

The Shipwreck, 1987

The Blackwall Tunnel is the birth canal forcing me underneath the pressurized gallons of the river that splits the city into north and south.

Every week I have to leave the Saturday-morning sky-view from my flat in the grand Georgian crescent of the Paragon, which faces the wide green flatland of Blackheath. The sky is the mother of all shape-shifters, but, whether tumultuous with rain and storms, washed out with cold or reflecting the brilliance of an imaginary blue, if I look long enough, I can attach my worries to an itinerant cloud and watch it drift away.

Every week, as I descend into the tunnel's arched, prowling depths, headlights dipped, windows closed because of the damned fumes, I dread the moment when I'm finally pushed out, noiselessly screaming, tiny fists clenched, eyes all screwed up and gummy, face blue and bruised like a little boxer, into the thundering traffic and toxic air of the Isle of Dogs, and from there, it's a short drive to the house where my father rots like a carcass of rancid beef.

I park outside the only house in the street visibly subsiding, switch off the engine and prepare in a moment's silence. It's like sitting on the ocean bed and looking out on to a long-forgotten shipwreck.

Sandwiched between identical one-storey terraces, all of which have gleaming windows and neatly pruned hedges, is my father's roof with its mosaic of ill-matched tiles. Quartered window-panes, frames black and fissured, are streaked with the greasy residue of the tar of cigarettes. A pile of bricks taken from the crumbling street wall is stuck in the middle of his garden, rising like a triumphant ruin out of weeds and tall grass. The path to the front door has missing slabs, and my way is blocked, as usual, by a tall green wheelie-bin, standing where the dustmen left it the week before.

I climb the three steps, which are cracked and sink at a right angle, ring the bell and look through the letter-box. The stench of

warm urine hits my nostrils, but thankfully not the aroma of a dead body, which I suspect I would recognize.

I turn the key in the lock, and let myself in.

My father moved here twelve years ago, but the top floor hasn't been used at all and the ceilings are caving in. This is the house he bought because the ghost of Pearline was everywhere in our family home:

Pearline

whose voice still greeted him when he returned home at midnight from the Working Men's Club

Oh! Yu remember yu have a yard?

Pearline

whose cooking aromas still filled the kitchen, fried garlic and onions hissing in a pan, curried goat in a pot on the stove, and his favourite – rum-soaked fruit cake baking in the oven

A likkle somet'ing for later, sweetie-pie

Pearline

whose antique cook's knife, with its smooth ivory handle, gathered dust in a draw because when he used it he could feel her strong hands sawing deep into hundreds of succulent hams, the Sunday roast, gammon

Pearline

who told me I'd inherited The Gift, passed down through generations of her mother's family: to see what others could not

They'll find yu in time, Stanley

Pearline

who suspected what I already knew but did not want to admit, even to myself: that sometimes when I was on my own, I sensed I wasn't

Pearline

whose votive candles for the dead ancestors she talked to left smoky streaks on the rosebud wallpaper over their bedroom mantelpiece

Pearline

whose favourite calypso song played itself in the middle of the night, waking Clasford in a cold sweat

Zombie jamboree, dat took place in a London cem-e-tery,

Dey were singing 'Back to back, belly to belly,

Ah don't care a damn, ah done dead already.'

When he hung up his flannel next to her threadbare green one, stiff and brittle as old cardboard, he heard her snap back,

When it get a hole, then I'll get a new one.

When he opened the bathroom cabinet searching for aspirin, it was crammed full of her medicine bottles and lotions, ointments and tubes, bandages and plasters

When he rummaged in the wardrobe, placing the armpits of her clothes to his nose, he smelled the noxious legacy of perfume infused with chemicals that had escaped through her pores

Pearline

whose teeth still lay in a solitary clouded glass, like a deep sea shellfish, on the little table her side of the bed

Pearline

whose wig sat on its stand on the dressing table, bought when her hair fell out; and when he buried his face in it, he could still smell Jax's scalp oil

Pearline

whose slippers were under the bed; and when he tried them on, he felt the lumpy misshapings of her feet, where she painfully walked

on the sides of them, where the bunion on her left one made it stick out at the front

When he unrolled her nylon stockings, he saw the saggy stretches from knees and ankles that had swollen to twice their normal size; and when he walked along the hallway, he saw her emergency overnight case parked over by the coat stand, because it hadn't made it to the hospital in time.

My father's new bed remains in its plastic sheath. The new bath stands upended in the otherwise empty bathroom. Clothes spill out of scuffed suitcases. Towels and sheets are squashed into plastic bags. There's a tower block of old boxes: official documents from the years of marriage, houses rented, bought; letters dating back to the 1940s; the passport dated 1956 that he was always going to get renewed for that migration back home that was always 'next year' away; the birth certificates, medical cards and dental cards; and, somewhere, a death certificate.

The weight of it all bearing down on us both.

A pot of congealed stew sits on the stove; beyond being unhygienic and an attractive proposition for flies, it's now just a cold, hard, flavourless lump. The last meal he ever cooked for himself. The cooker's four-eyed face is covered with grease. The garden is a nature reserve for foxes and rats, which are the subject of complaints by the neighbours to the council, which issues threats, which he ignores.

'Hi, it's only me. It's Stanley,' I call out with enforced cheerfulness, letting him know he can drop the hammer that he's just picked up, that he's slept with for decades in case the robbers he's been expecting finally do break in. I step on to the local free newspapers, which I push to one side with my feet, aware that whatever state my father is in, his hearing is unimpaired and a row will ensue if he hears me moving things about. Nothing is to be touched, not even the stew, which is still good enough to be eaten one day, *Mi na wasteful like you perishin' youngsters with yer cash an' carry, easy come easy trowaway ways.*

He sits in a brown tweed armchair, where he also sleeps. He hasn't gone upstairs for years, and, although I bought a single bed for the sitting room, he doesn't use it. This is where he sits all day, watching the television but not taking anything in any more. The world in colourful miniature, reduced to a murmuring visual backdrop in a corner of the room: the cookery programmes and soaps, the quiz shows and chat shows, films from Hollywood, Ealing Studios, Bollywood, the make-over, managing-your-money, managing-your-mind, managing-your-relationships, managing-your-every-damned-ting-shows. Once they were a point of conversation. Now it's just company that he ignores. He gets up only to let in Kathy from Meals-on-Wheels, who brings him a hot lunch at midday with a cold supper for later, which he barely touches; Raj from the off licence, who personally delivers his supplies of whisky, beer, cigarettes and chocolate; and the home help, Winnifred, whom I pay to clean up a little, but, unable to do much of this, and old enough and kind enough to humour the old man whose suspicious eyes follow her every move, she at least keeps an eye on him every Wednesday.

I walk with caution as I enter the sitting room, seeing first the commode that is only a few feet from him, and even then sometimes too far away. The gas fire is on. Winter. Summer. Spring. The windows are never opened. It's beyond being stuffy. It's an inferno.

He sits behind the door.

I feel the squelch of piss beneath my feet.

I sit down on the bed, which runs along the right-hand wall, placing a newspaper over it first.

'How are you?' Of course this is the most ridiculous question of all, but I can't help myself.

'Not good, not bad.' Sometimes it's 'Not too bad' or 'Could be better' or 'Not bad, not good' or, on really bad days, 'Don't ask!'

My immediate impulse is, as always, to embark on clearing everything up, to get one gargantuan black dustbin bag and chuck the whole bloody room in it – including him. There's that old globe of his, for a start, sitting on the mantelpiece, all smoke-stained and sun-bleached from the days when he let daylight into the room.

The countries and borders are about thirty years out of date. He made me memorize every country in the world when I was a boy and whacked me if I got one wrong. *The bloody noses, the split lips, the purple eyes, the zipped-up lips, the chill in his voice, my head down. Thank you, for your words in my useless mouth, for your early-morning rises, your sacrifices. Yes, I promise to obey you unto kingdom come and I will never, ever let you down after all you've done, for thou art righteous and I am, well, I am only ca-ca. your son. Amen.*

He resists every time I pick something up to be thrown away. Empty envelopes, cans, bottles, remnants of orange juice, cartons of meals, old newspapers. 'Stop rushin' me,' he'll say, because in the silent-movie space of this room, the energy of someone from the outside world of technicolour is overwhelming. After half an hour or so, I will attempt to empty the commode, then slowly drop detritus into a bag, shaking cans and bottles with great exaggeration first, right in front of him, to prove that there's not a wasteful drop left, prompting him to say, 'Doan be so *blasted* facetious.'

He'll insist the bag should be used again, once the rubbish has been emptied into the bin outside.

He hasn't washed in years; he won't let me or anyone else touch him. His nails grow and grow and grow, until they break off into jagged edges. His hair and beard, no longer dyed black, grow and grow and grow, into tangled scouring brushes. His trousers are stained with urine, his mouth dehydrated, with the dead skin on his loose lips forming little molluscs. He doesn't smell as much as the room, though, because, like the stew outside, the germs die after a while. They say that after the first few years the dirt doesn't get any worse.

Should I wash him? Maybe I should force him. It is obscene, washing my father.

How can I, his son, wash his balls?

Reaching out to my father, but with each lunge his body drifts off out of my grip, floating upwards; his big bones have lost their fleshy padding.

I am calling him down, to come back to me, *please* come back to me, but my words are muffled by water and the current is drifting him away and the creatures of the deep are swimming around us, oblivious as they dart in and out of the sodden timbers

the floating net curtains, tentacles trailing like colourless ribbons, are Sea Wasps; shoals of Clupeid Fry are electrified flying nails recruited from all the fallen doors and creaking floorboards of this house

the weird colony of yellowy sac-like Sea Squirts resembles the tapioca pudding delivered by Meals-on-Wheels, which he hates and always leaves

on the floor are piles of fresh diarrhoea, the Sea Cucumber, which I sometimes have to scoop up for him; it eats sand, in the hope of finding edibles inside

the luminous pink wisps of the Sea Slug, the violet-tipped polyps of the amorphous beings of the living coral

then we enter the dark zone, the cold zone, the abysmal abyssal plane, I try to catch him, but he is lost to me now, as he disappears over the top of the largest mountain range in the world, beneath the continental shelf in the forbidding basin, his wasted legs paddling as his brown corduroy slacks fall down, his feet limp and crusty at the heels

I am no anchor; he is supposed to be mine, he is going, going . . .

and I am left only with the creatures of the deep that I watch on videos late at night when I can't sleep, because I can lose myself in their magical world for hours

here mouth ulcers hover in the water like Christmas baubles with brilliant lights radiating from inside

unused condoms twirl around in a strange ballet with ET eyes, with a ballerina's swirling tutu skirt of red skin for a behind, bought when he imported a woman from home, a 'pen pal' who never wrote once she left this house

here there are beings that need no hard protective skin because there are no solid surfaces; his brain cells are afloat in alcohol, creatures whose skeletons show like X-rays beneath a layer of fragile transparency

they are looking for prey; I am praying for him

and then he drifts back down, through the ceiling, head first like a deep sea diver, arms at his side, feet flapping, and finds his way back into his armchair, bubbles coming out of his nose, and he picks up a can of beer and pours its remains into the dirty mug that reads:

40 YEARS — PEARLINE & CLASFORD — RUBY

He lights a cigarette as if he's been nowhere, nowhere at all, and suddenly, noticing the look of exasperation on my face, he snaps, 'Is all I've got left.'

'But it's so bad for you. It's killing you.'

'Doan be ridiculous. Nuttin' no wrong with it. Doan believe the papers. Go get my supplies, son.'

I get him to sign his pension book. His signature is all indecipherable swirls curling into each other, like an elaborate doodle — to deter counterfeit, although now it takes longer to create this intricate artwork.

Hidden in his signature is my father, somewhere.

Heaven, Really

Bone white, white lead, blond, *blanc d'argent*, *blanc de fard*, *blanc fixe*, antimony white, titanium white, strontium white, Paris white, zinc oxide, zinc sulphide.

Before I moved into this place and redecorated I never knew there were so many official shades of white. When I get back home, stepping into my flat is like stepping on to a moving cloud, into heaven, really. If I don't watch it, I'll fall down, because the floor is an optical illusion and hardly there at all. My place is just white with sloping attic ceilings and nothing on the walls or surfaces. No ornaments or adornments to show my wealth or taste, or lack of it. No magazines to show I'm hip to popular culture or my esoteric erudition. No books to show off my catholic literary interests. No letters, photos, sentimental mementoes, such as my first comic book or old school tie. No plants to show I'm a nurturing kinda guy, and certainly no moulting quadrupeds, thank you very much. (Though I sometimes think a limply aristocratic Dalmatian would fit in nicely – on a cream rug, just there underneath the window – so long as it doesn't move.)

Pure emptiness. Just the way I like it. Cheap too. Sophistication on a budget. The bare minimum of soft furnishings in contrasting shades, well, in the words of my design manual, 'subtle complementary tones of white'; while my two lounge windows, at this level, provide mutable art works that cost nothing. My favourite painting comes at least once a year: it's called January Snow Blizzard.

There is nothing more beautiful than a marble mantelpiece and fire surround, offset by ivory painted walls, with the sun pouring in and splashing everything with a warm orange glow. Nothing more beautiful than squares of snow-white floorboards, pearl-white skirting and an eggshell sofa throw, with flake-white cushions on it. Nothing more exquisite than an occasional wooden table painted off-white and, upon this, my occasional deviant indulgence: a single Van Gogh sunflower in a slim glass vase. A solitary sunflower that

draws you in while standing out, a potent symbol of life and, as the week progresses, decay. In other homes a great bunch of magnolias mixed with carnations mixed with roses mixed with tulips mixed with branches and leaves and whatnots is stuffed into an ostentatious vase and completely loses any possible charm amid all the chaos of clashing colours and a room full of things, things and things. I am 'cos I have bloody things!

Here, a single flower is what I call – resonant.

In my narrow kitchen everything is hidden in white cupboards, except a Chinese-white porcelain bowl of oranges, pears, apples and grapes. And when they go mouldy, brown or bruise, what is it? Pure modern art, man. The whole flat is a gallery and I am but a walking sculpture inside it. A solitary sculpture, yet to find its perfect match. And she'd have to look good lounging on my sofa. No one ever does – they just mess it up. Sometimes, months later, I'll find evidence underneath the sofa or down in between the seat cushions, such as a thread of hair, split at the end – strawberry blonde at the bottom and chestnut at the top, or a thick straightened brown one going frizzy at the root, or just a tiny black curl in my palm, like a perfect circle drawn with ink. When they leave, I have to open the windows, straighten out the room and light candles.

The Paragon: 'A model of supreme excellence, it was completed in 1807. The year that Blackheath achieved the status of a fashionable and elegant place to live. Replete with every convenience for use, comfort and elegance. A place to attract well-to-do professional and middle-class families who want to enjoy the air of the heath.' So I've arrived, living in the upper echelons of this crescent of houses with its own secluded road.

I start to clean, wiping all the surfaces with a wet cloth, washing the windows on the inside; then I lean dangerously out on the ledge and clean the outside too. I polish the TV and sound system, and run a duster over the CD rack, all stacked away in a cupboard. I Hoover the floor, before getting down on my hands and knees to give it a good sloshing with some hot soapy water and bleach. Next, the kitchen, the bathroom and my bedroom at the back with its

semicircular window, just large enough for a double bed and a built-in wardrobe (all white).

When I'm done, my flat might not look much different but it certainly feels it. I draw a bath and soak in lavender oil, get up, drain it out and check to see if I've left a rim of scum behind. I like to see evidence that my dirt has gone. If not, I scratch off all the dead skin with a loofah, shower and then shampoo my hair until it squeaks. Finally, I put on my white cotton pyjamas, place all the clothes I've worn to my father's house in the washing machine, hose down the soles of my pissy shoes and begin to cook. Well, I heat up something in the microwave, something ready-made from the supermarket, a cheesy tuna pasta today, and I make a lemon, garlic, mustard, honey, herb and oil dressing for a green leaf salad.

I sit down in front of the TV, pick out my favourite video and slide it into the video recorder. *The Great Barrier Reef* – 'a sea-girt wilderness of coral reefs, cays, islands and sheltered seas, forming a one hundred thousand square mile fringe of the eastern Australian mainland'.

Flying to Tower Hamlets

Next Saturday I call to say I'm on my way. He doesn't pick up.

I don't notice the drive to his house or the red lights. My siren is blaring. I try to open the door, but the key won't fit. It's the wrong key. My hands won't fit. They're the wrong hands. Then the key does fit, but it won't turn. It's the wrong lock. It's the wrong door. It's the wrong house. Then the key turns, but the door won't budge. So I push against it with my shoulder and it suddenly gives way and I'm thrown inside as if I've just crossed the finishing line in a tremendous last-ditch burst of power and agility and my legs are flying behind me trying to catch up. I stumble towards his room, then stop myself.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

He's on the floor. He's paralytic on the floor, arms and legs splayed out like a crab's. For Christ's sake it's only bloody eleven in morning. Couldn't he have waited until the afternoon before passing out? Ever heard of a solid breakfast, Dad? Remember the days when you ate porridge from a saucepan every morning without fail? Not something liquid and fermented?

I bend over him and shake his shoulder. He stirs and mumbles something. Nothing new there. I really struggle to lift him because he's a dead weight and I've never lifted a dead weight off the floor before, so my body is twisting one way and his another as I drag him on to his chair. He's wet himself, and he's drooling, and his eyes are swimming, and there's a bump on his head.

He's not drunk. Jesus Christ, he's not drunk!

I dial 999.

Suspected dehydration, they tell me at the hospital. Dehydration, pure and simple. Hydrate him, then, I say, relieved. I don't think he's drunk a glass of water for years.

I go home and resume work on my Toshiba laptop, researching Thai government bonds that do not have sufficient history to make investment expectations certain.

The hospital calls me at midnight.

The doctor's voice is middle aged, middle class, tired, measured, concerned, practised, ever so slightly hesitant, anonymous and unforgettable.

'Can I speak to Mr Stanley Williams, please?'

'Speaking.'

'I am sorry to call you so late . . .'

The Coroner's Office

Brain	1,230g
R. Lung	375g
L. Lung	750g
Heart	270g
Liver	1,120g
Spleen	135g
R. Kidney	135g
L. Kidney	135g

The body was that of a thin elderly man of Afro-Caribbean race, 166cm in height, at the time of my examination uncllothed.

The pleural spaces were clear. There were dense bilateral inter-pleural and pleuropericardial adhesions with hyaline plaques on the diaphragm. The air passages contained abundant pus and were inflamed. The lungs were congested and oedematous and showed pneumonic consolidation affecting in particular the lower lobe of the left lung with severe chronic inflammatory thickening of the bronchial tree. There was a slight thickening of the dilation of pulmonary arteries. No evidence of thromboembolism.

Remarks:	Death due to natural causes
Cause of Death:	1a Bronchopneumonia 1b Chronic obstructive airways disease
Time of Death:	11.55 p.m. 29.8.1987
Time of Examination:	10.35 a.m. 1.9.1987

Dr Amanda Foster, MD, MRCPPath, Dip FMSA (Belg.), DMJ
Department of Forensic Medicine



The Burial Ground

Stanley is burying his father, in a field of dumb bedfellows whose sole purpose is to provide balanced nutrition for the more vulnerable members of the animal kingdom: the invertebrates, who eat with the slow, sarcastic knowledge that dinner really isn't going *anywhere*. These are the subterranean militia of revenge, whose communal memory stores the cruel holocaust of their various insect species by predictable versions of swat: shoe, garden implement, rolled-up newspaper, cricket bat.

Mr Clasford Williams is the newest, fully paid-up resident of Tower Hamlets' community of gourmet cadavers, whose social relationship to each other is defined only by proximity and the fact that their hearts, in one breathtaking moment, had stopped.

Here Clasford will crave his daily cocktail of whisky and beer, as rainwater soaks through his rotting oak coffin with its oyster-coloured lining, through the linen safari suit he'd brought with him in 1965, *When mi fus come a this blasted country*, and finally seeps down to accentuate his thirst and accelerate the decay of brown skin that had been, for thirty-two years, his formal application to British society, determining his acceptance or rejection, something he was always going on about. *We doan belong ina this country . . . we doan belong, Stanley*. The bitterness at his transformation from fully qualified chemist in his home country to ill-paid postman in his adopted one never quite overcome. Clasford had overseen the trajectory of Stanley from grammar school boy, to university graduate, to City analyst receiving a weekly pay cheque that Clasford himself could never earn in a whole month of rising at 4 a.m. to sort out the post at the depot. But if it was a slap on the back Stanley craved: 'Ongle a man like me can produce pickney like oonoo. So don't swell y'head and tink say y'boots bigger than mine.'

'Hardly likely,' Stanley would mutter.

To which Clasford would reply, drawing his arm back as if to hit him, 'Awa you say?'

‘Nuttin’? Stanley shuffled out of the room, letting his father have the last word, as always, as he walked down the corridor.

‘Leave the bwai alone, Clasford,’ his mother interjected. ‘Mi know say yuh proud like lion fer im. We *both* are, Stanley,’ she shouted out as Stanley slammed his bedroom door.

‘I shoul da let him roam street. Woulda end up in the clink by now,’ added Clasford, topping Pearline in volume.

Now, when Clasford turned over in his sleep towards the heavenly body of Pearline, who had preceded him underground, when he reached out to caress her ample, blue-nylon softness, she would not respond warmly to him with a cajoling ‘You tink yu can manage it, Ole Bwai?’ or resist with sleepy irritation: ‘Mi not in the *mood*, Clasford!’

Pearline, who was lying peacefully beside him, had turned into an unappetizing arrangement of celibate bones. Nor would he sweat at night, as he had done all his married life, drenching the sheets, so that Pearline would complain that he’d give her rheumatism ‘one-a these days’.

Storm clouds had been rallying forces all morning on this windswept east London plateau. Its sprawling perimeter was overhung by trees with wrinkled brown, rust and golden leaves that floated to the ground. In the distance were tower blocks, which rendered an otherwise pastoral scene inescapably urban. The city fathers converged, broke off into splinter groups and flaunted their double-breasted chests, puffed up with the arrogance of knowing that a few dobs of well-aimed spittle were enough to warn the mourners below of their omnipotence.

Stanley wished the sky would split open into a terrible storm, wished for hailstones and lightning, for weather so dramatic that the feelings raging inside him would be matched, indeed dwarfed, indeed erased, by the roaring elements. He wore a specially bought new black suit purchased the day before, and his long legs were astride the heap of earth beside the hole into which the coffin had been lowered; inside was the man he had last seen in the mortuary’s viewing room, who had made him feel, for the first time in his life, infernally mortal.

He had entered the small, pine-panelled room with the atmospheric mood lighting of a chapel. Its background music was the hum of an air conditioner, and there was a flashing red light on the wall, specially designed for dead bodies on display. In the far corner was a vase containing a spray of violet lilacs and white lilies on an elegant metal plinth.

As he crossed the threshold, his body shrank like a cartoon figure's, losing two thirds of its height and bulk, disappearing into too-big clothes and shuffling in grown-up shoes. Unthinkingly, the unbroken voice of his childhood squeaked, 'Hello, Daddy', accompanied by a wild deluge of tears.

Stanley was immediately immersed in the most intimate communion with the man before whom he would never, ever cry.

Clasford Williams was tucked up into a purple drape with gold crosses embroidered on its sides. His head rested on a white pillow. His face, a dark matt brown, was so old yet so unlined, skin moulded smoothly over cheekbones that lack of food had made overly prominent, and his tensile jawline was as stubborn in death as it had been in life. His wild grey bush of hair had been cut close to his head, his wild grey beard had been trimmed into a neat goatee. His lips, which in his last years drooped listlessly away from his few remaining bottom teeth, had been tightly tucked in by the undertaker, making them thinner. His face still exuded a restrained fierceness, for after only a few days of death his body still contained something of the spirit that had been within him. Surely this is what Stanley could sense – or did the life force that made eyes shine with light from the miracle of creation, that gave skin its sheen, really just disappear so quickly, without even a lingering trace, after over seventy years? Just like that?

Clasford did not turn his head as he entered. Stanley half expected him to. He expected his usual brusque manner, for his voice to say with the familiar tone that carried both threat and approval with measured weight, 'Mi know oonoo bin behavin' yerself.' But he ignored him. Not a lopsided smile. Not a rant. Not a reprimand or provocation. Stanley moved closer. Here was death at close range. He touched his father's brow fleetingly; it was deep-frozen. Two

slits of eyes showed spookily beneath his closed lids. They hadn't shut them properly.

Stanley's urge was to pick him up in his big arms and cradle him. Would he be stiff and light? He would be cold. Would he melt as he held him, turn back to water and pour himself over his son?

He looked so frail. So dignified. So.

He sat down on the seat at the side. A box of tissues had been provided on a little table, and he was overwhelmed with a compassion that he never knew was in him. 'I'm so sorry,' he cried aloud. 'I'm so sorry, Daddy.'

He sat there and let it all flow out of him, wanting to stay close to his father's presence, which had always been there. Like air. Like memory. Like skin. Like earth. Like birth. Like the ghostly presences he had felt ever since he could remember – curtains blowing, the tingling in his ears, the cold breath down his spine, the breeze on his lips, a whisper. Realizing that now he would feel his father even more acutely.

Realizing he was only human after all.



Single at Mingles, 1988

There were dancers, in various stages of electrocution, who jerked knees and elbows on the lightning floor as the disco ball above their heads conferred a swirling galaxy, the strobe turning dandruff into luminescent stars and cheap white suits fluorescent with radiation.

Each new detonation from the stacked boom boxes in the four corners of the disco was the Big Bang of the universe, as James Brown's 'Sex Machine' sent the Friday-nighters into renewed paroxysms. Neon-pink talons and conveyor-belt diamonds waved in the smoky air. Gold-sovereign'd fists punched out at the inter-stellar chaos that poured through them, over them and under them.

Stanley: I'd been hijacked after work and frog-marched by the guys to this bunker called Mingles, where I squinted in the searchlight of a crazed strobe, my laced-up brogues stamped on by feet hopping to detonating beats that ricocheted around the fragile, membranous chamber encasing the one solid asset I was purported to own: my brain.

Behind the bar Jessie O'Donnell groaned inwardly as more tipsy revellers in fake Miami tans tumbled down the stairs in black satin pants and white stilettos, shutting out the flashing carousels, screeching dodgems and general helter-skelter of Piccadilly's midnight circus outside.

This is what I've come to, she nagged away at herself, pulling, squirting, plunging and pouring various types of alcohol into various shapes of glass. This is the fag end of a career treading the boards. An entertainer, an *artiste*, even, some would say, a diva.

What was she now? A barmaid. At *her* age.

Stanley: I slunked against the wall, my damp fingers slid into the grooves of a pint-sized mug, sipped beer at tepid intervals, felt

the gradual lightness in my head and that heavy sinking feeling in my belly, as people poured in from the street – like vomit – and the music vibrated on my sternum, making me feel sick and HATE-HAVING-TO-SHOUT-TO-SPEAK.

Jessie longed to see nothing but long, empty roads in front of her. To take four wheels, a credit card and the hitherto elusive *compañero*.

But there were more sparkling white wines to serve, more Baby-chams, Bacardis, beery breaths and Bloody Marys. More –’ere, got any chips? *No!* Tapas? *No!* Twiglets? *No!* You’re a big girl, aren’t you? *Bugger off or I’ll call Security!*

Stanley: My body is a stubborn bastard, it won’t do those strange, rhythmical manoeuvres fuelled by the human need for exhibitionism and abandonment, and even if it did the whole dance floor would crease up and covertly imitate, just like my first and last disco for the Tower Hamlets Under Sixteens (prompting premature retirement from this particular form of brain–body coordination).

Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I Will Survive’ hit the decks. The ultimate crowd pleaser, it was still the personal anthem for those who’d been dumped and wanted revenge, and those who planned on doing the dumping.

Stanley: So there I was – Stanley Orville Cleve Williams – who was supposed to be doing his *thang*, only he didn’t know what his *thang* was.

So I dodged my way to the bar to replenish myself.

Jessie was this close to walking out when, looking to her right, she found herself glaring at a young man who was smiling back at her. Cheeky thing. How dare he.

Stanley: That’s when the barmaid caught my eye.

Still, he *was* waiting patiently for her to serve him at the end of the bar. Manners. Lot to be said for it. She kept her eyes on him, surprised that he didn't look away intimidated. Instead he looked amused. She found herself resisting a sudden urge to smile back.

Young, copper-toned, crew-cut, cleanly shaven – she thought he looked too freshly scrubbed for the setting of Mingles. He wore a pale blue office shirt and a dark blue tie with gold flashes and no ring to show that he'd been tamed and made (theoretically) monogamous.

What a lovely young puppy dog.

'What's your poison?' Jessie called out, ignoring the fisted fivers thrust in her face by agitated customers.

'You!' he shouted back, grinning.

The club went into filmic, soft-focus, slow-motion. The faint glockenspiel of glasses. The harmonics of subdued voices. She beckoned him over with a seductive index finger, drawing him into her magnetic field:

Be – Lauren Bacall.

Be – Mae West.

Be – Eartha Kitt.

Miaaooowww . . .

And she whorishly deliquesced.

Café Italia, Soho

'I'm forty-five, but look thirty. Not vanity but fact, Stanley, dear. Wish I was twenty, if I knew then what I know now, etc. Have the emotional age of a three-year-old, or so every man I've ever married felt obliged to inform me. I've got the life experience of an octogenarian and a veiled woman going by the name of Salomé at the funfair at Roundhay Park, who, I may say, looked suspiciously like Mary O'Reilly what used to run chippie in Leeds High Street, told me I'd see in my ninety-ninth year, God forbid. Now, Stanley, when you boldly stared me out at Mingles. Sixteen. I was definitely sixteen again. Does that answer your question?'

Stanley and Jessie were seated on high stools beside each other in Soho's Café Italia, which was crammed with late-night revellers with bloodshot eyes and boisterous chatter. Sinatra, Stallone, Capone – a gallery of expensive suits lined the stairs, their all-Italian-American smiles shining like beacons for those en route to the toilet. The décor hadn't changed much since the 1950s: green and yellow linoleum tiles and long-panelled mirrors, which they were staring into while sipping copious amounts of the best cappuccino in town.

Jessie wore a low-cut blue chiffon blouse with a sheepskin jacket draped glamorously over her shoulders. On closer observation, its furry collar could be seen to be suffering from alopecia. Hazel-coloured eyes were her most noticeable feature, kohl eyeliner smudged on with casual affectation. They were smoky, vaguely bemused, secretive, and they appeared to look in on themselves rather than pay attention to the world outside, although, as with Marlene Dietrich, the world outside was drawn to look in on them. If her eyes were not those of an innocent, her complexion was the unlined, hazelnut-brown of a woman half her age. Plumptious lips, remnants of maroon lipstick staining the corners, were petulant. Long plait extensions were tied up with a black velvet scrunchie on top of her head and spilled chaotically over Rubenesque shoulders.