



## Four's a Crowd

Will Parks is no longer alone.

This is the precise instant it begins. He is being watched. Followed. Everywhere.

And he won't be alone again until The End.

Will himself has not noticed anything change in these last few seconds. Why would he when there are so many more pressing matters to worry about? Not least that he's stuck in a confined space with a girl he doesn't even know.

He's wedged in the back seat of his brother's blue Fiat, the second car in the queue at the level crossing. The stereo plays way too loud, bassline pummelling Will's back from the enormous speaker behind his seat. Frowning eyes stare from the rear-view mirror of the car ahead. His older brother, Danny, plumes vape smoke through his open window into the September evening. In the front passenger seat, a girl. She's dressed up for a Friday night with Danny. Her name is April, although Will doesn't know this yet. He'd only dared to look at her for the briefest of moments when they picked her up. She's beautiful, though; that he knows. Of course she is. And she'll be gone in a fortnight.

'He loves them and leaves them' – that's what people say about Danny.

The train comes into view at last: an express scything across the marshes. It crosses in front of them in a blur,

fast and close enough to make the little car rock on its springs. The flashing red lights switch to amber and Danny pulls away in his usual manner. Mr Unimpressed-Glare in front adds a small hand gesture to his expression of disapproval.

They rumble over the tracks into the part of town known as Patten's Island to drop Will off, his plans somewhat less stimulating than what Danny no doubt has in mind. But they make it barely a hundred metres beyond the crossing before Will feels several thunks from somewhere beneath his feet. The car begins to slow. The smell inside, candy-flossy vape smoke and April's perfume, is overpowered by the acrid whiff of mechanical failure. The stereo is suddenly silent as they come to rest, revealing a gathering chorus of horns from behind them.

Three times Danny twists the key. Four. Five. The engine cranks a little slower each time, the sound of his cool dying. He's furious, although you'd need to be someone as close to him as his own younger brother to recognize the signs: the reddening at the earlobes, the tremor in his right arm as he waves the traffic past, the sweat beading in the stubble of his skin-fade haircut.

In one movement, Danny is outside with the bonnet open. His muscle-fit jumper is rolled to the elbows, creating the illusion that he might have the foggiest idea what's gone wrong. That he might even *fix* it.

Unable to get out of the back seat without causing a fuss, Will instead stares out of his side window at the derelict shop they are stopped outside, with its peeling paint and cracked pebbledash. It was once a dry-cleaners, though the only evidence of that now are the rusted scars

left by the signage. The sea is visible in the gap between this building and its neighbour. The light is fading fast, the setting sun like raging fire and smoke over the marshes. Will concentrates on the view, his head locked round at ninety degrees to his body.

*I should have walked*, he thinks. *I really, really should've fucking walked.*

'You see your nan every Friday night?' April asks.

Will's heels dig into the car floor. She's less than a metre away from him. *Way* too close for a conversation. At least she hasn't turned right round, instead just inclining her head to the side. Limited risk of eye contact.

'Sweet of you,' she adds, even though Will hasn't replied.

'Sometimes,' Will eventually says. A lie. He does see her every Friday night; spends most evenings round there if he isn't working, and he'd wish it no other way. He's only too well aware there will come a time, soon, when he won't be able to do so any more.

'What you reckon to sixth form?' she asks.

'S'OK.'

Will stares at his iPhone in his lap, smearing a wet thumb round in circles on the lock screen.

'Hear about the dartboards?'

He gives a snort of laughter. He *has* heard about them – how they didn't survive a week in the common room before being removed after Saul Caan had to be taken to A and E with a dart buried barrel-deep in the back of his neck.

'You're at ECS?' he asks. Three days into lower sixth at Ebbswick Community Secondary, he's sure he hasn't seen

her around. Though the fact that he hasn't yet set foot inside the common room has, of course, limited his opportunities for meeting his fellow students.

'I'm the new girl,' she says bouncily, turning right round to face Will and giving it some jazz hands. 'Got a kindly upper-sixther to show me the bright lights of the town, though.'

Will focuses on his brother, perched on the wing of the car, unsure whether April's sarcastic tone is in reference to the suggestion of Ebbswick-on-Sea containing even a single bright light, or that Danny's invitation could be in any way interpreted as an act of kindness.

'Where should we go?' she muses out loud.

Will smiles back at her for a moment. 'It's . . .'

April stares at him, waiting. But Will has merely succumbed to the pressure to begin a sentence, trusting that the rest of the words will follow. They haven't. This is always happening. When will he learn?

'It's . . .'

At some quiet moment in the near future, he'll reflect on this exchange and carry out a post-mortem, running over every word and gesture in forensic detail, as he often does in the aftermath of a social encounter. At the heart of these investigations lies the big question he can never answer with any certainty: *What is it that I'm so afraid of?*

Saying something really fucking stupid, that's part of it for sure. But there's something deeper. It's a fear of being *seen*. Of being outed as *weird* – the hardest reputation to shift once gained. That's the furthest conclusion Will is able to reach. If he could only believe he might interact with another human being without the certainty they'll

leave disappointed, amused – repulsed, even – by the encounter, if he could *know* that's not how it would end, maybe he'd be OK.

It's far from just conversations with girls at which Will falls short, although those are perhaps where the struggle is at its most acute. And it's not because Will fancies those girls, even if his maroon-faced appearance makes it look like he does. In truth, Will doesn't so much fancy girls as exist in awe of them, considering himself thoroughly unworthy of their attention. He's two weeks off seventeen, but he long ago accepted that it's exceptionally unlikely he'll ever have sex. Sometimes he wonders if he might, in the long-distant future, when he's thirty or forty perhaps, pay for it – just to find out what it's all about.

'What subjects you doing?' April asks.

'English, history, physics, photography,' Will reels off.

'Snap,' she says, grinning. 'Be seeing you in photography. One of my *five*.' She does a disgusted face.

'Five?'

'Beasting myself, aren't I? Figure if I keep myself busy, no one'll notice I've got no mates.'

*You'll have friends soon enough*, Will thinks. *You must be seriously clever*, he also thinks. But he doesn't voice either of these thoughts, for fear they'll sound like an attempt at a compliment.

'Sorry, kids, but this old bus ain't going nowhere fast,' Danny announces, kneeling on the edge of the driver's seat. His hands are remarkably spotless for someone who's been supposedly nursing a broken engine for the past six minutes.

'What's up with it?' April asks.

‘Radiator, looks like.’

‘Shit. Sounds expensive.’

‘I’ll slip a new one in tomorrow,’ he says.

Will is always impressed by Danny’s ability to speak with utter confidence on matters of which he knows little or nothing.

‘You all right walking to Nain’s from here, little bro?’ he asks with a warmth he doesn’t usually use to address Will.

‘How come you call her nine?’ April says.

‘*Nain*,’ Danny corrects, although it sounds indistinguishable from the number. ‘Welsh for “Gran”. It’s where she grew up.’

Will is only too relieved to be squeezing past the front seat, unfolding his six-five frame into the salty air. He gives his brother a thumbs up, towering awkwardly over him.

‘Don’t forget to walk Beppo,’ Danny adds with a smirk.

This is a running joke, entirely at Will’s expense, but he laughs all the same because it’s easier than getting annoyed.

‘Got the lead?’ Danny winks.

Will opens his rucksack and shows it to him.

‘Woof woof,’ Danny says, playfully jabbing his arm.

‘Catch you in photography,’ April calls after him, just as another train howls past the level crossing.

Will pretends he doesn’t hear her.

*She must think I’m so fucking rude*, he thinks.

Shoulders rigid and hands jammed in pockets, Will walks away.

And he is followed.

## That Friday Feeling

Will rounds the corner into his nain's road. The single working street light glows in the darkness, wobbling like a flower on a stalk as an onshore breeze kicks up over the beach in the distance. He passes an old caravan, slumped at the kerb on flat tyres that haven't turned in years. The bungalow over the road has its glass front door held together with parcel tape.

This part of town is known as Patten's Island, although it isn't an island, and Mr Patten – the businessman who built it – had the good sense to bugger off a long time ago. An area of reclaimed marshland, surrounded by sea on two sides, hundreds of chalets line its grid of roads. Once a half-fashionable holiday destination, in recent decades the buildings fell first into disrepair, and then into the hands of private landlords, who do as little for their tenants as they can get away with. Fifty years ago, you might have seen the neighbourhood depicted on postcards, but these days you're more likely to find it in one of those 'crap towns' sort of books, which a particular type of person is entertained by.

Will stops for a moment outside Nain's front door and takes a deep breath, as he always does. He knows that once he's pressed the doorbell or stuck his key in the lock, he's at the mercy of whatever might be waiting for him inside. There have been times when that fact has come close to

making him walk away. He turns for a moment and looks at the few multicoloured flowers and stone squirrels that decorate her front garden. This small plot used to burst with blooms in every colour imaginable, a proper neighbourhood landmark. These days she keeps it simple.

‘Let yourself in, Wilbo,’ a voice shouts from inside.

Nain is in the kitchen, where she’s half sitting on, half leaning against a wheeled stool at the worktop. In front of her is a mound of roughly chipped potatoes and a gin and bitter lemon in a half-pint beer jug.

‘Look at the bloody state of them,’ she says, pointing a shaking finger at the chips. ‘Silly old fart.’

Will crouches to give her a hug and kisses her hot forehead. Beneath her silver woolly jumper she feels like a baby bird.

‘I said I’d cook my tea,’ he says, spotting the gammon and pineapple laid on foil and the beans on the stove. ‘You’ve eaten?’

‘Portuguese Louisa left ten minutes ago.’ Nain has a protocol when referring to her carers, prefacing their first names with their country of origin. ‘Cumberland pie. That makes it Friday?’

‘Yup.’

‘Don’t get old, Wilbo. Working out the day of the week from what’s on the menu! Bloody hell.’

She digs around in the fridge and Will helps her extract the chip pan from right at the back.

‘I’ll do my tea, Nain,’ he says quietly but firmly.

‘What use am I when I can’t even feed you?’

‘How are you?’ he asks. ‘Sorry, got called into work the last couple of nights.’

‘You work too hard.’ She rubs his arm.

‘We kinda need the money. Been OK, though?’

‘Fine, dear. Fine. Not buying green bananas, you know.’

Will tries to laugh, gripping his hand round Nain’s as she attempts to light the gas rings.

‘Go sit down,’ he says. ‘I’ll join you in a minute.’

He guides her to her chair, arm linked with hers, lowers her by the shoulders into her threadbare mustard-coloured armchair and waits while she packs cushions round herself. As he steadies her, he looks at the wall over the fireplace. His grandad stares back at him, or at least so it seems from the sparkling life in his eyes. The framed portrait rests above a highly polished cherry-wood box on the mantelpiece.

‘April 2018,’ Nain says, wedged in position now. ‘I was thinking about it the other night. He had no idea I was taking it. Last time we ever went out to a party. Worked out it was precisely a hundred days before, well, you know . . .’

Will nods. Like so many of Nain’s photos dotted about the house, it’s so beautiful that it’s impossible to walk past. It’s the sort of picture you can only take using an old camera with no electronics deciding you’re wrong, because it breaks all the rules. Ninety per cent of the image is jet black, with slivers of white where his hair and the deep wrinkles in his Middle Eastern skin catch the low light. There is the quick-witted grin, the Sinatra cut of his suit: an entire person in a thirty-centimetre square.

‘How you getting on with the camera?’ Nain asks. She gifted her 1970s Olympus to Will a year ago. ‘Shooting lots? Film’s expensive, I know.’

‘A bit. Here and there.’

He rarely leaves home without it. His wages allow him a thirty-six exposure roll every two weeks, together with the school darkroom fees so he can process it.

‘I live in hope that you’ll have something to show me one of these days. I know you have the eye.’

Will can’t bring himself to show his work to anyone, especially not Nain, who he’s certain he couldn’t compare to if he practised for a lifetime. This is something Nain can’t begin to understand, because while they may well share an eye for a good picture, above all they share a lack of belief in their own abilities. Someone need only glance around the walls of her small chalet, not just at the photographs but also at the watercolours of beaches and landscapes, the Indian-ink line drawings of animals, the scenes of fairies and picnicking teddies burned into slabs of timber, to realize that all those years spent working the delicatessen counter in an out-of-town supermarket were a waste of her skills. But Nain would never think such a thing. She can name scores of gifted people in this very neighbourhood; people who possess all the skill and flair to be master cake bakers, model makers, writers, who instead give themselves to jobs where someone makes you put your phone in a locker and tells you what time you can eat your lunch. There are professions that aren’t open to people from places like Patten’s Island; she’s long known that.

‘It’s chilly in here,’ Will says, flinching at the clank each time he prods the ignition button on the gas fire.

‘Don’t you bloody dare!’ Nain laughs. ‘It’s September, for crying out loud.’

Will doesn't argue, instead unfolding a blanket and laying it over her knees.

'Least I can do is keep the gas bill under control,' she says. Her expression shifts suddenly, lips tightening against teeth. 'He was out there again this afternoon.' She points to the closed curtains, beyond which is her small back yard. 'Brazen, he is.'

Will's fairly sure he knows where this is going, but plays along regardless. Out of what – politeness? Duty? He's never sure.

'Who was out there?'

'What's-his-name. You know. Arbuckle! That Jonny Arbuckle next door.'

'Does he still live there?'

Will knows that the De Souza family live there, that Mr Arbuckle moved away five years ago.

'Stealing my electricity again. Making a racket all afternoon.'

'Maybe he was using his own electricity, Nain.'

'Drills, saws, sanders – all sorts. He thinks I'm such a mug.'

'I don't think anyone's stealing from you.'

'I can't afford it, Wilbo. As if things aren't bad enough.'

'Try not to worry. I'm sure –'

'It makes me so bloody cross.' There are tears in her eyes now as she slams a fist against the arm of her chair.

Will hugs her and kisses her head. Her soft white hair smells of the perfume she's always worn and, as Will closes his eyes, he realizes that it's him who feels safe now, even though he's the one doing the comforting. He thinks how bizarre it is that minutes ago she was remembering

the exact day she took a particular photograph, and in another moment she's recounting something that never happened, or relying on a foil dish of Cumberland pie to tell what day it is.

As the moments pass, he feels the tension in her ease, and knows that she's either talked herself round or forgotten entirely what had wound her up in the first place.

'Gonna sort my tea,' he whispers, creeping back to the kitchen.

The chips are almost golden and bubbles rise slowly through the gloopy baked-bean sauce, popping and splattering the hob. Noise spills from the old medium-wave radio on top of the fridge. Through the whistling interference and the crackle of static, Will can detect two separate stations fighting each other to be heard. There's some sort of country and western song with swooping steel guitar, and then there's a radio play with cut-glass accents talking about a pheasant shoot.

Who are these people who listen to dramas on the radio, Will briefly wonders, and why don't they watch telly instead? He notices that if he concentrates on the music, the conversation fades into the background; if he focuses on the posh farmers, the song recedes till it's like the music in a lift. There's a great crack of interference as he sweeps the aerial to one side, finding a sweet spot where just the music remains.

He lifts the basket of chips to drain and switches the gas taps off. Before joining Nain, he stands for a moment and looks about the kitchen – at the irrelevant stuff that's been part of the scenery for every memory he's made

here: the bar of hand soap no one uses, marbled green and white and split end to end; the London Olympics commemorative plate above the door, veined with superglue; the fridge magnets from places no one in the family has been.

He thinks about his first A-level physics lesson this morning. The law of entropy was the topic: how all things in the universe move over time from order to chaos. And he thinks how there was a time when his life existed in perfect order: when everybody who mattered was still alive, when no one had illnesses that would take them away, when both parents still lived under the same roof and divorce was just a word used in gossip about other families. His life once had order, and he was happy. As order moves towards chaos, Will thinks, so happiness falls to bits and becomes misery.

He takes a seat next to Nain, knowing that what little order that still remains will soon be chaos too.

But he's wrong. Unlike most of nature's known laws, there's room for a little negotiation where entropy is concerned. Things are about to get better for Will.

Although they might get worse first.

## Work

Will stares at the folded trousers and the green and red striped waistcoat as his manager slides them over the bar to him. He feels nauseous. For a change, it's not because of the stench of stale beer and festering mops that always fills the pub until it gets aired out at opening time.

'Front of house?' Will asks. 'I'd maybe rather stay on pot wash.'

'Kitchen'll manage without you,' his manager tells him.

'I'm just not sure I'm –'

'High time we got you customer-facing – nice strapping lad like you. It's a cracking day. Be some tarts down looking for a bit of fun, mark my words. You'll be thanking me later.' He winks at Will. His name is Mick Touch, and there have been whispers from the younger girls on the staff that suggest his surname is not inaccurate.

Will keeps his hands clear of the uniform, as if picking up the pile of well-worn clothes will commit him to the gig. It's barely past ten on Sunday morning, but beyond the pub's glazed frontage the beach is already sprouting blankets and windbreaks, and the sea is fizzing with autumn sun.

'I'm kinda fucked since all the temp staff buggered off back to wherever,' Mick Touch tells him. 'That's the trouble. Give it a month and it'll be back to ghost town round here again.' He ploughs his fingers through his

gelled grey hair. ‘Tell you what: I’ll let you keep some of your tips. How’s that?’

He mimes spitting into his hand and holds it out.

With a choice only of agreeing or finding a new employer, the deal is sealed.

Mick locates a name badge from under the bar. ‘Today, you shall be known as Mo,’ he says, laying it atop the pile of clothes.

Will’s been working part-time at Smugglers Pub and Dining for nearly two years. Like most of the staff, his is a cash-in-hand arrangement – four quid an hour with a fiver bonus if it’s a public holiday. Ordinarily, he washes up, fetches ingredients from the fridges and cleans down the kitchen when the grill chefs are done. It’s a job he rather enjoys; the pace and heat make him feel like he’s working in the engine room of a cruise liner, and he creates his own fun by running a tally on every shift of how many times the C-word is used. He worked a double last Easter Monday when the current record of 412 was set.

‘Now tell me, *Mo*,’ Mick Touch says, ‘do you want to know the secret to being a successful waiter?’

‘I suppose.’

Mick stares at Will while nodding slowly.

‘Erm, I don’t get it,’ Will says uncomfortably.

‘It’s almost witchcraft, Willy boy.’ He’s still nodding.

‘What is?’

‘I call it the Magician’s Nod. You try it. Imagine I’m a table of punters. Ask me if I’d like another round of drinks. Go on.’

‘Can I . . . get you some . . . any more drinks, maybe?’

‘No, thank you!’

‘OK. Sorry.’

‘And now, Willy boy, nod while you ask me. Give it some Magician’s Nod.’

Will does as he’s told.

‘Yes, I’m rather thirsty, now you mention it. Another round, young sir!’ Mick grabs Will’s shoulder. ‘The power of persuasion, it’s an incredible thing. Now ask me if I’d like any sides.’

‘Any side orders?’ Will has finished the sentence before remembering to begin the ridiculous nodding.

‘Perfect! Onion rings, please. And, fuck it, let’s have some garlic mushrooms while you’re at it.’ He thrusts the uniform into Will’s chest. ‘You’re an absolute natural. Get yourself changed.’

Five minutes later, Will emerges from the gents. His trouser legs end several centimetres above his trainers. The waistcoat bulges between buttons like he’s an illustration of a fat man in a children’s book. He stands as if lost in this thoroughly familiar building, swinging his arms back and forth and certain he’s glowing bright red, when Meera bounds over to him. She’s well under five feet tall, not a day over fifteen, and she runs *everywhere*.

‘Follow me,’ she orders. ‘Mickey Bum Touch says I’ve got to teach you everything I know.’ She’s also Smugglers’ best waitress. ‘Just you, me and Janice today –’ a woman with crinkly blond hair waves with her back turned, laying up a table – ‘and a hundred and twenty covers for lunch. That’s just what’s *booked*. Gonna be fun, washer-upper man.’

‘Can’t wait.’

‘Be fine. Bum Touch given you the Magician’s Nod talk?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Such a tit,’ she says, and Will giggles along with her.

He tries to concentrate as Meera talks him through the touchscreen till and the card machine and the kids’ menu and the Pepsi machine, but he’s too busy panicking that he won’t remember anything to be able to remember anything. Briefly, he entertains the fantasy of simply walking out, but he daren’t; in a few weeks the wind and the rain will set in and Ebbswick-on-Sea will become deserted, and even jobs that pay as poorly as this one will become impossible to find.

The doors open. ‘Love Shack’ by the B-52s starts playing throughout the building, the first track of the playlist that’s been on loop for the last year. As if walking in time to the drumbeat, early-bird boozers swarm to the bar. Mick Touch hooks his arm round Will’s shoulder and guides him to a table of six seated in a window bay.

‘Here he is, your server for today,’ Mick booms as though he’s compèring at a comedy club. ‘It’s Mo! Be gentle with him, folks – first-day nerves.’ He ruffles Will’s hair and struts away, laughing.

All the guests are over sixty and dressed smartly. This puts Will partly at ease, reminding him of the Christmas parties for the elderly held by the school community club, where he served turkey dinners and alcohol-free wine in the school hall. Although those events never involved *ordering*, and Will is suddenly at a loss as to how to begin this interchange.

‘Drinks,’ whispers Meera, whizzing past behind him.

2 *Saint Clements*, he shakily scrawls, 2 *pints Creamflow*, 2 *halfs Creamflow*, and just hopes the bar knows what any of that means.

The tables start landing fast, far too fast to remember where he's got to with each. But the little speech Meera wrote out for him – soup of the day is minestrone, special is steak and kidney pudding, no barbecue ribs left – quickly becomes well practised, and with Meera's and Janice's help drinks and food seem to be landing in front of the right people. The beauty of being so absurdly stressed, Will starts to realize, is that you don't have time to get stressed.

An hour in and he's mastered carrying three plates at a time and almost looking at the customers when they're talking to him. And most of Meera's advice has already proved accurate: everyone does order the second cheapest wine on the list; there's a wanker on every table who answers the question 'How would you like your steak cooked?' by replying, 'On a grill!'; and lots of customers don't waste time with please or thank you. This is the bit that Will finds most fascinating, as if by putting on a waiter's uniform he's been gifted the minor superpower of being able to see people's real character.

'Great work, mate,' Meera tells him as the restaurant begins to thin out in the late afternoon.

Will stands rigidly and gently pats her back as she hugs his torso. She grabs a wad of notes from her waistcoat pocket and peels off two tenners for Will. 'Redistribution of wealth, comrade. If Bum Touch sees this little stash, it'll be straight in his back pocket.'

Will scrunches the money in his palm. Sure, he's spent the day sweating like a marathon runner, and he was moaned at by a customer whose shouts of 'Mo!' Will had constantly ignored, and there was a complaint over a

well-done rump steak that was too tough, which Mick Touch had to deal with, but Will is right now enjoying that brief window where he's happy with a performance he's given – before all the analysis has had a chance to begin.

He sinks a pint of soda water and begins the massive task of cleaning up the melted ice creams and dirty glasses that cover the vacant tables. Back in his own world, without people to serve and appear normal in front of, he doesn't notice the time pass, barely registers the beach falling quiet and the darkness setting in outside.

'Will!' comes a bark from the far corner of the building, where the restaurant gives way to the bar.

Will spins round, as if someone has woken him up.

'Need you, Will!' Janice shouts.

'What's up?' he mumbles, but she turns and hurries away, waving for him to follow.

He'll think about this moment a lot in the days to come. He'll wish he'd been harder to find, or that he'd told Janice to go and find Mick Touch instead – because it was his problem that Will was being invited to wade into. He jogs through the bar area, keeping Janice's bouncing mass of corkscrew hair in sight. In a low-ceilinged annex at the back of the pub, he steps into a load of trouble.

'Here comes the cavalry,' a red-faced man says, sniffing noisily and dragging his sleeve across his face. 'Big fucker, aren't you? How you doing, cock?'

'OK, thanks,' Will says, caught off guard and unable to forget his manners despite the tone of the question.

The room is open at one end into the bar, the other three walls forming a passage around the snooker table, which dominates the space. One guy stands in the corner,

his cue gripped upright in his fist, his clenched jaw chewing at an invisible piece of gum. The guy who's speaking is shorter than his mate. He's perched on the far cushion of the table with his legs crossed. His disproportionately large bottom bulges over the edge on to the baize as if it's going to explode through the central seam of his trousers any second. Meera stands backed into the corner, hugging a stack of empty pint glasses to her chest.

Janice talks hurriedly to Will, moving her lips excessively as she speaks.

'Meera was collecting their glasses. The short one starts asking her to take drugs with them. Keeps trying to make her go to the disabled toilet with him.' She's talking quietly but Will's sure they're close enough to be overheard. 'The pair of them are off their faces on God knows what. Said some really disgusting things to Meera.' Janice looks round and flashes a dirty look in the guy's direction. '*Filthy* things,' she whispers.

Will nods. He's aware that the two men and Meera are all looking at him. He's confused. *Why the hell are you telling me?* is what he wants to ask. *What on earth has this got to do with me?*

'Meera asked them to leave,' Janice continues.

Will looks at her blankly.

'She asked them to leave, Will, and they won't. And they're being abusive.'

For the first time since this morning, Will's suddenly aware of his uniform, with its ankle swingers and silly striped waistcoat.

'Shall I call the police?' he whispers back, petrified he'll be heard. He's heard there are people who'll kill a man for reporting them to the law.

‘Just get them out,’ Janice says, shaking her head.

Will says nothing. He looks Janice in the face for a second. She’s got to be the same age as his mum, older maybe. These guys are what – thirty? Why is he expected to resolve this problem? He may be nearly seventeen but he can’t remember feeling more like a child than he does right at this moment. He wants to run home and cry in his room. He wants to be in the arms of his nain.

But a decision has been made that he is The Man. He is expected to fix this. It’s not just Janice’s eyes that drill into him, it’s the two blokes’ eyes as well. A stage has been set here.

A scene is expected.

I don't want to watch this.

Why do I have to watch this?

Why am I here if all I can do is watch? Watch and not help . . .

Why am I here at all? I guess that's the question I'm getting at.

Why am I following you around, Will Parks, every minute of the day and night?

Why you? Why can I only follow you? What's so special about you?

So many questions.

It was Friday night when it began. In the car, at the level crossing, with you, your brother and that April girl. So, forty-eight hours. Ish. That's the only way I can work it out - count the number of times it's got dark then light again. I can't *feel* the time passing.

But here's the odd thing, or rather the oddest thing: I can *see* it - I can see the time passing. If I look behind me, behind us, I see what was happening before what's happening right now started happening. And if I look forward, I can make out what's coming up next. It's like sitting between two mirrors, seeing copies stretching out to infinity in both directions. Only it's you I see, not me. And in one direction the image is lagging behind what's happening now, and in the other direction it's running ahead.

It's like I've traded one plane of movement for another. You, and everyone else, can move backwards and forwards and side to side. I can only deal in 'befores' and 'afters'.

How far ahead can I see? It's hard to be sure. Weeks, I think, maybe a month. And like looking at anything far away, the further into the distance I look, the less clear the detail.

Behind me, I can see no further back than my arrival on Friday night. Ever woken up certain you were having some crazy dream but can't remember what the hell it was about? That's what my before-Friday is like. If I knew where I was before then, I might have a clue what this is about. Who I am. *What* I am, even.

But among all these questions, there are things I do know. Things hardwired into me, instinctive.

I know I'm here for a reason.

I know I don't have forever.

I know I need to make contact with you.

Right now, it's that last one that's most pressing. Because if I'd already worked out how to contact you, maybe I'd've been able to prevent what's about to happen.

Because I've seen it coming and, like I say, I don't want to watch this.

## Customer Service

‘Can you please leave,’ Meera snaps, eyeballing the guy perched on the snooker table.

‘Me and my friend here are going to finish our frame,’ he replies, ‘and another round of drinks.’ He stares at Will as he says it. ‘Why don’t you fetch us two Stellas, young man?’

‘And couple of tequilas,’ his friend mumbles, his face so taut he appears to have trouble speaking.

Janice’s expression is one of disbelief, angled first at the two men, and then at Will.

‘Where’s Mick?’ Will asks. ‘We should get Mick.’

‘Not a clue,’ Meera says. ‘Disappears when it gets quiet, doesn’t he?’

‘Come here, cock,’ the guy says. His accent isn’t local. It’s London, almost posh. The sort of voice that gets what it wants.

Will looks at the cue lying across the table. If this was a film, he’d reach for that right now. He’d square up to this pair of arseholes, holding – no, *brandishing* – the cue, and they’d say something like, ‘OK, cool it, mate, we’re leaving.’ But he’s never had a fight, never been interested in how to punch, never thrown his weight around. There are people who somehow know almost instinctively how to do that, but Will is not one of them.

He walks round the table. The guy stands and blocks his path. Will’s at least six inches taller than him but this

gives him no sense of security, his height instead making him feel vulnerable, as it always has, as if he's towering above an invisible fortress that exists to protect all the normal people.

The guy flicks Will's name tag. 'Nice to meet you, Mo,' he says. His breath smells flammable. A halo of white dust outlines his nostrils. He grabs Will's hand and shakes it. And then keeps holding it. Will tugs a couple of times but it isn't released.

'Please leave now,' Will says. He's almost pleased with himself. There's unexpected authority in his voice.

'You ever had sex?' the guy asks.

'Yeah,' Will instinctively replies. It's a lie, of course, but he's very much in the mode of dealing with a school bully, which this guy almost is. Those people may grow up and blend in with civilization, but their old self is only too happy to be re-awoken with a few pints and some prohibited substances.

'Who?' the guy demands.

'Anyone,' Will replies. He doesn't know why he said that.

'Anyone? Fucking anyone?' He releases Will's hand, instead cupping his own on Will's crotch and squeezing.

Will grabs at the bloke's wrist but it's rigid as steel.

'You had a go on this?' he asks, nodding at Meera.

'No,' Will mumbles.

*'That?'*

Will follows his gaze to the far side of the table and Janice. She shakes her head. 'Hardly,' she mumbles, as if that's the most important issue to address right now.

The guy massages firmly between Will's legs. He grins. 'You're getting a hard-on, aren't you?'

Inexplicably, he is. He can't imagine feeling less aroused. But, yes, yes, he is getting a hard-on.

'Like the boys?' the guy whispers, lips millimetres from Will's, squeezing hard on the end of his dick, sending spears of pain shooting up to his abdomen.

'Fuck off!' Will shouts. He steps backwards. The guy steps forward, taking up the space.

'Fuck off, cunt!' Will shouts, trying to wrestle the hand from his genitals.

The guy's arm flies up from between Will's legs, grabbing him by the throat instead. In what feels to Will like one movement, he finds himself staring up at the ceiling. He's not sure how he's ended up there but he's laid on his back on the snooker table. His cheek is burning where it's been scraped along the baize. A cold blue ball rests against his eye socket. And a cue is pinned across his neck.

'Don't call me names,' the guy says.

'Sorry,' Will forces past his crushed vocal cords. He feels a hot tear running past his left ear.

'How sorry?'

Will says nothing.

'Sorry enough to kiss my feet?' The man adds a little more weight to his cue.

Will can hardly breathe now but gives a tiny yet emphatic nod. He slowly rises from the table as the cue is released.

'Don't, Will,' Meera says, not looking at him. 'You don't have to do that.'

Will looks at the balls scattered on the table. He could grab one in an open fist. He could swing it straight at this bloke's face. But he doesn't. He doesn't even seriously

consider it. Will Parks is not the sort of person who can bring himself to really hurt somebody, to draw blood or break bone, and it would seem right now that there is shame in that fact.

He hears Janice muttering, 'Jesus Christ, Will,' as he drops to his knees and lowers his face to the floor. The navy suede slip-ons have an oddly musty smell, with a tang of what hopefully isn't dog shit. There's a mushroomy note to the taste of them as Will obeys the request for 'a bit of tongue'. The soles are grassy, crunchy with grit.

'Good lad,' the guy says after a good minute or more. He pats Will's head. 'Apology accepted.'

He sinks his remaining half-pint of beer in a single draught. 'We were leaving anyway,' he says, launching his cue so it bounces across the table. And the two of them are gone.

'My boys are your age,' Janice tells Will. 'They'd have sorted them right out.' She rolls her eyes. 'Call yourself a man?'

'Everything OK?' Mick Touch asks, bowling through the bar in their direction. 'What have I missed?'

Janice shrugs and leaves them to it.

'It's OK now,' says Meera. 'No biggie.'

She gives Mick a run-down of events, sparing the most demeaning details.

Once they're alone, Mick reaches an arm round Will's shoulder. 'Willy boy, Willy boy!' he says, roughly shaking him. 'What we gonna do with you? Not one for playing the hero, are you?'

Will looks at the floor, noticing how his hands are still shaking.

‘You gotta act a bit braver than that when you’ve got an audience,’ Mick says, his tone worldly-wise. ‘Good old Janice was ready to give you a white feather there. You know about white feathers, Willy boy?’

Will gives an embarrassed nod. It’s a reference he understands from GCSE history: how there were women who would hand a white feather to a young man who was slow to sign himself up to go to war.

Mick Touch is something of an enthusiast for military history, often to be heard expressing how ‘they should bring back national service’, or that what this country really needs is another world war, a chance for us all to come together and fight for death or glory. Although if anyone deserves that white feather, it’s probably Mick Touch himself, who spent the last ten minutes rooted to his chair in the office upstairs, watching the snooker table incident unfold on CCTV, his finger lingering over the panic button next to his desk.

‘If I’d have been here,’ Mick says to Will, ‘God knows what I’d have done to them.’ He raises a clenched fist close to his chest. ‘Wouldn’t have been able to control myself.’

## Starting Over

The sad truth is that Will Parks doesn't really have any friends. And so, as is not unusual, he's riding the number 83 to school, sharing a seat with a complete stranger. Who, unfortunately, doesn't smell great. Will breathes through his mouth into his own sleeve, desperate for the traffic to get moving as the bus crawls past Patten's Island on its way towards town. Still a complex aroma lingers in his nostrils: like the airless Hoover cupboard in a holiday let, plus a touch of blue cheese. A raspy cough escapes from the old bloke and Will holds his breath till his vision swims.

It's not that Will is especially unpopular. Few of his fellow students would think twice about riding to school next to him. It's just no one would go out of their way to do so. Friendship was once such a simple thing. You throw a load of kids together in a neighbourhood or a classroom and you're done – everyone's friends and they all go round each other's homes on their birthdays. But then something weird happens. You hit your teens and suddenly it's necessary to be in a tribe, to gravitate towards people of shared interests, of similar ambition, of roughly equivalent financial standing. Will isn't a weed smoker, doesn't care especially for grime, couldn't give a toss about PC gaming or chess. He's a kid from a skint family in a nice road. He enjoys night-time beach walks in the pissing rain and taking

black-and-white photos. He likes novels from the 1960s, films from the 1980s and dance music from the early 1990s – preferably on vinyl. His is a tribe of exactly one.

The bus is packed, mostly with ECS pupils. Will keeps his face turned from them. It's unlikely any of them know about yesterday evening's shoe-licking incident, but he can't be sure – who knows what details might have been shared and gone viral. There could be photos. What if there's a video? The more he considers it, the more sure he becomes that people know. That *everybody* knows. Why else would they all be having such a good laugh at this time of morning?

He cringes as he hears Mick Touch's words again in his mind: *Not one for playing the hero, are you? You gotta act a bit braver than that when you've got an audience.*

Will has long thought himself a wimp, but it's one of many secrets he keeps from the world: how he can't answer the front door at home, how he ignores the landline when it rings, how he finds things to do in the shed on Halloween to avoid being faced with someone demanding he answer the question 'Trick or treat?' But now it seems likely his cover is blown, that the truth is out: Will Parks is a pathetic little wimp.

The bus rumbles over the railway and pulls over at the stop in front of the library. As the doors hiss open, a fresh breeze whips in, swirls of dust turned to glitter by the morning sun. The man next to Will grapples with the seat in front, drawing himself upright. He turns to Will, gazing into his face.

Will forces a small nod. The guy stares harder, like he's looking deep into Will, and clean through him at the same

time. His skin is waxy grey and his beard is stained brown from smoking, but he's a good deal younger than Will had assumed – too young for that death-rattle cough. His eyes glow in the golden light, as alive as the rest of him is nearly dead. A half-smile forms – a wistful, knowing sort of smile.

He begins a lengthy clearing of his throat. 'Thank you,' he eventually says.

Will's expression is asking, *Thank you for what?*

The man's eyes begin to redden, dampness welling in the left. 'Thank you so much.'

It's a growling whisper, impossibly earnest.

'Sorry, I don't . . . Maybe you've confused me with someone else,' Will says.

'Can we move along?' calls the driver.

The man raises a hand, his eyes not leaving Will's.

'Oh no,' he says. 'No confusion.' He flashes a broad smile and for a second he is unexpectedly handsome. 'Thank you. It won't be forgotten. Not ever.'

He staggers, bent-legged, towards the exit, looking back briefly at Will. 'Go well,' he says, tipping the brim of an invisible hat. 'Today it begins. Make the best of it.'

He stands at the kerb in front of the library and watches as the bus drives away.

Will doesn't dare to look back at him, pretending instead to check his phone. But he replays the interchange in his mind for the twenty-minute journey to school, rattled by how certain, how serious the man was, how heartfelt the misplaced thanks.

The questions of what it could be that begins today, and what could possibly warrant such thanks, are still

nagging at Will hours later as he makes his way to period-four photography.

‘Don’t be shy,’ Ms Calloway shouts across the room as Will hovers in the doorway. ‘Join our circle of trust!’

She beckons him over with both hands raised like she’s an evangelical priest. ‘Breathe in – I’m not sure there’s room for everyone.’

With insufficient classrooms to go round, photography lessons have been scheduled in the Walton Room – a smaller version of the school hall, usually used for parents’ evenings and public exams. It’s named after Ebbswick Community Secondary’s most – perhaps only – notable former pupil, Jack Walton, a betting shop entrepreneur. A grinning portrait of him in trademark red blazer and check trilby hangs above Ms Calloway’s seat at the far side of the room. Four chairs are arranged in a circle round her, enough for the entire class, Will now realizes, mildly panicked that there’s no corner to stash himself in.

The chairs themselves are minimalist items fashioned from a single metal tube snaking from the floor to the top of the backrest, their contemporary style at odds with the faded blue carpet tiles and slatted window blinds. The seat springs backwards as Will lowers his weight on to it and he has no choice but to sit perfectly still till the rocking motion stops.

‘Cool chairs, huh?’ Ms Calloway says.

Will smiles and nods, accidentally setting the bobbing motion going again.

‘It’s driftwood,’ she says, stroking the silvered dagger of timber hanging round her neck, giving Will the benefit of the doubt about where his eyes have come to rest. ‘Jurassic Coast. So smooth.’

There are tiny tattoos on each of her long fingers, Will notices. Among a bland teaching staff whose personal histories no student could give a toss about, Ms Calloway is the source of much gossip. The billowing skirts, crazy jewellery and the regular mention of her wife add up to make her worthy of speculation. Rumours abound that she lives in the camper van she drives to school, that she once did magic mushrooms with her sixth-formers, that she was in a cult till her forties, when she swapped it for a life as an art and photography teacher. It's a reputation she's never been known to play down.

Two chairs remain empty, but already here is a guy called Kris Tring. He hasn't so much as looked at Will yet, instead sitting bolt upright clutching a massive Nikon, complete with flashgun and hooded long lens. His black-framed spectacles are what Will's dad would disparagingly call 'media glasses', and his air of nonchalance and the skinny fit of his clothes lend him the appearance of a conceptual artist in training.

The door rattles. Will feels his pulse quicken. He glances behind him and sees approaching the same black ankle boots that were in the hallway at home when he returned from Nain's late Friday night.

'Hey, Will,' April whispers as she takes her seat in the circle.

Again, Will nods. And again, the chair is off. Her perfume is familiar and it amazes Will that he can experience such a feel-good nostalgia from so recent and inconsequential a memory. He thinks about the closed bedroom door that night, and the noises beyond it, and the things he could hear Danny saying, and how he felt