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And Cut to March - A Work of Fiction

by William Adam Goble

Prologue

There used to be a pub on New Cross Road, down towards Peckham and between an open-front Thai place and a store where you could find cheap electronics. I'm not sure what's there now - I haven't been back - but I know there's no pub.

Pubs in London, at least the ones that make enough to survive, have a history of changing hands when the owners decide enough-is-enough. The Royal Albert in Lewisham, for example, has at various times been run by a man pretending to have once been a sailor; his daughter - the sailor's hag-breed, in later years; her first-husband, who happened to have been an honest-to-god sailor but died before ever stepping foot in the Albert; the woman's second husband, who had discovered it good for business when he wore the uniform of his wife's dead first-husband; several men who knew some sailors but hadn't tried the game themselves; a well-known but misguided franchisor who couldn't have been bothered with sailing; and, most recently, two men from the college who hadn't known a thing about the business of running a pub but who liked to, in unabashed irony, talk about the long line of sailors who once owned the place.

The pub that no longer sits on New Cross Road, though, was not remembered for its history but for its propensity to be open when someone needed a drink. For that reason, I immediately found the Red Cow to be one of the most exceptionally *English* places in the city.

The Red Cow itself had only been open since 1953, when Roger Bullard wanted a pint but decided he didn't want to leave his house while it was raining. He had a neighbor help him get a license and he took the old dining table from the basement and put it in his living room, right by the door, and called it a *traditional English pub*. For a while there was no sign out front and his friends would come with their own beer, and Roger would throw them a few pounds to bring him more, only to sell it back to them when they'd had too much to remember. When he had saved enough to order from a distributor, Roger's friends continued to sit and drink on the leathery couches and easy chairs because Roger didn't kick them out. If they wanted to stay late, that was fine so long as they didn't wake him from his red chair behind the counter-bar. Roger had nowhere better to go, but more importantly, his friends were finally paying him to sit around and do the same things they'd always done.

Even after Roger bought the first *The Red Cow* sign, a cheap banner with red letters that ran and smeared in the rain, the transition from "friend's house" to "pub next door" became a matter of interpretation, as it was easiest for a husband to pass off eight hours in a poorly-lit room as being a meeting of the boys; spending a third of the day with your head in an overpriced lager was little more than a consequence of fraternity.

Roger died less than thirty years later, drunk as anything but still out of the rain, and the Cow passed to his nephew, a dropout and unemployed footballer with his uncle's love of the drink. Dom also smoked like a truck and only left his pub to protest the

English smoking ban (a sad day for the Cow, by all accounts) and to kick the football around at nearby Cossall Park. He was a big man with a slouch that made him seem half his true size, and he had terrifying shaggy eyebrows and hair that thinned to nothing on top and grayed above the ears. While Roger had preferred a checkered shirt, Dom wrapped himself in a filthy white apron with gray edges, a gift from a butcher friend and an item washed by neither. Justin would later try to convince me that Dom was perpetually naked under his apron, but I decided it was one of those situations where the truth would only strip the Cow of some of its character.

Dom's Red Cow was very much like his uncle's; both were never major draws and the quality of the food hadn't improved over time. During Dom's run as owner, however, the beaten furniture and ring-stained end-tables gradually disappeared for dark, wooden tables and chairs. The wall between the kitchen and living room was removed almost immediately, and Dom quickly had the countertops extended and stained with deep, brown lacquer to hide the inevitable wear of the surface of a bar. With Dom, there had always been the intent to sell his uncle's pub to a developer, but no one was interested in paying good money for a living room-turned-shoddy public house, and he was forced to bring the place into the modern world if he expected any kind of payoff. That he still held on to the Cow after decades of salability was a question to which Dom refused to give a straight answer: some days he was *damned sure* not going to sell to some *prissy suit*; on others he would tell you that a sale was *in the process of being processed* and that he was already looking at condos in Dover.

After Roger died, there were the same old men in The Red Cow, the same *friends of Roger* who had once bought back their own alcohol. These men were old and they didn't move much throughout the evening, but for this reason they made excellent patrons for a pub that never attracted customers from beyond the same few blocks in either direction. Dom treated them just as Roger had, and the story goes that it took years for the Cow's regulars to notice a difference. It was only after Dom had decided to correct one of them that they really took a good look at him, and afterward, Dom never saw any of them again and the pub was empty for several weeks.

Though I've doubted this story since the first time I heard it, there's no question that Dom had to replace an aging customer base, almost overnight. When old guys die, they tend to drop in bunches, and the barflies at the Cow were some of the oldest in Southeast London. They had their pints of Stella, their stories of the Peckham of the 50s, and not much else, and when something interrupted their routine for the first time in decades (in this case, unfortunately, one or two deaths) it required a substantial amount of effort to adapt to the change.

Dom took to the challenge of finding new customers in a way that would have made his dear uncle proud: he didn't do very much at all. He added lights to the outside of the pub to remind the neighborhood that *yes, The Red Cow is still in business*, and he

finally replaced the drooping rain-worn red letters with the gold-rimmed scarlet block letters that I saw my first time walking through Peckham.

When the letters were up, Dom sat down at one of his tables and passed out to a glass of bourbon. If you believe him, he dreamed of running the perfect pub, one in which customers with suits and business cards came in and emptied their wallets before helping themselves to one of the bottles stacked on the bar, all while Dom napped in the back room to smooth jazz. The first of the new customers found him like this, napping not in the back room but snoring with his arms hanging beneath the table and his forehead in an empty glass, pressing red circles into the skin.

There was an atmosphere of indifference throughout the pub, something that signaled to the right kind of person that *you can drink here and no one's going to bother you if you don't want to be bothered*. There was an inherent isolation pulled thinner and thinner by the dim lighting, a pervasion of nothingness stretched across the pub and echoed in the characters of its patrons. It wasn't a place that everyone would want to go for an evening - it was never and would never be that place; it was dirty, quiet, and poorly-maintained, and ever-present in the air was the faint smell of stale Thai food from the restaurant next door. But for me and for the other people I knew who frequented the Cow, it was the place that we first found and where we then stayed. There was nothing in particular that kept us, and I would have one or two arguments with Mick whether or not we even liked to be there (if I recall, even at the time we didn't know which side either of us was defending). Dom didn't charge any less for a pint, and the chairs, once so-much-improved from his uncle's lumpy couches, soon became like carved, uneven rocks with one or two bad legs. And yet, with all the reasons to stay away, I was comfortable at The Red Cow, as comfortable as I'd be anywhere during that time in my life.

I

It was a cold night, that first one in London. Jacket weather with belts cinched tight to keep out gusts of wind, wool hats and breaths of winter fog. It was the second week of January and the beginning of the spring semester.

I walked the short distance from my dorm to New Cross Gate station and took the direct train to London Bridge, a ride of about eight minutes. I didn't know how to use the ticket machine and a line began to form behind me, and with my head down I thanked a woman in a green overcoat when she helped me select the correct ticket.

It was Saturday night and the train was crowded with people heading into Central London. I sat down along the aisle next to a kid in bright pink headphones who was texting on his phone. He looked at me and put away the phone, then slid closer to the window. His eyelids drooped and he reached back behind his head to pull up the hood of his gray sweatshirt.

The train moved north, cutting through townhouses and passing by the husks of abandoned factories, once optimistic signs of growth for this part of the city and now just ugly scars along the train tracks. To my left I saw a football stadium, empty and dark against the night sky. I remembered coming in from Heathrow and convincing myself that *soccer* was a made-up word for the next year and I had better not slip with it. I never did find out the name of the stadium or who played there, and though I passed the stadium several times a week, I never saw it filled.

The brick barrier to the left of the train was covered with graffiti - deep red and blue signatures subdued against the low light. I couldn't make out the lettering in the dark and with the speed of the train. The barrier on the right was bare, only recently repainted a plain beige and still cordoned off from the narrow walkway by strips of glowing yellow and black tape. This side of the tracks was lit up under bright, pale-yellow spotlights casting spidery shadows against the barrier and under the skeletal supports where there were gaps in the scaffolding.

The train banked left and the kid in the seat next to me slumped against my shoulder. The shifting cabin bumped the handbag of a woman in round eyeglasses from its perch on the rack and sent it down to the floor. The woman waited for someone to pick it up and when no help came, she groaned under her breath and fumbled for the bag along the smooth tiles with the back of her hand, bending at the waist only until her fingernails could comfortably tap the floor.

One more bank, this time to the right, and we were under the clamshell roof of London Bridge. Rows of lights, unbroken in uniformity, pressed false day into my eyes, and I yawned at the sudden change. The kid with the headphones was still on my shoulder and I tried to nudge him awake without knocking his head into the window. The train slowed with screeching brakes and stopped in one of the center gates. The people around me shuffled then stood and I tapped my unresponsive neighbor on the shoulder with the pointed end of my thumb until he stirred and glared at me under his hood. I flashed him a bitter thumbs up and stepped in line behind the woman with the round glasses, who was swinging her elbows as she rummaged through her bag.

I stepped onto the platform and pushed my ticket through the slot by the turnstiles. My little global phone, a cheap plastic throwaway to get me through the semester, chirped in my pocket, and I moved to the wall of the corridor and out of the flow of traffic. It was a text from my flatmate Rupert asking if I was still coming to the party. There was no hint that he had gotten my message. I put the phone back in my pocket and continued down the corridor, stepping onto the escalator that led to the main section of the station.

The first exits off the train platforms at London Bridge send passengers to a part of Central London nowhere near the bridge. The bridge itself is four blocks downhill and two towards the Thames, so when it was cold I liked to stay inside and go through the tunnel to the north end of the station. There was a short escalator down to the tunnel on

which people often stood rather than walk and there was usually congestion during the winter.

I passed by a flower shop and for a moment paused at the racks of bright purple and red bouquets that jutted out into the walkway and made the tunnel smell fresh and inviting. A man with a thick, black mustache held up an arrangement of summery wildflowers, waving it in the faces of those who strayed too close.

I took my phone back out from my pocket and considered messaging Rupert, but I didn't know what to say to him. Rupert had been the first of my flatmates to return from winter break and had been there earlier in the day when I moved in, juggling a soccer ball in the kitchen and bouncing it off the ceiling tiles. He was fit, not tall, and a few years younger than me, with shaggy, dark hair and a white shirt with no sleeves. There was going to be a party in the flat upstairs, he had said, and I should head up later and meet some of the people who were already back on campus.

I checked the time but decided against sending a message, and again I put away the phone. I was walking quickly and almost ran into the couple in front of me, so I slowed, deciding that since I didn't know where I was going there was no real reason to rush. There was a kiosk to the right of the tunnel and I bought some gum and a copy of the *London Times*, paying in pound coins and feeling stupid when I couldn't stop myself from laughing over how different it felt.

I continued down the corridor, walking slow, almost shuffling past the sandwich shop and a man behind a little cart who tried to sell me German sausage. People behind me, decidedly in more of a rush, reached past me with an outstretched arm then skirted forward until they were in front. I didn't mind them passing but I also didn't feel much like moving, so I didn't make much of an effort to step out of their way.

At the end of the tunnel there were no more shops and the walls were peppered with flyers for local music performances and for the openings of shows on West End, some new and some anxious revivals. I reached the end of the tunnel and took the stairs heading back into the station because there was less of a crowd.

I approached the big board of departures and arrivals in the main section of the station, joining a crowd of morose upturned faces all scanning the board for names and places I hadn't heard of. At that time, I knew only of the stops along the route from New Cross to its terminus at London Bridge. If I were to board a train back in the other direction I could travel to the southern part of London near Highbury or else I could catch a transfer and move west towards Wimbledon.

I left the station through the north exit and walked down the stairs and around the corner of the perpetually-under-construction London Bridge Tower, by far the tallest building in the city, until I reached the guardrail at the corner of the bridge where I could look down on the Thames. Tourists bracing against the cold huddled along the rails and leaned over to see the water, others - men and women in formal wear, arm-in-arm, slow and care-free to the world - weaving up and down the lane on after-dinner strolls. It was

dark but there were bright lamps pushing up from the concrete, and I walked along the path and onto the bridge with my fingers bumping against the freezing metal of the rail.

The city traffic had lessened, but the thrums of engines and radios still choked the slumbering silence, reminding the city that to live is to be forever in motion, always a destination in mind and never a second wasted.

I spit over the rail and past the concrete barrier, then watched as it disappeared somewhere in the nothingness between the platform and the black water below. I turned back towards the street and a young foreign couple handed me a camera, and I took their picture, catching them out of focus against a smear of dead lights on the horizon.

A strong gust caught me off balance, and I crab-shuffled on the edges of my feet and away from the highway. Half of me was quickly over the rail and I caught the top with the index and middle fingers of my left hand, holding myself from toppling any further, my eyes wide and the unknown depths of the Thames a brief and sudden siren-song. I froze and debated reaching back for the rail with my free hand, which was then hanging uselessly at my side, and at the same time I imagined rescue choppers and patrol boats and huge spotlights scanning the choppy waters for the American student who couldn't quite handle the life-physics of the real world. Then the foreign man with the camera pulled me back onto the bridge by the bottom of my jacket, and his wife rubbed my head and took a picture of the three of us as a reminder of the day they'd saved some stupid kid from his watery grave. I smiled with them and thanked them, though I knew I wasn't really in any danger unless I'd gotten tangled between the rails.

I left the bridge the same way I had come and walked along the shore and towards the lump of the Scoop amphitheatre, passively weaving through the concrete safety blocks at the edge of the walk without realizing I was doing it. I sat down on a bench facing the water where there weren't too many people and I dug through the inner pockets of my jacket looking for the newspaper. I unfolded it at the crease and squinted to see if I could read it in the low light, and it wasn't too dark as long as I kept rail-straight and used the light from the streetlamps back over my shoulder. It was windy on this end of the bank and the paper struggled to break free of my grip.

My phone chirped again in my pocket and I read a text from my dad back in Jersey, who was *very worried and hoping that I had fun plans for my first night away from home*. After a minute I responded, reassuring him that I was fine and at the moment hanging with my new flatmates. I sent the message and reread the text from Rupert, hating how stupid I could be.

I did want to go to the party; I told myself this even as I sat there along the river blankly staring at the front page of the newspaper. I'd wanted to go from the moment Rupert first invited me. This was, after all, my semester to find who I was, to open myself to other people and to break free from the cowardice that I felt dragging from my ankles like lead weights and chains of well-aged inertia. It was finding myself and

discovering someone who was far more interesting than the person I feared lurking, the person pulling the puppet's strings, his influence strong even in his diffidence.

I'd changed into my new shirt after I finished unpacking my suitcase. It was a dark gray and black button-down with open cuffs that my sister had said made me look *completely British*. I looked at it now, collar just visible above my jacket, and I forced it back under with the tips of my fingers. I pulled my jacket even tighter around me. I never wore new things, and I suddenly felt like I wasn't anyone at all. I was between and nowhere and the lack of any sense of direction disgusted me.

There had been dreams once, dreams made during sleepless nights in beds that had never felt right. Dreams of a living fiction from a kid looking out at a dark ceiling. Dreams of a character transcending real-life. Dreams of playing the *American*, of carving out something from within the growing masses of a rebel youth, of contributing a viewpoint that was hilariously counter-culture. Of being loved for the sake of being different.

I'd made it upstairs, hours before, at that time confident in the person I *wasn't*. There were still no answers but at least I was pushing away from something tangible. It was scary but exhilarating to feel that way, to at last be pulling strands of reality out of banks of fantastic make-believe. To be nowhere and to have everywhere seemingly within my reach.

And then, in bitter disregard for the new-sprouted hope, there had been the come-down, the fall from the height of expectation and the resumption of one young man's reality. I'd knocked on the door to the upstairs flat and nothing happened. I knocked louder, looking at the peephole in the door and then trying to pretend like I didn't see it. The music was loud and I could hear the bass thumping through the walls and into the stairwell.

I knocked again and gave a half-hearted shout through the door. I told myself that it was just that the music was too loud. They have no reason to keep you away, not yet. But regardless of what I believed at that moment, the doubt was there. It had always been there but now it had fuel for unrestrained growth, spreading from the pit of the stomach and transforming into a general numbness of the extremities.

I told myself not to be a coward, even an idiot. Facing that door, I knew the consequences of giving up and turning around, what it would mean for who I was going to be. It was, at that time, a choice, one in which the easiest way out was also the most terrifying. So I knocked once more, this time with both fists and - when no one answered - one final time with my forehead. Then I'd turned around, grabbed my coat from my room, and went outside to continue my unbroken nowhere.

A dot of rain fell below the headline of the newspaper and I watched unblinking as it soaked into the paper and blotted the ink. *Labour pushes back at Tories. Assange's arrest a marked success. Cameron to continue hard line on cuts.* Another drop landed

on the tip of my ear and rolled down to the lobe until I flicked it away with my finger. I hadn't considered the rain when I left my dorm. I didn't have my hat and looking up at a dark, swirling sky, I hoped the hard rain would stay away until I was somewhere well under cover.

I stood up and cracked my back. It was foggy along the river and the lamps above the walk carved arcs in the dark. It was almost midnight but my body was still in East Coast time, and I yawned into the sleeve of my jacket.

I made the short walk back into the station, and I sat down against the wall facing the board of departures. A man with a two-day beard and a bright necktie walked by and tripped over my outstretched feet, and when I didn't move to apologize he sat down next to me.

"Bum a cigarette?" he said and I shook him off without looking at him. I decided to be interested in the button of my jacket pocket.

"Don't smoke or not sharing?" he said when he realized I wasn't going to answer. I looked up and he was staring at me, his lips thin and expressionless.

"Don't have any," I said.

"Well you tripped me, you know. A little respect wouldn't hurt you."

I started to say that he wasn't so much older than I was but I knew it wouldn't do any good to spur him on. "You're right," I said. "I apologize." I got up and started walking away towards the platforms without turning back to see if he was satisfied.

I walked back through the tunnel and tossed my newspaper in the bin next to the same shop where I had bought it an hour before. The flower shop was closed and a metal gate had been pulled over the entrance. Everything loose had been loaded onto a cart and I watched a huge man in gray overalls push them away and into a maintenance elevator to one side of the tunnel.

The escalators had been turned off and the stragglers left in the station now used the stairs. A woman maneuvered a baby carriage around the flower cart and I wondered where she was going. She stopped at the base of the stairs and waited for someone to help her carry it up. I slowed and waited for two men to overtake me, and when they each grabbed an end of the carriage I stepped up behind them and then slipped around to the side when there was enough room for me to pass.

The station was almost empty but the room echoed with the conversations of the few groups of people in no hurry to get home. I stepped around an information booth and inserted my remaining ticket in the slot to the right of one of the automatic gates, stepping through as it closed with a click behind me. There was no roof over the outer platforms and a blanket of fine mist slid over the tracks and around the few engines idling in their platforms.

I moved to the far left where I could find the platforms with trains stopping at New Cross Gate, and I sat down at the base of a concrete staircase where there was an overhang and waited for the next train.

II

On the first Monday of the semester I woke up without an alarm clock two hours earlier than I had planned. The alarm had been set but the nerve-shock of starting something new forced me awake before I needed to be, at least for that one morning. I opened my eyes and realized I was facing the wall, something that until that morning I'd never done. I liked to face the edge of the bed so I could see my clock if I woke when the sun was up, but really the habit was founded on a boyhood fear of someone sneaking up on me when my back was turned. Safety first.

It was six in the morning and I sat up in bed. It was still dark outside and I thought about going back to sleep but decided I wouldn't be able to. An early-morning train rumbled by out the window and blew its horn. I still here that horn in my head some nights when habit demands my body fear a rude wake-up call for old times' sake. *Honk-Honk*, like an airhorn sounded twice. The sound would get caught in the trees by my window and in the valley created by the twin peaks of Lorrey Dorm and the white-washed apartments on the other side of the rail lines, bouncing off walls and windows and carrying for miles on the wind.

There were four tracks out my window, two pointing north and two south. New Cross Gate station was to the right, a meaningless intermediary on the edge of the glitzy, high-end wastelands of Central London, but if I pressed my cheek against the glass of the window there was a highway overpass blocking it from view. The trains would rumble by my window from five in the morning until half past midnight. My little crossroads of Southeast London, a four-track gaggle of engines and ill-mannered horns. Trains winding into Croydon; trains finding reason enough to skirt through Highbury and Islington; trains with an eye for none but London Bridge.

Trains passed through New Cross Gate because someone thought to put a station between where people wanted to leave and where they thought to go. It was a new station but it had been there when I first moved to the city and so I found it as unimpressive as any other.

I stood up and walked to the desk that ran the length of my room's far wall, and then I booted up my laptop and put my head on the desk as I waited for it to finish. I checked my email and read a message from my dad wanting to know if I needed anything mailed to me. I was always hesitant to read messages from my father because I knew he'd offer to send me something or pay for something even though we didn't have much money coming in. He was guilty, I knew then, and though I was thankful for the gesture, there had also been something deeper that urged me to resent his not treating me as a capable manager of my own life. And this feeling, so twisted and such a product of a brash and desperate youth, inspired its own feelings of guilty indecision. I was flush with

things that kept dormant until I had no need to worry, only striking when I was awake and staring at the ceiling or half-drunk and about to be more.

I deleted the email; I was away from home now and that meant the lifelines were cut. I convinced myself that I had wrestled my independence from maturity, that great keeper of all things adult. On my own and alone but not out of the running just yet.

I clicked through a few of the emails I had saved: an old letter from a girl I thought I had loved, the final mistake-ridden well-wishes of a dying grandmother, photo attachments from my little sister. I kept them around because they served as reminders of the good things that had happened, memories of the good to push back and conquer the bad that all of us face at one time or another. I liked seeing the things that kept me going back then; I squeezed from them everything I could get.

There was a bathroom through the door in the corner of my room and I took a shower and shaved in the little square mirror above the sink, and then I put on jeans and a long-sleeved shirt with a sweatshirt from my university back home. I left my room and went to the kitchen and made some breakfast (terribly cheap toast and an egg of little to no nutritional value), and I shoved a coffee-mug ashtray and several empty bottles to the side of the table and ate facing the open kitchen window, which someone in the flat had left open during the night. The heat was on and a rusty radiator warmed my back and I let a stubborn January wind chill my face.

It was still very early and no one else in the flat was awake; the music they had been listening to until after three was gone and the building was quiet. Katie, the last of my flatmates to arrive, had gotten in from Liverpool around midnight, and everyone from Saturday's party had stopped by to welcome her back and to drink some of the imported beer Rupert's family had left him as a token of his eighteenth-birthday legality. I had one ("from Prague...very good stuff") and I introduced myself to the people in the room, not remembering many of their names. When I had given my well-rehearsed speech on how awesome it was to be in London and how excited I was to meet everyone, the focus quickly left me, and I knew I would never get it back. They discussed how good Katie looked and they wanted to know what she did while she was staying in Dublin, and while they talked I finished my beer, unable and unwilling to find a way back into the conversation.

Rupert saw me sitting there not saying anything and offered me another beer, but I saw there were only two left and so I said I didn't want to drink all his birthday present. Next time though, definitely, I had said, and when everyone laughed I laughed too, and then I excused myself and went back to my room for the rest of the night.

I finished my breakfast and got up to rinse off my fork and plate. The sink was full of dishes from last night and the drain was blocked up with chunks of gray meat. I threw my own plate on top of the pile, and after washing my hands I went over to the stove and turned on the kettle to boil water for tea. It felt like a suitable moment to start

drinking tea, but I decided that should anyone challenge me on it, I had been a loyal tea-drinker my entire life.

I wiped some crumbs off the countertop with my elbow and pushed myself up so I could sit near the stove and still look out the window at the empty street. The door croaked open and Katie came into the room. She walked over to the window and shut it without seeing me, finally realizing I was there when she turned around.

“I didn’t notice you, Mark,” she said, smiling at me. She had bleach-blond hair that was cut short of her shoulders so you could see the two piercings at the top of each ear. She was wearing green leggings and a black top with a belt that you couldn’t remove. She was very short and she had a stocky sense of self that made her seem to hum with life.

“You’re dressed early,” I said quietly.

“Still dressed, actually.” She opened the refrigerator and stuck her head down low to check for something on the bottom shelf. “The girls and I went pretty crazy - first night back and all. Did you boys have fun back here?”

“It was a relaxing night, really. Everyone was really nice.”

“I’m glad you think so. We’ve all been good friends for a while now - five months.” She tried to get up next to me on the counter and couldn’t, and instead she pulled over a chair from the table. “You can talk more, you know. Next time we’re all lounging about or doing something. Maggie was asking why the cute guy didn’t say much.”

I started banging the heels of my feet against the cabinets. “Maggie?”

“You know, the *big ones*?” She rounded her arms across her chest. “Bigger than mine, at least. She likes exotic men.”

“I’ve never been called exotic before.”

“Maggie’s not very picky. But don’t tell her I told you that.”

“You got it.”

“She asked me what you *did*, and I said you wrote. You said you wrote, right? Last night before we left?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t always talk about my writing; the first thing people want to know when you tell them that you don’t mind writing once in a while is *what you write*, and when you blather through something about life and etc and etc, they want you to show them something you’ve written, a situation that can be one of the most embarrassingly unsettling experiences to a guy brimming with something that isn’t confidence.

“Do you write anything exciting?” she said. “Rupert writes songs, you know. He has the keyboard and everything.”

“No,” I said, “nothing exciting.”

“I don’t believe you. You must have written something exciting or you wouldn’t have told me.”

I thought about lying, of maybe ripping off something she would never have heard of and passing it off as my own. But I had seen enough bad movies to know the number of ways that could backfire. “I don’t really write about exciting things, I guess,” I said, trying to avoid her eyes. “Just, I guess, things that happen to me, or maybe things that are on my mind.”

“So, like what? Tell me a story. Awe me.”

Worse than showing someone something that you’d written only to get you through the night was having to say it to his face. At that moment you become terribly aware of how dry your throat is and how you are certainly making yourself out to be a raging fool.

“I don’t know that I’d be able to tell you anything that seemed interesting. I’m really no storyteller, Katie.”

“Well that’s all right; you don’t have to. I’d like to read something you’ve written, though. Maybe later today?”

“Sure, just remind me,” I said, satisfied that she didn’t think I was lying and already mentally working out how I could avoid her for the next dozen or so hours.

I didn’t have anything more to say so I leaned back against the cabinets behind my head and kept swinging my legs. The kettle went off and I reached over and took it off the burner. I rummaged through a drawer under my right hand and pulled out the box of cheap Lipton I had bought at the Sainsbury’s past the station.

Katie started to laugh and I froze. Her laugh was a screechy whistle and I was reminded of the kettle. “The last American who lived here with us told me he didn’t drink tea out of respect for the colonies. He had to explain what he meant of course, but it was so funny! He really was a very funny guy.”

“It’s too bad he le-”

“Trevor, his name was. Oh, I’m sorry, what?”

“Never mind,” I said. “Just it’s too bad he had to leave, because he was so funny, I mean.”

“Yeah. But it happens, and we have you now anyway so that’s all in the past.”

“Thanks. I’ll try?” I shrugged.

“Aw, I know you’ll do great. Just talk more. And Maggie’s really nice, so forget what I said about her.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

She looked at me with a blank face. “Wait, what’s that?”

“Never mind.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I reach behind her and excused myself as I slid over a clean mug with just my fingertips. I dropped the bag in first and filled the cup with boiling water, the steam warm and wet.

The sun was starting to come up, and through the window I could see the lifeless trees at the edge of the student parking lot. The largest had a clump of two birds' nests sitting in its upper branches. The kitchen was much warmer with the window closed but there was still a draft.

I blew on my tea until it had cooled enough to sip. Katie yawned loudly and then she got up and slid her chair back under the table.

"Well, I may try to sleep for a little while," she said. "Have a nice day, Mark."

"Bye," I said when she was already out in the hall.

On Mondays mornings I had class from nine until eleven on the top floor of Goldsmiths' NAB building. Leaving my dorm I would turn right and walk down an asphalt drive surrounded by train tracks on one side and separated from a daycare center and school by a chain link fence. During the day, the center was filled with loud children in uniform who seemed to be forever on recess; they ran and played games on the blacktop next to the building, screaming about who was now *it* or who was likely going to beat who back inside. I spent a lot of time that semester just watching them play (and trying not to seem creepy), altogether jealous that they still had years to go before the world sat on them, the way it eventually does to everyone.

Past the blacktop and its one basketball hoop against the far side of the fenced-in lot, I would make a left and walk up a small flight of stone stairs. There were more dorms there, and the academic buildings of campus were through a narrow street and around a peach-paneled church that was left unfinished until late spring, when a construction crew spent most of the fair weather eating and laughing on the roof and little time repairing the gaping holes in the church walls.

Then I would skirt around the architecture building, a fifteen-storey billboard of sheer metal and slick corners. On the roof of the building was a *Goldsmiths* sign made from twisted iron and light, reflective supports. Students and visitors were not allowed building access without permission from the architecture department, and the only time I tried to see the inside I was kicked out by a sallow-faced guard in an ugly gray uniform.

There was a metal arch in an alley between two buildings and then it was a short walk down Campus Way and past a row of huddled, pale buildings set aside for the college offices and facilities departments. The New Academic Building was at the far end of the row of offices where the street ended and opened up on the back of the campus grounds on a hill overlooking the college green. The green - the school's colloquially-termed *square* (of inconsequential, rectangular proportions) - was a muddy unlined football field with no trees. In the winter, when I first arrived in London, it was hard and patchy from being used as a shortcut from the Hoggart Building at the center of campus to the path up the hill, but by the time the weather changed, the groundskeepers had transformed it into a carpet of cut grass and students sunning on bath towels or dozing on piles of books and papers while studying for exams. On the weekends you could find

students drinking tall cans of beer from brown paper bags, kicking the ball in a circle or listening to alternative electronica turned all the way up.

But as I walked across the green in January, the grass was pressed flat against the dirt and it was completely empty but for one student wrapped in a spider-web red cloak. He had a teal-green hat pulled down low over his eyes but failed to hide the bunched ends of his dirty blonde hair, and he was strumming a wild melody on an acoustic guitar. He was missing many of the strings as he played but his hands looked cold and I thought some of his missteps were a result of the weather.

As I walked past he gave me a nod from under his hat. I responded by nodding once and when I wasn't sure if he saw me do it, I stopped walking and nodded again, more pronounced this time. Realizing that the moment had been awkward for both of us, I continued across the field and up the hill.

It was cold in the morning but the sky was clear and blue, and several students and faculty sat on the curb outside the building smoking. It felt early, and those who talked spoke in low voices. I unbuttoned my jacket and went inside.

The New Academic building had been completed the semester before so the name was memorable by convention, but last I've checked it still goes by that name, though now it is almost always shortened to The NAB, which is a nickname I've always found to be as terrible as it is needlessly hip. It was painted a drab, murky color with lime-green trim that reminded me of the icing on a birthday cake, and the school had furnished it with the most modern furniture I had ever seen: chairs that looked like inverted saucers, desks with joints that served no purpose, round-edged couches of colors that hurt my eyes, and a bright, flashy coffee shop run by a bright, flashy woman in a surprisingly boring white smock.

The building had been designed so that the largest classrooms - primarily lab space and for accommodating first-year core courses - were on the lower-most floors, while the available floor area on the upper floors was cut up and parceled away into seminar space. Two large lecture halls in the basement funneled much of the foot traffic down the wide staircases facing the main entrances and away from the narrow ramps along the far wall.

Between classes, students and teachers would sit by the big upper-floor windows with cups of steaming pick-me-up, some talking in clusters circled like covered wagons, others stretching across the couches and reading from books on theatre, English, or computer science.

With the completion of the new building, *Shakespeare and the Theatre* had been moved out of the sagging infrastructure of the Hoggart building and into the shiny, new *pride of the college*. It was a class I had chosen in part because I felt it was important to pretend to be British, at least in ways that might craft a more sophisticated, charming me.

I feel silly writing it now, putting my intentions into words, but in no way was it silly back then. I had wanted to read the Bard with a class of culturally-gifted Brits, the way I fantasized he was meant to be read. I was no actor and I didn't have a particularly strong track-record of class participation, but I thought that perhaps I was only missing the right inspiration: the influence of the roots of English language.

The hall was nearly full when I pushed through the double-doors, and I sat down in an empty chair in the front row off to the side near the wall, where there was a small, square window high up close to the ceiling. The other students were quiet and I looked behind me and saw that many of them had their eyes shut and their chins pressed to their chests. The few whispers of conversation were lifeless greetings asking if so-and-so had had a good holiday. The guy in the seat next to me - a lanky, freckled kid who had buzzed both sides of his red-brown hair - put his feet up on the top bar that separated the hall's spectators from the speaker and lolled his head against his shoulder until his forehead was nearly in his armpit.

After ten minutes, I watched as a girl in tall black-leather boots holding a pink shoulder bag walked through the doors, and unable to find another seat, she turned on her heel and sat in the empty chair behind me. She made some noise as she rummaged through her bag and I could hear her chewing on the end of her pen, and then she reached over my shoulder and nudged the freckled boy under his chin. When he opened an eye, she hunched over between our seats and held the clock read-out of her phone up to his face. He turned to see who had woken him, and then, seeing the girl and the time, he slid further down into his chair and muttered, "So what." It was a statement, not a question.

"He's never late," the girl said, prodding him in the ribs with her pen until his eyes jerked open and he caught it in between two of his fingers. Her elbow pressed slightly against my shoulder and I tried to wriggle away from her and closer to the wall. "I'm thinking about leaving," she continued, ignoring me. "I think you're thinking the same thing."

"Let's wait five more."

"If Larry comes, you owe me. I could already be gone."

"Pretty sure I always owe you."

"Of course you do." She turned to me, smiling, and she removed her elbow from my shoulder. "Sorry about leaning. Peter likes to abandon me and I'm tired of it, though I suspect he dreams about me."

"Hmph. Rubbish," Peter said to the underside of his eyelids. "I dream about deciding not to take an early class. And it's marvelous."

"Peter doesn't like his life - it *bored* him," she said to me, looking at him.

"You're a loon. She's a loon. Tires me out, if anything."

The girl in the boots shook him off and reached down to pull a spiral notebook from her bag. She balanced it on the back of Peter's chair next to my head. There were ugly spirals across the cover and it said *Marie* in silver pen in the bottom corner. She

opened to a page near the middle and scribbled *The Loon makes for a lovely meal*. She wrote it in billowy letters from the top left to the bottom right of the page. She saw me looking.

“Interested in the story of the loon? I might be too, but I never know.” She closed her notebook and looked at me. Her eyes were scalding blue and her straight hair was pulled back behind her head.”

I smiled and gently nodded because it seemed like the sort of thing I wasn’t supposed to answer, but she cocked her head and continued to look at me. Her eyes seemed too bright, and they weren’t a happy bright, nor even a lively one. They made me uncomfortable. “You write stories?” I said, and I broke away and lowered my eyes to the looping spirals on the cover of her notebook. “Marie, is it?”

“American. Another American, Peter.”

“Well, what do you want? Welcome him, then,” Peter said, evidently content to let someone else do the honor.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“Nonsense,” Marie said. She bowed her head. “I hereby anoint the arrival of...”

“You don’t have to...”

“The arrival of...”

“Mark Callan.”

“The arrival of Mark the American Patriot...in the name of the Queen, such that he be welcome to heaps of gold and jewels from the glorious vaults of our public storeroom in the basement of the Tower of London. He is also granted five stunning princesses, the purest of pure and beauties of undeniable grace.”

“Loon,” Peter said, now leaning on his wrist and smirking. “She’ll try to make you think she’s like this all the time but don’t believe her. She’s as boring as the rest of us. More so, ‘cus she thinks she isn’t.”

I said to Marie, “Thank you for the offer, but the gold and jewels will be fine. I’m sure I can get some princesses once I have that.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t sully the reputations of our princesses. I’ll call the Guard; it’s my duty as a citizen to do so.”

“Come off it. You’re not even from here,” Peter said and he turned to me. “Her mum’s French.”

“You asked me a question?” Marie said.

I didn’t remember if I had asked her one. I was happy to be talking with them. “Did I?”

“You asked if I write stories, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to answer.”

“You don’t have to answer.”

“I don’t mind. I can tell you that I write stories when they’re good. When they’re terrible I give the credit to the person sitting next to me.”

“I’m sure they’re all good,” I said.

She smiled and her eyes weren't so bright, and I wasn't sure who I was talking to. When she spoke again her voice was much softer. "You've never read them. You wouldn't know."

"No, I guess not. Still, though."

"You're playing into her hands, mate," Peter said. "This is how she gets us to fall for her."

Marie ignored him. "Thank you, Mark. Certainly a gentleman. And what is it that you do? Is there anything in particular that I can unjustly compliment?"

I thought about telling this person that I'd just met that I did write, that I wrote for reasons that disgusted me. Then I realized you don't tell that stuff to someone you've only known for a few minutes. "I write a little, like you," I said at last, shrugging it off like it wasn't a big deal. "You shouldn't compliment it, though."

"I'm sure it's all good," to quote a famous writer. Is that what you're here for, to write? I'd imagine there are better places to write than at Goldsmiths."

"I am in the *Writing Fiction* class for the semester. But there are other reasons to be here."

"Well, sounds fun," Marie said, apparently uninterested. She reached down to put her notebook back in her bag. "And good luck with the class. I wish I could be there to read some of your work."

"Still a loon. Such a loon," Peter said. I had forgotten he was there and, in fact, that there were other people in the room.

"Why am I a loon? Don't be mean. You don't even know what a loon is."

"I do know what a loon is - it's a flapping, crazy bird - but if I didn't it wouldn't matter. I know what you are. And you're textbook loon."

"Peter's a hurtful guy," Marie said to me, smiling at Peter and now leaning over the edge of his chair on her elbows. "If I was smart I wouldn't let him dream about me anymore."

I nodded to the side of her head and as I did there was a series of loud *thumps* followed by a low, droning scraping out in the small lobby outside the hall. The noise grew and grew until it sounded like nails being all at once drilled into and through a chalk board. Then the doors flew open and Larry Hart backed his way into the room.

"Larry's here," Marie said to Peter, and she flicked him in the ear and then fell dramatically back into her seat. "I will be claiming what you owe me when I feel it's inconvenient for you."

"Fine, fine. But you can still leave, you know," he said, stretching. "No one's stopping you."

I had spent much of my plane ride nurturing visions of the dashing thespian in well-tailored suits and the ideal stage accent, performing *for* us, living *with* us, bringing us from tears to slack-jawed adulation with his powerful monologues. I pictured a man

of the world, a man of indeterminate age with a well-traveled but exquisitely-preserved face suggesting that any guess would be a few years too high and a few experiences short of the truth.

Reality's professor, however, the unimagined *lecturer* of the class, was a short man with dull gray hair that curled around the crown of his head from left to right like a wave on a wrinkly ocean. When Larry Hart at last entered the hall, I imagined that his arms were fighting against being consumed by the terrifying purple of his vest. He dragged with him a plain, wooden podium that made a grating *scrape* as he pulled it over the new tiles and straightened it at the front of the class. His movements were short and unsteady, and as he pulled on the podium his eyes did not leave his feet.

Larry Hart was, as I later learned, fond of purple sweatervests, though each was different enough to make me suspect he knew what he was doing. His accent was strong (which of course had been desired), but it was not the accent of a Shakespearian legend of the stage. He was not, in fact, a British thespian at all but an academic from a university in Louisiana. And Larry did not act - had not acted since high school - but he *had* seen "Twelfth Night" seventeen times, most recently, as he told us the first day, a week before in an off-West End modern reimagining with no sets and actors in single costumes playing multiple parts. It was, in his own words, "thought-provoking."

There's something wonderfully numbing about the quick and painless dashing of a fantasy. When not given a chance to revise your expectations, it's hard to feel anything that could be misconstrued as disbelief. There's no empty feeling because the wind can only be sucked out of your sails so fast before it has to stand against the laws of physics. It's purgatory, really; there is nothing there. The imagined good leaks out of your ears and the bad is kept out by the current of a brain swimming in confusion. I've always found these brief transitions to be some of the most relaxing of my life.

"They tried to keep me from my podium," he said, drawling, his eyes up to the hall, which in the last few seconds had lost its eager buzz and was now settling into a quiet reservation. "I had to drag it up the hill from the old room but at least it's here, and I've gone over stairs but have yet to be sicklied over. Some of us good, old things are worth keeping around, after all. Welcome back, all."

He slid behind the podium and spread a thin book out in front of him. "As long as everyone's read *Antony and Cleopatra* (and I know everyone has) then we can jump right in."

Doctor Larry Hart's lectures (I was later told to drop the titles and the Hart and to speak with him as one would a sweater-vested friend) were mainly dry, symbolic analyses of the works of Shakespeare. Lectures were one play per week and he didn't stray from his lesson plan when he ran out of time; instead, it was just an *ah, time flies* and then *well, finish this up on your own and be prepared to move on for next week*.

Larry did like to read passages, though not the famous ones. What was most important, I gleaned from my time in his class, was the subtlety of Shakespeare's work,

the nooks and crannies that had been monstrously - brutishly, even - overlooked by scholars for centuries. An analysis of the well-known parts of his plays was, of course, readily available in the library and not worth wasting the time of our valuable class periods.

His readings were infused with off-beat swells in emotional intensity; it took me weeks to fully ready myself for the uncomfortable effects of being blindsided by annunciation, of being rudely woken from an Elizabethan trance as basic dialogue was transformed into cat-and-mouse games of linguistic tag. Sleeping during lectures was, I found, impossible, and I quickly understood why Peter had been so frustrated in being woken before the first lecture of the semester. Larry would remain behind his podium, perfectly stationary, just until the start of a new passage, at which point he would leave his book behind and dart to one side of the hall, his voice rising and falling at seemingly random intervals, sometimes even between words in a line. He memorized the scenes but made no eye contact with the students in his class; while an actor would consider looking out at his audience, Larry stuck to looking down at his feet, excessively concerned that he was just a slight misstep from certain and sudden death at the hands of a four foot drop.

Through all this, it was still very difficult to fault the man, as he had, as the label printed from end to end of his podium reminded us, his doctorate. That, and he *had* seen “Twelfth Night” seventeen times, a fact which overwhelms and damn well earns your respect just by how sorry you feel for the man.

That first day, after class, I caught up to Larry as he was leaving the room and told him that I was new and had no clue what I should be reading.

“The plays, my boy. The plays,” he said, and when I told him I didn’t know which plays, he directed me to the syllabus. And when I reminded him that I was new and hadn’t gotten a copy of the syllabus he dug through his bag and handed me a blank piece of paper.

“Copy these down,” he said, and then he started to walk up the stairs and out the door of the building, rattling off the names of the plays we would be reading as I wrote lightly over my hand and struggled to keep up.

We were down the hill and I followed him as he crossed the green and went into the Hoggart building. The deep red building stretched over several blocks along Lewisham Way and its turrets and misshapen roof had led the student body to call it the *Hogg-warts* of Southeast London. It was skeletoned by one long hallway that made a giant c-shape of classrooms and media studios. There was a cafeteria that served inexpensive slop and a gym that was more of an auditorium than anything else. The walls had once been painted a dull peach color which had since started to peel, and the overhead lamps cast pale, hazy light over the hallways and corridors that made walking through the building seem like you were moving through blurry film.

“And that’s one per week, in that order,” he said, finishing his list just as we had reached his office at the far end of the building. He unlocked the door and threw his bag inside, and before I could see inside he relocked it and continued walking down the hallway. “I’m going to get lunch if you’d like to join me.”

It hadn’t been very long since I had finished my breakfast but I decided I didn’t want to go back and sit in my room, so I agreed to Larry’s proposal and we walked back to Hogg-warts’ main entrance and turned left on Lewisham Way.

It was still cold and there weren’t many people on the street, and there were few cars this far north. I walked closer to the street and Larry didn’t say anything as we came to the corner and waited for the signal to cross the street. A bus skimmed by and didn’t slow down at the empty stop, and it accelerated to beat the light just before it turned red.

We crossed the street and I followed Larry into Goldsmiths’ Café, a sandwich place not affiliated with the college. It was owned by two brothers from Turkey and it was set between the school’s offices of financial management and another, more traditional Turkish restaurant with glass window facings. There were six tables outside in front of the café, protected from the London rain by a green canopy also advertising the name and phone number of the place.

It was just past eleven and we were the only customers. I ordered chicken on a baguette roll and Larry got tuna salad, and my lecturer paid for both of our sandwiches. We sat down to eat at a table near the window. Someone had left a copy of that day’s *The Guardian* on the windowsill and I picked it up and glanced at the first page.

Larry did not talk or even look at me; he seemed to be deep in thought and his eyes were unfocused. As I looked him over in curiosity, though, his eyes quickly narrowed back at me and he smiled. I put the paper down in the center of the table.

“So, new to London, then?” he said, and I nodded my head.

“And studying?”

I thought he was asking *if* I studied so again I nodded.

“No, no. What? What?”

By now I was uncomfortable and terrifyingly confused. “I’m sorry, sir?”

“Please. Larry.” Seeing my confusion, he continued: “I mean *what* are you studying, son?”

“Mark,” I said, but he didn’t seem to notice. I never once remember Larry Hart calling me by my first name - by *any* name, in fact - and that day was the last time I made an attempt to the contrary. “English,” I sputtered. “That’s my major at home.”

“Ah, yes. Good, good.” He took a bite off the corner of his sandwich and chewed, his eyes closing slightly as he swallowed. “As good a place as any to study English, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” I said, and when I saw that he was smirking, I forced out a polite laugh. “That was the idea.”

“And how do you find it?”

“London? It’s huge. I didn’t know it was so big.” That was usually enough to get the other person talking and to get their attention off of me for a few minutes, but Larry was apparently unimpressed and he rolled his eyes and then flipped over his hand.

“The culture, son! What about it? How has it *changed* you?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. Well I haven’t been here too long, yet. But from what I can tell...”

“When I first came here, I saw a performance of “The Tempest” in the worst theatre I’d ever been.” I relaxed in my chair. He continued: “But to Larry Hart, a real down-home Southern boy,” he took a drink of water from his glass, “it was life-changing. Truly remarkable. Magnificent, even.

“There’s so much to see here, so much of history to relive. And I never get tired of just walking around Central London. Not once. I’ve walked from here to Wimbledon. To Wembley and Croyley. So don’t miss out! Take my warning and run with it!”

His eyes were wide and I was afraid I had begun to sweat. I thought maybe I should get running and I started to get up, but saw he was grinning again. “Wow, I mean...I’m sure. It seems great. I can’t wait.” I traced the newspaper idly with one finger, and he looked down to see what was interesting me.

“The protests, eh?” he said. I read the headline near the crease of the first page: “UK Uncut to meet and discuss next move”.

“You missed a crazy time to be in London. To be a student here, even.”

I shrugged, “I’m not really familiar with it. Was it bad?”

“Oh it was terrible. Two months of violence, broken windows, traffic at a standstill. A hot-button issue, though, so you could suspect something like this would happen.” He sipped more of his water. “Democracy gets in our heads and we don’t stop until something happens. Good or bad. Especially with you well-intentioned dreamers of the *younger sect*.”

I gave him a face like I was thinking it over. It was the truth that I hadn’t heard much about what had been going on. The extent of my knowledge of British politics was quite honestly little more than *the Queen doesn’t do much, and the Prime Minister handles what’s important*. But there was something deeper that twisted my arm in those situations. It was a time when I’d accept the opinions of others as straightaway facts without caring to put too much effort into my own thoughts. It was easier to play on the bright side of things - there’s not much flattering about that kind of thinking, but we grow fond of the things that seem to make life a less stressful place to go about our business. In the eyes of that young man, I was far less likely to stir up anything uncomfortable if I stayed on favorable ground. Opinions were landmines; you step on the wrong ground and you’re liable to lose control of things damn quick.

“Of course,” Larry continued, “I’m not so stubborn that I think everyone should play safe. I still have some of the sixties left in me, after all. But it’s difficult for us, as impartial observers, outsiders really (and you’ll learn this in good time, I expect), to see

what's going on and not try to judge things from where we've come. So when I see shaky video of masked students smashing in the windows of the Treasury, or protestors breaking into a political party's headquarters, and doing it all over a few thousand pounds, I have to shake my head and wonder if there's a better way to deal with these things." He did in fact shake his head, and for some reason I wanted to apologize to him. "Do you pay a lot for college back home, son?"

"Yeah. It's rough."

"Well, students here don't know what it's like to be over one hundred thousand dollars in debt before leaving school. And, quite right, they don't want to know. They're fighting the way we all want to fight against it. You'd fight?"

"I think I'd have to." I dropped my eyes and finished my sandwich.

"Good, good. Then you understand where I'm coming from." He picked up the paper and thumbed through the pages as if emphasizing his point. "But where does it end? It's a near impossible task to change the minds of those in the government, and I think these students are desperate to make a name. They throw common sense aside and push the limits of the right to protest until police have no choice but to break them up. You see? How the limits change?"

"Definitely," I said.

"And America has had our share of this, don't get me wrong. Look at the response to the war, for example. But when things get like this - testy, like a powder-keg - well, then, safety becomes a real problem. And bad press - *loud* press - like this -" He held up the paper and shook his head from side to side. "Opinion-shapers, the press. Opinion-makers one day, shapers the next."

Larry seemed satisfied with his production. I remembered that he wasn't an actor by trade, and I thought that he might have tried. I found myself tempted to think of the protestors - people who I knew next to nothing about - as being misguided but assuredly, undoubtedly immature. Larry himself was calm and smug, clearly happy to have found a poorly-informed ear.

I decided I was ready to leave, so I thanked Larry for paying for my sandwich and wished him a good week. He handed me the newspaper as I stood to leave and told me that I should read up on what I'd missed. I thanked him and said I would definitely do so.

I left Goldsmiths Café and turned right, north on Lewisham Way. It was just past noon and I saw other students walking back from class or looking for someplace to get lunch. Two girls, while narrowly avoiding a passing bike, darted across the road and caught up with a friend who was walking down the stairs towards the college library, and the three of them sat on the bottom few stairs and smoked. A student in tight jeans laughed into the phone pressed against his ear as he walked past me in the other direction.

A few buildings down the road, Lewisham merged into New Cross Road, and on the corner there was a narrow pub called the Marquis of Granby. It was protected from the busy intersection by a safety rail and two separate crosswalks, but cars often cut the corner between the gaps if there was a slow-moving bus in the right lane and I learned that it was a risky move to stand there after sunset.

The Marquis was a two-tone building of ugly yellow upon brown painted concrete bricks. It was shaped like a pointed v that seemed to protrude from nowhere. Inside, the pub was paneled in rich, dark wood, and, being near campus, it was a good place to get a drink when the weather was wet or cold. Locally, the Marquis was best known as being the closest place to see a good football match if you felt like watching it on small televisions with strangers, and when you went there for a match you would always find a dozen or so diehard fans of such and such team huddled under one of the screens from first whistle to stoppage time.

I still didn't feel like heading back to my room so I went into the Marquis and got a beer. When I first got to London I bought a lot of Stella because I recognized it from home, but I did drink Guinness when I wanted something heavier. Later I would decide that I liked drinking Kronenberg because it was crisp and cold and had a name that was devilishly fun to order when you'd already had too many. Lagers were usually the most affordable drinks, and when you went to a place that had one of your favorites on tap, you would make a note of that pub as being a place you'd be willing to, on a later night, spend twenty or so pounds in a matter of hours. I saw a lot of London Pride and Stella sell during the spring months, but when it was cold, it didn't much matter what you drank as long as the place you drank it didn't have too much of a draft.

Just as it is anywhere else in the world, the people I met in London had their favorite drink. Justin only drank Guinness, for example, and he would politely demand that Dom serve it to him only in his favorite stein, even if that particular glass changed from night to night. Mick, on the other hand, was willing to drink a pint of whichever lager Dom decided to pour him, although he always finished the night with a pint of bitter, heroically strong but served warm, because, supposedly, it was the only drink that could get his mind *ready to head home for the night*.

I took my Stella and sat off in the corner booth where no one would bother me. At this time of day, there were never too many people in the pubs; there would be one or two men in business suits who had come for a beer with lunch, and sometimes students would come in when it was raining. The Marquis played softer music than they played at the Hobgoblin or the Goldsmiths Tavern, so if it was still early in the day and I didn't feel like walking to Peckham, I didn't mind going there.

I'm not sure if some part of me knew what was about to happen or if it was the environment that triggered the change, but I found that I couldn't focus while I sat in the pub. I started thinking about what Larry Hart had said, and I took the newspaper out of my bag. I didn't read it but only glanced at the headlines and read the captions under the

close-cropped black-and-white pictures. It was all much less interesting than it had been when Larry had explained it to me. David Cameron was meeting with someone, and when I pictured Cameron, I found myself picturing Tony Blair. The LibDems were trying to make a deal with Labour, and I thought that both parties - one standing for some form of democracy and the other espousing the virtues of labor - were worthy of receiving votes.

Then I thought of the girl from *Shakespeare*, Marie, and I hoped that I would get another chance to see her. I thought about her eyes and how bright they had been and how they dimmed when I had touched upon something beneath the surface, something *real*. She seemed like the kind of girl with the playful personality who could be friends with anyone, and I realized that I was probably going to be in love with her. I wasn't yet - at least early on, I was sure I wasn't quite there - but I didn't see any way out of it. The thought scared me and I downed my beer and immediately shuffled over to the bar for another.

It was always quick with me, falling in love, and doing so had never been a good thing. I was never prepared to deal with that rush of emotions that took me from a normal and healthy *she seems like a nice girl* to the much more deadly *she seems like she should be my nice girl*. It was a very slight difference until you were moving from one to the other; then, once there, you were sure there were miles in between, miles and miles where there was nothing that could be done except to look forward and hope it all turned out for the best.

It was difficult, that moment; it's difficult to know you are only going to make things awkward and terrible for yourself, while, at the same time, you know that you've never needed anything more in your life than you need her. It's difficult to be suddenly content with your lot in life, only to realize that this is the peak of the mountain and the long descent is in front of you in all directions. And, at that moment, you forget about the previous loves in your life, you forget about them and you dump the memories and feelings that were once so powerful. I had lost a lot of good things this way - good friends with the potential to become great friends, good chances to become something better than what I thought I was, nights that aren't so bad after all - all lost because there was no way to tell my heart that *no, I can't let this happen*. I was at the mercy of something I could not control, and thus I was bound to swing wildly from hope to despair, violently crashing into each extreme and leaving huge chunks of myself smeared along the edges.

I wanted to fight, though. After the last time, I had told myself that I wouldn't let it happen again. I had written a story after the fallout with Jess, a story about love and loss and most of all regret. It was the first story of *me*, and in finishing it, I was sure that it would be the last time I'd go through something like that. Writing it had been a cleansing ritual, and calling it that (even giving it that title) made me feel mature and healthy. I had been satisfied with it; I told myself my emotional insecurity was over and

done with, and though I didn't feel better, I was happy that I'd done *something*, even if it was something that no one would ever see.

But now there was someone new and unexpected. I knew nothing about her but was sure that I would like everything I didn't know. I told myself that I would take things slow and avoid falling over my heels and off a cliff, but I knew I was just blowing smoke; it didn't matter what I said, things were still out of my control.

The windows of the pub had been painted over so you couldn't see outside, and I lost track of time. When I snapped out of my trance, I was suddenly very tired and my eyes hurt, and I was aware that I was fairly buzzed. I looked down at the table and saw that I had finished four pints, and the glasses had pressed dark, blotchy circles into my copy of *The Guardian*. I pulled out my phone and saw that almost two hours had passed since I had sat down.

I yelled at myself for drifting off, and then I continued yelling when I realized that I had mindlessly finished four pints of beer in the middle of the day and had spent more than fifteen pounds doing it.

I brought the empty glasses up to the bar and walked out into the cold, bright afternoon. The sky was still clear and blue but there were more clouds now and it looked like it might snow later in the day if it got cold enough. There were more people on the street now and I had to weave in and out of groups of students and mothers with young children to get near the crosswalk. I passed between the metal rails along the road and crossed over to the bend between Lewisham Way and New Cross Road, and then I continued past the college library and headed west on New Cross Road, back towards my flat.

This route home led me past a small Chinese take-away shop, a sleazy fried chicken open-window building, and two breakfast cafes that advertised heavily to Goldsmiths students. There was a late-night wine and spirits store along the road to the left, as well as a boarded up pub and an abandoned costume shop that still had faceless mannequins in the storefront windows. If I looked right I first saw the dull-looking warehouse of the *Venue* club where bands playing covers of songs by more famous bands played for students on weekends. A block later and I could see Fordham Park at the end of Clifton Street. It was more of a field than a park but on nice days the parents who lived nearby took their kids there after school let out.

Goldsmiths Tavern was just past Clifton on the corner; it was the pub everyone went to after all the others had closed for the night, and you could find it in the dark by the bright yellow caution tape and metal scaffolding that had loomed like iron trees over the front door for longer than anyone remembered.

Finally, as I neared the first-year dorms, I passed Deptford City Hall on one side of the street and Icelands Foods, more formally known as Icelands "Cheap" Foods, on the other. The city hall was a wide stone structure with carved figures along the outer walls

and doors that were too modern for the rest of the building. It was always open and you could look inside from the sidewalk, but we really had no reason to acknowledge it until early in March. Iceland's was across the street from Lorrey Hall and next to both a Caribbean food shack and New Cross Gate station. I bought a lot of my dinners - all frozen - from Iceland's because it was the most convenient place for me to go and it was, honestly, the only place I could afford on my slim budget.

I went through the gate just before the train tracks and scanned my student I.D. card on the reader outside Lorrey Hall. I was feeling somewhat dizzy and, not having another class until the next afternoon, I decided it was a good idea to take a nap. I walked up two flights of stairs and unlocked the door to my flat, and then I went straight into my room and flopped down on the bed, only rolling over to throw my jacket over the back of my desk chair and to pull off my shoes and shove them onto the floor.

III

Living within a different country gives you a chance to explore a situation from a rather unique vantage point. At first, in all honesty, you're likely to come into the situation feeling as though you couldn't care less either way. You don't know what's going on and you're not surprised that it involves things in the past that there is no way in hell you could be expected to know. And that's okay, because it is in human nature to compartmentalize; if it's not happening to us, then we don't often waste precious time committing the outside world as a part of our own.

From this point, though, immersed in the culture as you are, you become a sponge for the unfamiliar. The outside world, once so very foreign, is suddenly *your* world and, thus, is worth knowing. You pick up facts because you're living in the product of such facts. You pick up opinions because you've surrounded yourself with people whose opinions matter to you. It's not as though you have made an effort to learn about what is happening, either; everything you've learned and everything you will learn is taken one bit at a time, and each bit is important to you and surprising to you and altogether not such a bad, scary thing.

In May 2010, there was a lack of an absolute majority in the British government.

IV

When I woke it was dark in the room. It was the horn of a train that did it, but with my head pressed under my pillow I reached for the cheap, little alarm clock next to my bed by instinct and bashed it with my fist to stop the noise. The blinds had not been

pulled and in the sky was the crisp moon of a cold winter night. The train whistled again and the sound faded as the train moved away from the alley leaving New Cross Gate.

I sat up in bed and my mouth was dry, so I swung my legs to the side and, walking to the sink, put my head under the stream of cold water. Then I decided to take a hot shower before I went in search of something to eat.

I was behind the curtain and when I looked down I could see the steam rising from the floor until a thick layer of it had filled the shower space and climbed over the curtain rod.

When I had washed my hair I turned off the water and rubbed away a circle in the bathroom mirror to check my face as I dried myself with a clean towel. It was hot in the room from the steam and it was hard to breathe, and I threw open the bathroom door to get some air. The steam rushed out into the bedroom and then there was an explosion of noise and I covered my ears with the towel.

The showers in Lorrey Hall had a nasty habit of fogging up and setting off the smoke alarms. Within a month there were eight or so alarms, all either very early in the morning or far too late at night and all exceptionally inconvenient. I asked the other students in the building and there seemed not to be any acceptable explanation for why the alarm only went off when you were deep within a dream or finally getting to shut your eyes for the night. It seemed it just happened that way and we learned to accept the regular alarms as being a part of our job as full-time students.

That night was the first of two times my shower would set off the alarms while I lived in Lorrey Hall. It also happened to be the first I'd heard the alarm and when it went off I didn't know if I should open the bedroom window or just leave and head downstairs. I tried waving at the red, blinking light up above my head but when it didn't work I grabbed a pair of gym shorts from my closet and because I was still dripping wet, I put my thick jacket on over my towel and hoped I wouldn't ruin it.

I opened my door and peeked out into the hall but there was no one around, and now I could hear the alarms go off in all the rooms. After waiting another minute I grabbed my key and continued down the hall and out the flat to the stairs, where I ducked behind two still-sleeping girls and followed them down two flights and onto the street.

It was cold and I could see my breath, and I huddled deep in my jacket. The two girls had brought with them a light blue blanket and they had it draped over their heads until only their eyes and noses were visible. One had a long nose and the other's was turned up at the end.

I tried to avoid their eyes when they looked around at the others who had come down for the alarm. Besides the three of us, there were only three others: a Chinese student who I had met moving in, his girlfriend, and a guy in pajama pants and no shirt who I didn't recognize sitting away from the door on the curb.

When he saw me watching him, the shirtless guy stood up from the curb and walked over in my direction with lazy steps. He had thick, black glasses and his hair was pressed up on one side from having slept on it.

“Always right when you decide to call it, isn’t it?” he said, at first looking at me and then turning his head to yawn.

We had to speak with loud voices to be heard over the blare of the alarm, though the noise wasn’t so bad when we were outside and the door was closed. “It’s my first actually,” I said, and I didn’t know if I should tell him the alarm had been my fault.

“Virgin, eh?” he said, and he didn’t smile. He lit a cigarette. “Well you’ll learn to love these wake-up calls, soon enough. They come in bunches.”

I breathed out hard and it came out in a gray puff against the red emergency bulb above the door. “So it happens a lot then?”

“Oh yeah. Just got to wait for security to get here and turn the damn thing off. We’ve all had it happen once or twice. Cruddy circulation, really.”

A felt like it was okay to smile. “I can see that. This one’s on me, then, I guess.”

He looked at me and bunched his shaggy eyebrows. Then he turned to the girls under the blanket and said, “Look ladies, the American’s at fault for this one.”

They dropped the blanket until it was just around their shoulders. “Oh, he is?” said the one with the turned-up nose. She started twirling her finger in her long, stringy hair. “Then I guess he’s also to blame for my not sleeping tonight.”

The smile sank from my face. “Sorry. I didn’t know the showers could set these things off.”

“Can and damn-well do,” the guy said, and he scratched at his side with his fingernails. “They don’t want us lighting up in the rooms so they’ve decided to strip us of our right to bathe.”

“We forgive you,” said the girl with the long nose. “You can owe me.”

“Okay,” I said. It seemed like enough of a joke.

“Maggie, remember?” she said. I remembered Katie’s gesture from earlier in the day and I nodded my head.

“Where is your flat?” said the other girl. “Are they not home? I just saw Rupert an hour ago.”

“I haven’t seen them.”

“I’m sure they’re hiding in the kitchen,” said the guy in the glasses, and he walked up to the side of the building and looked up. The window of my kitchen was open but it was dark inside. “Rupert! Rupert, are you there?”

Rupert came to the window and leaned over the railing. He had something in his hand. “Come up here, Stevie. We want to smoke this before it gets too late.”

“I will, I will. After the alarm’s off. They caught me last time.”

Rupert saw me standing by the door. “Mark, you can come, too, if you want,” he shouted down. “We didn’t know you were around.” He ducked back inside.

“I thought you couldn’t smoke in the flats?” I asked Stevie as he tossed his cigarette butt over his shoulder.

“Ah, don’t you know? Rupert likes to cover up the smoke detector when he’s got a stash. He’s a nit, that one.”

“Aren’t you cold?” Maggie said to me. “You don’t have a shirt.”

“It’s not too bad.”

“I don’t have a shirt either,” Stevie cut in. “At least he’s got a jacket.”

“You’re not interesting. The American is interesting.” She turned back to me.

“Going to bed now?”

“No, I think I need to eat something, actually. It’s been hours.”

“Oh! You haven’t eaten? Do you want me to cook you something? I’m a lovely cook.”

“She’s a fantastic cook,” said the other girl, smiling at me.

“Nah, that’s okay. I wouldn’t put you out like that. Thank you, though.”

“Put me out?” Maggie laughed and glanced at her friend. “Not at all. I can’t have you go hungry.”

I was sure that I didn’t have anything that would make a good dinner, but I also didn’t think this girl would let me go free after she had fed me.

“Thanks but I might actually go to bed after all. Have an early class.”

The security guard for the residence halls slumped past us and went inside the building. He was overweight and his eyes were baggy from a lack of sleep.

“Which class?” Maggie said, frowning.

“Anthropology,” I lied. I had *Anthropology in London* on Thursday, but I decided then that it could be moved up in the week. “Soon, though. This week’s rough for me, new to my classes and all. Sometime after, though, I’d love to try your cooking.” I beamed at her and tried to sell it. Part of me meant it, too; real food was a good motivator.

The alarm cut away and the night was quiet. Two guys from the flat on the first floor walked out in bare feet, followed by the guard.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Maggie said. “I won’t forget.”

The guard walked up to those of us huddled by the door. “Who’s in C3?”

“I am. Sorry,” I said.

“Shower?” He saw my towel underneath my jacket and nodded. “Okay.” He shuffled back towards the security gate.

We went inside and the girls and the Chinese student went into their flat on the second floor. Stevie and I continued up to the third and when I opened the door he walked off into the kitchen.

I stood outside my door and debated joining them in the kitchen, and when my stomach growled I decided that I really did have to eat. The kitchen light was on now and when I pushed open the door, music started to play. Rupert’s laptop was open and he

had it hooked up to two table-top speakers. His back was to me, and Stevie and Katie were sitting close to the window and he had his arm around her shoulder. Katie waved to me as I entered the room.

I waved back and opened the freezer. I got down on one knee and scanned the shelves for something that looked good, but after my second unsuccessful pass I sighed and took out a box of fish sticks. I preheated the oven and sat on top of the counter. The sink was fuller than it had been after my breakfast.

“He’s going to eat after all! What a shark!” Stevie said.

“Why is he a shark?” Rupert asked, lowering the volume of the music but not turning.

“The American here turned down the advances of one Miss Maggie Clarke. Don’t know if I could’ve done it.”

“Oh no, Mark! I hope you were nice to her,” Katie said. “She just wants you to talk to her, is all. She called you mysterious.”

“He was nice, don’t fret.” He patted Katie on her head. “Such a shark, though. Lied to her about going to sleep and everything.”

I started to grin but Katie was scowling at me. “No, I didn’t lie. I just decided I was going to grab something quick. I didn’t want her to have to cook.”

“She offered to cook?” Rupert said. “Get over there, man. Eat up, and then jump those bones.”

“Nah, I couldn’t. It’s really nothing. I thanked her but tonight’s just not good.”

“Who else did you invite, Rup?” Stevie said. “I think we’ve got enough for a few more people.”

I opened the fish sticks and put ten of them on a cooking tray, and then I slid the tray into the oven.

“Told Hannah she could come. She’ll bring Jack up with her. With all of us and Mark, that should be plenty.”

“You guys don’t have to save me any. I’ll just grab my food and leave you to it.”

“No, stay, Mark,” Katie said. “We haven’t gotten to really meet you yet.”

“Yeah, man. It’s no problem,” Rupert said. “It’ll be a good night.”

I wanted to stay, and I felt like this was one of those moments that would change things, maybe even pull everything into a narrow focus. Also, now my fish sticks were in the oven. I didn’t really see an alternative. “Yeah, sure. I’ll stay for a bit.”

“Good stuff!” Rupert said. He turned the volume back up.

I sat down at the table next to Rupert, and I watched as he scrolled through his song library.

“What do you like?” he asked me.

“Anything,” I said, and then I choked out, “I’ll listen to anything.”

“Something new? Something old?”

“Something blue.” He lifted his eyes at me, his head cocked to one side. “New, I mean.”

“Just got this. Really out-there.”

There was a low hum, and then the kick of a drum machine rolling up and fading back beneath a repeated, tapered clank. The melody was a harsh keyboard line punctuated in a rattling echo that reminded me of the sound a TV show will use when a prison cell door slams shut. Rupert looked up at me and I stared at the blank wall and tried to move my head in a way that I thought might appear in sync with the irregular beat of the song. Rupert cranked the volume even louder.

I looked over at Stevie and Katie, and I saw him first light a joint from the tabletop and take a stifled puff. Then he let the smoke out, took a deeper drag, and handed it to Katie, who did the same. Stevie laughed smoke down at her and rubbed her shoulder with his hand, and then she passed me the joint and I took my own drag. I held the smoke in as long as I could.

The kitchen door swung open and a girl with a beanie hat stepped inside and dragged along with her a guy in a sweater who had to be pushing thirty. He had a pair of sunglasses perched on the top of his head.

“Hi, all!” said the girl, talking low and not fighting to be heard over the music. “We’re here for now, but I had to promise this one we’d be back to his place before two so if you want us to stay longer don’t tell him what time it is.” I didn’t think anyone else heard what she had said but Rupert saw them at the edge of his sight and lifted his arm in acknowledgement. He lowered the music to the level it had been before.

The girl - Hannah - saw that the oven was on and went over to check what was cooking. “Oo, whose fish?”

“The American has chosen fish sticks over English tart,” Stevie said, and Katie started to pull away before he wrestled her back. “At least, it’s under serious consideration that he has.”

“Can I have some?” Hannah said. “I’m starved.”

“Are they done?”

“I think so.” She pulled out the tray and walked over to the bar.

I shifted myself to look out the window while everyone grabbed some food. The moon was out but I wasn’t surprised, and soon the voices of the room dulled away into the rest of the big, dark night.

Some nights I would lean against the windowsill and mindlessly count the cars on the passing trains. When I felt small I would scan the cabin windows for someone looking back in my direction, finding solace in knowing my life was as good as anyone else’s. Other times, I would close my eyes and think of nothing but the beat of wheel on tine, wheel on tine, until the howl of a train whistle ripped me from my mind and back into the room.