiling but not in a nasty way; I mean it's not a fuckin *smirk* or anythin. I don't really want to say anymore but it's like I can't help meself:

—It was like a woman.

—A woman?

—Floating in—a sky?

God I wish I had a drink to hide behind. I take the baccy out of me pocket and roll up.

Sion asks again: — A woman in the sky?

—Kind of, yeah. I can't really describe it any other way.

—What was she like, this woman? Fit, was she? Would you of?

I look up at Benny's smile and it's still not nasty. Sion laughs.

—An yew said—a E didn't work, says Benj. —An en yew talk about women floating in—a fuckin sky.

—Since when has MDMA been hallucinogenic like that?

—Well it wasn't MDMA then, was it? Yew ad some mild acid or something, didn't yew? Women in—a sky, mun. Don't be so daft.

All tingling gone, now. Gone, and what's this sudden sensation in me chest as if I'm missing it? What's going on here? Again, I wish I could drink. Wish I could drink like Benny and Sion and millions of others do, get happy-drunk for one night and drop a mild pill and enjoy meself and wake up with nothing but a hangover, just a grotty feeling and not an uncontrollable lust for fuckin mayhem. I really wish I could do that. There's a little urge to tell of how happy I felt when I saw that glow in the sky with the shape hanging in it, just a small urge, like the itch for a shot of strong coffee. But it soon goes.

—Women in—a sky, Benny says again. —What are yew like, mun?

I light up and suck smoke deep into me lungs. —I saw it, Benj.

—I'm sure yew did, mun. I have no doubt about that at all. Which is another reason why my favourite scwelsh ex-junkie nutbag is yew.

He ruffles my hair and gives a big grin. Obviously coming up on that pill. 'Mild', he said. Sion laughs again and announces that he needs a piss and goes inside.

—Did anyone else see her? Iss woman?

—Yeh.

—Who?

—Some girl called Emily or Emma or something. Pretty. Kind of a cat face.

—Lives in Trefechan? Got a kid?

—Don't know, I hadn't met her before. She's a mum, is she?

—One kid, aye. Little boy. Don't know her very well meself, like, just know of her. Know who you're talking about, I think. Got some stars here? He touches behind his ear.

—That's her. And she's got a kid, has she? Who to?

—Some crusty who passed through, few years ago. She's not with him now, like, he had to do one cos Black Jerry was gunner stab him, if I remember right.

—Who's Black Jerry?

—Before yewer time, mun. Black feller called Jerry. Did a bit-a dealin. Few years ago, iss was. And she took one-a ese pills as well, did she?

—Think so.

—There we are, then.

She's got a kid. She's a mother. Some crusty. Change the subject, Adam lad. —An some big fucker, dead sparky. He saw it too. Started on some students, he did, and taxed em for an iPod. He was there n all. Got a big red dragon tat on his neck.

Benny laughs loud. —Cowley, yew mean? Fuck sakes, boy, he'll see women floating in-a sky pills or no pills. God almighty! He knocks back what's left of his drink and puts the glass down on the wall. —So let's recap. A slapper an-a nutter an-a ex-junkie, smashin as he might be, all take a fuckin pill which is supposed to be ecko but is probably acid or somethin an then ey all see somethin floatin in-a sky. All three of ese people have a history of hard drug use. Iss sum it up? An ey all see iss thing in-a sky after stayin up all night on top of a mountain. No sleep. Right?

I can't help but return his grin. He's well up on that pill, now, and it's contagious. And behind him, over his shoulder, I see a small woman, not a dwarf or anything, I mean a small flat woman with blonde hair and wearing a bikini top rise up from behind the low wall that separates the beer garden from the alleyway. She rises up and speaks in Sion's voice gone spooky:

—Wooooowooooo! I have come for the one they call Adam! I am the floating woman of Pendam and I have come for him!

Benj spins, starts to laugh. Sionie stands up from behind the wall, all pleased with himself.

—Daft bastard, Sion.

He comes over the wall with the woman in his hand. He holds her up in front of me.

—Yur she is, Adlad. Your very own floating lady. Sexy one n all. Been looking for yew, she has.

One of them KP display board things that packets of peanuts are stapled to. Didn't know pubs still had them but this boozier's hardly bang up to date. Still got a bag of dry roasted over her fanny.

—Where'd you get her?

—Asked the barstaff. Had yew going, didn't I?

—Oi tort it was hursel, I say in a Father Ted voice.

—What yew gonna do wither now, then? asks Benji and Sion holds her up to, like, appraise. —Taker home, he says. Make a couple of holes in her.

—Dirty get.

He laughs. —Na, barman needser back. Only a lend, see. Apparently eyr collector's items now, so he says.

Without any warning a memory pounces; I shagged one such woman once, years back, a model for them KP boards, like. Well, she was probably a model for a lot of other things as well but that's how I met her, in a pub on the Wirral, when she was doing some promotional tour thing for the nuts. This was before I was using heavily and was drinking only like most people up there do. She came into the pub. We got talking. Went back to her hotel. And I don't remember much

more, not Her name, not her skin, just that she was wearing denim hot pants and she was nice.

The sun goes down and it gets a bit colder so we go back inside. Sion returns the lady to the barman and they share a laugh. Twat-head 20 has gone, I'm relieved to see, and the telly is showing replays and punditry with the sound off. It finished two nil. It's all fucking up. Is the desire to put meself through this shite so strong? And why? Well, there's the dead grandad and the memory of sitting on his shoulder on the terraces, for one. It's one of them: if you need it explaining to you then you'll never understand.

—What can I get yew, Adlad? Ty Nant, is it? Or ey'll do yew a cup-a tea if yew ask nicely.

Benny's eyes are big and he's chewing his tongue a wee bit. The day in the pub has entered its third and final act, when the faces shine like the bottles arrayed on the gantry and the talk becomes darting and the body language becomes easily readable; you can tell, now, who's gunner kick off with who, who's gunner go home with who. That loud lad at the bar with the splashes of paint on his jumper is gunner get a smack from the feller in the lumberjack shirt, who in turn will, no doubt, get off with the overweight lady with the short purple hair who keeps putting her hand in his back pocket. The Brummy guy with the shaven head is gunner go home with the lad with the floppy white fringe who's admiring his ink. It's all a unique and lovely theatre which I'm on the outside of now. I'm just an observer of it all.

The glow.

—Nah, I say to Benji. I've had enough. I'm gunner get off.

—Yew sure?

—Yeh. I'm hungry.

—Can't tempt yew wither bagger nuts? Go on, go crazy. Pork scratchings. Go wild.

—I'll pick something up on the way home.

He hugs me tight, Ecstasy-tight. 'Mild', he said, but listen to him:

—What I said before, mun, yew being me favourite an that. I fuckin mean that. Truly fuckin do. Yewer one uv a best,

boy. Never forget that aye? One—a the best. Yew and yewer floating woman.

—Aye, lad, alright. You n all. Now let me go yeh daft bastard cos yeh crushing me windpipe.

He does and I get squeezed by Sionie too and then I'm outside. There is the smell of frying onions and the noise of music, loud. At this top end of town the light is bright and the people are many, bare legs and pastel shirts gathered to smoke in the doorways. As if it's all inside a dome, the night sky over it all like a skin. It's alive and it's electric and I'm outside it all.

Temptation isn't so much everywhere as *everything*; lose two nil? Have a pint. Some dickhead with '20' on his back? Have several pints and get right in the cunt's face. And I know that 'Jacqueline' by Alabama 3, which I can hear from an open window somewhere, would sound even better and make me feel cool and strong with a bottle and a pipe or a line inside me. I know this as much as I know anything, as much as I know about abscesses and spewing blood and turning myself into a fuckin beast. This I know too and this I am entirely fuckin sure of.

Fuck it. None of this matters. Just the memory of that glow. And the knowing that the complexity of it all is a thing to be celebrated.

A bunch of burly boys dressed as cheerleaders spill out of the Academi. Welsh rugby boys dressed as women; someone's getting a broken jaw tonight.

I head homewards, through the people, through the glow from street lights and pub/club doorways. Humid night. On the way I go to the whistling hippy by the twenty-four-hour garage and pick up fish and chips and a sausage for Quilty who's on the bed when I get home, licking his balls. Wish I could do that. The old joke: give him a bit of your fish and he might let you. He rubs himself around me legs and purrs as I break the sausage up into his bowl and he bends to eat and arches his back when I stroke him. Little lion. Appeared at my window one day and didn't go away; decided he liked it here, with me. Chunky grey tabby with eyes like jewels and nicks in his ears. I remember twisting ticks out of his skin.

I sit on the bed to eat and watch the telly. Nowt on but *Match of the Day* or Graham Norton or a programme on Channel 5 called *When Animals Attack* – a more accurate title would be *When Humans Act Like Knobheads*. I watch Graham blethering to Tom Hiddleston for a bit until I'm sure that the lowlights are over and then I watch the rest of the footy. Turn it up a notch to drown out the revelry from outside. It's Sunday night but tomorrow's a bank holiday, hence all the fun. Well: fair play to em. Hope Benny and Sion are having a whale of a time.

SLOOOOOOW RELEASE

WHAT AV BIN thinkin is that that E I yad was slow-release. Dead slow release type-a thing. Or thingy, whatsit, delayed reaction or whatever ey call it cos yur was nowt from it at-a time, jes kept me awake like is all, but see since then ... don't know what it is. Jes that since A came down off that fuckin mountain Av bin on one, like. On a fuckin roll. Jes do not feel like any fucker's worth it. I mean, iss is me – mellow. Jes-a mellow man, aye, that is what I yam. Jes like Popeye said.

I mean, see this: that brickie from Trawsfynydd or wherever-a fuck he's from, he makes some snide comment about me mix, asks if Av got any bread to mop it up with like, an en ee gives me iss fuckin look, iss smarmy fuckin smirk on is gob, an I do not no I do *not*, it im in that fuckin gob. Like a usually would, piss-takin twat: bang, aye, smirk *now*. An A mean iss is not like a question of control or anythin, no, it's jes that-a urge has gone away. Snot even there. Yur's nothin in me that's tellin me to it im; that part-a me is not workin today, same as it haven't been workin since A came down off that mountain. Jes gone, it has. All's I do now is give-a cunt a grin, like, jes show im me teeth an a nod an give iss little laugh like an ee looks at me more shocked than if I adder smacked im one inner gob. Fuck im an his stewpid games. I do not fuckin care. I feel pure mellow an I will not let no cunt stop iss feeling. Cos it's nice. Like a good spliff sept I yaven't smoked in a week. Delayed reaction from that E, mun, must be. Sloooow release, likes.

So I wash me hands n face in-a Portakabins an leave me boots an hard hat in me locker and put me trainies on an change me shirt an put me coat on an A leave-a site an head down inter town. Day off tomorrow. *Bouncing* on me feet I yam. I do a kebab in at-a bottom of-a 'Glais and get some cash from-a machine an double-back on meself to go-a Cooper's. Why ey don't av a cashie in iss part-a town is beyond me. Makin us walk alla way to-a square if we need spends and

what if we wanna go-a Cwps or Scholars? Town planners, mun, must be fuckin stewpid. Banks n all. Makin everyone walk fuckin moren ey need to an wait longer for the pint ey deserve after mixin fuckin cement all fuckin day ... Oo the fuck ey think ey are. Selfish twats.

And Am thinkin iss stuff but me heart is normal. Me head feels normal. Am fuckin *right* in thinkin iss stuff but still Am mellow. Jes bouncing along. Money in me pocket. Jes roll with it. Stay like iss. All's yur is to it. Dead, dead easy. Tidy.

Bernie's already in-a pub, sitting right by-a door. His hair's getting long an A give it a rub with me hand an give im a little song: – For goodness sake ... I got the Bernie Bernie shITE!

Cunt's jes given me a dig in-a bollax. —The fuck was that for?

—Yew called me a Bernie Bernie.

—Aye cos that's yewer name innit? Get yewer bloody hair cut if yew don't like me takin-a piss. Yew can get-a bevvies in for that. Brains dark.

He goes to-a bar an I give me plums a rub. Sound feller, Bernie is. Only he can get away with-a odd dig, likes. Truth be told he's not all yur, in that noggin of his. Bit *penwan* as ey say. But he'll do for me.

I give his arse a pinch as I pass him on-a way to-a bog an he jumps in-a fuckin air. Barman gives a laugh. Me first squirt-a piss is black, like, with all-a muck from-a site. That's how dirty that fuckin site is; the muck even finds its way down yewer japper. Soon runs clear tho, or well, not clear, exactly – greeny, like. Yellowish like cider. Day off tomorrow an Al have a good lie in-a bath, I will. Unless *she* gets on at me to fuckin *do* somethin like she normally does, specially if she's started on-a fuckin cider with Jeremy Kyle like she normally does.

Am washin me hands at-a sinks when Aney Lavin comes in.

—Now then, Cowley, sor.

Least I fuckin *think* it's a Lavin. He's called Aney, A know that much. Probly is a Lavin cos-a McBrides tend to be ginger an iss feller's dark. I look at im in-a mirror an see the top of

the tattoo on the back of is neck, the head of the fuckin goblin or whatever it is, the top of its pointy green hat. Saw it last summer when he was scrappin on-a south beach with Jason McBride an he took his top off: a fuckin elf thing in a green suit, bottle in one hand an a bomb in-a other, some words by it which A think said 'Fighting Irish'. All over is back, like. A pixie. Looked a prick, Aney did, standin yur on-a beach and roaring like a fuckin gorilla, punching with is fists at is own belly and boobs. Wobblin like custard. Made me feel a bit sick, it did. An im with that fuckin goblin thing on is back.

—How's yehself, Aney?

—Can't complain, butt. An no cunt'd listen if I did.

—True dat.

I see his back shake as he shakes off. The top of-a pointy green hat moves up and down. I look at the *ddraig* on me neck in-a mirror an Am thinkin that I've got by far the better ink, here: great big *ddraig goch*, mun, roaring on me neck. What kind-a knobhead gets a fuckin pixie on eyr back? Bomb or no fuckin bomb.

—Glad our paths have crossed.

—Oh aye? Why's that then?

—Got what ye might call a proposition for ye, sor.

He comes over to-a sinks. I can see all cement snots on me head in-a mirror so I start-a scrape em off with me fingers.

—An what might that be, Aney?

—Some Quinn cunt down Carmarthen way's after a straightener. An wants it yesterday. Now I'm out of action cos of the oul ribs, like, still knittin. An in fact the only feller in fightin form's our Frankie but ye know the like of him; boy's a lover as he says. Useless with the oul fists, him. A lover, if ye don't mind! Last thing I saw him push his prick towards was a crackhead down Swansea dock. Lover be fucked.

—Ah. Not interested right now, Aney butt.

—Hear me ou', tho. Yer purse would be to say the least sizeable. An this boy, this *Quinn*. He spits-a word out so's all spots-a slime go up-a mirror. —He's a fuckin pussy. He'll be sparko in two rounds, sor. Definite.

—An yewer family will okay this, will they? An outsider steppin in?

—If there's enough money in it they will. He grins at me in-a mirror an I can see his teeth. Look like fag ends, ey do. —Easy enough to get a bye out of the blood if there's enough zeroes at stake, ee says, rubbin the fingers an thumb of one hand together.

Christ, mun, ese fuckin pikeys. Money's all ey ever think about. Couple-a weeks ago I'd be up for this, like, I'd be getting-a time an-a place sorted right now. But tonight? Nah. I jes cannot be arsed. Slow release.

—Not interested right now, A say again. —Am in temporary retirement. Ask me in a couple-a weeks.

—There's money in it, shag. A lot of fuckin money. Sure an couldn't we all be using some of that right now?

—Yur's other things I can do to get it, tho, mun.

I press-a dryer button so's A can't hear what he says next an leave-a bog. Don't even dry me hands. Could-a done with stickin me head under-a hot air like cos A can feel ese wet spots on it where A rubbed off-a muck. Unless eyr from Aney's spit ... Dirty bastard. Cos he's got hardly any fuckin teeth to keep is spit back in is gob, see. If he arks me-a same thing next month A might very well say yes. Easy money; all-a Quinns I know of, none-a em can barney. An if Am rememberin right, Ikey Pritchard's in Cowbridge jail for breakin-a jaw of one-a em an then torching his caravan. An-a fire spread to-a pub where the cara was pitched, in-a car park like. But aye, it'd be easy to give a Quinn a few taps like an if he arks me next month I might jes well say aye but now? Tonight? I am a mellow man tonight. Aney can sort out his own straight-ener. Got nowt to do with me.

Back in-a bar an Jack the Boy's with Bernie, now. No Jac the Bird as yet but she's probly onner way; fillin up on chips or somethin, rollin down-a road she'll be like a great big wheel-a lard. Got to line me stomach, she says, an all's she ever drinks is one glass-a wine. Line-a fuckin stomach! It'd take ten rolls-a wallpaper to do that.

—Jack.

—*Shwmae* Cow.

—Seen-a 'do on iss fucker? I ruffle Bernie's hair again.

—Aye. Bleedin mess. Glen Hoddle, '87.

—Glen who?

—Before yewer time, Bern. Footballer.

Bernie haven't got-a first clue what we're on about. Not that he ever does. His home address is not on iss planet, no lie.

—Where's Jac?

—Onner way. Stopped off at KFC.

—So she'll be with us in about three hours then.

He doesn't laugh. To him, his Jac is Megan fuckin Fox. It's all blind, innit? Sept he cannot see how to others his missis is a case of roll her in flour an aim for-a wet patch. Fart and give us a clue. Which is a question I will *not* be arskin tonight. If Am not in-a mood for a paid scrap I am not in-a mood for *that*. No lie.

—She'll be needin-a energy, Bernie says, with-a daft drooly grin on him. He smacks-a inside of is elbow with is hand an pumps is fist in-a air. A look at Jack an he looks-a same as Bern – pervy.

A jes shake me head an have a drink.

—Not tonight, Jack. Not with me, anyway.

—Eh? What yew sayin?

A jes shake me head an change-a subject. Or change it back, like: — Seen-a urdu on iss twat? Larst time I saw anythin like that it was bottom-feedin in-a harbour.

He's not havin this. —So what you sayin?

—Am sayin that Bernie's got a fuckin mullet on his head, mun.

—No no. About Jac. *Well* into it larst month, yew were.

—When I was full-a billy, aye. Stick it in a hairy knothole when Am full-a billy.

—Lucky A came prepared then, ay?

He puts a wrap on-a table. I flick it back off towards him, with me finger. Bernie grabs it up an scarpers off to-a *ty bach*.

—What's wrong with yew, mun? Jac's expecting, she is. Expectin another night like-a larst one. Been going on about it ever since, she has. Says she's never felt so sexy.

—Jes not in-a mood tonight, butt.

—But it's yur on-a plate, boy! Fanny on-a fuckin plate! What kind-a bloke turns down-a offer of free fanny? What kind-a *normal* bloke, that is.

I give him hard fuckin eyes. He's very close yur to crossin-a line. —Don't, Jack. Jes fuckin don't. One warning, *dim ond*.

—But tell us why tho, Cow.

—Why? Cos it's all jes a bit fuckin sordid, innit?

—Sordid?

—Aye, y'know. Sleazy, likes.

—Sleazy?

—Aye, sleazy. Yew a fuckin parrot now? A deaf parrot? To tell-a God's honest I don't fancy yewer Jac anyway.

—An what's *that* got to do with anything? Christ, mun, it's just friction, innit?

—It's not, tho, is it?

—What?

—It's not jes anything. What it is is yew watchin an wankin in-a corner at two fellers, yewer mates like, spit-roastin yewer missis. Puts a bloke off is stride, that does.

—Didn't hear yew complaining larst month.

Twat sounds all sulky, like a kiddie told he can't go out to play. —Aye, cos I had-a speed horn, didn't I? *Duv*, coulda knocked nails in with-a hard-on I had on me. An it seemed like a good idea at-a time.

—An yew regret it now?

Daft twat looks like he's about-a cry. I can't help but take a bit-a pity: —No. It was a laugh. But I'm not in-a mood tonight, butt. Bernie is, tho. He's yewer man.

—Aye but-a two of yew. That's what made it. Never felt so needed, Jac says. The two of yew together was what made it so special, that's what she said.

—Well I'm jes not in-a fuckin mood tonight. I don't want-a have to tell yew that again.

He kind-a yelped like a dog, Jack the Boy did, when he came. In-a corner, like, as if he'd been sent yur for being naughty. He made an horrible yelping sound like a kicked dog when he came an en ee started-a cry an begged us to stop. An Jac the Bird, she told im to shut-a fuck up an ordered us to carry on

an it was horrible but A shot me load anyway an had to get out-a there. Bernie jes carried on thrusting like a fuckin puppet or somethin, doin that stewpid brain-dead laugh ee does, all spit on is chin an drippin off onto-a top of Jac's head. And yer's Jack the Boy in-a corner, crying like, beggin Bernie to stop. I fucked off to-a kitchen, I did; I remember havin the idea that A needed to scrub me dick n balls with bleach. Couldn't find any bleach so A used washing-up liquid instead. Which was probably for the best, cos bleach woulda burnt.

And, ew, God. Not fuckin puttin meself through that again, not tonight, mate or no mate.

Bernie comes back, sniffin, eyes all shiny.

—That's set me up, that has. Raring to go already, boys, I am. He sits down and slips-a wrap back in Jack's pocket an en gives us a look, from me to Jack and en back again. —Oi oi. What's a do yer? Fuckin faces. Oo died?

—Arsk im. Jack nods at me an Am jest about getting fuckin fed up-a this.

—What's up with yew?

—Fuck all, Bern. It's him getting a fuckin strop on cos Am not in-a mood for porking his missis tonight, that's all. Daft twat that he is.

Bernie gives a shrug an sniffs a load-a snot back up his nose. It gurgles. —Suits me. All-a more for me, then, innit?

—Aye but it was-a two-a yew that made it special. Never felt so needed, she said.

—Oh for fuck's sakes Jack. Special be fucked. Shut yewer gob about it, now.

—Now now. All mates yur, boys. Bernie grabs me around-a waist an his hand clunks against the thing in me pocket.

—What's this? Baccy box?

—No. It's one-a these. A take it out to show him. —One-a them music things. Like a Walkman, aye? Plays music.

Jack ignores it all an goes off, to-a bar or-a bog. Fuck im.

—Aye-Pod ey call it.

Bernie picks it up an looks at it, holds it about an inch away from his face as if he's blind. Which he's not, jest thick.

—Where'd yew get this then?

—Up on-a mountain. That party last week, remember?

—Never went.

—No but yew heard about it. Yew were gonna come, remember? But *The Apprentice* was on.

—Did yew nick it?

—No. Found it on-a floor. In some plants.

—Oh aye. Bet yew nicked it.

—I found it on-a floor, mun, told yew.

He pokes at it with his fingers. God this boy has sheep shit for brains, honest-a God. From Tregaron, originally, see.

—How's it work? How'd yew use it?

—It stores songs.

—Aye but how'd yew then get them out?

He's jest poking at it, stabbin at it like with his fingers.

—Can I have it?

—No can yew fuck have it. An giz it back now before yew fuckin break-a bleedin thing.

I take it back off him and put it in me pocket. Tell-a truth I don't know how to use-a fuckin thing either but I'm not goin to tell Bernie that. An I know better than to jest peck at it with me fingers like Am a fuckin chicken.

He has a drink an wipes-a foam off his lip, spreading speed-snot all over his face. —Was it any good, then?

—What, mate?

—Iss rave yew went to.

—Wasn't really a rave. Jest a few people. Stew-dents mostly. Did an ecko which A at first thought was shite like but now Am not so sure. An I saw iss glowing thing.

Why am I telling him this? Them words jest bounced out. I saw a rising sun, that's all it was. No shape or anything, it was nowt but-a fucking glow in-a sky like-a sun.

—A glowin thing?

—In-a sky, aye.

—Probably jest the sun, mun.

He sniffs again. Could do with a line meself, really. Bernie seems happy on it, like. But then Ad end up with me dick in one-a Jac the Bird's holes an then Ad feel like a right dirty cunt in-a mornin.

—I slept on that mountain once.

—Did yew, Bern?

—I did.

—Why?

—I had to.

—Yeh but why?

—Got lost. Had to have a shit in a plastic bag. Ever tried that? Not easy.

—Why did yew have to av a shit in a plastic bag?

—Found it.

—Found what?

—The bag.

—Aye but why shit in it? Why not jest have a dump in-a grass or something?

—Didn't want-a leave a mess on-a mountain, did I? Nice up there, it is.

Oh Christ. See what Av got to deal with, yur? A boy all in-a sulk cos A won't spit-roast his missis with a retard from Tregaron an that retard from Tregaron who'd sooner have a shit in a plastic bag than leave it on-a mountain which is full-a shit anyway from sheep and cows an everything else. An a pikey tryna get me to fight his fuckin battles. How the fuck did I end up yur? I am a mellow man aye that is what I yam but how-a fuck am I? Still, A mean?

—Missed with most of it. Bit loose, I was, see, an it went all in me socks. Ad to fall asleep in me shitty socks, I did.

A Lavin scrum comes through-a door jest then, five-a them, dark boys all, all done up in eyr bling, fuckin gold ropes an rings, all eyr tats greased up an on show. Loud, ey are. Bunch-a wankers. Ey go straight parst me an Bern an parst-a bar to where Aney is sitting an A see Steve the barman give em iss look, like: *yewer not fuckin welcome in yur*. Most or if not all of em will be barred but who's gonna say anything? Stevie? Wither body on him liker corner flag? He'll have a pickaxe handle handy underneath-a bar like but that's no fuckin good against a crew-a Lavins. When it kicks off which A know it will soon he'll probably try an rope me in an I am not in-a mood tonight,