

A Thousand Points of Light

a novel, with accompanying exegesis:

‘Lacanian Psycho: Analysing Transgressive Fiction’

Mark Rossiter

Doctor of Creative Arts

2015

Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student:

Date:

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Anthony Macris for his advice, his guidance and his patience. I would also like to thank the other members of my doctoral assessment panel, Paul Allatson and Sue Joseph, for their comments and suggestions. I am grateful to UTS for financial assistance. Thank you also to the following: John Dale, Sergey Podzorov, Conrad Walters, Isabelle Li and Toby Black. Special thanks too to Helen Richardson.

Contents

Certificate of Original Authorship	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Contents.....	iii
Abstract	iv
Major work: <i>A Thousand Points of Light</i> , a novel	1
Exegesis: ‘Lacanian Psycho: analysing transgressive fiction’	186
Introduction	186
Chapter One: Transgression and the real	191
Chapter Two: Beginnings or warning: transgression ahead	208
Chapter Three: The erotics of transgression	223
Chapter Four: Endings or the ethics of transgression	251
References	267

Abstract

A Thousand Points of Light is a novel that tells the story of a wildlife photographer who begins his career making pornography in London. After a trip to Berlin, he moves to Ukraine, where he photographs young models for a website. Now living in Australia, Max is forced to return to Kiev and confront his past when a journalist, Nadya, arrives to interview him about the international award he is short-listed to receive.

The novel incorporates aspects of the 2008 Bill Henson affair and draws on the largely undocumented Ukrainian child model websites phenomenon. By locating the reader within the narrative as intimate witness, it exposes and exploits what the theoretical aspect of the thesis calls the Lacanian desire/drive of the transgressive. Additionally it explores the gulf between conventional morality and the artistic instinct which seeks to show beauty wherever it lies, asking to what degree the photographer is responsible for the scenes he or she captures.

‘Lacanian Psycho: analysing transgressive fiction’ is the exegetical component of this thesis. It applies the work of Jacques Lacan to the problem of transgressive literature by imagining the text of the novel as a Lacanian symbolic order, a pre-existing domain into which the subject/reader arrives and must resolve primary conflicts.

The exegesis locates the transgressive moment in the text as the last signifier in the metonymic chain proximate to *das Ding*, the unattainable/forbidden object of desire. The field of desire motivates both reader and writer, yet because *das Ding* is also in the unknowable and terrifying order of the real, subjects are threatened. One response is repressive censorship; the alternative is the acquisition of new knowledge.

This model is applied to both the writing of the companion creative component, *A Thousand Points of Light*, and to the analysis of the following other novels: Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, *The Kindly Ones* (Jonathan Littell) and *Platform* (Michel Houellebecq).

Major work: *A Thousand Points of Light*, a novel

1.

It was just another interview, that was what I thought, as I walked through the hotel lobby to meet Aleksandra Kovalenko. Just another one, all part of the brief flurry over the *Photography International* wildlife award nomination. Of course, the publicity was great for my agency, but it wasn't what I wanted. You see, I've always been the one behind the lens, framing the shot, setting the scene: suddenly I was on the other side. Journalists phoned me and Skyped me and a few actually travelled to meet me in person. A few, like Aleksandra Kovalenko.

She was where she'd said she'd be, seated near the concierge's desk. But it wasn't Aleksandra Kovalenko I saw, the London-based writer whose details I'd checked on Google. As I walked towards the tall young woman, and as she looked up and saw me, and rose to her feet, and held out her hand and said my name, I immediately knew who she was: Nadya.

I said nothing. We shook hands and I followed her into the lift. I watched her, in the mirrored wall, as the indicator climbed its way up to the top-floor. It was fourteen years since I'd seen her last, a young girl, in Aleutskaya Street, getting ready for school. Now she was grown up: long legs in stylish jeans, hair in a neat black bob. Her eyes caught mine and I looked away. The doors opened.

The bar was empty. Nadya chose a lounge in front of a big window with a full view of the sunset, looking towards the mountains and the burning clouds. We sat down, with her facing the window. The city lights were already on.

'I am sorry I did not go to your office as we arranged,' she said. 'I slept in.'

'No problem at all. This is fine.'

She gestured out the window. 'It would make a good shot.'

'Sunsets are not my thing,' I said. 'Not enough happening.'

She looked at me. 'I know. I have seen your work. I like it very much, as I told you in the emails.'

'But you didn't tell me everything, Nadya. Why didn't you?'

At the mention of her name, her eyes held mine for a moment. She took a notebook from her bag and opened it. I waited for her answer.

A waitress came to take our orders. As she left, Nadya asked her something. They laughed, and spoke quickly. I recognised a few words of Ukrainian.

'She is from Kiev as well. I will friend her.' Nadya tapped on the phone. I looked out the window.

Some music came on, soft jazz. There was a clink from the bar.

'That's your cocktail,' I said.

Nadya smiled. 'You didn't want one?'

'I'm driving. And I'm too old to drink.' I don't know what I expected, but she ignored the comment. She went back to the phone.

'Nadya,' I said.

She looked up.

'You contact me,' I went on, 'using someone else's name. You didn't have to do that.'

'But I did. Maybe you would not meet me—' She paused. 'Anyway, you are the one who changed his name, Mr Argent, hiding in the world.'

It's true. I had changed my name, all those years ago. Became a new person, began a new career, lived on the other side of the world, left everything behind. We do what we have to do. It wasn't fair of her to trick—

'Max, I ask *you*, now. Why?'

I looked down at my hands. She was watching me.

'It's a long story.'

'I believe you,' she said. 'Even your emails, to me, as Aleksandra, they were long.'

I smiled. 'Aleksandra Kovalenko is real,' I said. 'And she isn't you.'

Nadya nodded. 'She is a friend. She helped me.'

The waitress arrived with the drinks.

'So,' I said. 'What is this about? What do you want, really?'

She picked up her cocktail, sipped a little, then put it down on the table. She straightened the notebook on her knees.

‘Max,’ she said, looking up. ‘You must come back with me.’

I stared at her. ‘You want me to go to Kiev?’

‘Yes.’

‘With you?’

‘Yes.’

‘But why?’

Her expression was serious, eyes steady, mouth firm. I could see her mother in her, quite clearly.

‘You are,’ Nadya said, ‘frightened to come back?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You don’t want to?’

I hesitated. ‘Just tell me why.’

She sighed. ‘You will find out.’

‘When do you go back?’

‘The day after tomorrow. And you will come with me.’

I wanted to smile. Even the voice. That was what I’d recognised first, downstairs in the lobby when we met.

‘No,’ I said, after a moment. ‘Now, tell me what’s happened. Is it your mother? Is she okay?’

Nadya said nothing.

‘She’s not sick?’

She shook her head.

‘Then what is it?’

I waited. She still said nothing. I decided I’d give her more time, and besides I needed to think. I excused myself and I stood up to go to the toilet.

Washing my hands, I looked at myself in the mirror. We pretend time isn’t passing, we claim to feel the same as we did when we were twenty-five, but it’s always there, chipping away, it all adds up. Yet sometimes there are shortcuts to the past, lightning strikes from long ago. I thought about Nadya, sitting in front of the window, a confident young woman. Yes, I left her, when she was eight, and her mother. It was a long story, as I said to her in the bar, but, believe me, I had no choice. All I knew was, I wasn’t going to Kiev. I dried my hands and looked again at the mirror. I’d left nothing at the

table. I could turn left instead of right, walk to the lifts, be gone before she noticed. She was leaving in a day. I could simply lie low.

When I got back to my seat, Nadya was looking at her notebook. I sat down.

‘Max,’ she said. ‘There are two reasons why I am here.’

‘Go on.’

‘The first, you know now.’

I nodded.

‘The second is, you see, I really am a journalist. I don’t write stories under my own name, but of course I want to. So, when I saw you had been nominated for the award, I mean, when I saw your face in the picture ... well ... do you understand?’

I nodded. ‘You knew it was me. And you thought you could interview me at the same time.’

‘I didn’t know, before, Max Argent was you. I do now.’

I sat back in the seat and stared at the city lights.

‘I thought,’ she went on, ‘if I get an interview with a favourite for *Photography International*, it will help. And if you win—’

‘I won’t win.’

She smiled. I shook my head gently. Then she asked if she could start. I took a deep breath, and said yes.

What kind of equipment did I use? (Nikon, F-mount system.)

When did I change to digital? (I was late to adopt. Mid-nineties.)

Which was my preference? (There’s no comparison. Fujifilm Velvia, RVP 50 ISO if possible. If necessary, the faster 200, or even 400.)

She switched to the personal. Where did I grow up? (My family lived overseas, from Kerala in India, to Bangkok, to Sao Paulo. My father was in paper manufacture. I went to five different primary schools, then boarding school in the UK.)

Nadya changed tack again. She asked about the wildlife shots that had made my name. The Tasmanian devil and its facial tumours. The mother and child orangutans in East Kalimantan. I told her about the orangutans, the rainforest almost all gone, the apes coming into the plantation for food, the traps, the villagers, the killing.

‘You let them kill them?’

I shrugged.

‘You did?’

‘I was an observer. It wasn’t my place—’

Nadya stared at me. ‘An observer. Is that so.’

I nodded.

‘You don’t think there is an ethics? For the photography?’

I looked at her. ‘Photography is shadows and chemistry,’ I said.

She wrote that down. She looked at the notepad for a moment. The lights in the bar came on brighter, or so it seemed to me. Outside the sky was black and the city was beautiful.

‘What is the difference between wildlife photography and, ah, the human subject?’

Nadya asked the question in the same tone as the others. This time, I was slow to reply.

She glanced up. ‘Have you photographed models, professionally?’

I hesitated. Of course, she knew the answer.

‘Every photographer,’ I said, ‘has shot the human subject, it’s normal. But as you know, I’ve specialised in animals. For me, the human world is too complicated.’

‘What do you mean, complicated.’ She shifted in her seat. ‘You mean political?’

I looked closely at her when she said that. I can’t explain why, but I felt a surge of intensity.

‘I suppose so,’ I said. ‘Human photography is about eyes. Everything depends on the eyes, in the photograph of a person. Do they give consent or not? You can tell. It’s right there. Even if they do, have you taken something from them, just by looking—’ I stopped. The background music seemed louder.

Nadya was still looking at her questions. ‘What have you taken,’ she said quietly, ‘from your subjects?’

I wondered what she was doing. Finally she glanced up.

‘Let’s say that I stick to animals. Their world is outside of us, of me and my camera. They can’t know or care.’

We listened to the music for a while.

‘You know this used to be the main post office? They gutted it and built a hotel,’ I said. ‘Are the rooms nice?’

‘This one?’ She looked around. ‘I don’t know. I am staying in another one, down the street—’ she turned and pointed away from the harbour. ‘Near the Central.’

I must have looked puzzled, because she went on: ‘This hotel is expensive, you know. That one is okay. I have what I need. Perhaps you can walk with me back there. I do not know this city. There were some strange people last evening when I came to check this place.’

‘Of course I’ll come with you.’

She picked up the menu again and studied it. Watching her, I found myself feeling responsible, though I knew I wasn’t. Yes, I had a connection with this young woman, but it was broken a long time ago. And a couple of minutes earlier I’d almost decided to slip away. After all, I’d lived my whole life slipping away. But she was hiding something, and it niggled at me. Plus, she was in an unfamiliar city. Anything could happen. I opened my mouth to speak. I was going to tell her she should check out of the hotel and come and stay in my house in Cottage Point. Since Caroline had gone, several months ago, it felt empty, and the downstairs guest room was always ready. I closed my mouth. There was no need to go overboard. I finished my drink instead.

‘They have food here. Would you like some?’ Nadya said. ‘I must eat.’

I suggested we could go up to Chinatown, but she preferred to stay where we were. ‘Something now, and then I have to go to bed. Can we talk tomorrow?’

The question didn’t surprise me. She had her interview, and there was much more to be said. Before I answered, the waitress came and took our orders, a margherita pizza for me, one with everything for Nadya. And glasses of red wine, her idea. I relented.

‘So. Tomorrow?’

I played along. ‘You need more material?’

Her eyes brightened. ‘For a story, always you need material. You keep talking, as long as you can. But,’ she closed the notebook, ‘if you are busy, of course, I understand.’

‘No, that’s not a problem. The agency runs itself these days. I have good people there, they know what to do.’

Nadya smiled. Looking at her, I felt my age. Her vitality—a simple property of youth—was very attractive. I smiled back.

We talked about the city and what she should see. Should she climb the Bridge? I didn’t think so, it’s a gimmick. Did I have a sailing boat? No. Why not? She thought everybody here had a sailing boat. We laughed.

I asked her about Kiev. What was it like now, with all the trouble? Where did she live? How had she got the job at the magazine? She said she'd studied journalism at the Technical Institute. She'd wanted to travel abroad, but it was hard to get the opportunity. Still, everybody wanted to get away. We talked a bit about Russia, about the president, the little Napoleon. She nodded, then shrugged. 'What can you do?'

A waiter brought the glasses of wine.

Nadya picked hers up and held it out.

'*Na zdorov'ya,*' she said. '*Budmo!*'

I felt her eyes on me. *Budmo! May we live for ever!* I knew the response, *Hey!* Instead I just lifted my glass. 'Cheers.'

Her eyebrows lifted briefly, then we clinked glasses and drank. She looked out the window.

The pizzas came and we ate them, then ordered coffee for me and black tea for her, Russian-style.

While we were waiting, we made arrangements for the next day. We could meet down by the harbour, perhaps take a boat trip around, to see everything. I wondered how much interviewing we'd get done, but as Nadya wasn't here for long, she might as well see the place.

The coffee and tea came.

'Tell me, Max. Are you married?'

There was no reason, but the directness of her question surprised me. I put down the cup. 'I'm not married. I did live with someone for a long time, but not now.'

She seemed to be waiting for more. Eventually she broke the silence. 'Okay, if you don't want to talk.'

I smiled and said it was all fine. I didn't tell her how much it had surprised me when Caroline disappeared. There was no explanation, no warning. We'd just come back from a holiday in Bali, a couple of months earlier, and one afternoon I came home to find she was gone. I was over it. Of course, I was.

'Life goes on,' I said.

Her brow furrowed slightly. Then she said, 'So. I think I should go now. Or I will be sleeping right here.' She called our waitress over and spoke to her in Ukrainian. When the bill came, I insisted on paying. We walked back to the lifts. We seemed to reach the

ground floor in no time. She took my arm as we left the hotel and we walked comfortably in step.

‘Tomorrow, I will ask more questions. Tonight was just some background. I will ask about your youth. I will find out what embarrassing secrets you have hidden, believing no one will ever uncover them. I want to know more. This profile will be the truth, it will be everything about you. You are a great photographer and the world should know.’

I protested and we both laughed. I knew she was just being grandiose, she was a little bit drunk. I stopped and touched her arm lightly. ‘What is this all about really?’

She laughed. ‘I told you. Come back to Kiev, you will understand.’

We walked along, side by side, her arms swinging freely now. She looked in the shop windows. I watched the street. It was quiet.

Her hotel was a cheap and cheerful one near the station. We said goodnight outside.

‘Tomorrow, eleven o’clock, at the ferry ticket booth?’ I said. She confirmed. We parted and I retrieved my car from the underground car park. It was a long way back to Cottage Point.

2.

My first nude. I don't remember how we got onto the subject. We sat on the back deck of the ferry and watched the Opera House slide by on one side and then the Bridge the other, and we watched the other watercraft and looked at the city buildings and the expensive houses, in between them the jacarandas.

Nadya wore jeans and sandals and a light top. There was no sign of the notebook and she had only a small shoulder bag. But we carried on, still in interview mode. Had I seen kangaroos (of course, but not around here). Did I have a surfboard (no)? Did I eat steak with fried eggs on top for breakfast (no)? Had I ever found an opal (no)? Did I have children? She looked at me as she said that, almost for the first time that morning.

I stared at her. The words seemed to resonate in the blue of the sky, the blue of the sparkling water, the light everywhere.

'With her', she went on. 'Caroline.'

I looked to the right. 'Over there—' I gestured with my hand, '—is the Pacific Ocean. Past the cliffs, the sea is much rougher. Big waves. The ocean.' I looked at her.

She was watching me.

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

Nadya glanced towards the horizon. 'Are we going out there?'

'We stay inside the cliffs, around into the next bay. There's a seaside suburb called Manly. We can have lunch in there by the wharf and walk along the main street. Maybe on the ocean side. It's so different there.'

Nadya liked the name Manly. She was still chuckling when, with a lurch, the ferry arrived at the pier and we disembarked. She made me stand beside the gangplank and took a photo on her phone. I was surprised she didn't have a proper camera, for the magazine piece, but I said nothing. If she needed a photograph, I had plenty on file. She

was checking the phone. 'Here is one of Sydney's wildlife,' she said, showing me, smiling. Then: 'You don't carry a camera?'

'No. Not any more.'

'But why not. There is always something to see.'

'Nah. Too many photographs in the world,' I said. 'Too many images, nobody sees the real thing any more. Everybody is an artist. Instagram. You know.'

'You mean I should not take photographs?' Nadya looked reproachfully at me. I smiled. Eastern European women do reproach very well.

'Not what I meant. I was being more general.'

'Okay. General is okay. We can have ice-cream.'

I took out my wallet.

After lunch, walking along the ocean side of the town, a stiff breeze coming off the water, we strolled for some time, finally in silence. It felt like we'd been friends for a long time, yet it was less than twenty-four hours. I glanced at Nadya. She was looking at a couple of surfers walking across the sand away from the sea, boards slung under their arms. Their wetsuits were unzipped to the navel, bare skin showing.

'Is it dangerous, what they do?'

'Not really. Sharks maybe. As long as you're with friends you're safe. The shark will get one of them first.'

Nadya looked at me. 'Shark is serious. Not for joking.'

'I know. It happens, but not often.'

The two young men crossed just in front of us. One looked frankly at Nadya. She looked back. He smiled and flicked the hair from his eyes. He didn't look at me.

'He has a good body,' Nadya said, as the two continued barefoot across the road towards a block of flats. She looked at me. 'You don't agree?'

I didn't answer.

'I think he is. Maybe I come back tomorrow morning, before the flight.'

We walked on and then sat down on a bench between the palm trees. Then came the question about the first nude.

'When you took photographs of people, did you take ones with no clothes?'

I turned to look at her, wondering what she was getting at. Okay, she was writing a profile, but—

‘Yes, I did,’ I said, eventually.

‘The first one. When was it?’

It was when I was eight years old, I told her. A self-portrait, actually. My father had bought himself a folding Polaroid Land Camera, Model 210, with instant developing. He kept it in a box at the bottom of the wardrobe in my parents’ room, along with some packets of the film. I found it, when they were out playing bridge at the neighbours’ and Sabine was watching television downstairs. I opened the cardboard box and held the camera in my hands. This was a real camera, not like the toy one I had. I looked through the viewfinder. In there was another world. A grown up world. A world that would disappear unless you pressed the shutter release. Even then, it could be lost. Load the film. Frame the shot. Set the focus range. Check exposure compensation. Check focus again. Then press the button. I fingered an unopened film packet. I saw myself in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door, standing there, waiting.

Nadya was listening carefully. She’d forgotten the surfer. I hadn’t noticed, but she’d taken the notebook from her bag and was scribbling in it with a pen. I looked out at the waves breaking. A huge container ship, big even at the distance of the horizon, was making its way along the coast.

A week later, I went on, lost in my recollection, they were all out, Mum, Dad and Sabine. They’d gone to the cinema, something my sister wanted to see, something girly. I said I’d stay and read. I did do some reading, for a while, in case they came back straight away. I sat downstairs in the big leather armchair my father used. I flicked through one of the Time-Life books, we had a whole series on art and civilisation. I loved the images, the silver-toned monochromes, silky on the semi-gloss stock, the rich full-colour plates. In the book on photography, there were plenty of nudes. I admit, I was interested. Nudes were important, you could see that. You could also see that clothes just got in the way. Light flows smoothest over bodies; nude was obviously the right way to show the human form. I might only have been eight, but I could see what I could see. I wanted to try for myself. But there was no way I could use the Instamatic. The film would have to be developed, and other people would see, especially my mother.

I closed the book and put it back in the shelf. I went upstairs and opened the wardrobe door. I got out the Polaroid and opened a packet of black-and-white film. I’d seen Dad load the camera, so I knew how to do it. After setting the exposure, I pushed

in a flash cube. I knew the look I wanted—something from the book downstairs—so I twisted the bedside table lights until they lit me from the side. I took off my clothes and saw myself in the mirror. I held the camera at waist level. The flash popped. I put my pants back on. Then I reached for the white tab on the side of the camera, pulling steadily, like I'd seen Dad do. Nice and fast, that was the way. Then the yellow tab, with the arrows like a convict's uniform. Another steady tug, pulling the negative and print sandwich, letting it dangle from my fingers. Finally, I peeled the print away. Blurry. Something must have moved. I took my pants off and tried again, breathing slower this time. There I was, staring at the lens, crisp against the out-of-focus curtains, naked as Adam.

Nadya laughed. I was startled. I'd almost forgotten she was there.

She asked if I still had the photograph.

'It was a long time ago,' I said, looking at a sailing boat out on the water.

'You didn't keep it?'

What happened was, I said, I showed the photograph to Jessica, the girl from next door, the same age as me. I had to show someone. That's how it is with something you've made, or at least how I've found it. It doesn't exist until someone else has seen it. But that can be the problem. Some things you shouldn't show other people.

I'd told Jessica I was a photographer and one day she'd see me in Time-Life. She laughed. I opened the book on photography and there I was, resting among the pages as if I belonged there. She took the book and the print fell to the floor. I picked it up and held it out to her. She looked closely. Was that me? I nodded. That was when she laughed again. She said it looked like a little snail. It was a harsh comment. She had a point.

But she didn't laugh when I asked her if she wanted me to take her photograph. She went quiet at first. Then she wanted to know how I would do it. There was only one way, I said. Okay, she said. I took the photograph, her standing by the curtains, in my parents' room, the light coming sideways, the flash bringing out the fine hairs on her arms, the pale pink of her flat nipples, the smooth young skin. She liked the photo and I had to persuade her to let me keep it. In return, she kept the one of me.

That was a mistake. Her mother was furious. My mother had to explain. After that, the Polaroid was locked away.

Nadya stopped writing. She seemed to be thinking. I was still facing the ocean. We listened to the seagulls that had gathered round a small metal boat that two older men had pulled up on the beach.

‘There must be fish inside,’ I said. Nadya nodded.

I stood up. ‘It’s a little cooler, do you think? Shall we go back?’

‘What was she like?’ We were sitting on the ferry, the cliffs and the seaside suburb behind us. We’d tried to sit on the sheltered side of the ship, but all the seats were taken. Inside it was noisy but warm. Outside, on the windy side, it was cold, but Nadya seemed not to notice it.

‘What was who like?’

‘The girl. Jessica.’

‘It was a long time ago. But I remember she had reddish hair. Long curly hair, gorgeous.’

‘Was she pretty?’

‘Pretty. Young girls are always pretty.’

Nadya frowned. ‘Not always.’

‘Well. She was. She was just an ordinary little girl, but she was special to me.’

‘Do you think she remembers you taking a photograph of her naked?’

‘I honestly don’t know. I remember it like it was yesterday. Everything about it. I wanted to take more, many more. But it didn’t happen. I never saw her again. Her parents were outraged.’

‘And yours?’

‘They were mildly embarrassed.’ I saw her expression. ‘It was the seventies. It was okay. No one said anything. They just forgot.’

She wrote something in the notebook.

‘I was very sorry not to see Jessica again. Sometimes I think it was the most important thing that happened to me—but, anyway, we moved soon after. When you move, you leave everything behind.’

The ferry had arrived back at the main quay and we walked off with everyone else. It was four o’clock. I suggested a coffee and we found a table looking across the inner harbour and the ferries sliding in and out. Nadya decided she’d have something cold, and I said I’d have a beer. She agreed. I ordered.

‘What time is your flight tomorrow?’ I said.

‘Five in the evening. There’s no rush. Maybe we can have lunch?’

‘I can’t. I have to go down to Melbourne for the day.’ I really did have to go, but I also was relieved at having the excuse. I knew I’d said too much to Nadya. Contact had been made and we could perhaps have some kind of relationship, but this had been more than I was comfortable with.

‘Really?’ Her eyes were fixed on mine.

‘Really. I am sorry.’

‘Okay. I am sorry too.’

‘Do you have enough? For your profile?’

Nadya took off her sunglasses and looked at me. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not enough. But it will be okay.’

The drinks arrived. We clinked glasses.

‘So,’ she said. ‘Just one more question.’

I nodded, taking a long sip of beer.

‘Why did you take that photograph?’

‘What photograph?’

‘The girl. Jessica. Was it erotic?’

I swirled the glass slightly, feeling the liquid shift. Nadya was watching me closely.

‘I was eight, for goodness’ sake. Why do you ask?’

‘Because I am old enough to know something about the world. And I want to know this about you. Please answer the question.’

I thought for a moment. ‘Honestly?’

She nodded.

‘No, I didn’t. I just wanted to be like the photographers in the book. To make an image of another person, like I had done of myself. And like I told Jessica, I was going to be in the Time-Life book.’

‘So it was not, like paedophile?’

Something happened with the glass I was setting down and the metal table top. There was a loud bang and beer ran over my fingers, some onto my jeans. I stood up and went over to the service trolley parked behind a pillar, and took a couple of paper napkins. Nadya said nothing when I returned. I wiped the table and then went over to pay at the counter.

When I got back to the table, Nadya looked up from her notebook.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘I ought to head back before the traffic gets bad. It can be terrible at this time of day.’

‘Of course,’ she said, standing up as well. ‘Where is your car?’

‘It’s in the car park. Under the office building. Past the station. You can catch the train there to Central.’

She nodded.

We walked in silence along the quay. Nadya took a photograph of a man covered in silver paint, standing on a silver plinth. A clutch of pigeons scattered as we walked past, then reformed. An ibis, the royal Egyptian bird, perched on the edge of a rubbish bin, lifted its head briefly.

We stopped by the ticket machine. Nadya’s sunglasses were back on.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘I apologise for that, back there. We shouldn’t part on that note.’

She waited for me to go on.

‘You know, you shouldn’t stay in that fleapit of a hotel. Let me—’

‘It is a fine hotel.’

‘No. It’s not. Shared bathrooms are terrible.’

She looked at me strangely.

‘I checked,’ I said, ‘on the net. Look. Why don’t you stay somewhere better? I’ll pay, of course. You might as well be comfortable on your last night.’

‘Stay where?’

‘My agency has a corporate account at a much nicer hotel. We put overseas clients in there sometimes. It’s all looked after.’

She looked away as if considering. Then she turned back. ‘No, thank you. I will be fine.’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s get my car and I’ll run you up to your hotel.’

There was a space right outside the hotel and I slotted the car in, leaving the engine running. Nadya seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

‘Will you tell me?’ I said. ‘What is happening?’

She shook her head. ‘You know what you have to do. It’s not hard.’

I felt a surge of anger. I was too busy. It was too far away. Why couldn’t we talk here? Or in email? But I said nothing. She was watching me.

‘I must go,’ I said. ‘I have to pack. My flight is at seven-thirty.’

Nadya unfastened the seat-belt. ‘So, this is goodbye?’

I leaned against the headrest, watching her.

Undoing the seatbelt, she turned. ‘You won’t come back with me?’

I looked out the windscreen, shaking my head. She was waiting.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘Let me think it over. I can cancel Melbourne, it’s possible. But give me some time and I’ll reply to the email you used. Okay?’

She nodded slowly.

I found myself saying silly things. ‘It was wonderful to see you again, Nadya. Such a lot has happened. We must stay in touch.’

She lifted her bag, ready to go. ‘Of course. Thank you, Max. And send me your answer.’

‘No problem,’ I said.

‘Okay.’

I held out my hand to shake hers. She took it, then, after a brief hesitation, offered the side of her face. We embraced awkwardly over the gear shift. I kissed each cheek. The car door closed behind her.

3.

The seven-thirty Melbourne flight left on time, full as always with men and women in business dress. Neat, efficient, organised, they'd done this many times before. As had I, I admit. What's left of the Australian publishing business is still centred in the southern city, and consequently I have to go down to finalise contract details or simply keep in touch with key people.

Lucia, in the office, had arranged for me to see one of the production editors of a new series on Australian bush wildlife. We were supplying a key tranche of images and I wanted to make sure everything was on track. I caught a taxi from Tullamarine and the meeting went smoothly, including a nice pub lunch, and I was finished by two. That gave me a couple of hours. I flagged down another taxi and asked the driver to take me to St Kilda.

When I reached the house, Lanyard's car wasn't outside. It looked like I'd missed him. I told the taxi to wait while I climbed the steps and rang the doorbell. I heard footsteps. Sally opened the door and smiled broadly. 'Hello, stranger. Come in.'

I kissed her on the cheek, then went back and paid the taxi driver.

'Sure you're not busy?' I said as she showed me through to the living room.

'No, no. Taking a break.' She wiped her hands on her smock, covered as usual with clay marks, wet and dry.

'How's it going? Finished The Kiss yet?'

I could see her studio in the back garden, doors and windows open.

'Sit down and have a coffee, I'm just making one myself. Then you can have a look.'

'Thank you,' I said, sitting at the table. 'Where's Simon?'

Sally hesitated, looking at her hands.

'Is he okay?'

'We've had more threats. He says it's okay, but it's getting to him.'

‘I thought that was all over. It was three years ago.’

‘Five years.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Down at the police station. He should be back soon. Want me to call?’

‘No. No. I should have said I was coming, just I’ve been very busy recently.’

Sally looked up. ‘Very busy? A woman?’ She was smiling.

‘No, no. Well, not really.’

‘Go on, tell me. I could do with some good news.’

I found myself telling Sally about Nadya, how we’d spent the best part of the last two days together. How we’d talked and talked.

‘She came all the way here to interview you?’

I nodded.

‘Is she younger than you?’

I told the truth, that Nadya was lot younger than I’d—I stopped and smiled.

‘Well. What a surprise. You old dog.’ Sally clapped her hands. ‘About time we heard some real scandal. Not the crap they keep pouring on Simon.’

I commiserated, stirring my coffee. ‘How’s his work going?’

‘Oh, he’s okay. Been shooting a series of landscapes. He also did some work in the centre of town, in the evenings, he’s going to call it Closing Time.’

‘Is it good?’

‘Of course it is.’ Sally was abrupt. ‘Might not win an international award like some—’

I shook my head. ‘Come on, Sal. That’s not going to happen.’

She laughed. ‘Well I hope you do. It’s about time people in this country recognised their own artists. Philistine bogans.’

We both laughed.

‘Doesn’t sound right, does it?’ she said. ‘Anyway. That’s what they are. Morons. Beer and cricket, Kardashians and cooking shows.’

We paused, sipping our coffees, me looking into the backyard, Sally at the clock. ‘He should be here now.’

‘Is he going to show his work again?’

‘Yes. The National Gallery of Victoria suggested something small. Recent pieces and a couple of the older ones.’

‘Do you think there’ll be trouble?’

‘We don’t know. The director says it’ll be fine. But you never know. It was so unexpected—’ A phone began ringing and Sally pulled it from her jeans’ pocket. ‘Hello—’ Her voice was strained. ‘Yes. Darling. Really? Nothing? If you say so. When will you be ... yes ... okay ... oh, wait, there’s someone here for you—’ She passed the phone to me. ‘It’s him.’

‘Lanyard, you old pervert.’

‘Max. What the hell are you doing there?’

I apologised for not warning them. If there was anything I could do, I said, and he assured me it would be fine. He went on, telling me I should expect an invitation to the gallery. I said I’d look forward to it. I handed the phone back to Sally.

‘Darling, Max didn’t say, he’s got a girlfriend ... yes ... some Ukrainian journalist with a crush on him.’ I could hear him laughing. I told her to shut up, but she’d already said goodbye and cut the call. She was laughing too. She put the phone in a pocket and then stood up to rinse out the mugs. ‘So you haven’t heard anything from Caroline?’ Sally kept rinsing water over the mugs.

I said nothing.

She kept the water running before eventually turning it off. The silence felt oppressive. Without looking, she said: ‘What really happened, Max?’

Sally and Caroline had been good friends since art school, when they shared a flat. While Sally had struggled to survive as a potter and had met Lanyard and fallen in love, Caroline had gone from a temping job in the city, which she’d only done because of the money, to a full-time PA role and then into HR. This was in the late 1990s, when, as she put it, HR was moving from the irrelevant backwaters of personnel—people smiling to each other and processing holiday leave forms—to being the all-powerful central nervous system of every corporate structure that it is now. Caroline was smart and she understood all that. She was good at it and she quickly rose through the system, spending evenings attaining the few qualifications that were required.

Caroline wasn’t conventionally beautiful, but she had that attractiveness that comes with intelligence. The eyes sparkling with humour, the quick wit—she was alive. After art school, she often visited Sally and Lanyard in the tiny Fitzroy terrace they’d bought,

and that was where I first met her. She'd been curious, probing, but reserved at the same time.

'So you and Simon were in school together?' Caroline said to me, glancing at Sally.

'Lived, worked, slept together,' Sally said. She clarified—it was boarding school. They looked at each other and laughed.

Lanyard was defiant. 'We were founding members of the camera club,' he said. 'The Queen had her Silver Jubilee, the Sex Pistols were number one, and Max and I, and a couple of other reprobates, were fumbling around in the dark trying to make photographs. Great days.'

Sally scoffed. 'English public schoolboys. We all know what was going on, all that fumbling in the dark.'

Lanyard winked at me. 'Women always like gay stuff.' He reached over to pour more wine into Sally's plastic tumbler. 'Am I wrong?'

She reached out and stroked his hair. 'What's not to like?' she said. 'Love is better than hate.' Then they were kissing.

I asked Caroline what she did and she talked about a new role she'd just been given in Sydney, in the best office building, right by Circular Quay. She was moving in a couple of weeks' time. She liked Sydney, although the coffee wasn't as good as Melbourne. We laughed, Sally and Lanyard too, sitting entwined on the battered lounge. Then Caroline wanted to know about camera club. Did I teach Simon how to take photographs, or did he teach me?

We'd taught each other, really. The school had written to our parents for permission for us to access our accounts to buy good cameras from a man who came from the local town. To my surprise, my parents said yes. I got an Olympus OM-1, a beautiful machine, with the standard 50mm F/1.4 prime and a Vivitar 70-210 zoom. The man supplied the chemicals and spent a couple of afternoons with us setting up a darkroom, in a big shed behind the science block. We found books on photography in the school library. That was how we learned.

'Yes, but were you any good?' Caroline laughed at her own question. 'Back then, obviously,' she added.

Lanyard grinned, saying we were rubbish. Caroline said she doubted that.

‘It was the weather,’ he said, after some thought. ‘Grey and drizzling every single day. When the trees are bare and the streets drab, it’s damn hard to take decent photographs.’

I pointed out that part of the problem was trying to *make* them, with developer and fixer and all the rest. We’d gone through—I reminded him—a hell of a lot of chemicals.

Sally said he still did and it cost them a fortune.

Lanyard retorted that at least he sold his photographs. Galleries bought them now. He turned to me. ‘What about your pictures, Max? Before you arrived here?’

I said something about giving it away, how I’d been travelling since then. It all got too much.

‘Max is a *real* traveller,’ Lanyard said. ‘Didn’t you get buried in snow when you drove to Berlin, in your 2CV, when they opened the Wall?’

Caroline smiled. I shrugged. ‘It was very deep. But I followed a snow plough. No problem.’

After refilling his glass, Lanyard went on. ‘We both worked in London until 1996, that was when I came out to Australia. And him—’ he looked at me, ‘—really, what happened?’

He was genuinely curious. He’d asked me a few times over the years. This time he pressed me. ‘Max. It was eight years. What the hell were you doing?’

There was a pause. Sally sat up straight and brushed down her dress.

Caroline ended the silence. ‘He was travelling, *obviously*.’

We laughed. I repeated Caroline’s *obviously*. Lanyard was still looking at me.

Sally stood up and stretched. Caroline changed the subject. ‘What happened to camera club?’

I looked at Lanyard. He smiled. ‘It just fizzled out. After Alison and the incident.’

Caroline was curious. ‘Who was Alison? I thought it was a boys-only school.’

We’d had boys and girls, although most of the boarders were male—suddenly Lanyard was in full memoir mode. Camera club started as male-only. It wasn’t intentional, just that no one else was interested. We took photos religiously. Pictures of sports matches, school buildings, trees, hills, clouds—

I broke in, pointing out that clouds were a speciality of Lanyard’s. Still were.

—and sometimes you might take a photo of the girls, but you knew where the line was. The best girls had boyfriends, so they were definitely out. The rest, well you didn't really want to.

Sally and Caroline looked at each other and grimaced. Sally told me to finish the story.

One day, Alison joined camera club. She was very serious and she had a good camera, a Nikon SLR. Everyone wanted to get their hands on it. We'd sit in the meetings, discussing the merits of macro lenses and tripods versus monopods, and all the time we were watching Alison. She wasn't particularly good looking, not really. She couldn't be, she didn't have a boyfriend. Her legs were a bit thick and she wore black-framed glasses and had her hair in a ponytail, and she was a bit chubby in the face, but she was one of the gang, our gang.

I can't remember who it was, it might actually have been Lanyard, but someone suggested we take turns photographing each other. A series of portraits. No one had thought of this before. Basically, no one was interested in photographing boys. But suddenly this seemed like a great idea. We thought we'd start with Alison. Would she mind posing under the lights?

To our surprise, she agreed. She sat there looking demure, her tie only a bit loose and her legs clamped together. There was complete silence in the room, just the sound of shutters going off. Boys fought for the best angles. Relax, Lanyard kept saying. Plenty of time.

Alison seemed to like being photographed. After a while she took off her glasses and undid her ponytail, shaking the dark hair loose. The clicking became intense. She pulled her tie down, opened her collar, loosened her blouse fractionally, letting herself relax, turning her head to one side and then the other, coquettishly. Her whole body seemed to change, becoming something else under the floodlights. It was amazing.

One by one, the boys ran out of film. I was the last. I am the kind of person who hoards his resources and I still had ten shots left. I took my time with them. Best of all, I didn't have to jostle with anyone else. Then it was finished and the main light went on and the floods were turned off. Alison put her glasses back on, straightened her tie and smoothed her skirt down. She was normal again. We all looked at each other. We knew we'd never be normal again.

There was a pause after I finished. ‘And,’ said Lanyard, ‘we never were normal. That afternoon changed everything. From that moment, I knew what I was going to do when I left school.’

‘Yes,’ I said, echoing his tone. ‘He was going to carry on photographing clouds.’ The others laughed. He was renowned for his moody, black-and-white, full of shadow and atmosphere. But it was the underage models he used that caused the problems. By the time Caroline and I met, he’d already been shown nationally and internationally, and was famous in the art world for the young nude models he’d taken to using. One day—nine years later, and after a wildly successful retrospective show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales—a hack columnist got hold of an invitation to one of his private gallery shows. The invitation featured one of the more provocative images. Everything exploded. Before we knew it, everyone was on his back. Shock jocks, tabloids, advocacy groups, everyone had a go, even the then prime minister, who said the images were ‘absolutely revolting’. The police were involved, but Lanyard had no case to answer. The fuss had gone quiet after a few months, and he’d never admit it to anyone, but Lanyard had been bothered about it ever since.

All that, the retrospective show, and the scandal, were a long way in the future then, as we sat round in the little house in Fitzroy. Lanyard wandered about gathering the empty tumblers and the bottles, and Sally left the room. Caroline got up to leave. Did I need a lift anywhere? Well, I’d been sleeping on the lounge right there in the living room. Looked a bit cramped, she said. It was, I said. She had a bit more space at her place. The sentence didn’t exactly resolve into a question, but I said I didn’t have too much stuff. She told me to hurry up and Lanyard cuffed me on the arm and winked as he went past.

In the St Kilda house, I left Sally to her pottery, asking her to give my love to her husband. I made the five o’clock flight, along with the other same-day itinerants, and settled into my seat. As soon as the seatbelt lights went off and we were level, I checked the messages my phone had collected before I’d left the terminal. A couple from the office, but nothing serious. I tapped an email to Lanyard, telling him to let me know if I could help in any way. The message wouldn’t go until we’d landed, but at least it was done.

I put the phone away and rested my head against the seat back. I wondered where Nadya was. Somewhere over Indonesia, probably, drinking another sweet black tea. She was up in the sky, I was up in the sky. An entire small country of people, up in the sky at any given time, all flying here and there. I didn't know what airline she was flying with, or where she lived. When I thought about it, I had hardly asked her anything at all. How had she grown up? What had her life been like? I didn't even know if she had a boyfriend, or a girlfriend. Then I remembered Sally's questioning, and her telling Lanyard I had a Ukrainian girlfriend. Everyone wants to know the intimate connections. It explains everything. Or perhaps it's all that matters.

The plane was banking, the windows were full of rippled dark blue. We were coming into Sydney over the sea. Down there was the Pacific Ocean. Down there, creatures found each other, in the great vastness.

What did Nadya really want? For me to go back to Kiev with her? Was that really it? Well, I wasn't going to. If there's one way I've lived my life, it's that I never go back. But I should have at least sent that email telling her. Still. She was gone. The plane levelled and briefly surged forward, the pilot clearing the engines. Another ten minutes to landing. My ears popped reluctantly. I closed my eyes and waited.

4.

The next day I spent at home, clearing some weeds from the garden. It wasn't really a garden—the metal fence that separated it from the bush of the national park was only symbolic—the trees and the dry forest floor, thick with leaves and twigs, continued right up to the house. Or rather they used to. Since Caroline had left, the introduced weeds had spread everywhere, almost a metre thick in places, and they buried everything. Clearing them away was hard work, but it was somehow important. Underneath the weed, almost in hibernation, the forest twigs and leaves still lay, waiting to see the sun again.

After a few hours of clearing, I climbed the stairs up onto the back deck and looked over the balcony down to the garden. Finally there was more of the original forest floor uncovered. Caroline would have approved. I made myself a coffee.

Later, I phoned Manuel, the office manager. Nothing much had happened. A shipment of brochures had come in. The colour laser printer had finally been repaired. One intern had finished work and another was due to start tomorrow. Interns. Bless them. Frankly, I couldn't survive if I had to pay everyone who worked for me. I told Manuel that was fine and I'd be in the next day and I could say hello then. Office life is a pantomime, but we all have to play our parts.

I sat at the computer for a while, reading the newspaper sites. I did a search for Simon Lanyard, to see if anyone was saying anything. Did the media know about the up-coming show at the National Gallery of Victoria? It seemed not. Ordinarily that would be a shame, but in this case, it was probably better. All I found were articles covering the incident, all those years ago. He'd been torn to shreds by those the activists, the social work stasi, the local and national politicians and of course the tabloids and the shock jocks. Miserable bastards. And no one gave a damn except for a few feeble government-grant arts types. I admit, I'd kept my head firmly down during

the whole thing. Offered Lanyard help, but said nothing in public. I had been approached for comment by a broadsheet reporter who was writing a book, but I'd been vague. I talked about the sanctity of art, the importance of free speech. I left it there.

I rebooted the computer, this time into secure mode. It took a long time for the TOR connections to complete, but it's worth it. When you're talking to people who might be wanted by international law enforcement, you need to take precautions. I logged into the secure mail system. One message, from Oleg in Brazil, offering congratulations. He asked if I thought I would win. And: did they really have a category for my speciality work? I thought about replying, then shut down the client. Oleg was from the old days, a time before Caroline, when I was working in Eastern Europe. We kept in touch, a few of us. Some of them still did work in that speciality area. Brazil was a good place, so they told me. Great poverty. Desperate people. And very relaxed about sexuality, considering the whole Catholic Church thing. I looked out the window. You can't leave everything behind, even if you try. I didn't do that work any more, but it was a part of me. Had Caroline somehow uncovered all that? It seemed impossible, yet I couldn't rule it out. Was that why she left?

We'd been a quiet couple, as couples go. I'd stayed that night with her, in her place in Melbourne, the night we met at the Lanyards'. It wasn't love, not really. She was so driven with work, and me, well, I'm not a believer. We made each other happy. Isn't that enough? I followed her up to Sydney and we lived in the company flat she'd been given. Later, when she bought a house in Hunters Hill, looking out over Woodford Bay, I was able to set up a proper darkroom.

She got me work as a photographer, doing a series of portraits of the executives of her firm. They gave me a meeting room and I set up a studio with floods and a cream backdrop with the firm's logo discreetly located in the corner. In they came, on a timetable, one after another. When the work was done, she found me another contract. It was tedious work and I hated it, and she knew it, but it gave me spending money.

It was Caroline who encouraged me to take up wildlife work. I can't stand animals, to tell the truth, but I knew I had to do something, something legitimate. I hadn't tried outdoor photography since camera club—before Alison—and I wasn't sure if I could do it. I thought I was better with people. But Caroline's idea stuck. I bought a 4WD troop carrier wagon, already fitted with a sink and cooker, and drove out past Broken Hill into South Australia. I camped at Coward Springs, on the Oodnadatta dirt road, and each day

I drove along rough tracks out to Lake Eyre. It had just flooded, a once in a decade event, so they said, and I photographed the water birds that'd flown hundreds of kilometres across the desert to feed and breed in the spring sunshine. There they were, in their tens of thousands, standing knee-deep in tepid salty water that had run all the way from the Queensland mountains, tucking into the brine shrimp and the bony little fish that had survived deep in the mud during the long dry, waiting for the water to come. I spent three weeks there and when I got back I sold the pictures to *Nature* for ten thousand dollars. My career as a wildlife photographer had begun.

I was sitting in my office, turning in the leather chair, my back a little sore from the gardening the day before, sometimes looking out at the city skyline, sometimes at the flat screen. Really, I had nothing to do. I've had nothing to do for a long time. You work hard, you make your mark in something, and if you're very lucky you don't really have to work again. Of course, my agency survived largely on my name, and winning an international prize would help a great deal. Even just the nomination was significant—I had that to be grateful for. Things simply weren't as cushy as they had been.

I met the intern, a dark-haired twenty-year-old named Mia. She didn't have much idea, it was obvious, but she was smart. She'd either storm out at being asked to do menial tasks, or she'd buckle down. Manuel had her sorting the emails quick smart. The website was forever clogged with submissions and contact forms with people desperate for work, offering images and advice and help, and someone had to categorise them and choose the lucky few we'd reply to. It was mostly public relations. Off trotted Mia, glad to be of service, certain of making an impact.

My phone rang, an internal call, Lucia on the front desk. 'Mr Argent. There's a young woman here to meet you.'

I turned to the screen and looked at my calendar. There was nothing for the day, apart from the intern. I hesitated.

'Ask her to make an appointment.'

'Sure. No problem.'

Out over the city, a small hunting bird spiralled, turning easily in the warm air, a long way from the open country and the long shadows of mice and rats.

The phone rang again. 'I'm so sorry, Mr Argent. The woman is insisting. She won't give her name. She says she must see you—'

I listened. Not many people managed to ruffle Lucia's feathers.

'She says she's come from Ukraine. Her—'

Nadya. I found myself staring at the wall. I put the phone down and walked through to the reception. She was standing at the desk, angular, defiant. As I approached, something of a smile appeared on her face. I turned to Lucia. 'It's okay. This is a friend. I hadn't been expecting her. I'm sorry.' Lucia nodded and went back to her screen.

'This way,' I said, going into my office. Nadya followed without a word. I offered her a seat and she sat down, still saying nothing.

'This is a surprise,' I said. 'Can I ask what happened?'

'I did not get on the plane.'

'I can see that. Why not?'

She looked out the window. Little yellow and green ferries crossed the harbour.

'Actually, I have an open return. And maybe I went back to the seaside town, to Manly.'

I looked out the window too. The bird was still there, turning. Then I felt myself smile. The surfer guy. It seemed pretty unlikely she'd meet him again. But it was just a village really, and surfers are dedicated. I turned back to Nadya. 'Well.'

'Well, what?'

'Was he there?'

She shrugged, half-smiling.

I shook my head. 'Okay. What can I do for you now?'

Nadya looked down at her hands, then stood up and walked over to the window. She must have bought some new clothes, these were light summery things. Open sandals, a short white skirt and a light top. She'd been lying in the sun because the skin of her legs and arms had that richness of near-but-not-quite sunburn. She turned, smiling, the brilliant sky and sea behind her. 'You did not give me your answer, Max. You said you would do that.'

I leaned back in my chair, lifting my arms and crossing them behind my neck. I waited.

She stood up and walked to the window before turning to me. 'It is simple. You must come back.'

I stared at her. 'What do you want?' I said. 'Is it money?'

'Is that what do you think?'

‘I told you, Nadya. I can’t. I’m settled here. It’s too complicated. Look. Tell me what this is all about. Perhaps I can help you.’

She shook her head, *nyet*, her bob swayed and fell back into perfect position. Standing by the window, with the elements behind her, the sea and the air and the burning sun, she was like a goddess.

‘You must come.’ Her eyes were intense. ‘You don’t want me—’ the eyebrows lifted a fraction, ‘—to tell them what happened, do you? When I was a child. Now you are a world-famous photographer?’ She waited. Seconds moved slowly in bright light. ‘Do you?’

I sighed. In the end, perhaps everything comes back to you, one way or another. I thought about phoning Manuel, saying something banal but including the code words, ‘Top Gun’, and he’d call security. We’d never had to use it, in the eight years we’d been there. He might not even remember. Moments passed. I knew I wasn’t going to try. It wasn’t only my reputation that was at risk—and I cared far less about it than I might once have done—but the agency itself would not survive, certainly not under my name. Manuel and Lucia, the interns, the company, their jobs depended on me managing this properly. If Nadya did talk—well, it could be nasty. I looked out at the sea. But the truth was I didn’t care about the company. I didn’t care about my name. I’d moved on in the past, I could do it again; so could the others. It wasn’t that at all. Maybe I’d just had enough running. We are, all of us, getting old.

I picked up the phone. ‘Lucia. This is going to sound odd, but could you please talk to the young woman ... yes, Nadya ... and see if you can find a seat for me on a flight with her ... yes, to Kiev. An open return for me. As soon as possible.’ I put the phone down.

We ate lunch at one of the better outdoor cafes on the east side of the Quay. I had a tuna steak, and Nadya a plate of oysters in red-wine vinaigrette and then a rib-eye steak, and she had no trouble finishing it all off. She said she’d eaten nearby the day before—I looked at her in surprise and she admitted it was one of the self-service restaurants near the railway station. But it was nice. We finished the wine and ordered tea and coffee.

We walked off the lunch along the Quay, round in front of the Opera House and further into the Botanic Gardens. Hordes of gaudily-clad exercising executives, male

and female, young and old, bustled past. I asked Nadya if she worked out and she shook her head.

She had changed, in only a few days. She'd been confident when I first met her in the hotel lobby, but she'd also been deferential. That was gone now, and it wasn't just familiarity. She saw me looking. 'What is it?'

'You've grown up a lot. Please don't be angry.'

She looked down. I saw past the perfectly shaped bob which framed her face so well, past the confident firmness of her jaw, past the subtle make-up that emphasised the size and colour of her eyes, and past the strength they contained. Instead, there on the quayside walkway under the all-seeing Australian sun, I saw the long straight hair tied into a single ponytail or sometimes two plaits, the hesitant mouth, the defiant yet cautious eyes of a child. It really was her. I looked ahead again and said nothing, and we carried on walking. She had grown up so much. There she was, a young woman, beautiful, strong, perfect.

We reached the point, jutting out into the harbour, and I showed her where to climb up to the chair carved into the rock so the wife of the governor could watch the British ships come in. She sat down and insisted I take a photograph on her phone. I framed the shot nicely, fitting in part of the Opera House and the Bridge beyond. Suddenly she was there again, in the viewfinder of my old Nikon. As I looked, a cloud must have covered the sun because my vision went dull. It was as though I couldn't see anything. I pressed the button anyway.

As we walked back, my own phone rang. Lucia had a couple of options. I could fly in ten days' time, it would be economy and much cheaper. If I wanted to go earlier, there was a business class seat on both legs on the same flight as Nadya. I thought about Lanyard's gallery show. There was no way I could miss it. I could put the whole thing off—but having made the decision, I really wanted to get it done. I told Lucia to get the first flight, if she could also confirm for Nadya. A couple of minutes later, she called again. Everything was booked for the ten p.m. flight the next day. Both electronic tickets were already in email for me, along with an insurance certificate. All I had to do was remember my passport. I told Lucia she was marvellous and she laughed. Was I coming back in the office? No, I said. I was going straight home.

*

Nadya came back to Cottage Point with me. We picked up her stuff from the hotel and checked her out. Her room wasn't as bad as I'd imagined, but still I was glad to see her leave. I asked her if she needed anything, she shrugged, so we had wandered the city shops for a while, but in the end she didn't want to buy anything. She said the shops on Khreshchatyk were just as good.

The run out of Sydney was fast, the freeway clear. Then we got caught in traffic on Mona Vale Road, crawling along thanks to an accident that blocked both directions. Nadya dozed off sometime before we'd got into the national park. I glanced at her face, peaceful with the eyes closed, the long lashes. She was very beautiful, more so now. I turned off the main road and slowed down to get past the unmanned toll booth at the park entrance, under the dark trees. With the change of motion and the rumbling as we went over the speed hump, Nadya woke up. 'Where are we?'

'Nearly there,' I said. 'Nearly there.'

5.

She was standing on the back deck, looking out into the darkness. Although I'd opened windows, the temperature in the house was still warm, and when I'd brought her out a gin and tonic it was a relief to feel the cool river air coming up through the trees. You could smell the richness, the strange flat weight of the water beyond. Nadya said something about the cicadas, how loud they were. I said they got a lot louder and she cocked her head, pretending not to be able to hear me. I saw the whiteness of her teeth before she went back to watching the bush. I turned up the deck lighting.

In the kitchen, the ceiling fan turned above my head, doing little more than stirring the cobwebs in the corners. I stood at the chopping board, my hands going through the familiar motions. On the hob, onions were sizzling in the pan. I was hiding behind domestic routines. Sometimes it's better not to have to think. There she was. In my house, in Cottage Point, after all these years. I looked out of the window again. She was sitting down now, swiping through her tablet computer. I'd given her the WiFi password and she'd connected immediately. I watched her laughing at something, her hair swinging back and forwards as she moved her head. All those years.

With everything in the pot and the rice cooker on, I tidied up the mess. I took another sip of my drink. There was so much I wanted to know. But she had hidden her identity from me and there was the implied blackmail threat. Was that really what she meant? The gin was strong. I thought about another one, but chose the chardonnay in the fridge. I took it and the glasses outside.

'Anything interesting happening?' I gestured to the tablet, opening the bottle.

'Ha,' she said. 'Never. Same old world. It does not change.'

I waited for her to say something more, but she carried on scrolling and tapping. Was there someone else, on the other end? I poured two glasses. Then I went inside to get some candles, matches and the insect repellent.

*

‘This is a big house for one man,’ Nadya said, holding her glass, half-smiling. ‘Did she live here with you—your wife?’

‘She wasn’t my wife,’ I said. ‘But, yes, Caroline and I lived here.’

‘And no children.’

I finished my food and pushed the plate away. Nadya had already finished. She stood up and gathered the plates and cutlery. She never used to do that. But that was—I stopped myself. She was watching me.

‘As I told you, no children.’ I opened the screen door for her. I heard her setting everything down on the worktop.

She came back out. ‘Don’t you think you’d be a good father?’

‘Nadya—’ She looked at me. ‘I’d rather not talk about that. You can ask me about my work. That’s how this started. Unless there’s something you want to tell me?’

She looked away this time, out over the railing, out to the trees and the cicadas and beyond them the river, dark and mysterious. ‘I didn’t mean to be nosy,’ she said. ‘I am interested. Not just in the photography.’ She paused for a moment, as if she was thinking. Then she laughed and I smiled. ‘Seriously, Max. Tell me something, anything.’

I wondered if I could tell her the truth. There was nothing much to say, really. Caroline and I had lived together, the way people do. At first we made love all the time. The years went past. We fucked less often. Then we stopped. Perhaps it was me. Perhaps I felt guilty in some way, I don’t know. Then, that day, when I came back from the city, I found she’d gone. Taken very little with her, some jewellery, some photos, her passport—it took me a while to discover that. And I had never heard from her again. I’d called her office, they said it was her long service, didn’t I know? Of course, I said, I’d meant to call her at her mother’s. I put down the phone. That was all.

‘We moved here eight years ago,’ I said. ‘Caroline had been promoted again and she wanted to buy another property. So we decided to look further north, somewhere with character, but in the bush. As soon as we saw this place, we knew it was right. It doesn’t have access to the river directly, you can see it in daytime, through the trees. And it’s so peaceful.’

I stopped speaking. The cicadas were sawing away. I glanced at Nadya. ‘Yes, they’re loud. But a good kind of loud.’

She nodded.

‘Caroline kept the unit in Mosman, staying there mid-week nights. Sometimes I was there too—to start off with there was only Lucia and me in the office—but as my agency grew, I didn’t need to be there so often. I could stay up here, feeding the mosquitoes. That was our joke. I’d taken a lot from wildlife, Caroline would say, and I had to give something back.’

Nadya grimaced.

‘You get used to them,’ I said.

‘We have them in Ukraine—’ She hesitated. I knew. When she was eight, she’d been badly bitten on a camping trip to the Carpathian forest, her arms and legs and face, all red with bites. ‘Perhaps they are different here.’

‘There’re two kinds. The ordinary ones and savage ones.’ I reached for the spray can. ‘Prevention is better,’ I said, covering my arms. I handed it to Nadya. In the darkness, our fingers touched.

‘She was a hard worker?’

I nodded. ‘Very hard. She paid for all this. I mean, I earn money now, but I didn’t back then.’

‘So, you worked in England,’ she was still asking questions, as if we were in the interview again, ‘and then you came here to Australia?’

‘Well. I worked in a few places, you know, building up my skills. And you know I was in Kiev.’ I stopped. She was watching me closely.

‘Yes. I know,’ she said.

I waited to see if she’d say anything else. I reached forward and poured myself another glass. ‘Some more?’

She held up her glass. ‘Yes, but not full,’ she said. ‘Just a—as you say—a night cap.’ I poured a little more than I meant to. When she said the word ‘night cap’, she tilted her head back and smiled. The girlish innocence but also a curious frankness.

She got up and went inside the house. I sat there swirling the wine in my glass and listening to the cicadas.

‘I like the photographs in the hallway,’ she said, taking her seat again. ‘They are from you?’

‘Yes, they are. They’re okay.’

‘Where is the location?’

‘It’s up in a small township called Hill End, near Bathurst. Not too far away.’

‘They’re good photographs. They look like they’re from the old days.’

‘It was a gold mining town. It’s almost empty now. Just a hotel and a tourist centre.’

‘And no animals?’

I smiled. ‘I have too many pictures of animals. I wanted something different. In the museum there, there’s a wonderful photograph of a man holding a nugget of gold ore that’s only a bit smaller than him. I loved the strangeness of it. I wanted to see if I could get some of that feeling.’

‘Nice,’ she said. ‘I would like a piece of gold that size.’

I glanced over at her. Was that what she wanted? I waited for her to continue.

‘What do we do tomorrow?’ she said, after a moment.

‘Whatever you like. We’ll leave late afternoon and have something to eat at a nice place I know near the airport. We can relax there and have plenty of time before the flight. I just don’t want to get caught in traffic.’

‘No problem,’ she said, standing up. ‘Can I help with the dishes?’

‘It’s okay. I’ll load the machine.’

‘Okay. So, I will go to bed, I think. It has been an interesting day.’

I stood up as well.

‘Max—’

I looked at her. The candles had burned down and the only light came from the kitchen window. Her face was mostly in shadow, only her nose and curve of her cheek catching the light.

‘—thank you. For this.’

I waited to see if she’d say anything more, but she turned and went inside the house. I sat down and poured myself some more wine.

Back in the kitchen, I turned the dishwasher on and then remembered to check my phone. The notification light was flashing—I’d missed a call. When we first moved up to Cottage Point, I found the intermittent mobile service irritating, but as the years went by, it became a blessing. But given I was leaving the country the next day, being connected seemed more important than usual.

It was Lanyard. I dialled voicemail. Not a problem, the message said. Just wanted to check something.

The house was quiet. Nadya seemed to have settled down in her room, so I went out the front door and climbed the steps through the yard. Once on the street, I set off up the lane. To get proper reception, you had to climb to the highest point, just off the road. It was only a couple of hundred metres, but all the residents knew it. Often there'd be someone else, yakking away. They'd nod in recognition, then move away to the far side of the area.

I checked my phone. Three bars. No further messages. I wondered whether to disturb Lanyard. I knew he stayed up late—in our London days, in the flat in Rupert Street, he and I would talk until dawn, or work together in the darkroom, him on the enlarger and me processing films or the other way around. I hesitated. I pressed the button.

'Hello, Max.'

'Lanyard. How are you?'

'Good thanks. And you?'

'Sorry I missed you earlier.'

'You have to get the phone company to sort it out.'

'Actually the phone got the call, I just missed it. I was eating on the back deck. What's up?'

'What were you eating out there for?'

'What?'

'I know you, mate. You'd be sitting watching 7.30 with your plate on your lap. Who's with you?'

I hesitated.

'Come on. Is it the Russian girl?'

I smiled. He was only extrapolating from what I had told him and Sally, and it was a long shot, but he was pretty good.

'Yes, it is actually. It's a long story.'

He laughed. 'No, I don't believe it. Sally said she's young enough to be your daughter and she was going back soon. You're hiding something. What's going on?'

'Oh, nothing, really. I'll tell you soon.'

'All right, mate. Anyway, I wanted to say that I heard from an old friend of ours. Remember Felix?'

The cicadas suddenly stopped, the way they often do. One minute they're shrieking away, the next, they're silent. Or maybe they'd stopped earlier and I hadn't noticed. Anyway. Felix. After all this time.

'Of course I do. What the hell is he up to?'

'First of all, I have to apologise. Actually it was about three weeks ago he called me, out of the blue. He said he was doing well in Kiev, he'd set up a video production company a couple of years ago and it was going really well. They won some contract for the UEFA cup the other year. Knowing him, he's probably producing porn as well. Anyway, I thought he was going to offer me work—' He paused.

'Go on. What was it?'

'Turned out, he was interested in you.'

I froze. 'In me? Why? I haven't spoken to him in years.'

'Yes, he said the same thing. Hadn't heard about you for ten years. He said he liked your new name. Had to look it up in the dictionary, but he thought it a good joke, you know what he's like. Anyway, point is, he'd recognised your face from the press photograph. So he called me. No big deal. He was happy for you.'

I looked out over the bush and the glow in the sky where Sydney was.

'Max?'

'Yes. Sorry. I was just thinking.'

'What? Did I do something wrong? He was our buddy.'

'It was a long time ago.'

Now it was Lanyard's turn to be silent. A couple of seconds passed before he spoke. 'I have done something wrong, haven't I?'

'No, mate. You weren't to know. I didn't know.'

'It's about that Russian girl, isn't it?'

How much do we ever really admit? I've changed my name twice and lived a life of concealment. It's a hard habit to break.

'Lanyard, I'm flying to Kiev tomorrow—' I heard his intake of surprise '—with the girl.'

'You're kidding me. The girl. I knew it. But why?'

'Look. Let me say what I want to say and nothing more, okay?'

'Of course.' His voice was reasonable. But I could hear his curiosity.

'She knows stuff. Big stuff.'

‘To do with Felix? And you think he put her on to you?’

‘I didn’t before, but now, perhaps, yes.’

‘Felix? Come on. He’s a mate of ours. Isn’t he?’ He paused. ‘It’s nothing to worry about.’ Another second passed. ‘Is it?’

I said of course and it would be all right. Lanyard wasn’t happy with that, trying again to get me to explain. But in the end he let it go, making me promise to let him know if he could help—especially since he seemed to have fucked everything up. We laughed.

I asked after Sally. She was good. She’d fired up a set of small sculptures. She was using a new glaze. One of the nicest pieces had exploded and she was furious. I made the old joke about superglue. He said he’d stick to that idea next time. Then I asked him about his exhibition. How was it going? It was working out fine. They’d had a selection meeting the day before. Quentin, the gallery director, had been very supportive, although the PR person had expressed anxiety about two of the images. I remembered back to the events of five years ago. The media storm. The police pushing in, the van taking away several pieces, blue-and-white chequered tape across the entrance of the gallery.

‘I can’t tell you,’ Lanyard was saying, ‘how important it was, Quentin standing up for me like that. After being—’ he paused. ‘Well. It meant a lot to me.’

‘I understand. When does it open?’

‘In ten days. You’re coming, of course you are. I have to say, I’m really excited. My first exhibition in Australia for five years. God.’

‘Right. Hey, my battery is dying. I’d better sign off.’

‘All right mate. Will we see you before then? When are you coming back down?’

‘I don’t know. But anyway, you should come up here, after the show. There’s always room for you guys in Cottage Point.’

Wishing each other a good night, we hung up. I stood in the clearing for a moment, looking at the moonlight on the ground, so faint, there but not there. Out on the water, the pale outline of a sailing boat rested in the darkness. There were no permanent moorings in the creek. They must be holiday-makers. I thought of my house, down in the trees, a wooden vessel, floating in the same darkness. And inside, Nadya.

*

I reached the front gate and went down the steps. Everything was quiet, even the cicadas. Inside, I paused outside the guest room. I couldn't remember if I'd opened the window to let the room breathe. Because the house was in a gully, the back deck nearest the river was the only side that tended to get fresh air. Round the sides and the front, there was less circulation and the downstairs rooms could get musty. I turned the handle and pushed the door as quietly as I could. She was lying on the far side of the bed, facing me, the sheet over her with the blanket pushed down. I glanced at the window. It was closed, the blinds half up and slanted, letting in the moonlight. I walked across the floorboards. Her clothes were draped over the chair by the window, the underwear on top. I looked at it, pale in the weak light. Strange things, women's clothes. Just garments, yet impossible to separate from sexuality, especially underwear. I stood there. Then I reached forward to the window, undoing the catch, then lifting it. Soft cool air drifted in. I stepped away and turned. I couldn't stop myself. I leant forward and lifted the blanket up over her bare arm. My shadow fell on her face. She moved in her sleep. For a moment I was certain her eyes were open, but perhaps it was just the light. I left the room, pulling the door closed behind me.

6.

Felix. A year older than Lanyard and me. Sandy blonde hair, always untidy but always just right. Blue eyes that never stopped laughing, even when he was serious, and you could never tell when that was. His tie—we all wore ties in senior school from third year onwards, before then shirts were open-necked—his tie always looked different to everyone else’s. Sometimes a lazy fat Windsor, sometimes a strangled eel, it didn’t matter; his top button was never done up either way. He just looked great. With his strange Russian surname and his weird accent, he didn’t care about anyone or anything. That was only part of his magnetism. His father was supposed to be fabulously wealthy. I mean, most of the parents were pretty well off, their sons and daughters wouldn’t have been in a private school otherwise, but there were limits. Some fathers managed oil fields in the Middle East. Some were in industry in even further away places, like my dad in Sao Paulo. Plenty were high up in the armed forces. But Felix’s father was something truly exotic: a Ukrainian émigré. That was all we knew at the time, but it was enough. I found out later, his father had got out of Ukraine with his wife and Felix in 1970 by claiming to be Jewish—well-connected friends helped with documentation and it all went very smoothly. He’d kept connections with senior figures in the country and was able to act as a business agent for them, sourcing all kinds of in-demand consumer items from the West.

When I first saw Felix, in the junior common room in the boarding house, the first night back after the long holidays, standing there surrounded by boys, showing them his Rolex Oyster, he was like a god. Yes, the seniors were bigger and tougher, more godlike, but even they knew who to pick on and when. They never touched him.

It was a real Rolex—the second hand moved smoothly without ticking—but everyone else thought it wasn’t, it couldn’t be, not a Rolex, and Felix didn’t care to tell them. Despite, or perhaps because of it, they were unable to tear themselves away from

him. He told us his father was working in Istanbul at that time and Felix had stayed for a holiday and had been sent to the London home—Unaccompanied Minor—with four Rolexes, one on each wrist and two in hand luggage. The customs man had spotted the one on Felix's outstretched arm as he held out his passport. Was that his? Yes, Felix said. It was his. Actually, Felix went on: it wasn't real, it was a copy, for his own personal use. He said the customs man looked like he hated him, but Felix just smiled and the man let him go on, without checking anything else. In a plastic bag at the bottom of his bag were the links for the strap of the second watch. His father let him keep the one he'd been wearing, the others went to a man his father had arranged for him to meet in Kings Cross. We all stared. Felix laughed.

We stayed in the common room for hours. People came in, still in their civvies and lugging half-full cases and bags back down from the dorms upstairs, emptying them into their lockers or the bookshelves where we were lounging. It was the first night of a new school year and everything was pretty random. Soon enough it'd run as smoothly as an army barracks.

After eight o'clock, the younger boys were chased upstairs to the junior dorm and the seniors went into their own common room to watch TV, leaving us third and fourth years. Most wandered off to tidy their lockers or polish their shoes ready for inspection. Felix was left, with Lanyard and another third year, Johnny Short. Short was playing a tape of the Top Forty countdown on his cassette player, David Bowie, 'Sound and Vision'.

Lanyard and I hung out together, even when we weren't in camera club, which we'd started the year before. We weren't great friends really, I didn't know anything about him except that he went home to Lincoln at the holidays although his father lived in New York, and he wanted to be a writer, but he also liked photography, which was what we had in common. That was what it was like in the house. You knew the basic details, you might know one big thing about someone, but that was it. There was no depth. You couldn't afford depth. You didn't give anything away and no one asked you anything. Your home life was something you kept to yourself—it had no place here. It stopped when you walked in the doors and it didn't start again until you were back home, fifteen weeks later. If you were lucky, you had someone to go to the shops with, or sit next to in church on Sundays, or kick a rugby ball back and forth in the fading evening light out on the playing field, wondering if each kick might be the last and the ball would simply

keep going into the night. It never did though. It would be caught and punted back and suddenly appear, a ghostly missile, for you to run and reach into the air, thudding hard against your chest.

The Rolex fascinated Lanyard. He wanted to touch it, but he was scared to ask. He just stood, looking. Short turned up the cassette player. What did we think the lyric meant, 'Blue, blue, electric blue. That's the colour of my room.' Wasn't it the name of a porno mag? Didn't we think so? Lanyard didn't think so. He was still staring at the watch. Felix didn't care. He asked if Short meant men's magazines. Short just grinned. Felix went on: 'Women? Naked women?'

Short looked at him. 'Yes. Exactly. If you want some,' he looked closely at Felix, 'they're down behind the rugby lockers, round the back.' It was an open secret. The area simply called 'round the back' consisted of a changing room, toilets and a rugby shower. On top of the lockers in the changing room was a pile of sports bags and holdalls, and thrown down the back were loads of men's magazines, in various states of damage. It was hard to get in there, the best ones seeming to be out of reach, but there they were. A strange reserve of fantasies, undisturbed by authority.

None of us thought that was bad. The magazines were there, the cleaning staff never came round the back, the room was swept and occasionally mopped by whatever scavenging crew was on at the time, and so the status quo remained. The reason they were in that location was obvious. The row of cubicles, affording sufficient privacy, was directly opposite.

No, Felix said. He didn't want the magazines. He was just curious. He looked at Lanyard, who blushed, caught out staring at the watch.

'You like it? It's nice. Try it on?'

Lanyard looked shocked. Then he nodded. Felix undid the clasp. 'Don't drop it.'

We laughed. Lanyard took the watch. 'It's heavy.' Felix nodded. Lanyard put it over his wrist and fastened the clasp. The watch was loose. He just stared at it.

'You want to buy?' Felix was smiling.

Lanyard shook his head. 'No. But I would—' he looked up, unfastening the clasp again, handling it carefully, giving it back to Felix. 'I'd like to photograph it. I've been thinking about a new series. Max, what do you think?'

We looked at him. 'Desire,' he said. 'What do you reckon?'

'Another stupid idea.' Short was unimpressed.

‘You mean,’ I said. ‘As in objects of desire? Things people lust after?’

Lanyard nodded. ‘We could do Short’s golf clubs.’ We laughed. Short scoffed. ‘Leave your filthy hands off my clubs.’

‘Go on,’ said Lanyard. ‘They are desired, aren’t they?’

Short shook his head slowly.

Felix was listening to this, a distant look in his eyes. ‘You have a camera?’

‘Of course. We both do,’ said Lanyard. ‘Me and Max. Founding members of camera club. You interested?’

‘Perhaps. Why not. My father plays golf in Scotland, but it’s not for me. Stupid game. The balls are too small and the holes are too far away.’

Johnny Short was actually really good at golf, he was one of the few boys to play with a handicap. He was also in the A team for rugby in the winter and first eleven in summer. But Lanyard and I didn’t spend much time with him. Short switched off his cassette recorder and told us he was going upstairs. The three of us were left. The room was quiet, for the first time.

‘When is this club?’ said Felix. ‘Do you have a place here?’

It wasn’t in the boarding house, we told him. It was in a shed up by the main school, behind the science block. It was a great place. We’d take him to the next meeting. Felix held up the Rolex. ‘Photograph this? Well, okay. Why not. It’s something to do.’ He pushed away from the wall he was leaning on. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘So which one of you will show me round the back, these rugby lockers? I am interested to see.’

We looked at each other. ‘Come on,’ Lanyard said. ‘I’ll show you where they are.’ He glanced at me as he went past.

Camera club was on Wednesday afternoons, after school. I got there late for the first one, the geography class had run over. There are a lot of capital cities in the United States. By the time I got in, most of the seats were occupied. There were the same faces from last year, plus some new ones from the year below us. Apparently the art master had encouraged his classes to come along. But there was something else. Alison was there again, but she looked different. She’d changed over the summer holidays. She was thinner and taller, her hair wasn’t in pigtails any more, it was combed back down past her shoulders; and the glasses had gone. But even more interesting, she had brought a friend. Bronwyn was also a day pupil. Bronwyn had a Canon compact, nowhere near as

flash as Alison's Nikon, but she was obviously interested in photography. Lanyard stood up. He cleared his throat.

'Hello, everyone. Welcome to another year of camera club.' He paused, perhaps anticipating a reaction. There was none. We all waited for him to go on. 'Today we have to elect a president,' he looked at me. 'And a secretary. Just a formality, but the school rules say we have to do it. Then we can plan a program for the term.' Another pause. Nothing. 'But first, we'd better hear from those who are new to the club. Let's go round and everyone say your name and whether you're new. And what camera you've got, and what kind of photographs you're interested in.' Everyone spoke in turn, some only for a moment, some you had to tell them to stop. We'd got to the end and there was a general buzz in the room. They'd begun to relax.

Then the door opened and the room went quiet. Standing there, carrying a folded tripod in one hand and an aluminium camera case in the other, was Felix. Everyone looked at him.

'Come in, Felix,' Lanyard said. 'Plenty of room.'

After we'd elected office-bearers—I was president, and Lanyard, secretary—we all discussed themes and projects. Lanyard still wanted to do his 'desire' theme. There was a lot of discussion about what that actually meant. Could you do a waterfall, or a flower? Lanyard said you could. What about clouds? Of course. However, most were not convinced. The theme wasn't concrete enough for them. A third-year, Bates, wanted to do cars. Someone said we didn't have cars and how were we going to photograph them. Bates said we could stand by the side of the road. Lanyard said that it was true, how you carried out a project was the point, not the subjects in themselves. But Bates said he was just interested in cars. He had some photographs from the Cologne Motor Show, did we want to see them? He opened an album. The room filled with noise. A few boys crowded around. The rest just started talking.

'What is your name?' Felix said to Alison. The girls looked at each other. Alison laughed.

'I suppose you know how to use all that?' She gestured to the equipment Felix had set down on the floor.

He smiled. 'I only just got it. My father had it couriered from London. That's why I was late.' He leaned forward, waiting. Bronwyn nudged Alison, but she said nothing. Felix saw me watching and winked. He too said nothing.

‘Her name’s Alison, and that’s Bronwyn,’ I said, breaking the tension. Felix smiled.

‘Actually,’ he said, opening the metal case. ‘I have no idea how to use this. But you can teach me. My name is Felix.’

Bronwyn was giggling, but Alison just sat impassive.

It wasn’t clear why Felix chose Bronwyn’s house for our third photo shoot on the theme of desire, other than he said we’d be more creative away from the clubhouse. Bronwyn didn’t mind, and her mother worked until six o’clock on Saturdays at a charity shop in the town. Her father was in Calcutta, the head of some relief organisation.

It was probably simply because Alison’s mother was always around her house. Felix and Alison weren’t exactly going out, not officially anyway, but she’d changed over the weeks. She’d become less standoffish and more like one of the gang, always at his side. And Bronwyn, she was obviously infatuated with Felix, as we all were, in a way. Despite having only just joined, he’d become the central figure in the club. Everyone listened to him and did whatever he suggested. Lanyard was the only one who stood up to him, but even then only in fun. We’d just done Eastern Europe in Geography and he called Felix a Carpathian brown bear, which didn’t really work because Felix had blonde hair. Anyway, Felix just smiled.

Alison tried to help him with his photography. She was patient, but she told me he just didn’t seem to learn. He was always in a hurry. I went over the theory with him, in the boarding house on rainy Sunday afternoons, when we were allowed to stay inside. I covered it all: focus and depth of field, light and exposure, the choice of lens and film. It wasn’t difficult, I said. It was all about balance and composition. Lanyard said the same as he always did, that theme was what mattered, what you were trying to say. Felix didn’t know what he was trying to say—or at least he couldn’t tell us—but it was that one photo session he organised that caused all the problems.

When we finally got the equipment up to Bronwyn’s house, a stone farmhouse at the top of the old town, before the new estate, it was already two in the afternoon. Someone asked where the lights were going. Felix walked into the spare bedroom. He turned at the door, looking back. ‘Here,’ he said.

Everyone looked at each other. Bronwyn’s face was confused.

‘We can’t go in there,’ Bates said. ‘That’s a bedroom. Anyway, there’s a double garage round the back.’ He paused. ‘Bronwyn, does your dad have a decent car?’

She didn't answer. Felix hadn't moved. Lanyard picked his way through to the door and looked in. 'The natural light's good,' he said. 'It has a rustic feel.' He turned to Felix. 'What are we going to photograph?'

Felix smiled. 'Desire,' he said.

Lanyard looked around the room, then back at Felix and finally at us. He smiled too.

7.

The photographs were pornographic. They hadn't started that way, but it became obvious why Felix wanted to use a bedroom, and why we couldn't have done the shots in the clubhouse. It was all about the bed. And when Felix found the wine rack in the laundry room, and opened several bottles of red wine, and everyone had drunk a glass or two, everything became blurry. Everything that is except the photographs.

The photographs came out beautifully. Mine were factual, documentary, even a little harsh. I'd been interested in social realism at the time and wanted to show things as they really were. I slightly over-exposed and used high-contrast paper. The effect was almost brutal, but it was exactly what I wanted. Lanyard's were very different. They were dreamy, on the edge of focus, in his trademark black-and-white, pale limbs against the white sheets, the darkness of the bed frame and the rough stone wall behind resonating with subtle shadows and shading, Alison's shiny hair over her bare back, Bronwyn's long legs, her firm arse, the wisps of pubic hair visible in the gap between her thighs as she lay facing Alison, their arms around each other. And Bates, he'd needed surprisingly little persuasion to take off his clothes and pose with the girls, entwining, writhing, stroking, the three of them on the big bed, in the name of art, epitomising—as Lanyard put it—the very notion of desire, the perfection of the naked human form.

Once again, as it had been with Alison the previous year, the room was silent except for the clicking of shutters and the occasional direction from Felix. He'd put his camera down and was standing watching, arms folded, a look of satisfaction on his face.

Perhaps it was Lanyard who pushed them further, I don't know. I suppose it was just what you'd have expected, but as the bodies moved on the bed, something more serious began to happen; we all felt it. Alison pulled back, seeming to wake up. She moved to the side of the bed, picking up her blouse to cover her breasts, perhaps wondering why she was naked—without her camera—in a room full of boys using theirs. She glanced at

Felix, who looked back with nothing more than his usual bemused expression. He turned away from her and carried on watching the others. Everyone else was photographing in a kind of trance, moving round, changing angle, winding film, focusing again, locked into what was happening on the bed. Bronwyn and Bates were clamped together now. They were lost to the world, to all time. He had her above him, straddling him, facing him, her hair partially obscuring her small breasts. Her hips were moving mechanically, rising and falling. His body moved too, in motions he can't yet have known, but seemed to have come to him anyway. He stared intently up at her; she didn't seem to notice. On her face was a look of rapture. Their motion quickened, an urgency came across the room, everyone felt the sharpness of the moment as, with a small cry, she threw her head back and Bates lifted himself and her up so that his body was like a low bridge from his heels to his shoulders and everything stopped, even the camera shutters.

The prints lay across the big meeting table. We pored over them, from one to another. A couple of boys had ruined their films during the processing stage. One, Dorchester, had never wound his film on in the first place, so he'd not taken a single photograph and had ended up with an unused film canister rolled back into itself. He managed to extract the leading section of film. He could use it next time.

All told, there were about fifty decent prints, spread out on the table, grouped by photographer. Some were still damp.

'Beautiful,' Lanyard said. 'Really beautiful.'

Felix nodded. 'Good.'

Bates was staring. 'Is that me? It doesn't look like me.'

We all looked at him. Of course it was him. It was only the day before. He hadn't changed much. 'I mean, it's a nice picture. It's sexy.'

'It's not,' Lanyard said. 'At least, that's not what I wanted. I wanted the simplicity of the moment, the universality of the human figures. Yes, Max?'

'Certainly. And it works.'

'Oh, yes,' Felix said. 'It does work. And I think it is sexy. That is good.'

We looked at him. Lanyard shrugged. 'A picture works on many levels. The job of the artist is to disturb the viewer. If the viewer is complacent—' he looked round at us, a

smile on his face. Good old Lanyard, always the philosopher. 'If the viewer is complacent and is not pushed out of his complacency, then the photographer has failed.'

'Exactly,' Felix said. 'I agree.'

I wanted to tell Felix he had no idea, but none of us did that, even though we all thought it most of the time. Instead I picked up another picture. 'Who took this one?'

Lanyard said he thought it was Andersen. We all looked at it. It was taken from the end of the bed, and you could see the soles of Bates' feet, some distance apart, and between them, his balls, and then his cock, disappearing inside Bronwyn as she squatted over him, her pale buttocks vivid in the floodlights.

'A bit graphic,' I said. 'But effective.'

Felix smiled. 'Do you recognise yourself there?'

Bates shook his head. I'm sure the rest of us were all thinking the same thing. It never looked that big in the shower. Not that anyone did look.

I put the print down. 'What are we going to do with these? We can't put them on display.'

Everyone laughed.

'No,' Felix said. 'We can't. We can keep them here, in the back cupboard.' He seemed to be thinking. 'You know, these would look very good blown up properly, wouldn't they?'

'Of course,' Lanyard said. 'One day they will be.'

'But, you see, they can. Now. My father has a friend who curates at a gallery in the East End of London. He could put on a show. These images could be part of it. Why not?'

Bates looked a little worried. Noticing him, Felix went on: 'No one knows anything. You guys can make fake names for the artist, no one will know about the model, no one will care. We choose ones where you can't see faces. Bronwyn's hair is over her face most of the time anyway. Her tits are big enough. No one will know her age. Or yours.' Bates didn't look convinced.

'And,' Felix continued, 'just to be fair—' he paused, '—I will buy the negatives.'

We stared at him.

'I am serious. The curator will want to deal with only one person. It's better for our story. Don't you want your photographs to be seen properly? Look. I will pay good

money. You don't need the negatives now, you have these prints. I'll give you two pounds for each negative strip.'

At two quid a strip, that was a tenner per film and most of us had gone through two or three films. It was a fair bit of money. 'Okay,' I said. 'Let me see your money.' He paid up. And, that day, or at the next meeting, everyone sold their negatives to him. Everyone that is except Lanyard.

'Why not take his money?' I said, back in the boarding house.

'The negatives are mine. You don't sell them. It's like selling your own heart.'

I knew what he meant, but money was money. Plus he could buy more film now. Or anything he wanted. He could keep the prints. They were the art. The negatives were just a means to an end. Lanyard looked at me, as if I had no idea.

Neither of the girls had come to the clubhouse the Sunday after the shoot, and they didn't come to the next Wednesday meeting either. As we'd left Bronwyn's house on the Saturday, she and Alison had stayed. We'd tidied up everything, rearranging the bedclothes, washing, drying and replacing the mugs and glasses we'd used, we took the three empty wine bottles with us and spread the remaining ones out so nothing seemed to be missing. Felix was fastidious, checking and rechecking everything, I guess because it had all been his idea. All the time, Bronwyn looked completely vacant. She was quiet anyway, but she simply wouldn't say anything or look at anyone. Alison stayed with her. She too had been silent after the session and I knew she wasn't happy. It had been nothing like the photo session the year before, where she'd grown in stature, everyone knowing it, it had been so natural. This was far more real—we all knew it. Alison seemed uncertain, as if she couldn't work out what to think. No one had made her do anything, not even Felix. It had been Lanyard who'd moved people around, and no one doubted his commitment to art. But her eyes were angry when he tried to speak to her. Felix tried too, a couple of times. She avoided him as well.

It was the third week after the photo shoot. We'd pretty much forgotten the whole thing. The prints were still in the back cupboard and, of course, they were found by Mr Hitchens, the art master, when he went through the whole place. There they were, back on the meeting room table, the whole of camera club standing there in front of Hitchens.

‘There’s been a complaint. Mrs de Klerk. Bronwyn’s mother. She discovered—’ he stopped. He seemed to be struggling. ‘She discovered a film canister under the bed in her spare room. Bronwyn wouldn’t say anything. The thing is, you see, this is important. There was a film inside. And, well, the chemist phoned Mrs de Klerk as soon as the prints came out. Mrs de Klerk came to me. It’s hard to identify the people in the images, but it is possible. I’ve already spoken to a number of them. Anyway, there’s only one group in this school who uses film, so I knew where to look. And I find—’ He gestured across the table.

Whether his story was true, that someone had kicked an exposed film under the bed, I couldn’t tell. Although Alison had come to the meetings with the rest of us, Bronwyn had never come back. Someone had talked. But it didn’t matter. He’d searched the room and all the evidence he needed was now in front of him.

‘Now,’ he went on. ‘This is the hard part. I need to know, from each of you—’ His hands lifted first one then another of the prints. ‘Which of you were there? Which of you are perpetrators of this horrible act? Please identify your images.’

We looked at each other. Felix had his usual half-smile, but even he looked a little tense. Lanyard glanced at me. I lifted my eyebrows briefly.

‘Well? Who will be first?’

We stood there. Silence. Then Bates held up his hand.

‘Yes?’

‘Mr Hitchens. I was there. But I didn’t take any photographs.’

Hitchens stared at him, then nodded. ‘Very well. You may leave. Anyone else?’

Alison raised her hand. Hitchens nodded to her. She left the room. More silence. We all stood there.

‘While we wait,’ Hitchens said. ‘Those of you that are boarders, your housemasters are searching your lockers. If we find negatives, then we will assume they are yours, and we’ll know the perpetrators. If anyone would like to step forward now, you’ll make it easier for us all.’

Still no one moved. There was only one person who still had negatives, apart from Felix, and his had gone to the East End. Lanyard held up his hand.

He was expelled that day. Mr Bloom, the rector, agreed with Hitchens, and Lanyard was a goner. They took him back to the house and he was watched constantly as he packed

his trunk and suitcase. A taxi came and took him to the rector's house where he stayed for several hours, with Mrs Bloom keeping an eye on him, while Bloom contacted Lanyard's mother. Apparently her brother lived in Leeds and he came and picked up Lanyard, driving him down to Lincoln. We never saw him again.

As no other negatives were found, he was the only one to be expelled. Most people got away with a warning. The school really didn't want a fuss, and certainly not the police. But Hitchens was harder on Felix and me. He felt let down. We were close to Lanyard, we must know more. Didn't we?

Felix just smiled through the whole thing. He pretended not to understand. His accent suddenly thickened. Hitchens didn't know whether to believe him or not, but he wasn't confident enough to press him.

Me on the other hand, Hitchens was furious with me. I'd set up the club with Lanyard, I'd been there from the beginning, when Hitchens and Lanyard and I had gone to the town and spoken to the manager of the photographic shop there, to get him to come to school and equip us. Hitchens had trusted us, for goodness' sake. And we'd repaid him with this? I'd been there, hadn't I? I'd taken photographs. Where were my negatives? What was I going to do with them? This was a disaster. He'd probably lose his job.

I thought about telling him the truth. It'd be easy enough, and he obviously knew I knew more than I was saying. But I'd had time to think. Alison must have gone to him and told him what had happened. Perhaps Mrs de Klerk was involved, but probably not at first. We'd never know, because Bronwyn moved away that same term. Maybe her mother knew but wanted to keep the whole thing quiet. Anyway, Alison stayed at school. She became a real swot, taking her final exams a year early before leaving to go travelling before university.

Hitchens continued to try to get me to admit what I'd done. It was all so clear. Why didn't I just admit it? I stuck to my story. I'd been there and was completely surprised by what had happened. I hadn't participated in any way and I certainly hadn't taken any photographs. I knew and he knew that the prints from the back cupboard had no names on them. And the housemaster had found no negatives in my locker. Hitchens gave up. He couldn't expel me without real evidence.

So I was punished. Every morning, I had to do five laps of the running track before breakfast. It meant getting up earlier than anyone else and it meant being late for

breakfast. But I did it. It was better than being expelled. Winter was coming and the mornings were colder and darker, but I'd still be down there, waiting until I saw the stiff figure of Mr Bloom on his morning walk, leaning on his cane, his patient golden retriever beside him. Mostly I'd carry on running, but once or twice I was close enough and he'd speak to me. He always seemed relieved to see me there. I realised it was all a joke and you just have to play your part. As long as you do, everyone is happy.

Of course camera club was shut down. Our personal equipment still in the clubhouse was identified, packed and shipped back to our parents or, if they were overseas, our guardians in the country. Everything photographic went, including our own cameras and lenses and any other items still in our own possession. Hitchens was adamant. There'd be no more potential for embarrassment in that department.

Felix kept his head down during all this. Like the rest of us, he surrendered his equipment, his aluminium camera case and its contents, the tripod, but he did so quite willingly. The photography had been fruitful, but not his own. And, of course, we never heard anything more about his plan to have our photographs shown at the East End gallery. He was moved to another boarding house and I didn't see so much of him. Anyway, Felix had switched his attention to something else.

One evening during prep, the formal hour-and-a-half in the evening when we all sat in silence at tables in the Junior Common Room ostensibly studying, I stood up and asked the housemaster if I could go to the toilets round the back. When I got there, I was surprised to find Bates crawling on top of the rugby lockers. He looked embarrassed to be caught there, and, under questioning, said prep had finished early in his house and he was on a mission. It was easy enough to see what the mission was. He was collecting. On the floor was an open sports bag almost full of magazines, and he was stretching down the back of the lockers to get what he could. I asked why he was doing it. Didn't I know? Felix was paying for magazines, no matter what the condition. Bates didn't look like he'd stop if I told him to, and anyway the magazines had been thrown down the back—obviously they didn't belong to anyone. I went into one of the cubicles and listened to his scrabbling. When I came out, he was gone.

Felix had found a new line of business, one that turned out to be very profitable. He'd be available in his boarding house, in the music room where people would bash at the piano for a while and perhaps draw a small group of boys looking for diversion. He'd sit

there idly playing notes on the piano keyboard, a satchel bag at his side. It wouldn't be sheet music he had in that bag. Soon enough, everyone knew what he was doing, and they'd come to see him, magazines stuffed down the back of their trousers under their blazers. It was a disreputable business and no one wanted to make a fuss, but they were happy to sell him what they no longer had a use for, and buy something new. Of course, the prices were always different—in Felix's favour—but people were glad he was there. He kept a constant turnover of pornographic material, and there was always new stock, as people would bring magazines back from home or wherever they'd bought or found or stolen them. It was a win for everyone. Felix finished that year and never came back. We never found out why. It wasn't that his business had been discovered—under Bates's control, it flourished.

8.

Sometimes, when I wake, especially when it's earlier than usual, say four or five in the morning, and the room is faintly lit, grey and then pale blue through the half-closed blinds, I am terrified. The quiet light accuses me, exposes me, my crimes are there for all to see. Somehow, it's too late. There's no covering up. No more lying. I am guilty. But what of?

I woke early that morning, remembering immediately that Nadya was sleeping in the bed in the guest room, directly beneath mine. And this time the dream I'd been having stayed with me: I was back at school, we'd been caught, Lanyard was expelled, I'd said nothing, Felix had carried on smiling. Alison had stopped talking to me, in fact she'd stopped talking to anyone, instead spending all her free time in the school library, turning pages, writing notes, holding a pen to her lips, avoiding eye contact. We still didn't know where Bronwyn had gone. There were rumours she'd gone to Ireland to have the baby and hand it over for adoption. She'd gone to London for an abortion. She'd gone to a hippie commune on a Scottish island to have the baby raised by many mothers, while she slept with many men. In reality, we didn't know. The rumours annoyed Bates, but he did walk with something of a swagger too. It was very unlikely, he said. It could have happened, but the chances were against it. And after all, no one had come to him. He was, he thought, in the clear. There was no need to tell his parents, he hadn't been identified, Bronwyn must not have given names. His swagger increased. He grew stronger. His business boomed. We all forgot the incident. In the end we are all innocent. Self-justification, weak self-serving logic and, most of all, fading memory make it so. That morning, in Cottage Point, having laid down the ghost of the dream, I got up.

*

Nadya didn't want to get up. She stayed in her room while I potted around the kitchen making toast—the smell would get anyone up—and coffee—ditto. I turned up the radio. She still didn't appear.

I had my breakfast on the back deck, waiting for the cicadas. They don't start until around eleven o'clock so it was still quiet. I opened the laptop and booted the secure system. No new messages, not even from Oleg.

As I sat looking out over the trees, I heard from down by the water the first stirrings. To my left a single cicada began buzzing, an uncertain intermittent noise. Unimpressive. Then, sweeping up from the water, came a surge of sound. They were off. I returned to the laptop, and in a few minutes, my ears were ringing with their full-blooded shrill.

I didn't hear the screen door close. Nadya stood beside me, apparently trying to see what was on my screen. I flicked the window to the browser and she sat down on one of the chairs. She wore only a big t-shirt and her hair was ruffled.

'How did you sleep?'

'Terrible. It was so hot. You don't have air-con. It's crazy.'

I laughed. 'You get used to it, don't worry. And you should see what it's like in summer.'

'In summer I will stay in the hotel. Or in a proper house.' She turned and looked out through the trees.

'Would you like some coffee—' I stopped. She just looked at me. 'Sorry,' I went on, 'I forgot. There's a tea pot in the cupboard and unopened box of leaf tea. It might be a bit old, but it'll be fine.' Caroline was the tea drinker. I'd thrown out what was in the caddy when I washed the tea pot, which had been left wet with tea in it and gone mouldy.

'There's bread in the freezer and stuff in the fridge. And—um—some eggs if you want to boil one?'

Nadya shrugged then sprang up and went through the door. I couldn't help remembering her when she was young, all those years ago, impulsive, judgemental, but innocent as well.

She came back out with the tea pot and a mug.

'Nothing to eat?'

She shrugged again.

'Don't tell me you smoke.'

‘Do you think I am crazy?’

‘I don’t know you. Perhaps.’ I suddenly wanted to shake her. What was it all about, this far-fetched visit of hers, the whole interview thing. But I knew I’d find out, and I knew I’d been hiding myself in Australia. There was too much hidden. And, of course, there was always the nagging fact: I was, in a way, too guilty.

‘What do we do today?’ she asked. ‘Besides fly to Kiev.’

‘Besides that, I have to find my passport and pack a few things and do some work on the computer upstairs. I always back up before I travel. It’ll take me a couple of hours to do all that. Then we can have lunch and leave late afternoon. We’ll have dinner at a nice place I know near the airport, then we can check in with plenty of time.’

She nodded.

‘If you like,’ I went on, ‘you can take a walk further along the road. There’s a marina at the end. Nothing much happening, but you can see the creek properly. It’s quite nice.’

She sipped the tea. ‘You need to get some sugar,’ she said.

‘Ah. Sorry.’

I carried on browsing the net, while Nadya watched the trees. The cicadas came back, louder than ever. Nadya screwed up her face and swallowed the last of her tea. She looked at me as if to ask how I could bear it. I smiled. She stood up and went inside, leaving her mug.

Later, showered and dressed, she came out again and told me she’d be back. The side gate clanked shut. I looked out through the trees. What if she didn’t come back?

The day flew by. I screwed up the backup and thought I’d lost all my work since the last time. The irony of the whole thing is that if you just leave the computer as it is, you have a small chance of losing your data. But when you start backing-up and encrypting and doing all the clever stuff I do, there seems to be a higher chance of it all going wrong. Still, it’s worth it to be safe. You never know who might look on the computer when you’re not there, and the thought of it happening while I was away was simply too much. Although there’s much less illicit stuff on my hard drive than there used to be, old habits die hard. It was already four o’clock by the time I was ready. Then there was Nadya. Of course, she was all ready to go.

I got out and checked the front door for the second time. When I got back she asked why I’d done that.

‘Oh, just have to be sure.’

‘Ach. The only time you can be sure is when you are dead,’ she said.

I smiled. ‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll give you that.’ We set off.

The drive was fine, and dinner at the restaurant in Brighton-le-Sands was delicious. A crisp Frascati set off the seafood. Nadya was obviously hungry and ordered extra garlic bread. I began to relax.

In the car, we’d talked about general stuff. What it was like in Sydney. What she thought of Kiev. What were the best places in each city. What did she think about the war and the Russians? She didn’t have much opinion on politics. What about Europe, didn’t she like Europe? She just looked at me and I remembered, she’d said she hadn’t travelled much. I kept my eyes on the road. She was revealing small things, but not telling me what I wanted to know.

It wasn’t until we’d checked in her suitcase and had gone through security that I began to wonder what I was doing. At the point where immigration checks your passport, when you know you’re officially leaving the country, I knew something important was happening. This girl had appeared in my life less than a week earlier, and suddenly I was boarding a plane with her to go back to a city where I’d lived for five years, a long time ago. And, yes, it was a part of my life I’d sought to erase. I glanced at Nadya. She smiled. I handed over my passport, e-ticket and departure card.

When we met up on the other side, I said she was lucky they’d let her go. She looked at me curiously. I said this used to be a prison colony, it was very hard to get out of, not so long ago. She thought that was stupid. I said it was a joke. She pulled a face. We walked along the airport concourse, dodging the increasing number of retail displays—perfume and whisky and enormous packets of triangular chocolate.

Nadya looked enquiringly at me. Sure, I told her. She could wander around. She hesitated. I gave her some money. If she needed more, it would be okay. I watched her drifting along the aisles, studying the labels.

There was a bar just beyond the first shopping area, so I ordered a beer and sat facing the shops, so I could see her when she came past. As I watched, a group of young women, very much the same age as Nadya, walked in the wrong direction, back towards the entrance. They too stopped in the shopping area and fanned out. They were dressed similarly enough to Nadya, but they looked so different. In one way, compared to them, she was unworldly, yet she knew so much more.

I checked my phone. Nothing. I'd half expected something from Lucia, but then again she and Manuel were perfectly capable of handling everything without me. Anyway I could check my email on the plane. I swallowed some more beer. Someone appeared right next to me.

'Hey.'

'Oh. Nadya. I was expecting you to come from over there.' She sat down on a stool beside mine. 'Well,' I said, smiling. 'Did you find anything?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing. It's all the same. Each shop has the same things and the same prices. Why do they bother?'

'I honestly don't know. People are on holiday. They're not thinking very clearly. And this is a captive market.'

'But the shops pretend to be different. Each one seems to be a new one. Except they're not.'

'Welcome to capitalism, baby.'

She studied my face. 'You think I don't know?'

'I didn't mean that. It was a joke.'

'I know capitalism, Max. I know buying and selling. Not just people in the West understand that.'

Chastened, I nodded.

I bought her a drink, Bloody Mary, and brought it back.

She'd moved to a booth.

'Here you go,' I said. 'Cheers.'

'*Na zdorov'ya,*' she said. '*Budmo!*'

I smiled and lifted up my glass. '*Hey! Cheers.*'

We clinked glasses and drank. The group of young women, now laden with glossy shopping bags, wandered past, laughing and excited. Nadya watched them go. I wondered what she was thinking. The concourse was quiet now.

'When we were filling out forms back there—' I motioned with my head.

'Yes?'

'What did you put under usual occupation?'

'Why?'

'Just curious.'

'Well,' she said. 'I wrote photographer.'

‘Okay.’

‘Why?’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘Is that true?’

She shrugged. ‘Not really. But you know—’

I waited.

‘You don’t always tell the truth. And if you put journalist ... but ... you never put journalist.’

‘I don’t think that matters so much these days. Does it?’

Her eyes flashed. ‘Actually it does. Maybe only if you come from where I come from. But it does. My mother—’ she stopped.

There was a jolt in my chest. I looked away, so she would not see my face. Now at last we were getting somewhere. But how to negotiate? I waited.

‘Where I come from, you must be careful sometimes. Journalist means trouble.’

‘I understand. I didn’t mean—’

‘That is why I say photographer.’ She looked at me. ‘What about you?’

‘My passport says photographer. That’s okay.’

She nodded. ‘I know.’ She smiled. I felt better.

‘But,’ I went on. I couldn’t stop myself. ‘What should it say?’

‘As I told you, journalist. You know.’

I waited for her to say some more.

‘Sounds great. You’re a writer.’

‘No.’ She was emphatic. ‘I am not a writer. A reporter.’

‘But it’s the same thing. A reporter uses words. The same as a writer. Actually, I think a photographer is a writer, but in images not in words. Don’t you—’

‘I do not. A writer reveals everything about themselves. Everything.’ She was surprisingly intense, completely different to how she’d been earlier.

I went on, ‘A writer tells a story in words. A photographer—’

‘I understand. But I do not think so. Words tell everything about what is inside a person. When someone writes, they are letting you see inside their head.’

‘But they make up the words. Even if it is a true story, they choose them.’

‘And they choose them from their own head.’ She was speaking carefully. ‘So they let us see inside their head. It has to be that way. The words are not outside their head.’

I thought for a second. She'd made a good case. I fell back on my greater experience as a photographer. The only person I knew who wanted to be a writer was Lanyard, and he'd still ended up making a career in photography.

'Okay. But when a photographer takes a picture, what is he doing? Is he not also telling a story. Is he not also letting us into his head?'

She looked at me directly. Several seconds passed. 'I don't know,' she said. 'When a photographer takes a picture, perhaps of a small girl, she is wearing no clothes, what is the photographer doing? Inside whose head is he showing?'

I couldn't say anything. Somehow everything had changed. I felt her eyes on me, cutting into me. What did she want? Was it time to talk about that now? It seemed we'd only just started.

'Your mother—' I found myself saying. She watched my face. 'How is she?'

Nadya pulled herself upright and swallowed the last of her drink. 'I don't think I want another one. What about you?'

I said nothing, waiting for her to answer.

'Then I will go for a walk. I will find the women's.'

I pointed vaguely down the concourse. She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. I watched her. I thought we'd been making progress. But there was a long way to go. I looked at my watch. There was another hour at least before they called the flight. I thought about another drink, but decided against it. Perhaps I'd take a wander, look at the technology displays. Something to distract myself. The old feeling, it returned again. It was true, I thought as I took the handle of my case and put my wallet in my back pocket. It was always true. I was guilty.

9.

I found her again near the gate, sitting cross-legged on the floor, leaning against a big pillar, her tablet on her lap and plugged into the outlet set into the floor. She was oblivious to everyone, a smile on her face. I watched her for a while, as she tapped and swiped. It's a strange thing, watching someone you know, when they haven't yet realised you're there. They're in another world, their own world, their real world, outside yours, a world that you can never claim knowledge of, a world which does not—at that moment—have you in it. Only when you appear, only when they turn and see you, do they admit you into their world. Until that moment, you're a notion, a memory, an idea. And at that moment, their behaviour might change, knowing you are there. Fraudsters, con-artists, cheats, liars, all these rely on your acceptance of the world they construct knowing you are observing them. But of course, as you discover later, that world was only a fabrication. Their own reality was quite different. And you no longer have any part in it. Too late, you realise the truth, but the trickster has already gone, taking whatever it was he—or she—wanted.

What might Nadya yet do, sitting there in her own real world, thinking she was not being observed by anyone who knew her? I wondered if she was communicating with someone online. What world existed beyond that which she shared with me, allowed me to see? A world full of secrets, perhaps, being discussed right there. I wondered if I should walk over and ask, or at least just interrupt, even if only by making myself visible to her. Yet it was strangely compelling, this surreptitious watching. I lingered for several moments, enjoying the illicit pleasure, terrified that she might glance up and catch me. I stepped forward. There was an announcement. Nadya looked up and saw me. She smiled. I was back in her world.

‘My tablet has no battery. I forgot to charge it last night.’

‘We can probably charge it on the plane. There's usually a power outlet.’

‘Really?’

‘Wasn’t there one on the plane you came over on?’

She shrugged. ‘I slept. And ate the meals. Then I slept again. But wait, I have to send this mail.’

Another announcement. Boarding was commencing. Nadya was paying no attention. I wondered again who she was emailing. Then I thought about our next move. We still had to get on the plane. I studied my e-ticket, remembering that Lucia had booked me on business class: I could board immediately. But of course, Nadya’s ticket was in economy. She would have to wait. I stayed with her. I leaned against the pillar and watched the economy class line slowly diminishing. Eventually, Nadya stood up and announced she was ready to go. Gathering her stuff, she walked with me to the front desk. She was directed to the right. I went left. She looked confused. Then she was gone and I walked along the airbridge into the calm of business class.

Soft music played. The cabin crew wandered up and down, offering refreshments. I took a mineral water. My seat was an aisle one and there was no one yet beside me. There was more than enough room even if there was someone there, but of course it was preferable to be alone. As we’d been among the last on the plane, things were looking good. I settled back. What was I doing? Returning to Kiev. What would happen? I had no idea. Nadya had a plan and I was going along. Something would happen. But that was all hours and hours away yet. I flicked on my phone and swiped through the news it had downloaded.

Eventually there was an announcement for the doors to be closed. The seat beside me was still empty. The plane began to move. A hostess walked past. I thought about asking her if Nadya might be allowed to sit beside me. I decided to try after we’d taken off. The hostess smiled at me and checked my seat number. I returned the smile. She bent down to speak to me.

‘Mr Argent.’

‘Yes. How are you?’

‘Good. As you can see, we’re not too busy tonight. I believe you are on the same booking as a Ms Kuznetsova?’

Nadya.

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Well, the flight director wondered if you might like her to join you? Your flyer status allows us to offer you this, and as you can see, there’s space.’

I smiled. ‘I would like that very much. Thank you.’

‘Please wait until after take off. Then we’ll move her up.’

The plane seemed to wait forever for its turn to take off. I sat there wondering what was going to happen. Eventually we were in the air.

Nadya slipped into the seat beside me. The air hostess behind her smiled and helped her put her bag into the locker overhead. Nadya turned to me. ‘You were going to leave me back there?’

I shook my head. ‘It was your original ticket—’ I saw her face. ‘Sorry. Blame Lucia.’

‘Well, thank goodness they have nice crew on this plane.’ She leaned back and stretched her legs, sighed happily. She turned to me again. ‘This is good. Very good. Always I will travel this way.’

I smiled at her and said nothing. She pulled out her tablet and I showed her where to plug in the USB cable to charge it. The unit came brightly into life. Nadya was grateful. If only she could check her email. But, I said, she could. I took out my credit card and turned on her WiFi. The tablet found the connection and I quickly logged in using my card details. Then she had some data. I warned her it was hardly anything and she shrugged. She shouldn’t download fancy webpages. She said she wouldn’t. Stick to email and forget attachments, okay. She sat back in the seat, contentedly prodding at the tablet.

I logged in my mobile phone as well, so I could check email. There was nothing. I turned it off and began flicking through the screens on the entertainment system. So many movies, so little to watch. I pulled out the inflight magazine and browsed it for a while, looking at the glossy full-page advertisements. Wristwatches, fountain pens, perfume, alcohol. What more did a person need?

After about half an hour, Nadya prodded me on the arm. Her online allowance had just run out. I wasn’t surprised. I wanted to ask her what she’d done with it, how had it gone so quickly. But instead I just offered to renew for her. No, she was okay. With her tablet charging and her seat almost fully extended, she was happy. We had drinks: she, a vodka tonic and I, a beer. Drinking on planes is stupid but pleasant; it passes the time. And we had a lot of talking still to do.

We clinked glasses. We remarked on the decor and the space in this section of the plane. But we didn't talk. She read a magazine, then turned on her entertainment unit. I turned mine back on too and found a movie. We ate dinner, each of us with our screens on. Nadya was impressed by the choices and by the quality of the food. It takes a lot longer to eat in business class. And we still hadn't talked. I realised I didn't know how to start. Away from the context in which we'd become acquainted, in Sydney—the hotel, the interview, even Cottage Point—away from those reference points, we were more like strangers again. Nadya pulled up her blanket and turned to sleep. I started another movie.

Later I woke. The cabin was darker and the air cooler. I reached for my blanket. Nadya was curled under hers. I lay there for a while, listening to the steady whine of the engines.

At some point, I heard Nadya whispering. Was I asleep? Yes I was, wasn't she? No, she couldn't sleep any more. She said she wanted to talk. I sighed. I was exhausted, but perhaps this was what we needed. I raised my seat.

She was watching me expectantly. I looked around the cabin. Everyone else was still, even the cabin crew. Nadya looked out her window, then back at me.

'Where are we?' she said.

I leaned past her and looked out. 'Borneo,' I said, resting back in my seat. She studied my face. How did I know that? It was dark out there. I pointed at the flight map on the console. Borneo. She rolled her eyes.

I asked her if she'd flown much before. She looked directly at me and shook her head. The flight out was her first ever. This was her second.

Did she like it? It was okay, what about me? Had I flown a lot, besides for work?

I told her I'd been flying since I was born. Unaccompanied minor, the whole boarding school thing. Of course, she said, and we were back in the interview again, and I didn't mind. Travelling alone, she said, what was that like? As I talked to her, in the darkness, I felt her surprisingly close. I could smell her hair and perfume. But it was the sense of proximity that you always get in such situations that I felt more. Usually I loathe it. But this time, with Nadya, I didn't mind. I didn't mind at all.

I told her about the flights to and from Brazil, going to school or coming back. Being an unaccompanied minor meant being herded around the airport with other snotty kids,

supposedly waiting where we were told to wait, but sneaking off to go to the toilet or to buy sweets or just to be bad. But once we were on the plane, we were in our own worlds. Neither home nor at school. Eleven hours until London. Eleven hours to do whatever you wanted, within the narrow limits of the seat and the cabin, to read, or listen to the Walkman, or watch the movie, or just dream. Then, after an hour or two's wait in Heathrow, the shuttle to Manchester. Then being picked up by my uncle and being driven first to his house for a meal of beans on toast. Then back in the car and we'd be crossing the moors. There was a lay-by, up on the hill, where my uncle would stop the car. He'd pour us coffees from the thermos and open a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits. You could see the lights of the town down below, and there, in the darker patch, that was the school grounds, there were all the school buildings and scattered further out, the boarding houses. You could look down on them and wonder what was happening. You weren't in that world yet, but it was waiting there, as it had been all along. The whole journey had been a temporary distraction, a moment of suspended life, between home and school.

I paused. Nadya said nothing.

I went on. Hey, ho, my uncle would say, and start the car, ready to move out of the lay-by. I'd always hoped it wouldn't start, but it always did. He was good with cars. We'd drive along the winding road in silence. Then we'd be parking on the street, and I'd be lifting out my suitcase and my hand luggage. Suddenly I'd be in the neon of the junior common room and carrying my suitcase upstairs and unpacking my stuff and seeing everyone there, friends and enemies, the car with my uncle in it already long gone.

I waited in the darkness. Nadya still said nothing. Did she have aunts and uncles? I turned to see her properly. Her eyes were closed and a soft snore passed her lips. I leant back and looked at the dark.

The captain came over the speakers and announced we were about an hour from Dubai. The cabin crew, she said, would soon be serving breakfast. Outside the plane it was still pitch dark. Nadya got up out of her seat and pulled down her bag, rummaging around for what seemed like an eternity. Finding what she wanted, she walked behind us and chose a toilet cubicle. On my phone, I flicked through the pages of the newspaper which had been refreshed since I last looked. Nothing untoward. Nothing interesting. There

almost never is, just the same old recycled stories and opinions. I looked out the window. Oblivion. I rested my head back and thought about the flight. She'd revealed nothing further. Despite my attempts, she simply wouldn't talk. I felt a surge of frustration.

Nadya came back. She'd changed out of the jeans and top, and was wearing a baggy white t-shirt that managed to accentuate her figure. Underneath were black leggings. She sat down, looking enquiringly at me. What was I looking at?

'You're so beautiful,' I said.

She looked at me for a moment before replying: 'I don't think so. And anyway there are many beautiful women.'

'I know. But really.' I found myself almost pleading with her. 'You are.'

'Really?' Her demeanour changed subtly. 'So, I am beautiful, am I?'

I nodded. I could have made light of my comment. I could have withdrawn, it would have been easy enough to do. But since we'd been on the plane, she'd avoided connecting with me. I must have thought that this would, in some way, make or provoke a response.

'Well, I tell you that I am not. But, anyway—' She put her hand on my arm, on my skin. It was the first time she'd intentionally touched me. 'You, Max, you are handsome. Really, you are.'

I shook my head. 'No. Nadya.' I watched her face. It had become distant. 'I am not attractive and I never was. Also I am old. I am nearly thirty years older than you. And I am your—'

'Father,' she said. There was a curious finality in her voice. I meant to go on, but I stopped.

'Okay,' she said. 'I agree. You are not handsome. But, Max, you are very wealthy.'

'Well, not really. Not at all, in the scheme of things. You do know that—'

'But, yes. Of course you are. Compared to the men I know—' she paused. 'Very wealthy. Do not deny it.'

The cabin lights were coming back on. I could see her face more clearly now. There wasn't anger in her face, but something close.

'When a man tells a woman she is beautiful,' Nadya went on. 'He means he wants to fuck her.' She paused. 'Always.'

I shook my head. 'How do you know that, Nadya? You're only twenty-two—'

‘I am twenty-three. You think that is too young to know such a thing?’

I had no answer.

She sighed deeply, as if she were dealing with a child.

‘So, Max,’ she went on, speaking slowly. ‘Am I still beautiful? Perhaps you will take my photograph?’ Her tone was flat. Her eyes caught the cabin lights that were now fully on. I seemed completely excluded from her world. I had become, as I sat there, fully outside her world. I tried to say I was sorry, but she turned and leaned back on her seat. I leaned back in mine, alone in my own world.

10.

‘Extraordinary, isn’t it?’ I’ve seen the Burj Khalifa quite a few times, once while it was being built, and on three separate trips since, but it never fails to impress, soaring up as it does, shouldering its way into the sky towards the sharpest and most distant point. We were sitting in comfortable armchairs, looking out from the bar on the fifty-fifth floor of one of the hotels that were part of the same complex. Everything outside was lit up in the desert night, the fountains below, the buildings around and the tower itself. And behind, the star-riddled darkness.

‘It’s like a science fiction. Really,’ Nadya looked at me. ‘It is very beautiful. But it is cold.’

‘You haven’t put a foot outside yet,’ I said. ‘We went from the airbus to the terminal in a walkway, and from the terminal to the metro which went straight inside this whole place. It’s hot out there. Trust me.’

‘Okay. But still. The glass and the steel. There’s no warmth.’

I lifted my beer and she her cocktail. We clinked. We shouldn’t have been drinking. It was seven a.m. in Sydney, time to get up and have breakfast. But here were, midnight in Dubai, with time to kill. There were ice storms over central Europe, and we were delayed at least twelve hours. The airline had given us vouchers for a hotel, plus refreshments, and arranged for us to be whisked through immigration. Nadya’s suitcase stayed in the system so she had just taken her cabin bag. I had my small cabin case with me.

There was no one else in the bar except an Asian couple at the far end and the bar staff, both Indian, both young, a man and a woman. The waiter had spoken English with an American accent, very clear, very international. I glanced over. He was polishing glasses, she was approaching the other couple, negotiating the sets of steps that gave access to the tiered seating platforms that dropped towards the huge floor-to-ceiling

windows, the way a theatre's floor drops towards the stage. It must kill the legs, walking up and down those steps all day and all night long.

I turned back, glancing at Nadya's reflection in the glass. She was curled up in the big chair, her feet pulled up under her, the ballet pumps on the floor. From time to time, she reached forward and scooped some of the salted cashews the waiter had put down on the low table.

'We should talk,' I said.

She turned to me. For a moment I thought she looked tired and maybe I'd chosen the wrong time. But her eyes came alive. 'What do you want to talk about?'

'What are we doing here?' I said.

She paused. 'Your secretary made the bookings. And there is the weather—' Her voice tailed off.

'You know what I mean.'

She just looked back, waiting.

'You travelled all the way from Kiev to Sydney. You pretended to be someone else. The whole interview thing.'

She nodded.

'What is this about?'

My question hung in the air, floating against the glass. Down below, the fountains began their routine once again. The water surged up, three stories, five stories, it was hard to tell. The single jets fired one after another, each one lit up from below. When they were all alight and shooting up into the air, they began swaying, all together. Despite the obvious scale of the display, it seemed toylike from where we sat. Yet it was mesmerising.

She drew herself up in the chair. 'What I thought is, is this the same man?'

I waited to see if she would mention Felix. She carried on. 'The English photographer. You. I knew your name, the Max Argent name, because I have seen your work. But I never saw your face. Only when I heard about the award, then I saw a photograph of you. Do you understand?'

I nodded. I sipped the beer. She reached forward and drank a little of her cocktail.

'It's strange—' She paused. 'I had looked at your work for years but I did not know it was you. You understand that?'

'I do, yes.'

She looked at me. ‘It was your face, but you were, well, older. I mean, it is how long?’ She watched me closely.

‘It was 1999. Fourteen years ago.’

‘Yes. Fourteen years ago. And how old was I?’

I looked down at my drink. She waited.

‘Come on. Tell me.’

‘You were eight.’

‘I was eight years old. I was a little girl.’

‘I know.’

‘I didn’t know anything about the world.’

I glanced up. She wasn’t looking at me, but somewhere over my shoulder. I watched her face. Perhaps it was the light, but it seemed to change. For a moment, I could still see the grown up Nadezhda, then perhaps her mother, then little Nadya—she turned to look directly at me. ‘And you disappeared.’

My throat was dry. The air-conditioning. I lifted the glass and drank the last mouthful of beer. As if by magic, the young man appeared by my side. Did I want another one? I looked up and nodded. He raised his eyebrows at Nadya. She shook her head. He turned and climbed the steps.

‘You have,’ she said, ‘very much to tell me.’

I nodded. Her head was level with mine. Her face seemed to have relaxed somewhat. Perhaps there was going to be a smile. But the lips remained firm, the eyes steady.

‘And you, Nadya. You have much to tell me.’

She looked away. I couldn’t tell if it was defiance or vulnerability. I waited.

Her eyes found mine. The sharpness was confronting. I felt myself almost wilt.

‘Please,’ I said. ‘Tell me?’

She crossed her arms over her chest. ‘Me? You think I have to tell you? What have I to tell you?’ Her voice hung in the air, it’s Slavic timbre warm and strong. She went on: ‘What is there for me to tell? We lived in Kiev, Mama, you and me. We lived in Vladivostok, all three. Okay. Fine. Vladivostok. Then, one day, you are gone. I am eight years old. I am still in Vladivostok. Me and Mama. We didn’t go any place. Only you. And you want me to tell you? There is nothing to tell. Only some big space.’

She was talking to the glass window, to the crazy sci-fi world outside, the amazing buildings, the impossible tower, the surging fountains born in light. I looked out as well,

catching the reflection of the waiter descending the steps carefully, Nadya sitting motionless. The waiter set down the beer along with a fresh bowl of cashews, taking away the empty one. Did we want to see the menu? I asked Nadya if she was hungry. She shook her head. The waiter left us.

Nadya rearranged herself, then reached forward into her bag, pulling out her cardigan. I said the air-con was pretty fierce and we could go if she wanted. It didn't matter about the beer. We could get rooms here, the vouchers we had would work fine. She could have a warm shower. Her body clock was upside down. Perhaps she should eat. But she said she was fine. We sat in silence. I looked at my phone, Nadya at her tablet. I stole glances at her in the reflection from time to time. She seemed back to normal, back in control.

Flicking to the *Guardian Australia* website and scrolling down the page, I came to a small item near the bottom. *Gallery controversy*. I knew before I clicked the link that it would be Lanyard, but I followed it anyway. Sure enough, his section of the up-coming revamp of the gallery was being suspended. A prominent shock jock, Alby Mitchell, a small, loud-mouthed man, claimed to have been sent an email by a listener who'd included images of the pictures that were to be shown. The gallery had reacted immediately. History was repeating itself. I knew Lanyard would be upset. It was only two days since the decision for the show had been made. I checked my watch. One a.m. in Dubai, eight o'clock in the morning in Melbourne. I supposed he'd be asleep.

Nadya was still quiet, just flicking through pages on the tablet. She saw me looking, then turned back. She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand.

'Let's get those rooms,' I said. 'Might as well. We still have ten hours. A lie down would be nice, wouldn't it?'

She nodded in agreement. I waved to the waiter. After I'd given him the vouchers, I suggested to Nadya that she stay there with the bags and I'd go down to get the rooms. She was happy with that.

When I came back, she was curled up with her eyes closed. She glanced up, a little girl, as I came down the last step.

The lifts took us back down twenty floors to our level. The hotel corridors were the same as elsewhere in the building, dark wood edging against a plain off-white decor. It was elegant, if a little oppressive. Reception had given us neighbouring rooms. The man at the desk hadn't mentioned, but there was a connecting door. I could see on my side

there was a physical lock, and I imagined the same on the other side. I unlocked mine, then wondered if I should disturb her. Reception had asked what time we wanted to be called and I'd told them to call us both an hour before we had to leave the hotel.

In my room, I stood by the window and thought about what I wanted to do. While I was looking out, I heard Nadya's voice on the other side. I heard her unlocking the door and I opened mine. There she was, smiling. Did I have a spare USB cable? Her tablet was already charging on the only one she had. I opened my case and found a cord and handed it to her. She hesitated before leaving.

'It's funny, these rooms.'

I must have looked confused.

'Like in a Hollywood movie. You know. His room and her room. What will happen? Who will cross into the other room?' She smiled and I did too.

'I'm not crossing anywhere except,' I pointed to my bed, 'there.'

'Okay. Me too. Don't let me sleep in.'

I said of course not. We closed our doors.

I didn't go to sleep though, not right away. Instead I plugged in my laptop and connected to the WiFi. Then I left the unit to catch up while I looked out of the window. We were on the other side to the Burj, and down below was a huge elevated expressway with what looked like eight lanes in each direction. On each side were office buildings, and beyond, smaller residential blocks and, further out, there were no lights at all. That was probably the desert, I decided.

I turned back to the laptop. There was nothing new in email, just the usual updates and some housekeeping from Manuel. Mia, the intern, had resigned. Manuel wasn't impressed, but I silently cheered her. It can't be right to work for nothing, and no one should put up with it. I made a mental note to tell him I'd like to interview her if she applied to us for a real job.

I was about to close the lid of the machine when I saw a Skype notification—Lanyard was online. I did a brief calculation. It would be nine in the morning now.

I guessed he'd want to talk. I clicked the name. He accepted the call.

'How are you going?' I asked. It turned out not to be Lanyard after all—it was Sally who'd heard the Skype ringing and had picked up my call.

‘He’s okay,’ she replied. ‘He’s still in bed. He had a big night last night. Bad news.’ She paused. ‘Did you hear?’

I told her I’d read it online half an hour earlier.

‘It’s shithouse,’ she said. I agreed with her. They were indeed total cowards.

‘It was that useless PR person again and that bastard Alby Mitchell. Quentin has gone to ground. No one knows where he is.’ She laughed. ‘Simon told them they simply had no integrity. No backbone. Everything was Twitter this and Facebook that, all safe and boring and predictable. Nobody standing up for anything. Everyone too busy re-tweeting inane comments, liking this and that crap. Morons.’ She paused. ‘He made a bit of a fool of himself really. Told them they were all cowards. Stomped out of the office. Then he stopped at his mate Paul’s house on his way home—except I didn’t know—and they got themselves blind drunk. Wouldn’t answer his mobile. At midnight, I finally called Paul, hoping Simon was there and not in the hospital or the watch house. In the end, I had to go and pick him up.’

I commiserated and said I wished I’d been there. She didn’t think that would have made much difference.

‘I’m worried about him, Max. This strain. It’s too much.’ She paused before going on. ‘Could you, please, would you have a word with him? Call him, maybe later today?’ She went on without waiting for my reply. ‘They just won’t leave him alone. Five years ago and the police found no grounds. But they didn’t accept it. It wasn’t over. What is the point in picking on artists when there are real criminals out there, and the church and the police are covering them up?’

To be honest, I hadn’t realised how bad it was. I asked if they were okay for money.

‘Oh, we survive,’ Sally said. ‘Sure, his sales have dropped and the no one will carry his monographs any more. But it’s more than that. He’s an artist. He needs to show his work. People should engage. That’s the whole point. He should be heard, shouldn’t he?’

I could only agree. I told her I’d talked to him only a day ago. I’d keep in touch. Everything was up in the air, I said. It would all work out. Things would change, she shouldn’t worry. If there was anything I could do, I said, I’d do it. I sat looking at my screen.

Sally didn’t respond. The conversation dropped. I stared at the window, wondering if my internet was lost. I checked the WiFi signal. It was good. I flicked onto the browser screen. The icon told me I was still online. I went back to the messenger. I was about to

give up when a Skype text message popped up. Sally said she was sorry, something wrong with her audio, could we type. She apologised for her rant. I typed back it was fine, and I was sorry to hear of the problems. He just had to keep going. She agreed. And, she went on, there was something I could do. There'd been talk of an injunction against the National Gallery of Victoria, but of course naming Lanyard. Mitchell was behind it, obviously. He wanted to stop the show, on behalf of 'decent Australians everywhere'. If Lanyard intended to fight it, he'd need to appear in court. The thing was, would I be willing to testify in support of him? As someone who'd known him since he was at school? I was about to agree, and then I realised: what about Nadya? About her threat to expose me? I still didn't know what would happen in the end. She might yet do it. Were she to go ahead, my testimony would look terrible; worse than that, it would damage Lanyard, being associated with me. I realised I had to say no. I wanted to kill the Skype line there and then. She was waiting. The line stayed open. Of course, I wrote. Anything I could do.

She said she was so glad I'd called. It had helped her, she said, to let out how she felt. Knowing that I'd support him in court was such a relief. I was hardly listening to her. There was a silence. She repeated her question: How was Cottage Point? And why wasn't I at work? Obviously Lanyard hadn't passed on what I told him. It was probably just as well. I told Sally I was in Dubai and the beautiful Russian girl was asleep in the next room. We were on our way back to Kiev where I was going to meet her mother. Sally sent a stream of LOLs and told me to stop with the fantasy. I was fifty years old and it was about time I behaved like it. Whatever I was doing, she said, I should enjoy it. I let her go. In the hotel room, looking out over the dark desert, I could still hear Sally's laughter.

The bedside phone woke me up, a soft but insistent metallic shrill. I reached out at first, wondering where I was. There was light in the room—I hadn't closed the blinds—and sitting up, I could see the desert out towards the horizon.

'Mr Argent, your morning call.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'I have called Ms Kuznetsova, there's no answer.'

'It's okay, I'll deal with it. Thank you.'

'Very well. Would you like a taxi?'

I decided that we would get a taxi, why not. The traffic didn't look too bad outside on the freeway. The voice said one would be waiting for us in fifty minutes.

I gave the connecting door a quick knock and listened. Nothing. Thinking she probably was still in the shower, I decided to have one myself and get into some fresh clothes. After I'd shaved and brushed my teeth, I felt a hundred times better. I rapped on the door again. Nothing.

I opened my door and turned the recessed handle on her door. It was closed but unlocked, and I gingerly pushed it open a small way. I shouted into the gap. Was she there? Nadya?

There was still no response. I pushed open the door and stepped in the room. The bathroom had been used, I could see a bath towel draped over the chair. The bedclothes were ruffled. Her bag was packed and waiting by the door. Otherwise, the room was empty.

11.

Once again, the world tipped back and shook violently, roaring in our ears, jangling our nerves, rushing past the windows, faster and faster. Outside it was light now and the few who craned their heads to look back had views of the city we were already leaving behind. The rest found either sky or sand or perhaps a glimpse of the sea, depending on which side they were on when the plane banked. We waited for the seatbelt lights to go off. I turned to Nadya.

She was lucky, I said, we weren't late getting to the airport. I'd rushed downstairs from the hotel room and asked at the desk, then raced out into the already stifling heat to see if she'd gone to look at the fountains. She wasn't there. It was roasting outside. On my way inside, I was approached by the receptionist who told me she'd phoned upstairs and I should go to the lounge bar. There I found Nadya, standing by the big glass windows, not on the Burj side but on the other one, the same as our rooms, with the expressway a long way below, the spread of the city more impressive from this height, and, beyond, the aching endlessness of the desert, its pale blues and velvet-darks struggling to survive as the low sun continued its sluggish start to the day.

She was lucky, too, her ticket for this leg had been upgraded. I didn't mention I'd had a word at the airline desk just before we'd gone through to the departure lounge, and because the flight was almost full, I'd had to pay this time.

Nadya turned and smiled, realising I'd been talking to her. She held up the smartphone with the headphones running discreetly up under her hair. I hadn't noticed. I rolled my eyes. She pulled a face and turned back to the phone.

I made myself comfortable in the seat. It hadn't been much of a sleep in Dubai and there was that rush at the end, but here we were, still on our way. We were going to Kiev—but what was there? Nadya wasn't going to tell me, at least not then. She

slumped back in the seat, adjusting the leg rest height. She saw me watching her and smiled. She was having fun.

This time I was by the window and I looked out at the clouds that were already below us. How used we've all become to this everyday magic.

The hours passed. Since getting on the plane, I'd watched two movies (very close to my limit). I'd flipped open my e-reader and clicked through all the texts I had. I found Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, I'd forgotten it was on there. An old book, one I should have read when I was at art school—and one of the reasons I'd left. But I'd gone back to it later. I opened it up, there in the plane, and read. The act of photography, she says, is a kind of theft, an appropriation. What have you stolen from me, with your camera-machine? Of course, it's an old fear, a kind of blood libel against image makers, and I think she's stretching it a bit. But she goes on: photographs don't contain anything that is not already in the world, but they do something else—they furnish evidence. Evidence, she says, of what has been. Now she's on the money. Why else was I sitting on the plane with Nadya? Without the photographs—and they exist, they're out there, I've seen them, over and over again—it would be her word against mine. The testimony of a slim, relatively impoverished Ukrainian girl against me, a robust, well-established, world-renowned name. Who would believe her, but for the evidence? There is always the evidence.

Nadya was looking at me. 'Who were you talking to last night?' She'd put away the headphones. Obviously I'd disturbed her as she lay down to sleep in the otherwise silent hotel, with the roar of the traffic so far below, and the silence of the guestless rooms everywhere. I told her it was Sally Lanyard, the wife of Simon Lanyard, the Australia photographer. He was, I went on, a real photographer, an artist. Had she heard of him? She wasn't sure. Had he been in *Time* magazine? I said I didn't think so. Had he produce any images of nature? Of adventure? He hadn't, I said. That wasn't his shtick. I was hoping she'd lose interest, but the reverse happened. Nadya was wide awake now, and she wanted to know more.

What was this Sally like? Was she attractive? Did I want to fuck her? I shook my head. Sally was okay, and no I didn't. Sally was really good. They both were. They helped me a lot when I first arrived in Australia. I didn't say—but it's true—that it was

Lanyard who had helped me gain residency, thanks to the amnesty against Vietnamese illegal immigrants and visa-overstayers. They'd supported my legal name change without question—Ian Maxwell became Max Argent. My transformation was complete. And it was through them I met Caroline and got into the wildlife stuff. Between the three of them, they'd given me a whole new life. I did tell Nadya, quite truthfully, that I owed them everything.

So he was my friend, from a long time? Yes, he was my friend. I supposed he was my best friend. I thought about it for a moment. Actually, I said, he was my only friend. She stared at me. Was that true? It was true. When you get older, I said, your idea of friendship changes. It slips away. Friends become more like acquaintances, people with whom you are acquainted, some well, some less well. So the number of acquaintances multiplies, but they all merge in a curious way with the strangers, the many strangers that make up the world. So the strangers become less strange. In the end, no one is really a stranger, there's just a lot of acquaintances, some you've met and some you haven't.

She was staring at me. I was mad, she said. Very mad. She didn't know, she said, if she liked this talk. It was stupid. She went on. I should tell her, she said, about this Lanyard, my only friend.

I told her about Lanyard. How he'd disappeared after he was expelled. I didn't receive a letter or anything from him. Whether he'd tried or not, I didn't know. In the boarding house, there was no room for sentimentality, it could get you thumped. So you didn't care. It was important not to care. The year went past.

'Yes, but what about Lanyard?'

Apparently, he'd been sent to a sixth form crammer, so he could finish his A-levels. He still wanted to be a writer, but in those days you studied English if that was what you wanted to do, and he'd had enough of that. So he thought he'd go to art college instead, probably to Chelsea. That was the one everyone tried to get into. He had the qualifications, he had an excellent photographic portfolio, but they wouldn't take him. The business of being expelled, it was too much. It was, I said, the beginning of the eighties, we'd just had punk, you'd think having been expelled would be a credit—but apparently not. Everything was conservative again, just like that. Lanyard was devastated. He lived in a squat in Hackney and took crazy photographs of nothing. Of

course, I didn't know this at the time. I found out the next year, when I'd left school and started in art school myself.

'Where did you go?' Nadya said.

I went down to Brighton Art College. It was a modern place, a lot of fun, but it was a long way from London. And the beach was made of pebbles, which were good to photograph, but it got boring quickly. And then there was the business of critical theory. We were supposed to write essays. I don't mind talking a load of crap—Nadya nodded—but it was hard to write it down, to make it sound right. Plus I was going up to London anyway, taking photographs of small concerts and gigs. You know, I said, bands like the Stranglers and Simple Minds. There weren't professional photographers at that time, it was more do-it-yourself. I had a lot of fun and I made some money selling shots to places like *NME* and *Sounds*.

A cabin crewmember came along dispensing soft drinks. I hadn't deliberately chosen not to drink alcohol, it just didn't happen this leg. We both asked for orange juice.

I continued with my story. I was walking along Oxford Street, in Central London—Nadya nodded impatiently—like I used to do quite often. I mean, the venues I went to were there, and the West End was the place to hang out. Anyway, there, on the pavement in front of me was Simon Lanyard. We just looked at each other. Apparently when he was in the squat, he'd been a real mess. Not washing his clothes, not having a bath, that sort of thing. But when I met him, he looked okay. He had a green jacket on, drainpipe trousers and a skinny tie. And he was taking photographs, proper ones. He took me back to his flat in Rupert Street, in Soho, right in the middle of the West End.

I never went back to Brighton. I stayed the weekend. I had an assignment due. It never got done. I phoned my tutor and told her I'd be down in the middle of the week. That never happened either. Lanyard already had plans. He'd applied to migrate to Australia, and because he was so young and had a good reference from his work, and his A-levels were really good, he was able to get residency. I didn't understand why he wanted to go to the arse end of the world. It was probably nice enough for a holiday, but not forever.

Nadya was listening closely. I'd almost forgotten I was talking to her. She asked me why had he gone.

I said it was probably because he felt let down. Something about the prudishness of the UK. How he'd been the only one not to sell his negatives when we all got caught.

Yet he was the one to be punished. I thought he'd really internalised all that, and it had damaged him.

She wasn't impressed. She said it couldn't have been that bad. He should have tried living in a former communist country. Then he would know how bad things could be. Her mother—she began, then stopped. It was never so easy, she said. Anyway, she said. So he went. What happened next?

What happened next was that I got his job. He'd been working for a magazine. The proprietor was a man called Raymond, we called him Mr Raymond. He had a number of titles, what you'd call men's magazines. Nadya nodded slowly. You mean, she said, magazines for men, with pictures of naked women inside? You wanted to work on that? Her eyes were on mine. I shrugged. I'd quit college. I had no job and Lanyard was leaving his. I was staying with him and after he'd gone I'd have to pay the full rent. I had been taking photographs all my life. What difference did it make what the subject was? I would be paid.

So I worked in Soho, in Old Compton Street, in pornography.

I started being experimental, you had to with Mr Raymond. He really wanted to expand his titles, develop new areas of the market. He was the first to go with ugliness. It seems so obvious, looking back now. Everyone's done nasty now. We're up to our necks in MILFs and messy and midget porn. Not that these are ugly, but they were not the kind of thing men's magazines featured. It used to be young, good-looking, tall, blonde, young and young. Mr Raymond changed all that.

We had a schedule, managed by Jacqui. Jacqui was just an ordinary person. She lived in Croydon and it was a slog for her, travelling up. But she was always there on time, 10 a.m., door unlocked, office aired, kettle on. Mr Raymond wouldn't come in until at least eleven, more like lunchtime. But you never knew.

While Lanyard was still there, we had a laugh, the three of us. And Jacqui was very good with the models. They'd knock on the door, hesitant tentative taps, and she'd open it, smiling and cheerful. Come in, love. Make yourself at home. Fancy a cuppa?

Before you knew it, the woman would be stark naked in front of the clothes racks and Jacqui would be choosing this and that. The afternoon would go in a blur. The model would change first one outfit then another, she'd try the boots, the shoes, the sandals, bare feet. We'd go for the secretary look, the business lady, the mum with

teenagers, the military wife. We had her against the window, over the bed, at the desk, in the armchair, back on the bed, looking coy, looking sultry, looking horny—always looking horny—or looking as though she'd just been screwed by an entire platoon. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Usually it did.

All the time, Jacqui would be doing her best. Making jokes, making small talk, making another pot of tea. Redoing the model's make-up. We all did our best. Sometimes though we'd have to leave Jacqui and the model on their own. Jacqui would tell us when to come back, when to say something, when not to say anything. And at the end, I'd have the pictures and the model would have her small clasp of banknotes.

It wasn't always ugly, but it usually was. After I'd been there several years, Lanyard was long gone to Australia and I only got the odd Christmas card from him, I struck on something that Mr Raymond really liked. I developed a new specialist pornographic genre, not for general interest: the upskirt. Let's be honest, the hand-held camera is purpose-built so that men can take photographs up women's skirts without them knowing. What women have hidden from view is a source of endless fascination for everyone, and everyone wants to look, always. Why else would skirts be worn and legs be shown but to prick that interest? Anyway, the notion of the upskirt as a genre of pornography is relatively new. This is how it came about.

I came up with the idea on a weekday ferry, going from Harwich to the Hook of Holland. I was on my way to Berlin. I had a Leica at that stage, a neat pocket-sized rangefinder camera. I'd taken a few photographs, some of Hull harbour under a heavy sky, pictures of the sea from the ferry, some views of the main bar in the casino area, empty but for a few dedicated souls. The interior shots were street-style, taken surreptitiously, Leica held at waist-level or just sitting on the table with the self-timer running. There are two kinds of photography—overt and covert. In the first one, subjects can tell what's going on, irrespective of whether they're actually posing or just happen to be in shot. Then there's the other kind.

For a photographer, the difference is academic. Subjects are simply manifestations of the interaction between light and the natural world, reflectors and transmitters. No one owns the light that fills our world. The fact that some of it reflects from human subjects is no more or less significant than if it were to bounce off inanimate objects. The light reaches me, the photographer, or rather my camera's film, via the lens and the aperture, and that's how the photograph is taken. It's the only way. I couldn't care less what

happened *before* the light reaches me. Why should I? What am I, God? Am I responsible for everything that happens in the light-filled world? Who would claim that responsibility? Of course, covert photography presents its own special challenge—lighting. How to make sure there's enough, when you're pretending you're not taking a photograph. Even my 800 ASA black-and-white Fujifilm needed some light, and there's a constant struggle to find perspectives that maximise available illumination. Essentially it's a technical problem.

I knew I had no decent pictures, and I put the camera away and went back into the casino bar. A group of five girls and two lads were celebrating on the ferry, one of the girls' birthdays, and the fizzy wine was flowing. There's nothing like the pop of champagne, even at eleven in the morning, to enliven a gathering and attract attention. Although there was no single bright light source, the large room was surprisingly well-lit, with small spotlights everywhere. I stayed at my corner table, facing into the room. Fortunately for me, several girls were sitting at the edge of their table, legs facing me, as they turned to join in the fun. Perfect. As they drank, the girls were more and more outrageous—they were on holiday, a long weekend, the party was just beginning. Of course I wasn't the only one watching. There were plenty of males, lonely truck drivers, or businessmen in ones and twos, and everyone in the room was at least, from time to time, glancing over. Some were staring. Of course, I didn't stare. Rule number one, never stare. But I did watch. And my Leica was sitting on the table in front of me, pointing their way, pre-focused, aperture widest, ready.

The noise became louder. The faces became redder. Eye make-up ran with tears of laughter. The girls' bodies moved more easily as the alcohol's lubrication spread. Sleeves rolled up. Skirts rode up. Blouse buttons yielded. Breasts quivered as waves of hilarity passed through the group, reflecting off the harsh walls and the faces of the watching men. Legs parted, skirts were tight across thighs, panties were showing, and there were the shots I was looking for. Mr Raymond would love them.

He took the prints of course and the negatives. Very good, he said. I had an eye, he said, he'd always said that. Look how I burned in the men's faces all round the edges. They were there, but they were in the darkness, bringing the light to the centre, drawing the sightlines to the cluster of girls in the middle of the frame. Did I see the highlights? Of course I saw the highlights, I'd made sure they sparkled, glinted, shone. The harsh

contrasty paper drew them out. And I'd dodged them in the enlarger, holding the wand so that less light fell, keeping those areas bright. The cut glass in the chandeliers. The bezels on the wall mirrors. The flashes on the cutlery and the champagne flutes in the foreground. The white panties of the centre-right girl, her legs parted long enough for my film to be exposed, the dark stockings ending below a perfect band of soft white flesh. Very good, he said. Black stockings, he said. Had I paid her? I hadn't? They were real pictures? They were. Perfect, he said. Perfect detail, beautifully expressed, the touch of genius. Of Rembrandt. 'The Night Watch'. He was getting carried away. Exquisite. Lovely work. I'd kept, he said, the girls light, lifting them out of the frame. And there in the background, the dark-eyed men. He wasn't asking me, he was telling me. He could see it all, he said. And he was right. I smiled. There's nothing better, when you're an artist, when you've made something new, something no one has ever seen before, there's nothing better than having them view your work and get—without you explaining—what you've done. Mr Raymond got what I'd done. He was like that. He was, by his own admission, a connoisseur, an aficionado. One thing, he said, no model release forms? I shook my head. No problem, he said, this was private material, his own collection, no problem at all.

He offered me a hundred knicker for the lot, including the negatives. I said three hundred. He hesitated. I reminded him of 'The Night Watch'. All right, he said, two hundred. We shook. He pulled the twenties from his wallet and told me to get back to work.

Nadya was asking me something. I'd almost forgotten she was there. She repeated the question. 'This trip was to Berlin?'

I watched her face carefully, trying not to show my own interest. We were so close now to the heart of the thing.

'Yes,' I said. 'It was.' My mouth was dry. I swallowed.

'And when,' she said, 'was this trip to Berlin?'

I knew exactly when it was. 'November 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall.'

'So, you were there,' she said. She paused. 'Did you know Felix?'

I nodded. 'I knew Felix.' I waited, watching her. Then I asked her directly, 'Have you spoken to Felix, recently?'

She stared at me. Then she told me—very directly—that it was she who was asking the questions. In the silence, the whine of the aircraft engines seemed to surge all around us. She went on. ‘When I stop asking the questions, then you can ask me some.’ She hesitated again. Then she spoke clearly. ‘Will you tell me about your trip to Berlin? About how you met my mother?’

12.

You don't understand, I told her, you weren't born then, you didn't live in those times—but it was momentous. I was lying in bed, it was a Friday, and the voice on the radio said, quite simply, that the Berlin Wall had come down. The crossing points had been opened and people were moving through. I was in the bedroom of a girl, her name was Alice, she worked at the video store and sometimes she let me stay over with her. She was getting ready for work, pulling on her pants. I was watching, my head on the pillow, wondering if she might get back into bed. The news came on and we heard the announcement. At first, I thought I was dreaming. It's true, for months, something had been about to happen—East Germans had been getting to the West through Hungary and into Austria. They'd tried to stop them, but the numbers were too great. But no one believed, not for a minute, that the Russians would let the Wall fail. Surely, everyone thought, they'd call in the tanks, like they'd done all those times before.

I'm not an emotional person. I keep a lid on things. But this mattered. I felt like crying, sitting up in Alice's single bed, watching her check her bag before leaving. We grew up, not like you youngsters, we grew up knowing that the end of the world could happen at any time—a fiery, roaring, boiling, poisoned end of the world, as missiles melted city centres and the people living there, and flattened out suburbs and burned the people there, and poisoned anyone for hundreds of kilometres—we knew all that could happen, with only a short warning. Living like that, knowing death was suspended above you, makes a difference. So when you hear that it's all over, well, you'd cry too.

I told her I was going. She stopped what she was doing. She asked me why. I think she thought I meant I was leaving her. No, I said, hadn't she heard the radio? Go to Berlin. I couldn't miss this. I had to go. Did she want to come? No, she didn't. Then she left for work.

When I got into the office, I told Mr Raymond I wanted the next week off. He wasn't happy. We had the New Year edition of his magazines to get ready, but there's never a good time to take a break in publishing. Although there's nothing particularly difficult about the business, things never quite get finished and there's always ten more that should have been done and no time to do them. I said I was going anyway. I hadn't had a holiday for two years and if he didn't like it he could—he looked up at me, almost for the first time—well, I said, I was going anyway. He smiled and said it was okay. Jacqui laughed when I told her. She said no one spoke to Mr Raymond like that.

I packed the car with food and a sleeping bag and quilt in case I stopped somewhere on the road for the night. I had my camera, the Leica, plus the Nikon 'F' with several lenses. I also had the tripod and seven or eight rolls of film. That was it. The next day, Saturday morning, I left London.

I spent the night after the ferry trip in the car park of a service station in Germany. It was freezing and I wondered if I would be dead by the next morning. I wasn't dead—the sleeping bag and duvet kept me very warm—but there was ice on the inside of the windows. I went into the service station to wash my face and get a coffee. Then I was back on the road.

There's nothing better than driving, when you have a long way to go and you know nothing about the road except what the map tells you, and you don't need to do anything but check the fuel and keep the car pointed in the right direction, it's glorious. And then I was at the border. I'd stopped at the petrol station just before it and spoken to a young man—he'd been about to leave and was talking to the lady behind the counter. He said something to me in German, then looked closer at me. Did I speak English? His accent was strong, but I understood him perfectly. Was that my car? He was looking out at the 2CV. It was a cute car, he said. His sister had one just like it in Marseilles. Then he told me what the woman behind the counter had said—it was going to snow, heavily. I should be careful in that little thing. I nodded and thanked him.

Back in the car, I hesitated at the checkpoint booths. A white van was stopped and the person inside was arguing with one of the border officials. The driver got out. It was the man I'd spoken to in the cafe. He looked across. I reversed and parked to one side. He called over, asking if I could give him a lift, because they wouldn't let him through.

His name was Dolph and he travelled regularly between East and West Germany. This was his first time driving alone, and he didn't have the right papers for the van. It was good of me to help him, he said. He was very grateful. I said it was okay.

He made himself comfortable in the car. We talked. What did he do? Import export, he said and smiled. What did I do? I said I worked in magazines. So, I was a writer? I shook my head. Photographs. Oh, he said. Photographs. He looked across at me again. Women? Sometimes, I said. Of course, he said. It's always women. Naked babes, that was right wasn't it? He laughed. He went on. Many men like photography. But no one asks why they like it. He would tell me. It was naked babes. Even when you photograph the hills or the sea or a vase of flowers, he said, it was still naked babes. That was why men like photography. They ask their girlfriends to pose for them, if they have a girlfriend. C'mon baby, that's right. Very nice. Show some more leg. Very good. Very sexy. That was all anyone wanted. Men, women, they were all the same. Babes. Pretty girls. That was what we liked. Why did I think women's magazines always had photographs of attractive young women on the covers, every single one, every single time? It was just how people are. Just what they like to look at. It was a fascism. Did I understand that? We drove on. Later, much later, I'd think about what he meant. Beauty as a kind of fascism. We're all fascists, every last one of us.

The sky grew darker. On each side was forest. Not big trees, but thin vertical pines, with dead ground between each row, flattened with pine needles. We stopped for a piss. For some reason, I'd walked further away from the car than I meant to. I wasn't the first person to stop there, as there were small clumps of white tissue scattered around in the pine needles. I looked back. Dolph was standing on the driver's side, looking in the window. I'd left the keys in the ignition. I wondered what it would be like, walking the rest of the way to Berlin. You weren't supposed to stop at all along the corridor. I didn't think I'd get much sympathy.

When I got back to the car, he was in the passenger seat again, going through the my box of cassettes. He chose Tom Waits. He was about to put it in the tape deck when I saw blue flashing lights in my mirror. I asked Dolph what I should do. He said to stay put. The car pulled up behind us. Two men got out, one in the same uniform as the border guards, the other in a darker uniform. The border official said something quickly to me. I shook my head. Dolph translated. The man wanted to see our papers. And he wanted to know why we'd stopped. I rummaged for my passport and the insurance

certificate. The border guard kept talking to Dolph. The discussion was becoming heated. I wondered if the guard wanted money. Then the other man, in the dark uniform, interrupted. He'd been walking round the back of the car, and now looked in the window on Dolph's side. I'd seen them nod to each other. The border guard was still holding the papers, and then he was arguing with the other man, not Dolph. The papers were returned, abruptly. The border guard walked back to his car and Dolph opened his side window. The man leaned down and they talked quietly. Before leaving, they shook hands. I thought I saw something transfer from Dolph to the other man. Dolph turned to me. We could go, he said. It was all good.

We drove along listening to *Swordfish Trombones*. I wanted to ask Dolph what had happened earlier, but I waited to see if he'd explain. Instead, he began talking about the changes in Germany. What did I think? Would the world really be better? Would the Soviet Union really let East Germany go? I didn't know, I said. Russia had big problems. Yes, he said, it had to change. And then, he looked at me, we would all be capitalists. I said I wasn't a capitalist. He laughed. Of course I was. We all were, in the West. When you live in a culture, you don't even notice the effect it has. We thought we were radical, we were different, we were artists or cultural critics or fucking hippies. It was, he said, bullshit. We didn't realise the air we breathed, the way we walked, the language we used, everything was depending on the system, and the system was made of us, constructed by us, ourselves. Everything had its price, he said, every man, every woman, every child. He loved the West, he said, looking out of the window, the freedom, all that *keep on rocking in the free world* stuff. But, he went on, what was this freedom for? Was it really any better?

I didn't answer him. We drove along, the sky ahead darkening. It began to snow but Dolph didn't notice. He was probably still thinking about the previous conversation. Had I heard, he began, the joke about the capitalist, the Christian and the cheat? I shook my head, smiling. He was about to continue when we saw a big sign saying we'd reached the end of the corridor, the border was ahead, we should get our papers ready. It would be a while before I heard the rest of the joke, because Dolph turned and asked me where I was staying in Berlin. He had a friend, she ran a music bar in Kreuzberg, the coolest part of town. Lots of Turkish immigrants, students, great food. I could stay with them, if I wanted, it would be fine, Jutta was cool. I said I'd probably get a hotel near Zoo, near the Wall and the Brandenburg Gate. Dolph was unimpressed. *Touristen*

scheisse. I would be wasting my time. I smiled. I was a tourist, if he didn't know. He shrugged. Up to you, man, he said. No problem.

I slowed at the line of booths ahead, but they were unmanned and the gates were up. I looked at Dolph. I carried on. After that was the entrance to West Berlin. I gave my papers to an American soldier who cheerfully welcomed me to the city. He said there was an office where I could get tourist information. I parked and told Dolph I'd be back in a minute.

When I came out, with a list of hotels and a city map, the car was empty. Dolph was gone, and his bag with him. For a moment I thought about my equipment. The lenses alone were worth a fortune. I felt under the quilt. My camera case was still there. It'd be fine. But, I was surprised he'd gone so quickly. Then I saw, sticking out of the cassette player, a flat packet of matches, like you used to get. It had the name of the music bar on it: SO36.

Once I found my hotel and got settled and had walked down to the Wall, I'd already forgotten Dolph. There was so much happening. I walked along the Wall, from Checkpoint Charlie to the Reichstag, past the Brandenburg Gate. It was evening by then. It was very cold. There were lots of people around that area, some standing, some taking photographs, some laughing, a few crying. I walked back. There was a place to buy mulled wine. It was wonderful, having something warm. People were attacking the Wall, some in groups, some on their own. They used picks or hammers. You could see it was hard work. Most wore goggles and some even had face masks. A man saw me watching. He offered me his pick. I smiled. It was fun. I joined the others, hacking at the sparkling concrete. Chips flew off. I picked them up, some just stone, others had sections of paint. I took the best pieces I could find. I've lost them since.

A couple of days later, there was a big protest in the centre of West Berlin, and I hung around taking pictures. Rallies can be fantastic for photography and I got a lovely shot of a young woman holding a red flag, limp in the still air, but catching the late afternoon sun beautifully, echoing the colour of her short auburn hair. Afterwards, when everyone dissipated, I followed one of the groups, wondering where they'd go, enjoying the sunshine and the clear sky that coloured the snow pale blue on the pavement. As the students walked, first one, and then another, peeled away, leaving the others to continue. They were down to four. Before I realised it, they'd all gone into one of the Turkish coffee shops along Wienerstrasse. This was the furthest from the centre I'd gone on

foot. I decided to walk a bit further before heading down to the metro. There it was, on the main street, SO36. I smiled to myself. Perhaps I was meant to be there. I went inside and asked for Dolph. The woman—she turned out to be Jutta—didn't seem surprised. She told me to wait a minute while she finished serving some customers. Then, when it was quiet and another staff member was back behind the bar, she took me upstairs. We went out onto the street, then through the archway that led to a back yard. In the archway was a door, and inside a vestibule with stairs on one side and a small lift on the other. We took the lift. On the top floor, Jutta rattled some keys, the door opened onto a big old apartment. We went into one of the rooms. There they all were.

She was standing by the big casement windows they have in those old Kreuzberg apartments, looking down at the few remaining groups of protesters as they passed. Light poured in the window—it was a bright day, the brightest of the days I spent in Berlin—and it framed, even exaggerated, Kateryna's figure.

'Exaggerate?' Nadya said. 'What do you mean?'

I meant, I said, that her mother was slim—she was a dancer, Nadya knew that very well—and she, herself, was already taller than average. But the way light shone around her, the way the net curtains filled and floated in the breeze, each billow seemed to add to her stature, to make her somehow slimmer, taller, more beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked powerful yet also impossibly delicate, as if she might be whisked away in the flash of an eye, to disappear into the white and grey folds of fabric. And in her silhouette, she was like a queen, imperious, haughty, savage.

'Savage is a strong word. Do you mean that?'

I did. Honestly. She was always so gentle, but there was such strength. I paused.

'So. You fell in love with her.'

I couldn't tell if that was a question or a statement. I looked at her. I am not, I said, a believer. Love is for other people.

'You don't believe in love?'

I didn't answer. When you have to invent yourself, as a child, when you don't know anything, before you're grown up, when you have to set yourself up against the world because it has already set itself against you, when there is no one, no one at all for you to trust, to open yourself up to, then, you learn what is possible and what is not possible.

'You really don't,' she said.

A flight attendant came past with drinks. I took a beer this time, Nadya an orange juice.

‘So, Mama was there?’

She was.

‘And Dolph.’

And Dolph.

‘And Felix as well, he was there?’

I hadn’t seen him yet. Dolph came over and slapped me on the back. He said he knew he would see me again.

‘Was he speaking English?’

He spoke English, I think it was for my benefit. Mostly they did speak German, sometimes French. Basically, I was fairly useless when that happened.

‘Anyway. Mama?’

She was still by the window. I wanted to take a photograph. A young man, he turned out to be Polish, came up and spoke to her quietly. He got her coat from over one of the armchairs, and helped her in to it. They were about to go. Then another man came in the room. His eyes swept around, checking who was there. I felt them rest on me for a moment. I knew who it was immediately—he hadn’t changed at all—the same dashing face (somewhat fuller, somewhat redder), the same hair (a bit thinner), a bit heavier overall, but still the same person. He showed no signs of recognising me.

‘What happened?’

First of all, he said something harsh to Dolph. I didn’t understand the words, but the tone was clear enough. There was merchandise—that was what they called it in English—hidden in the van. It was worth a lot of money. If it was found by the police, well, Dolph explained later, then Felix would be very angry. As it was, he had a shortfall. They’d have to put the prices up, people were still going to party and if he didn’t have enough merchandise, then they’d just have to pay more. When Dolph told me this later, he smiled. This is the capitalist way, of course. The Wall parties would not go on for ever. Limited time, limited merchandise, the price must go up.

Anyway, once he’d made a fuss and everyone was looking sheepish, Felix relaxed. He spoke English, telling the room there was a great photographer in their midst. They looked puzzled and he gestured towards to me. I laughed. But Felix came over and shook my hand and we embraced. Of course he was the same as ever, the same boss

Felix. And now he really was a boss, running the biggest party drug business in Berlin during the biggest party time.

‘And Mama?’

She left with the Polish guy, Janek. I don’t know where she went, but it was like a light went out in the room after she’d gone. I had my camera still in the case. I wished—but anyway. I had chances later on. It became something of a home away from home for me, that apartment in Kreuzberg, in the week I spent in Berlin. I went back to the hotel to sleep, but the rest of the time we all hung out there.

‘Like a light going out.’

Yes, I said, turning to Nadya in the business class seat she’d been very comfortable in. The captain’s voice came over the speakers. The cabin crew would be bringing us refreshments soon. We were about an hour out of Kiev.

13.

Berlin was one big party for that whole week and Kateryna seemed to be right in the middle of it, everywhere I looked. Sometimes there was dancing—your mother would be out on the floor, shaking it with everyone. Sometimes there was standing around looking cool and beautiful—well, she did both of those very well. And sometimes we were just hanging, talking, doing stuff.

Felix was in charge of everything of course. He had his plans, he knew where to go next. We operated as a gang, sometimes together but often arriving at places at slightly different times, so we didn't attract attention. We went wherever there were people, mostly in bars or nightclubs, even in the street. Sometimes the parties were in apartments, new ones in Charlottenburg, or old ones in Kreuzberg, in warehouses in what was the West, in warehouses in what was the East. They were in gardens or parks under floodlights or lit by a couple of oil drums, burning bright and keeping warm those who weren't dancing—though there were hardly any of those by the time Felix's ecstasy kicked in. The music systems played New Order and Depeche Mode and Kraftwerk into the night all over Berlin, and the snow lay on the ground and heard it all.

Sometimes we were in old bunkers, abandoned by the East Germans and before them the Russians, or before them—well, of course, before the Russians were the Nazis. But bunkers are bunkers. They are hard to destroy, so they stay where they are. And they all have doors, and doors can be opened. And they're always useful, whether you want to hide from bombs falling from the sky or whether you want to persuade someone to talk to you when they'd really rather not and perhaps a little force is required. And if you are having an illegal rave party, a good bunker is an excellent place.

We walked through the crowds, Kateryna and I, following Felix's instructions. I had my camera with the flash always ready. Felix liked it. I was the English photographer, a stupid tourist, here from England to see the collapse of communism, to record it for

posterity, and—of course—to add cover to his business endeavour. If people wanted—and they often did when spirits were high—they could be photographed, with Kateryna if they liked. I had cards to give to people, they could be used to get in touch. The idea was I'd send them the prints, but people knew. Kateryna would speak quickly to them. The others in the gang had their polythene bags of tablets that Felix handed out in the apartment before we walked down to get the metro.

On the way to the gig, Felix would set the prices depending on the expected volume and on the risk. And of course the postcode. Around Kreuzberg, availability was high and incomes—legal ones anyway—were low. You could stand by Kottbusser Tor metro, where Adalbertstrasse and Skalitzer meet, and see people hanging out, in the shadow of the wrought-iron metro station, buyers and sellers. Mostly they'd be discussing events of the day, with their straggly hair and their shambling ways, their black and brown loose-fitting clothes and their workers' hats and their vacant stares, one eye always on the street checking for cops, the other on you—what do you want, what are you offering—they'd be asking. They'd tip back their beer bottles and smack their lips and scratch their fuzzy chins or jangle their bangles and shake their earrings. They could get it for you, they said, whatever it was. Just one phone call, that was all. If they didn't have it on then, they'd give you an address. You should ask for Franz, tell him they sent you. He'd have what you wanted. These are the ways a market works, whether the police roll in or not, and of course they knew it was there, they tolerated it. It's a good way to know who's doing what, who's still alive and who's not. So the gatherings on the corner near Kottbusser Tor metro were allowed to go on.

When she spoke to me, your mother, I was surprised at her accent. Her English was good, but it had a distinct American accent. She smiled when I asked her. She'd been a dancer—of course, you know that—and she'd danced with the Mariinsky. I was impressed. 'I wasn't lead, you know. Just in support.' I said I thought she should have been. She smiled.

One time, we were on the metro going to a gig, she explained how she learned English. The train jolted. Janek was leaning against the pole. Felix reading a newspaper he'd carried hidden in his big black leather jacket. Dolph and several other Germans were spread out in the carriage. A young man with a guitar had got on the train at the last stop, and was opening his case.

She'd listened to pop music, of course. Duran Duran. Did I know them? I laughed. She looked confused. They were good, I said. But they'd become a bit old-fashioned. Oh, she said. Anyway, that was how she first learned English. There were tapes people passed around. She loved it. I nodded. Then, she said, she went to the dance academy. People had books, but she preferred magazines. They brought them back from the West, when they went on tour. It was a risk, but they were artists. And they shared the magazines, they were quite expensive. She read about Princess Diana, of course. What did I think about Princess Diana? Did I think she was beautiful? Not really, I said. I thought she was in the wrong time and place. It was sad. She thought about that for a while.

The busker started a song, 'Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution', by Tracy Chapman. The song has a slow beat and soon we were all keeping time. When he got to the chorus, the bit where you have to 'run', people joined in. Strange when you listen to the song. It's all about poverty and unfairness and the inevitability of revolution, of justice. Of course, it's bullshit. Justice is always inevitable, if you have money. And if you don't, it isn't. Kateryna was smiling. It was good, she said. I nodded.

Felix picked up the man's hat and said something to him. He nodded. Felix handed the hat to Janek and motioned to him to go round the carriage. When Janek came back, there wasn't much inside. Felix spoke to the busker. They exchanged a few words. Then the busker began playing the heavy chords of Neil Young's 'Keep On Rocking in the Free World', the unofficial Berlin Wall anthem, we'd heard the record everywhere. People pretty much ignored the verse lines, but the whole carriage exploded when he got to the chorus, the same words as the title. The people sitting on the benches who'd been keeping their eyes down when Janek went past the first time, now they were singing along with passion. Faces smiling, eyes bright, cheeks flushed. Anthemic. Rocking in the new world order. And they reached in their pockets and dropped coins into the hat.

The next station was our stop and we got off, everybody shaking hands with the busker, Janek giving him his hat back, heavier now with cash. Everyone was feeling good, the refrain about the free world ringing in our ears. Only Dolph was muttering. He started telling everyone that the song was shit. It wasn't about freedom and happiness—didn't we hear the lyric 'we got a thousand points of light, for the homeless man'—it was about the losers, the dispossessed, the recessions of the early 80s and the 90s and

the ongoing structural response, the Reagan and Bush doctrines of small government, big business and the cocksucker trickle-down effect, cut taxes, cut welfare, motivate the poor or leave them to rot, they only have themselves to blame, it's a free world, after all. Sure, you have the right to be super-rich, in your free world—go ahead, punk, it's your world—keep on rocking in it. Horseshit.

No one responded to Dolph. He'd put a damper on the mood, but it picked up as soon as we entered the next party. Kateryna was happy. We were all happy. It really was a new world, everyone believed it then, even me.

We all watched her, Kateryna, all the time. Even Jutta, and she was busy enough keeping an eye on Dolph. But your mother, she seemed both vulnerable and innocent, yet stronger than anyone. She was so beautiful, people would stand aside to let her through; they'd smile and say something nice, they just wanted her to be around. Yet she was like a child.

There was one man who stared at her all the time, a short, dark-haired Russian with a round face and receding hair, an outsider but still part of our group. As we stepped off the train, Felix leading the way like a king, the dark-haired man seemed to bump into me. I apologised and he just grunted. I looked at Kateryna. She shrugged.

When we were walking further on a bit, I asked her who he was. His name was Vadim, she said. He was from Moscow and he'd worked with the East German security. He liked to be seen as a hard man, an outdoors man, always talking about breaking horses or riding motorbikes over the Urals. But he was okay. He used to like hanging out with Felix and the gang back in East Berlin, before the Wall came down. Exactly how he could have been part of the East German security but also friends with Felix—a drug dealer, amongst other things—wasn't easy to understand, but that was what your mother said. Besides, she went on, he'd been helpful when her permit to remain in East Germany had expired. She should have gone back to Moscow, but he'd got her an extension. Ever since then—she grimaced as she spoke—he'd been a little too close. I told her if I could help, I would, not that I was good at that sort of thing, but I would do what I could. She thanked me. She would be okay.

Felix had a crazy idea. The city was full of people with crazy ideas, but not many actually tried them out. During the day, when we weren't selling drugs, he had a plan to make use of the time. He had a friend who had a place on the other side of the wall, in

an industrial area. We drove there, in my 2CV, me driving, Dolph directing, Felix squatting in the back with Janek and Kateryna. I said to anyone who was listening that the whole of East Berlin looked like an industrial area—Felix laughed, Dolph laughed, keep going said Dolph, I kept going. Felix's plan, which really was crazy, was to paint concrete tiles with thick acrylic paint and then smash them up and sell them. There was an unofficial flea market that had started in the big open space which was all that was left of Potsdamer Platz. Felix's plan was to flog the chunks of concrete there as souvenirs of Berlin. We were not to actually say they were pieces of *the* wall, but we were not to encourage anyone to think they weren't either.

Janek said weren't we cheating? Felix laughed. Dolph looked at Janek as if he was stupid. He said we were all fucking capitalists now. The war was over. And if we didn't understand capitalism, we were stupid. Then he told his joke, the one he'd started in the car. There's a capitalist, a Christian and a cheat, in a shop. A customer comes in. How much is this item, the customer asks. Well, thinks the capitalist. It cost ten dollars, so sell it to the customer for fifteen. But, thinks the Christian, this person needs the item and here it is, right here, let him have it, after all God teaches us to help our neighbour, love is more important than anything else. Wait, thinks the cheat—the customer needs it, he wants it, he can pay thirty dollars or find somewhere else. The customer pays thirty dollars and leaves. The shop-keeper turns out the light and locks up the shop.

There was a pause. Janek stared at Dolph. What about the three still in the shop? he asked. Felix laughed. Janek looked puzzled. He glanced at Kateryna. She smiled. Weren't they, she said, all the same? Wasn't that the point? Dolph nodded. Felix explained: the shopkeeper was the capitalist, of course, it's a shop. He was also a Christian. And, because he was a capitalist, he was a cheat as well. Even if you were a Christian, you couldn't be a capitalist and not a cheat. You always have to buy for one price and sell for a higher price, for as much as they will pay. You always buy more than you need, and you keep it all until someone else needs it. You're greedy. You cheat them. That's how it works.

Janek look confused. So, it was all right then to lie and sell fake pieces of the Wall? No one answered him. Felix spread his arms widely. We should relax. No one was going to lie. We were selling a concept. A memory that would last for ever. What could be wrong with that? There was laughter.

Felix took me to one side. He was sure it would work. He loved the irony, of course. Selling fake symbols of communist oppression back to the free world. Those stupid American tourists. The smug French and the superficial Italians, not to mention the gullible English.

Except that it didn't work. We sold a few, but mostly we stood around in the cold air on Potsdamer Platz. I took some photographs, I even managed one of Kateryna, with her back to me, talking to Janek as usual, another of Vadim arguing with Felix. It was a stupid idea, he was saying, Kateryna translated for me. It was an insult to the GDR. It was prostituting history. We were all prostitutes.

In the end, it didn't matter what he said. The venture was a complete flop and we packed it in after only two days. Felix had spent more on paint and brushes than he had earned. Plus we'd made a fair mess of the workshop and that took hours to clean up. We were glad to go back to selling drugs. It was far easier.

14.

We'd play a game, Kateryna, Janek and me, when we were walking along the Ku'damm. Your mother liked to look in the shop windows, sometimes we'd go into KaDeWe down on Wittenbergplatz and we'd sit at the cafes there and have coffee and she'd have tea—Black Russian, of course—and we'd play a game, spot the Osis. Kateryna was the best of the three of us, by a long way. I didn't have a clue. Germans looked like Germans to me. Well dressed, clean-shaven, mostly, or with nice hairstyles. Young people, students, they look the same everywhere. But tell the difference between East and West Germans—I had no idea. Janek could, mostly. And Kateryna, well, she was the best.

Of course, we couldn't know for sure where people actually came from, but part of the game was explaining why you'd made your decision. And your mother was always illuminating. Shoes. She started with shoes. Old, ratty, with holes, or just solid and boring. That was her first pointer. Then clothes, of course. Dull colours, worn fabric, shapeless, styleless. Things women notice, I know, but still. Then she'd mention the things I'd looked for first: the over-tired eyes, worn out from simply looking at what the West was really like; the greying old skin, the wrinkles; the plodding hairstyles; the too-plain heavy potato faces of both men and women. The obvious make-up on the women, the too bright eyes and the excited flush on the cheeks of both men and women. The thrill of the West. She was very good, your mother.

The three of us were outside a cinema, it was late afternoon, it was cold. Kateryna said we should go in. It was an erotic cinema, it didn't seem right to me. But she wanted to go in. She was curious. This was the West, she said. This was freedom, wasn't it? She was serious. Then she laughed.

Inside was a ticket booth with a video rack on one side with a selection of *Private* videos. On the other side was a sweet counter. We were given rectangular metal

baskets, each one holding two drinks in plastic cups—beer for us, white wine for Kateryna—on either side of the handle, under which was a packet of salted peanuts. It was very civilised.

The theatre itself was quite light and there were a fair number of people already seated. We made our way down the middle aisle and found an empty row. Janek went in first, sitting near the wall, then Kateryna, then me. What surprised me was that there were more groups of people than single men. Even more interesting—and you never got this in a UK adult cinema like the Windmill in Soho—was the fact that there were quite a few men and women sitting together. The atmosphere was cheerful, no one looked seedy, or guilty, or embarrassed to be there. I relaxed. Very different to the head down, collar up demeanour of British clientele. I opened my bag of nuts. Kateryna sipped her wine. The lights dimmed, but not completely. There was a hush.

I don't remember much of the film. I do remember the image quality was good, though the colours were somewhat saturated and the print was scratchy. Mercifully there was none of the censorship charade of British blue movies, where any moment of action involving aroused genitalia was obscured by some superimposed object, the silhouette of a lampshade or a bowl of fruit, and if the scene was simply too large the entire screen was blacked out with the only portion of the original film being visible through either a keyhole shape or perhaps a circular peephole. Laughable, of course.

Kateryna watched intently. She noticed me looking. She smiled and carried on watching.

The film had no real plot—but you know they never do. My interest was only technical: camera angles, lighting tricks, that sort of thing. There was a house in the country, visitors, a gamekeeper with an Alsatian dog, a handsome beast that kept looking off screen and licking his lips, and of course a succession of nubile young and not-so-young Fräuleins whose clothes kept coming off. The main intrigue in the story, it seemed to me, was whether or not the dog would be involved. My money was against it, but the point is that pornography is the art of the (sexually) possible. If it is possible, it is featured, somewhere, somehow, in one film or another. The only question is, would it be this one. The seed of desire is sown. We wait to see it flower. Whether it flowers or not, the viewer will return.

I finished my beer and sat back in the seat. Kateryna was still engrossed. The film was reaching something of a climax. Most of the cast were on screen at the same time in

two dynamic groups. And the dog was in the centre, barking excitedly. I looked around the room. Everyone was watching closely, even the women. I had seen enough. The dog wasn't going to get involved. I stood up and went out into the foyer.

The woman at the counter was reading a magazine. She looked surprised to see me and glanced at her watch before returning to her reading. I waited another ten minutes before Kateryna and Janek came out. She was laughing. She thought the film was funny, it was stupid but it was okay. We walked along the avenue. She asked me if I'd been embarrassed. Why had I left? This was the free world and nudity was not something to be ashamed of. When she was growing up, in Kiev, nudist camps were very popular. It was okay. It was fun. Janek seemed to agree with her—she spoke rapidly to him. Really, he said to me, it was a way to forget the classless society. He smiled. It was a joke, he said. The classless society. I laughed. They laughed too. Nudity, the only way to be equal in the classless society.

Suddenly it was all over. The week was finished. The drugs were gone. The party people were leaving. There were no longer cars parked everywhere, on the pavements, on the roundabouts, on the snow between trees.

We had one last party. Felix said it would be the biggest motherfucker. Everything we hadn't sold, we were going to smoke or snort or swallow, every last bit of it. We got in the 2CV and headed to north Berlin through the Grunewald forest. He had a place, he always had places, this one was a former bunker and observation tower near the Teufelsberg, near the American monitoring post. When we got there, climbing through cut wire, carrying crates of bottles, pushing up through bushes, there was just a huge dark mass. And below it was the city.

Soon they had a fire going inside. Roaring in the middle of the big upstairs room, fed from a pile of broken furniture to one side. Heavy curtains blacked out the windows that looked onto the main building on the other side of a narrow gully, but you could see it if you went onto the balcony.

More people arrived. Someone started playing a guitar and singing. There were cries of protest and then a cassette player was switched on. A couple of young guys were spraying graffiti on the Wall and the air was full of sweetness that hung in the throat. I followed Felix outside.

From the balcony you could see the white dome of the American listening post. Amazing, I said to Felix. He just smiled. His face looked terrible, worse than when I first saw him in the apartment. It had been a heavy week. He nodded to the Teufelsberg, a big dark mass up in the sky. It used to be a Nazi training college. The Americans tried to blow it up after the war, but they couldn't. So they brought the rubble up from the city and dumped it on top. Now it's a small mountain, a mountain of history.

Felix looked over the city. 'What will you do next?'

'I'll go back to London,' I said. 'I have a job.'

'If you want a job,' he said, 'I could use you.'

He looked at me.

I said nothing.

'Up to you,' he said, and turned and went back inside.

I stood at the railing and looked at the city. The air was freezing. There was a noise behind me. As I turned, I smelled a familiar scent. It was Kateryna. She asked me how I was. I smiled. She smiled and asked if I was going home then next day. I nodded. Back to England, she said. She made it sound exotic. I nodded. I asked where she was going. She said she didn't know. Felix had some work—a job, I said—yes, she said, a job. What did it entail, I asked. I admit, I was worried, although I had no right to be. We were all just friends and there was nothing between us. Oh, she didn't know. Probably helping to sell his stuff, somewhere else. I told her to be careful.

I asked her if I could photograph her. I held up my camera. I still had half a roll of film left. She nodded.

Some people are comfortable in front of the camera. Most are not. Kateryna belonged there. Of course, I already knew that. I can always tell even before I've taken the camera out. I didn't have to direct her, there was nothing I needed to say. Some people you have to talk to, to seduce, to prompt. Not your mother. I must have taken ten shots, some with the listening post behind, others with the city lights. I knew I'd have to burn in the backgrounds to emphasise the location, but it'd be worth it. My flash was finished.

She said something as I was putting the camera away. If I liked, she could give me a phone number. A friend, not someone from here. In Kiev. She went inside to get a piece of paper.

She didn't come out. I was cold.

The room was full of people, some dancing in the middle near the fire, which had died down somewhat. Most were standing in small groups. A few were sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall or lying together in the corners. I saw Janek on his own. I walked over. Here, he said, holding out something. I took it. A round pill, the image of Buddha pressed on it. Go on, he said. I put it in my mouth and swallowed. Nothing. Kateryna walked over. She said something to Janek. He laughed. I asked what was funny.

‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘Do you have a Mercedes?’

I shook my head. ‘No Mercedes. Only the white car, the French one.’

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘The French one. No Mercedes, in London?’

I shook my head.

She was smiling. ‘Doesn’t everyone?’

Janek said something and grabbed at Kateryna. She evaded his reach, her eyes steady. Janek muttered. She laughed as he walked away.

‘Janek likes you,’ I said.

She stared. ‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t,’ I said. ‘But I’m sure.’

She smiled. ‘Are you sure you don’t have a Mercedes?’

I shook my head again.

‘Okay,’ she said. She wandered off, swaying slightly. Over on the other side, Dolph and Jutta were necking slowly. His hand was inside her loosened jeans. As she moved, I saw her face. She seemed lost to the world. Pleasure is a savage thing. It was getting hot in the room and people were taking their clothes off and no one seemed to mind. I thought about taking photographs. I decided against it.

The room was stuffy. My head felt thick. I went out onto the balcony. It was colder outside than it had been before and I put my hands in my pockets and turned my collar up and looked out over the view. Behind me the noise of the party gently subsided. The city lights seemed brighter. The phrase Dolph had mentioned, the lyric from the Neil Young song, came into my head. *We got a thousand points of light*. The white dome loomed in the sky across the valley. I thought I heard voices, saw lights on the inside of the dome. People were listening, inside, it was a listening post after all, what else would they be doing? Did I see someone running on the concrete below? Abseiling down the

tower? I shook my head. Nothing. The wind curled round my ears, brushing my cheeks. It was cold, but now I felt surprisingly warm.

Back in the room, it was very hot. Someone had found mattresses from the lower floors and brought them up. Someone else had brought old curtains with them, thick velvet ones, which were spread on the mattresses, covering them. Some couples still lay in the corners of the room, but others made their way onto the mattresses, dropping their clothes wherever, stepping forward, kneeling forward, pushing forward. Their limbs became confused, tangling together. I watched them writhe, all mixed up, backs arched, thighs clenched, arms loose and dangling or locked round necks or waists, hands reaching, hands caressing, hands kneading, mouths open, mouths together, against skin, eyes closed, eyes wild, eyes white-rolled. Every now and then someone would find themselves on the floor and would get up and crawl back into the middle. It went on.

The music was louder. Most of the lights were turned off. The few remaining were draped with coloured fabrics. Blue. Red. There were shadows everywhere. I leaned against the wall and concentrated on breathing. I opened my eyes and waited for them to focus. I thought I saw, on the wall, the Buddha. It was just a shadow.

I watched the few remaining dancers. The firelight flickered on their shining bodies. From time to time they embraced, languid, smiling. They were beautiful. They were all beautiful. I thought about what Dolph had said, about the fascism of beauty.

I saw him and Jutta in one corner, kissing, arms wrapped around each other. Janek had found someone, a young German girl. But he was staring at Kateryna. She sat against the wall. Janek and the girl went into another room.

Only Felix seemed sober. He leaned by the main door, examining his notebook, a pen in his hand. I sat down on the floor.

There was a shout and a thump. Someone turned the sound off. The room went eerily silent, the way rooms do when something happens, even something we haven't seen, but someone has seen, and although there isn't really any disturbance, people know something's up; they stop whatever they were doing and turn to look.

My head was spinning. Kateryna was leaning against me, her hand on my leg. I could taste lipstick. I heard someone shouting. *Prostitutka. Historia.*

It was Vadim. I hadn't even seen him at the party, but there he was, arguing with Felix again. Nobody paid any attention. It looked like Vadim was leaving. He stepped

back, leaving Felix where he was standing, leaning against the wall, a faint smile on his lips. The kissing and groping resumed.

Kateryna snuggled into my arm again. Vadim made a show of fastening his jacket. As he passed Kateryna, he whispered something harsh. She said something back and he stooped down and grabbed her, pushing her hard against the wall. He didn't care that I was right there. No one else seemed to notice. His hand was poised over her face. It gripped her chin. He kept repeating something. I opened my mouth. I wanted him to stop. But nothing came out. He slapped her sharply, her head staying where the blow had knocked it, the hair cascading over her face. I lifted up the Leica. Vadim turned, as if seeing me for the first time, his eyes fixed on mine. Kateryna too seemed to focus on me. Wouldn't I do something? she seemed to be saying. I pressed the shutter. Nothing happened. No flash. No picture. Vadim laughed and stepped back and pulled his collar up and moved to the door. Kateryna slumped against the wall.

We stayed there all night. I woke and found myself on one of the mattresses in the middle of the room. I had no idea how I got there or what had happened to my clothes. One curtain had been half-torn down and light was coming in through the windows. Everything was grey. The naked girl next to me stirred, tilting her head, her hair drifting off her face, revealing a dark bruise. Kateryna. My arm lay beneath her. I tried to move it. She opened her eyes and smiled and took a deep breath and exhaled, loose strands of hair lifting and falling. She groaned. I extricated my arm and sat up. I saw my clothes over by the wall. I couldn't see the camera. I stood up.

I found the camera and the rest of my gear. Everything was okay. People were waking up. Jutta and Dolph, still embracing. Janek and his girl. Felix appeared from outside, grinning and holding plastic bags with cartons of orange juice and croissants. No one asked where he'd got them from.

Vadim had gone. I looked for Felix, to ask what had happened, but I didn't get a chance. And Kateryna. She dressed and smiled at me. I wanted to say I was sorry, I should have stopped Vadim, but there was too much going on. Someone said they were going now, was anyone wanting a lift. Before I could stop her, she was gone, without a backwards glance.

15.

Our wheels thumped the frozen tarmac of Kyiv-Zhuliany airport. I smiled. Nadya breathed out, a long slow exhale. We were still in the same cabin we'd been in for seven hours, but she seemed different. She was on home turf. Everyone has a home. Almost everyone. The overhead luggage bins wobbled slightly as the aircraft trundled towards the new terminal.

'Where are we going,' I asked Nadya, the first question I'd been wondering all along. I looked at her.

She said nothing.

I asked the second question. 'Will we be seeing her?' My voice seemed small. She looked at me. I clarified. Kateryna. Cold morning light came in one side of the plane. The name sounded strange in the harshness.

She looked ahead. Her hands fidgeted with the travel documents, the Cyrillic passport, the printed email electronic ticket I'd given her in Dubai. Our plane approached the terminal. Then everyone was on their feet before we'd finished moving, scabbling at the overhead lockers and forcing their way down the aisle towards the exit. I followed Nadya.

She insisted we take the bus into the city. I pointed to the taxi queue and she laughed. When we got near the front, she said, and that would take a long time, we'd realise there was another queue, a much shorter one, where the special people appeared and got into the taxis we'd been waiting for. Nobody complains about the special queue. You just wait your turn. The bus was quicker, if you're going into town.

The road ran along a railway line for a while. Old boxy suburban carriages trundled past. On the other side were block after block of concrete apartments. Not unpleasant,

simply uninteresting. I turned my attention to the other people on the bus. Most were wrapped up in scarves and hats and thick coats.

Nadya was talking on her phone. She'd been tapping on it since we landed, even when we went through customs. Pretty girls can get away with a lot. I listened carefully. I heard a man's voice on the other end. I tried to make out what she was saying, but she spoke quickly.

Still, I heard several words I recognised. Maidan. Hotel Ukraine. Four o'clock or perhaps fourteen. The bus stopped to pick up an elderly woman. She scowled down the aisle. Someone moved aside to give her a seat. We drove on.

Ahead of us, at last, was the great open space, Independence Square. Of course I recognised it. We'd stood here, in 2003, before things got really hot in Ukraine, when they were only simmering. People had sung for freedom, even then. It came, later, but still not forever. And I was gone by then, of course. I said nothing to Nadya as we climbed down and collected our bags from the side of the bus.

I'd set my watch to local time on the plane, and by then it was three-thirty. We walked a short distance and put everything down. I was beginning to feel lightheaded. It was bitterly cold.

'We should get something to eat,' Nadya said.

I looked around. There were many cafes, of course. I said I didn't mind. We'd eaten only a few hours ago, but everything was upside down. I asked her if she was she hungry. She smiled. She was always hungry. She pointed to a big cafe on the corner, overlooking the square. We should go there, she said. I followed her.

We were given a seat upstairs, by the window, looking out onto the square. The waiter had led us directly there. Ugly old men, like me, when they're with beautiful young women, always get the best seats. The combination is a winner. Sex and money. The waiter and Nadya spoke quickly. She didn't bother with a menu, just ordered *deruny* right away. Before she could ask me, I nodded. Sure. Light potato pancakes with honey and jam would be very nice. She smiled. I understood, I said, enough.

The drinks came soon. I'd expected tea, but there was vodka for Nadya and beer for me. I smiled. I was on holiday. We each took a couple of sips. I leaned forward. I wanted to know what was happening. What were we doing there? Where did she live now and was she going back there? What did she have planned? And—again, I couldn't

say the words, but their echo from the plane seemed to ring around us, and Nadya would have heard it too—where was Kateryna?

Nadya didn't reply. She'd brought me all this way and now she was mute. Her face was shuttered. Eastern European faces can be like that. They simply close. We in the West expect at least to be answered, to have our notions entertained, to be responded to. You can't just ignore us, we say. We probably get lied to anyway, but we get an answer. Life in the Soviet Union contained no such guarantees. That's just the way it was. And the faces of people had absorbed the arbitrariness, the cruelty. Not only would she not give me an answer, she would not acknowledge my question.

She looked out the window. A few brave tourists were ambling past, their faces pale in the cold. Kievians passed too, better dressed, used to the cold. Women wore fur hoods, men, warm hats. But we were comfortable inside. I finished my beer and looked for the waiter. He was up by the entrance, at the service desk, on the telephone. He looked over to us, then put the phone down. I glanced at my watch. Four o'clock. A man entered the upstairs area, wearing a bulky coat and a big fur hat. He said something to the waiter who looked over in our direction. Then he headed our way. There was something familiar about the way he threaded through the tables, rather than around them along the aisles. He was coming directly towards us. Then it came to me—I knew exactly who it was. But he looked terrible. Bigger in the body, moving slowly and deliberately, like an oil tanker. Heavier in the face too, now he was nearer, his skin pale and blotchy. As he approached, his eyes found mine. I thought I saw surprise there. Then something of the old vigour flared up. But he looked bad. Nadya turned, realising he was there. I stood up.

'Felix,' I said. 'After so long.'

He opened his arms, put his head back. His laugh rumbled round the room. We embraced.

'Max, my friend. Why have you been hiding for so long? All this time, in Australia!'

I said I had nothing to hide. He laughed again. Immediately he was back to the old Felix, dispensing with small talk.

'Everybody has something to hide,' he said. 'If you have nothing to hide, you have done nothing in this world. And what good is that?' He winked at Nadya. 'They will put you in the cold ground and no one will care. No one will be sad. No one will be happy. What good is that?'

I said nothing. Nadya just watched.

Felix sniffed the air. 'We will drink,' he said, and gestured to the waiter. 'Beer!' He pointed to himself and to me. The waiter disappeared behind the bar.

Nadya stood up. Assuming she was only going to the toilet, I carried on listening to Felix. Then I realised she was putting on her coat. I stood up hurriedly. Felix struggled to his feet and she embraced him lightly. She kissed him on each cheek and said something quickly. He grunted and slumped back in his chair. She turned to me.

'Tomorrow, okay, Max?' I stared at her. She went on, 'I told Felix to help you find a place to stay. We can meet here, you and me, tomorrow, at two in the afternoon, okay?'

It wasn't really a question. She was already moving away. I reached out, but she just smiled and stepped into the aisle.

'Ciao,' she said, quickly, and turned and walked briskly to the entrance, where the waiter was ready with her suitcase.

We drank hard. To be honest, I was out of practice. Lanyard had been a drinker, we all were after we left school. I could handle six pints of strong lager on an empty stomach, back then, standing in the pub in Cambridge Circus. But that kind of resilience requires constant maintenance. If you fall behind, if you lose the edge, you're done for. You go to pieces and then you're on your knees, with the world violating your stomach and reintroducing its contents to your mouth. This reversal of time's flow seems to last forever, long enough for you to swear never to come to this point again, or at least to never lose the edge again. I'd lost the edge years ago. I could still finish a bottle of wine on my own, and I had done that a number of times after Caroline had gone, but that was about my limit. Felix still didn't seem to have a limit. I wasn't surprised.

We talked a lot, but not about anything at all. Drink talk is like that. I asked him how he'd been. Okay, so, so. How was business? Okay. So, so. Actually, it wasn't so good. He glowered at me meaningfully. I had no idea what he was saying. What about me? I said I was going okay. I smiled. What, he said, about the prize? So he had heard about it. Of course, he said, leaning back, spreading his arms and smiling broadly. Fifty thousand dollars. They had all heard about it. He saw the photographs. That was how he recognised me, he said. Why hadn't I told him where I was?

Sometimes even drink talk comes to the point. Sometimes too much so. The trick is to steer it back into the general morass of mumblings, clumsy generalisations and empty

philosophising. But I was still sober then and I had to make a choice. I hoped he'd tell me what I wanted to know. I'd found Nadya—or she had found me—but what about Kateryna? How was she? I wanted to ask him, but I also wanted to wait and see what this was all about.

The reality was that I didn't want him to know the truth. I had a new identity in Australia. Yes, I kept in touch with Oleg, and through Oleg I'd heard about some of the old crew, but Oleg had no idea where on the planet I was, and I'd asked him not to let people know I was still on the channel. I used my old hidden accounts, and through the deep web, no one could know where I actually lived or what my current name was. I liked it that way. But I realised I couldn't say that to Felix, not then anyway.

I hadn't told him where I was, I said, because I didn't want to compromise him, or the other way round. Not after Kiev and Vladivostok. He stared at me. I waited. Then he laughed. I laughed. He drank. I drank. The beer flowed, and it didn't seem to matter anyway. Drink talk heals the world—just before it splits its face open.

Beer was good, Felix said. I agreed. Beer was good. The waiter brought two more. Cheers, Felix said, *Budmo!* I lifted my glass and said, *Hey! Budmo!* May we live for ever! Yay! We drank deeply.

So many years, Felix said. So many years. From school, did I remember school? Of course I did. Wasn't it great? he said. No, I said, it was shit. But he was, he said, the Porn King. Did I remember? He owned the place. Yes, I said. I remembered. He owned them all right. He was the king. Even then, he said, he was the capitalist pig, before capitalism won the world.

We laughed. It was true. He was.

He went on. We had good times, didn't we? I nodded. When we met in Berlin, he said, did I remember how crazy that was? The girls? The drugs? That crazy motherfucker party in the bunker? The city lights? Did I remember that? I nodded. I was surprised he remembered an aesthetic detail like that, the city lights, the view from the Teufelsberg. Perhaps he was just softening me up.

Shit that was a good time, he went on. The Wall was gone, those crazy years of nothing, of nobody making money, just some stupid bastards at the top and all the weasels licking their bootlaces. Did I remember the weasels? I said I remembered one of them. Fucking goddamn weasels. Fuck them all. He stood up. He shouted. Fuck Vadim! He was one too! Fuck them all!

There were more people in the restaurant now and many looked over, alarmed. I wondered if we should move somewhere else. And I also wondered where I was going to sleep that night, not that I was tired, but I would be.

Fuck them, Felix was still saying, seated again. Fuck them all. Fucking thieves. Fucking criminals. His face was bright red. There were veins everywhere. The skin was flaking. The eyebrows too wild. His hair too thin. His eyes were watery and unfocused.

He went quiet. He sighed. They'd broken him, he said, finally. Him. Felix. Broken. Thieves.

Drink is like the moon. The moon—that small white marble—pulls entire oceans, they slop around unable to resist its lure. The tides rise. The tides fall. So it is with drink. The emotional tides rise and fall. The motion is less predictable, but it's still inevitable. Felix was—simply—at full ebb.

The waiter appeared. Seeing Felix slumped, head in hands, he spoke rapidly to me. His English was perfect. Perhaps we were both tired. Would we like him to call a taxi? Which hotel was I staying at?

I looked out of the window. There was the Hotel Ukraine, the huge Russian-built monolith of a previous-century hotel, a building I'd stayed in a long time before. It was okay, I said to the waiter. I was just over there. We'd get some fresh air. Perhaps he could bring us the bill? The waiter nodded.

It was a long way across Independence Square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Ukrainian. The word maidan is the same as in English, meaning a square, an open piece of ground in the city. Both languages borrow from the Persian original, English getting the word via Hindi. Sometimes Kievians simply talk of the maidan, the square, or the word on its own, meaning the pro-West movement. Revolutions are won on that place.

Getting Felix going, past the touts and hustlers that were hanging around, past the shut-up shopping centre in the middle, was not an easy task. Eventually I stood at the front desk inside the hotel. The people who work at the Hotel Ukraine are—quite frankly—from another era. The front door is a portal. Inside, everything is Soviet, from the decor and the accounting system to the service.

I made the booking at one desk. I paid at another. I received a slip of paper at another. Finally we could go upstairs. The lift man checked the slip before pressing our level. Once there, we had to wait several minutes for the floor lady to come back to her

desk at the end of the corridor, where she had a clear view of the lifts and therefore everyone who came and went. She took the slip. She phoned downstairs. Finally, she handed me a key and pointed vaguely down the corridor. Felix groaned. She didn't even look at him.

The room was large, better than I'd expected. Many floors had been redone for the European Football Cup, and there was even supposed to be WiFi in the room. I took out my power adaptor and plugged in my phone and tablet. It was a relief to see the charge lights come on. It was true, I hadn't needed the gizmos since leaving Dubai when I'd Skyped the Lanyards, but I felt a lot further away now.

While I was doing this, Felix was checking the minibar. A couple of beers, half-size bottles of red and white wine. The standard variety of miniatures. He took one of the little bottles and cracked the lid, keeping the bottle itself covered.

He wanted me to guess, he said. Come on. Okay, I said. Vodka. He pulled a face, as if to say, did I think he was that predictable? He shook his head. Try, again. Okay. Whisky? I was wrong again. He found this funny and opened the fist to let me see the label. Brandy. Did I remember, he said, the old song? *Brandy makes you randy, whisky makes you frisky, but a stiff Johnnie Walker*— he took a swig. I finished the lyric: *A stiff Johnnie Walker makes you pregnant*. He threw me another miniature. Johnnie Walker. I got a glass from the sideboard. He stood up and went over to the bedside table.

I turned to see he'd already dialled the telephone, the receiver in his hand. He muttered something, then *Da, da*. He put the phone down.

What had he done, I asked. He shrugged and lifted the miniature. It was empty.

I put my clothes in the wardrobe. That took all of ten seconds. My little flight case was empty. Only the Leica remained. Felix's eyes lit up as he saw it. So, I still had that one, did I. That little lovely. I smiled. Man, he said, lifting it up, unclipping the cover. It was a beautiful thing, he said, that one. How many photos, he said, with this one, how many, eh? Very beautiful. His language was breaking apart.

There was a knock at the door. *Entrez*, said Felix loudly. The door opened and a uniformed young man came in pushing a trolley carrying a bottle of champagne, a litre bottle of Nemiroff Lex, the most expensive brand of Ukrainian vodka, several different glasses and a two ice buckets. He hesitated by the trolley. Felix waved him away. I opened my wallet, finding the US money I'd put in before I left Sydney. I gave him five

bucks. He was happy. Meanwhile, Felix had taken the wrapper off the champagne. I closed the door. It was going to be a long night.

Crazy things happened. At some point the full-length windows were opened and freezing air, minus fifteen degrees, swirled into the room that had become stuffy with the cigars Felix had produced. Snowflakes spun under the centre light. By the time the windows were closed, we had to open the room door to let in some heat from the corridor. Then an underdressed and over-made-up young woman stalked past on very high heels. She stood in the doorway, throwing almost no shadow on the wall behind. Did we want anything? Felix looked hopeful. *Nyet*, I said, pushing the door closed. There used to be a night club on the floor below reception, and it was always full of girls. They'd wander the corridors, looking for patrons. The hotel had obviously not changed. About ten minutes later, the phone rang. I reached it before Felix. A voice spoke in English. I replied. No, we didn't want any company. No girls. Yes, we were sure. No, no boys. A couple of minutes later, the phone rang again and I took it off the hook. Felix just laughed.

He'd finished most of the champagne, and the vodka bottle was now under assault. He'd top me up and when he wasn't looking, I'd pour mine into the ice bucket I'd placed on my side of the table. I knew very well, I'd lost the edge.

Felix began reminiscing again. Those days back at school, they were the best, weren't they? (No, they weren't.)

That party in the Berlin bunker, that motherfucker, it was crazy, wasn't it? (Yes, Felix. It was crazy. I never knew what happened afterwards, though. Kateryna just left. He just left. Dolph, Jutta and I had gone to her apartment to Kreuzberg. Then I'd driven back to London.)

Man, it was snowing, eh? He remembered the snow. God bless the East German snow ploughs! (There is no god, Felix, but, sure, they were damn good ploughs. I cruised all the way to the border in a line following one of them. White on the left, white on the right, the tail lights of a Trabant ahead of me, ahead of that, the dark bulk of a monster plough.)

So I'd gone back to London, had I? God bless London! Leicester Square. (Felix was rambling now. He refilled his glass, then leaned over to me. I held my hand over my

glass and he poured anyway, the cold vodka running between my fingers, a fair bit making it into the glass.)

Really! God bless London. And God bless Kiev. We'd made art, him and me, did I remember? Huh? Man, those little girls, those beautiful girls? They were all grown up now, he went on. They were beautiful women now. Very beautiful. And some—he cocked his head to one side in concession—some not so beautiful. But they were all beautiful back then. Crisp little chickens. But wait—he was struggling to remember something—when was it, when I came to Kiev, when was that?

It was 1994, I said. Didn't he remember, I had to leave London, urgently? He looked at me blearily. Why did I have to leave London?

He didn't remember? He shook his head, no. What was it? Why did I have to go? I'd been happy, hadn't I, working for that pornographer Ray Bone. I corrected him. Raymond. Mr Raymond.

Didn't he remember, I said, the farmhouse? Those men? Charles and the others? Felix looked at me blankly. I took photographs. He ran the delivery business. He brought stuff up for Charles. Didn't he remember?

Felix remembered, through the vodka, through the champagne, through the beer. Names he forgot, he said. Faces, he forgot, he said. But deliveries, the special ones anyway, he remembered them. What ever happened to Charles? They went to jail, Felix. They did? Sure. I had to get out of England, he remembered didn't he? They were after me. Who was after me? The police were, Felix. They wanted to talk to me. No doubt they'd want to know what else I'd been working on for Mr Raymond.

He shook his head. He sighed. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. He didn't remember. I'd come to Kiev, back then, looking for a new life. All I had was my Leica. That same one.

He picked it up and caressed it. We had made art with this, he said, him and me. He lifted up the vodka glass and tossed the spirit back. Then he leaned forward and threw up on the floor, just missing the camera. I helped him off the couch onto his knees and he crawled to the bathroom, moaning about art and chicken. I went back to clean up the mess. It looked like even Felix could lose the edge.

16.

Felix lay in the bathtub. I'd loosened his clothes, undoing everything I could. His head lolled to one side. If he threw up again—or rather, when he threw up again—it'd stay inside the bath. More importantly, as his head lay to either one side or the other—that slight crest of bone on the back of the skull where the neck joins means the head rolls left or right on a hard surface—he would be unlikely to choke. I didn't need a dead Carpathian brown bear in my hotel room.

I drank a lot of water, filling my tumbler from the tap. I'd had plenty of Kiev water in my time. It was very cold. I walked into the main room and sat down at my desk. I wasn't at all tired. As I didn't yet have a local SIM card, I connected the phone via the room WiFi. The device began downloading emails. I hoped there'd be something from Sally and Lanyard. They seemed very far away now. I watched the headers. Nothing from them. There was an email from Manuel telling me everything was fine at the office. A message from Lucia wondering if I had a return date yet. I marked the email for reply, but left it blank. I shut down the phone to recharge quickly.

I lay on the bed. It was surprisingly comfortable. The clock said it was two in the morning. From the bathroom, there came deep rumbling snores broken by occasional snorts. It was like being back in the dormitory, almost. I had mixed feelings at the thought. I stared at the ceiling. Felix had given away nothing that might explain why either he or Nadya wanted me in Kiev. I thought about him and his drinking. That night was the first time I'd ever seen him suffer under alcohol. He used to be able to drink anything. Then I remembered exactly what had happened when Felix arrived on that courier job at the Yorkshire farmhouse, back in 1994. I'd been on an assignment for Mr Raymond. He'd mentioned a client wanted photographs, proper ones, arty ones, ones he could get someone to make into a printed book, like a coffee table book, but not, of

course, for any old sod, this was different, it was specialised. And—more to the point—it was very illegal.

The metal edge pressed against skin, leaving a fine straight line, along which sprouted red pearls, growing and glistening. Everyone stared, their faces darkened by the lights behind them. My Leica clicked. I moved position, pushed past the others, making sure I captured the blade as it moved.

‘Okay?’ The oldest man, Charles, said, sitting back for a moment, holding the scalpel in the air.

‘Yeah. Beautiful.’ Dave was breathing steadily. He was naked, they were all naked. He sat on an upright chair, his legs apart, his penis still part erect thanks to the ring around its base. Charles held it firmly to the seat.

‘More?’

‘Yep. Go on. Fucker.’

‘What do you want? Swazi?’

‘Yep. Do it.’

Charles leant forward. He held the scalpel carefully and cut over the penis head. Some of the blood from the previous line smeared on his fingers. He smiled, raised them to his lips, licked them. ‘Yum.’ Then he positioned the blade again, re-cutting along the same cross-line. More blood appeared. Some ran round to the underside and dripped into the metal bowl positioned below.

‘Hurt?’ Charles was watching Dave’s face closely. A log fell in the fireplace behind and sparks rose into the chimney.

‘Yeah. It’s good.’

Charles nodded. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Now to finish.’ He worked his way around the four ends of the cross he’d made in Dave’s flesh. At each end, he cut in the ‘feet’ of the swastika. It was careful work. I had to position the camera closely. The macro lens was fine, but at times I felt I was in the way. Charles said nothing. I carried on. Focus, click, flash, wind.

When Charles was satisfied, he sat back. Dave’s penis drooped, shiny with blood. Alberto, who’d been watching from the back held up a bottle of disinfectant. ‘Want?’

Dave looked to Charles. Charles shook his head. 'Nah. Spit on it. Rub it with your fingers. Scar it baby.' Dave did as he was told. Alberto shrugged. No one had used disinfectant.

The fourth man, Peter, was staring at Dave. 'Let me,' he said. 'Spit.'

'Okay,' Dave said.

Charles moved away and Peter knelt in front of Dave. He took Dave's penis in his mouth, moved his lips over it, past his teeth, into his throat. Forward and backward. Something between a grin and a grimace appeared on Dave's face. I caught it beautifully, close up in macro, the others blurring in the depth of field. Peter stopped and held the penis, now almost fully erect, between his thumb and finger. It was still bleeding. He smiled and rubbed it against his face, streaking blood on his cheeks, a dab on his nose. He took the penis back in his mouth, moving more urgently over it now. Dave let his hips slide forward and stretched his shoulders back. He moaned.

I moved away, switching the lens for a wider one, seeking to capture all four of them. Behind them, the fire burned brightly and my lights set off the brass ornaments on the rough wall and the pallor of the naked flesh.

Charles stood up and motioned to Alberto. 'You're next,' he said. Alberto smiled weakly. 'Come on,' Charles said. 'We've started. The blood's flowing. We're all brothers here.' Alberto stood up. His penis sagged despondently, seeking solace in his scrotum. Charles reached out and took it, drawing it to him. With his other hand, he worked his own, stroking it, his fingers playing with the end. I hadn't noticed before, but his was the ugliest penis I'd ever seen, and I've seen a fair number in my line of work. It had been cut deeply, vertically from the tip up to the end of the head, so that the head was split completely into two. You couldn't look at that and not wince. I wondered who'd taken the photographs of that operation.

'What do you want, Alberto?' Charles's voice was smooth.

Alberto seemed transfixed. His penis had hardened in Charles's hand, but he still looked nervous.

'You must want something. Same as me?' Charles opened his hand to let Alberto see. Alberto looked away. He shook his head.

'What then?'

Alberto opened his mouth. On the settee behind him, Dave and Peter were kissing, masturbating each other. 'Yin and Yang,' Alberto said. 'Sixty-nine.'

‘Really?’

He nodded.

‘Okay,’ Charles said. ‘Curves are hard, but I can do it. Max,’ for the first time since they’d started that afternoon, they paid attention to me, ‘are you ready for some more?’

I nodded and reached for the macro lens.

There was more blood and Alberto whimpered throughout. The others were encouraging, following Charles closely. He’d first carved a circle on Alberto, then the S-shape motif inside that made the delineation between the two parts of the symbol. Given he was only using the scalpel, he’d done an impressive job. Everyone agreed, including Alberto, a little too quickly. His face had been white throughout and only now was some colour returning. There was more blood in the bowl. Alberto reached for the disinfectant, but Charles stopped him. He didn’t need that, he said. Alberto hesitated, then let Peter and Dave hold him, after Charles had moved away. Dave stood close to Alberto. Peter knelt between them. He held a penis in each hand. He pressed them together so that the blood ran together. Then, stooping down, he licked each one in turn. This seemed to be a signal, and the group moved subtly together, touching each one another, grappling, almost wrestling, taking turns with each other’s bodies, licking, sucking, pushing, penetrating, sometimes all four, or three with one watching, or two pairs. I kept photographing. Soon Dave was close to orgasm. Charles told him he knew what to do, and Dave obeyed, directing his penis into the bowl. Then it was Peter’s turn and after him Charles. Alberto didn’t ejaculate. He seemed overwhelmed by the whole thing. The bowl lay on the floor, sticky with various body fluids, the men lying against the settee or on the floor in front of the fire. Peter had put a couple of fresh logs on, so it was burning brightly. Outside it was dark. I turned off my lights and the room was only lit by a small lamp on a table near the fireplace, and the firelight itself. The men were sated.

‘Drink?’ Charles said, and everyone agreed. ‘You too,’ he said to me, as he opened the picnic hamper and took out spirit glasses and bottle of brandy. ‘Everyone ready?’

Peter took the metal bowl and swirled the contents round several times. It moved slowly, like just-melted chocolate ice cream. He took the whisk Charles gave him and began beating. From time to time, he lifted up the whisk and watched the mix run off it,

blood, semen, saliva. He looked up at Charles and smiled. Charles opened the brandy bottle and held it over the bowl. When Peter was ready, he poured about the same amount of spirit as there was mix. Then Peter used the whisk to stir everything together. Charles held out a glass jug and Peter tipped the contents of the bowl into it. In the light from the fire, the fluid looked lighter in both colour and texture. The jug was about a third full. Meanwhile, Dave had set out five glasses on the side table. He looked up at me and smiled.

‘I’m fine,’ I said, but he left the extra glass there. Charles began pouring. Behind him, Peter sprinkled ground nutmeg on top of each one.

‘Gentlemen.’ Charles motioned to the glasses. The others took theirs. I hesitated. Charles picked up the last glass and gave it to me. ‘Please,’ he said. ‘I insist.’

We all held our glasses in the air. Charles toasted the evening, declaring it a stunning success. They all threw back their glasses and made noises of satisfaction, banging the empties on the table. I’d lifted mine to my lips and then held it cupped in my hand. The jug went round again. I shook my head. Another toast. Now the group was more voluble. Someone asked when dinner was, and Alberto went to check the oven. He’d put the roast on hours earlier. Peter and Dave went to shower. That left Charles and me.

‘Good pictures?’ He’d slipped a silk dressing gown on. I half expected to see him light up a cigarette in a fancy holder.

‘Yes, I think so. Wasn’t easy, but I’d say they’ll be fine.’

‘You’ll give us the negatives.’ It wasn’t a question.

‘Of course. I understand.’

‘The room is okay?’

I nodded. The room they’d given me had a sink in the corner which was wide enough to let me rinse out the photographic trays. There was a table nearby on which I’d set up the enlarger. I’d be busy that night processing, but I’d be able to give them everything in the morning when it was dry. It crossed my mind that I might keep a print or two, but Mr Raymond was quite explicit when he told me about the job. Keep it clean, he’d said. I would keep it clean.

Charles was squinting at my glass which I’d set down on the hearth. ‘Would you like some more spermnog? There’s plenty left.’

I pretended to consider the offer, before declining politely. Charles stood up and stretched. The dressing gown swung open and he folded it closed again. 'Chilly, even with the fire.' I nodded.

'Well,' he said. 'Dinner is at eight. I'm going to have a bath. That Russian mafia chap is supposed to arrive with supplies. If you hear him at the door, do let him in.'

'Of course,' I said. 'See you later.'

Charles left the room and I heard the stairs creak. I sat at the fireplace and watched the flames. I threw on another log. Sparks burst everywhere, then settled down. The door to the kitchen opened.

'Charles here?' It was Peter. He wore an apron and nothing else.

'He's having a bath.'

'Alone?'

'I've no idea.'

'Okay. I was going to ask what vegetables he wanted.'

'I'm afraid I can't help.'

'It's just he's quite fussy.'

I nodded, then shrugged. Peter shrugged too and went back into the kitchen. The house was quiet. The grandfather clock in the hallway struck for six o'clock. I stood up and turned on the standard lamp behind me. Then I sat down in the armchair. The glass of spermnog sat on the hearth. I picked it up and looked closely. The liquid had somewhat settled, or perhaps it was the heat. Anyway, the top half was cloudy and the bottom clearer. I held it up to my nose. The brandy was unmistakable. Perhaps also the nutmeg. The light of the fire flickered through the glass. I thought about throwing the contents of the glass down one side of the fire. There was room there, a sort of blackened shelf. No doubt the alcohol would burn quickly, but the other stuff? Being organic, full of protein, it might not disappear so easily. I had visions of it smouldering stickily round the side of the fire. The smell could be awful. I put the glass back on the tray with the empties.

Bright lights swept through the window and there was the sound of crunching gravel from outside. I heard a car engine race then die. A door slammed. Someone knocked on the front door. I waited to see if anyone would answer it, but no one moved. Charles was still upstairs. Dave and Alberto had retired to their room. Peter hadn't come out of the kitchen. I went through to the front door and opened it. There was Felix, grinning.

‘Photo man. It’s you. So. Let me in. I have a parcel for the headman.’

I stood aside to let him in.

‘Nice place here. Cosy in the winter, eh?’

‘I guess so. I’ve only been here for one night and I leave tomorrow. But, it’s nice, sure.’

‘No one else around?’

‘They’re upstairs or in the kitchen. We can wait here for Charles.’

‘Sure. No problem. He’s the one with the money.’ Felix walked over to the fireplace and stood with his back to it. ‘Long way to drive in the night, eh? I won’t stay long.’

‘Good idea. Do you want something to eat? I’m sure—’

‘No, it’s okay. I stopped on the way for a pie. That will keep me going. But a drink would be nice.’ He spotted the full glass on the tray and reached for it. I was about to tell him not to, when the hall door opened.

‘Are you the Russian guy?’ Charles was dressed for dinner. White shirt, flannel trousers, dark jacket.

‘I’m Felix. Charles?’

Charles nodded. He stretched out his hand. ‘You have something for me?’

They shook. ‘I do,’ Felix said and pulled a package from inside his leather jacket. ‘The money?’

‘Upstairs. Will you give me a moment?’

‘No problem.’ Felix was relaxed. Charles left the room and Felix looked at me. ‘It’s okay?’ he said. I shrugged. We waited.

‘Did you take the photographs?’ Felix seemed to know everything.

‘I did. This afternoon.’

‘They are fucked up bastards, eh?’

‘You could say that.’

‘But they buy plenty from me. What am I to say? I just do what I am paid to do. If they get caught, it wasn’t me. As far as I care, they can do what they like.’

‘You’ve seen them before?’

‘I haven’t seen them, but I saw some photographs.’ He screwed up his face. ‘Ugly.’

‘You can say that again.’

The door to the kitchen opened. It was Peter. He crossed the room and shouted up the stairs. 'Dinner's ready.' He turned to Felix. 'You're welcome to stay. Why not? Be ready in five minutes.' He went back into the kitchen.

I looked at Felix. 'Sure, why not,' he said. 'As long as I get the money.' He sat down on the sofa and looked around the room. 'Yes. It's a nice place, for sure. There guys are rich.'

'I don't think they own it. Just rented. For the weekend.'

'Okay. Still. Not cheap. What do they do?'

'Not sure,' I said. 'They talked a bit last night. Peter is in the City, from what I can gather. Charles is a vet. One's a doctor I think, Alberto. Dave, I don't know.'

'A doctor. My god.'

'Well. He was concerned about hygiene. He was the only one.'

Felix looked puzzled. 'There was blood?'

'Plenty.' I waved towards the almost empty jug, still on the silver tray. The hall door opened and Charles came in, followed by Dave and Alberto. They were all dressed this time. Suddenly they looked normal. Middle-aged men, successful, well-groomed, relaxed.

Felix stood up. Charles handed him an envelope, then introduced him to the others. They all shook hands. 'Very civilised,' Charles said. 'Now, let's eat.'

The meal was delicious. Peter obviously knew what he was doing. Charles agreed, carving the roast at the head of the table. Alberto, at the other end, was serving roast vegetables. 'Timed to perfection,' Charles said, noting the blood trickling out of the pink flesh at the centre of the meat. 'Just how we like it.' There was agreement around the table. Once everyone had a plate before him, all sounds stopped. They were hungry.

'What are we doing tomorrow?' Dave said, his fork poised before his mouth. He looked at Charles.

'I thought perhaps a brisk walk in the moors. Burn some of this off.'

'I can think of other ways to burn it off,' said Peter.

'That's tonight. Unless you fellows are sore?'

Dave shook his head. Alberto seemed less certain.

'No bunga bunga tonight?' Charles was smiling.

Alberto grinned meekly. 'Always,' he said.

‘That’s the spirit,’ Charles said. ‘Now, Felix. Where do you go next on your deliveries?’

‘I go back to London. Then Europe.’

‘Restock?’

‘Yes. I don’t like to stay here too long. You never know.’

‘Of course.’

‘But if you need some more, just use the phone number. No problem.’

The conversation moved on. The Middle East. George Michael. The Scottish Catholic Church. The Ikea gay couple ad. Chairs were pushed back. The men were contented.

‘Well,’ Felix said, standing up. ‘Thank you so much for that. But I must be heading back.’

Charles stood up and held out his hand. They shook.

‘Max, can you see Felix out?’

‘Sure, Charles.’ I walked into the living room. The fire had burned down. It’d need more wood soon. Felix paused by the tray on the table. He reached out for the glass. I held out my hand to stop him. Wasn’t he driving? He just smiled and tossed back the contents in one throw.

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Not bad. Nutmeg.’

17.

She was standing by the front door of the cafe, wearing a red coat with fur lining and a hood. It seemed an age since I'd seen her, and she looked even more elegant. She said hello and let me kiss her on the cheek. I smelled her perfume.

'How was your night with Felix?' Her eyes were curious.

I said it was rather rough. I'd been okay, but Felix was a mess. He didn't seem to know when to stop.

She shrugged. 'I don't see him much, you know,' she said. 'He contacted me a couple of weeks ago.'

I waited for her say more, wanting her to tell me everything. I knew that Felix had something to do with Nadya coming back into my life, but I didn't know what. The sky was overcast and of course it was freezing, but it was not unpleasant.

'Okay. So what did he want?' I said.

She looked at me. 'He wanted to know if I'd spoken to you.'

'To me? He wanted to know that?'

'Yes. I told him I hadn't seen you since—' she looked at me. That old reproach again. 'Since the early 2000s'.

I looked down at my feet. We'd reached a bus stop and Nadya was watching as a number of buses arrived, stopped and set off again. We had to wait there, she said. It was a forty-three bus we wanted. I should stand there and call to her if I saw one. She said she'd be back in a minute. There was a small shop behind us with flowers in the window. I nodded my head. She disappeared inside. I looked around. Retrieving my mobile, I realised I'd forgotten to ask her about a local SIM card. I had no signal.

A bus rumbled round the corner. Forty-three. I called to Nadya and held out my hand. It drew to a halt and the doors opened. I stepped in, keeping one foot on the pavement. Nadya appeared from the shop, carrying a small bunch of white flowers. I

shouted to her to hurry. She followed me inside, calling thanks to the driver. He closed the doors and the bus began to move. She validated her ticket and for me also. We found seats. We'd made it, she said, smiling. Perhaps because I hadn't seen her for half a day, perhaps because of something Felix had said the previous night, I was struck by a wave of tenderness. She seemed so delicate compared to his gross bulk. I turned away for a moment.

We were heading north, climbing the hill up towards the Lavra, the complex of shrines and churches. We'd walked through it as a family, back when I lived in Kiev. I wondered if Nadya would react. Was that where she was taking me? The bus went on past the entrance. Soon it was behind us. I stole a glance at her. She was just watching the street going by.

After a few more minutes, she leaned forward and pressed the bell. The bus began to slow. She stood up, so I did too, stepping into the aisle. The bus came to a halt and the doors opened. We were the only ones getting out.

On our side of the road, there were big old houses, a long terrace. On the other side was what looked like a park. I looked at Nadya. She said simply that we should go. At the pedestrian crossing, we walked over. I knew enough to watch the cars very carefully. In Ukraine, traffic signs are little more than street ornaments.

Safely on the park side of the road, we carried on.

'Do you know about,' Nadya said, 'about my grandparents?'

The question completely threw me. I was expecting to hear about Kateryna, her mother, not about her grandparents. I confessed I knew nothing at all. Kateryna had never said anything.

'That's the point,' Nadya said. 'She never said anything. But my grandfather he walked along here, along this very path. Don't you know that?'

I stared at her. I was beginning to remember the place. It wasn't just a park. But I had no idea what was she saying about her grandparents.

She picked up the pace. There was a gate ahead. Further in, I knew, was a memorial garden and a sculpture.

I'd been there once before, with Kateryna. Nadya was at school, I'd finished the set of images I'd been working on. It was a warm day in summer and Kateryna wore a light dress and sandals, like a little girl. She'd been laughing. She was happy. We'd gone

walking through the city, I thought with no particular destination in mind, but it appeared I was wrong. She'd led me through the gates, still happy. But her mood changed when we walked into the memorial garden. Did I know, Kateryna had asked, what had happened in this place? At that time, I didn't know. It seemed a pleasant park, pine trees, nothing more. The memorial was obviously something to do with the Second World War, almost every memorial in the city was. Kateryna hesitated by the information sign. She seemed about to speak. Then she just walked on and I read. It was Babyn Yar, where in three days the Nazis murdered more than thirty thousand people, Ukrainian gypsies, asylum inmates, communists, nationalists, and, most of all, Jews. Kateryna was a distance ahead. I caught up with her, surprised by her pace. The path led through trees, providing pleasantly dappled shade on the warm day. There were benches for the elderly or the young to rest on. The path continued, through more trees. Suddenly it opened out onto a ravine. A wide cut in the earth, torn open, spilling down steep slopes, falling into the darkness below. Kateryna led me to the guardrail. She said nothing, just looked over. I leaned against the railing as well. Behind us was the city. There were occasional screams of children from the park. Around us, ahead of us, it was silent. Just darkness below and the pale blue of the hills beyond. We stood there for a long time, Kateryna looking down. I saw she was crying, her face expressionless, tears trickling on her cheeks. A soft summer wind blew up from the ravine and stirred the fabric of her dress. A loose strand of black hair fluttered on her face. I reached out and held her. She let me put my arms around her. Eventually we stepped away from the rail and walked back through the trees, my arm loosely around her waist. We made love back in the apartment, tenderly, as I remember. Kateryna cried again. When we'd finished and were lying on the bed looking out of the narrow window that showed only the roof of the block opposite and the greying sky above, I asked Kateryna what had happened in the park. She just shook her head. She wanted me to be there, that was all. We never discussed it again.

In the freezing air, the memorial garden seemed menacing. A new sculpture had been erected, an ugly thing. There was a patch of graffiti on a corner. Nadya didn't stop. I followed behind. I had been through this already.

At the guardrail, Nadya began to speak. 'They come here, thousands, tens of thousands. Did you know that?'

I said I did. I'd read about this place, on the internet. I'd seen the archival photographs.

She looked at me. 'You have seen photographs?'

I nodded.

'You think photographs tell you anything? Anything at all?'

I looked at her.

She laughed. Then she looked away.

'My grandfather walked here,' she said. 'Him. His parents. His brothers and sisters. His aunts and uncles, their children, his cousins.'

I watched her face.

'Many. So many. They walked here. They believed what they had been told. In leaflets, documents. They were told to come. They came.'

I said nothing. The snow seemed to muffle any sound.

'And you have seen photographs. Did you see the people in the photographs? Did you see my grandfather's face?'

I shook my head.

'Of course not. Of course you didn't.'

I waited for her to go on.

'Your grandmother,' I said. 'Do you mean she did not walk here?'

Nadya shook her head. I waited. Then she started speaking. Her grandmother's name was Elisabet. She'd been with her friend. The friend's husband was a veterinarian. The family had relatives near the Black Sea. They had been allowed to travel because an animal was sick. So Elisabet was with her friend, in the farmyard, a thousand kilometres away. In those first days in October, no one believed what was happening here. But after three days, they knew. Elisabet stayed on the farm. That was all.

Nadya stopped again.

'And the family hid Elisabet?'

'Yes,' she said. 'That's all.'

'Elisabet survived then.'

Nadya nodded. 'She survived. And the baby she had inside her.'

A snowflake appeared out of nowhere. The sky had been darkening. Then there were flakes everywhere, spinning out of the sky, landing on Nadya's hat, landing on my

shoulders, catching the tip of her nose. I brushed it off. She pulled her head away. I reached out to hold her. She said something sharp. She didn't want me to touch her.

'Don't you know?' she said. 'Don't you understand?'

I shook my head.

'Those people were defenceless. They had no power, not even the tiny piece of power which is knowing what is happening. They were like naked children. Weak and trusting. Those men, only a few men, with their uniforms and guns and dogs and, of course, with vodka. They drove the people along this track.' Nadya stopped.

I said I knew what happened.

'Maybe you know,' she said. 'But knowing is not the same as understanding.'

I opened my mouth, but said nothing. She went on.

'You do not understand, Max. You could not understand. If you understood, you would not have done what you did, when I was small, when I was a child.'

I stopped. Everything in the world stopped.

I replayed in my mind what she had just said. I could not have done, she'd said, what I had done, when she was a child, not if I understood.

The cold was savage now. The snow had stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Everything was white, the sky, the earth, the upper parts of the branches, and only the trunks black below. I began to realise why I was there, in Kiev, with Nadya. I took a deep breath. She looked at me. Human eyes are fascinating things. In themselves—the coloured irises, the whites of the eye, the black dots of the pupils, whether they are point-sharp or wide open—eyes tell us relatively little. But the setting of the eyes, the lids, the eyebrows, the bags beneath, the effect of the pull of the muscles around about, all this tells us so much more. The eyes might be the window to the soul, but to understand what the soul is thinking and feeling, you need to study the window frame. I studied her face. She was defiant. She was reproachful. And, behind all that, she was hurt, I suddenly saw. The things that had happened, there in Kiev, when I lived with her and Kateryna, not the earlier things during the war, those things had stayed with her. This was the moment I'd never thought would come.

'You don't care, do you?' she said. 'What happened to those people. They were raped and killed. They had everything taken from them, everything that made them human, even, in the end, their lives. But you don't care. You did it anyway, didn't you? You took everything away from me and left me with nothing.'

My mind was reeling. I struggled to put together what she was saying.

‘You don’t care. You did it anyway. You took everything. Gave me nothing.’ She paused. And then she said it. ‘You are no different. You are those men, with their uniforms, with their guns and their dogs and their vodka.’

I stared at her. I am sure my mouth was open. I wanted to respond, to say something. I wanted to talk about art, about beauty. But she wasn’t looking at me any longer. Her eyes had clouded. She looked to the ground, at the flowers that were still in her hand.

‘We should go,’ she said. ‘We are not finished.’

We walked out of the park. The fresh snow gave way under our feet. It was not yet thick enough to complain. The sounds of the city came out to greet us. Soon we were on the road and I was looking for the bus stop for our return journey.

To my surprise, Nadya led me towards the crossing, the one we’d used on our way there. We went over and back to the same bus stop. She said nothing to me except that we should wait. Minutes passed. Several buses came and went. On one, three men got off, laughing, their faces bright, steam puffing from their mouths. A thin woman arrived at the stop and waited with us. Her bus came. We stayed. Eventually a number seventy-four arrived, almost empty, and we got on. Nadya validated the tickets. We sat down.

I thought about asking her more, about Elisabet, about Kateryna. When had she been told? Why had Kateryna never mentioned it to me? She and I had stood there ourselves. She could have told me. The bus slowed at red lights. All our heads nodded forward, then back. We took off again. Yet she’d said nothing. Perhaps she had been worried what I would think. Or was it just a complication that couldn’t help, there was nothing that could be done.

And Nadya. I knew now why we’d gone to Babyn Yar, but she had to understand, if I could find a way to explain. And was that what this was all about? I wondered where we would go next. She was sitting still, looking ahead. I wanted to ask her. I wanted her to just say what it was that was on her mind. But I knew she wouldn’t tell me, not until she was ready. The bus ploughed on.

Ahead, on our right, was a big church. There was an iron railing all around, and it went far beyond, around what looked like a field. Nadya said it was time to get off. The bus drew to a halt. We walked along towards the church. Instead of going in, Nadya led me further on, through big wrought-iron gates. On either side were headstones. At the

front, the monuments were large, fancy, ostentatious even. As we walked further through the cemetery, the stones were smaller, the crypts less obtrusive. Soon the plots were marked with plain stones set into the earth. Nadya looked to me. We were standing by several plots, some older than others. She knelt down, in the snow, and crossed herself at one of the graves. The writing on the stone was old. I made some kind of deferential gesture, then moved forward to see the name written there. I knew it already. But I was thinking, there had to be a mistake. There were crosses everywhere, this was an Orthodox cemetery. But I realised. The family that had taken Elisabet in during the war were Christian. I understood.

There, on the headstone, I made out her name and the years, 1926 to 1986. I looked at Nadya. Elisabet had been here all along, yet Kateryna had said nothing. Still, it made sense. Keep things simple. I felt foolish. To have known so little. I expected Nadya to put the flowers at Elisabet's grave. But she didn't. Or, rather, she pulled one flower and placed it in the jar in front of the stone. Then she stood up, repeating her gesture and whispering something. She then turned and led me further along.

We walked away from the entrance. The flowers were still in her hand. I knew then where we were going. Eventually she stopped before another plaque, a newer one. I felt my throat tighten. I hadn't thought it would be like this. All the way here, on the plane to Dubai, sitting in the hotel, on the second flight. All the way, I'd believed I could see her again. I'd have a chance to explain.

Seconds passed, each one longer than a year. Nadya stood a couple of paces away, watching me. I looked down at the gravestone. But I couldn't read it. There was a rushing sound in my ears. Perhaps it was the sound time makes when we finally notice it is moving, when we finally see that it cannot stay still and it must leave us behind. We run with it as long as we can, it's quiet, it seems to stay still. But every now and then, we hear the sound of time passing. It rushes on, leaving us behind. It always leaves us behind, in the end.

I knelt down and brushed the light covering of snow off the flat plaque. I saw the name I knew was there, the one I'd hoped never to see in this way. Even with the Cyrillic script, I could make out dates and meanings. Born 1970. Died 2010. Kateryna Kuznetsova, mother of Nadezhda. I looked up. Nadya's face was impassive. I understood. She had done what it was she'd wanted to do. She held out the flowers. Still kneeling, I took them. They were fragile in my hand. Strangely I was worried they'd

break, being somehow frozen. They weren't. My hand was trembling. I leaned forward and placed the flowers in the vase before the plaque. I looked at the name again. I took a deep breath and stood up. Nadya was already walking away.

She ordered tea. It would be black. It would be sweet. I was about to ask for coffee and then I changed my mind.

'Dva laska,' I said. Two please.

Nadya smiled, for the first time since the night before, in the restaurant. 'What about your coffee?' she said.

I shrugged. 'When in Rome.'

The cafe was on the other side of the road from the cemetery. I supposed it got a fair bit of business from people visiting graves. It was quiet and we had a good table by the window. I wondered whether Kateryna used to come here before. Then I remembered the date. 2010. I glanced at Nadya. She was flicking pages on her mobile.

'What happened to Mama?' I said.

Nadya looked steadily at me. 'It was nothing unusual. She was in a car, with a man.' She paused. 'Mama still believed,' she said, 'that a man can make things better. This one seemed pretty good. He was a writer. But, of course, he was also a drinker.' She sipped her tea. In the kitchen, someone dropped a plate. I waited.

She went on, 'There was a crash. Maybe he had not stopped at the light. Maybe the other driver had not stopped. Who can tell these days. But she—'

Nadya paused.

I watched her. I put my hand over hers. She let it stay there for some time, moving it only when she picked up the teapot to pour out another cup for us both.

We went back to the maidan. The bus took a long time to get there and it was stifling hot inside. It stopped endlessly, people getting on and off, baby carriages, shopping, all manner of objects. At some point, I asked Nadya what we would do next. What were her plans? Did she need some help, perhaps? Knowing that Kateryna was gone, I suddenly felt responsible. I understood the awful hypocrisy, given how long it was since I'd last seen her. I knew it was a form of guilt. But I didn't care. I'd been given a chance, even if I didn't deserve it.

But Nadya had not replied. She was as enigmatic as ever. I would meet her, she said, at the same place the next day, in the square, outside the same restaurant. Would I be there? Of course, I said, I would be there, she knew that. Nadya shrugged as if to say she knew nothing. Then we were at the maidan and it was my stop. She said she'd stay on and see me the next day. As I stepped off, jostled by the crowd, I turned to see Nadya, to find her pretty red coat and her fur-lined hood. But she was gone.

18.

‘Yes, but what did she mean?’ Sally’s question hung in the air, somewhere between Melbourne and Kiev, somewhere in Skype’s enveloping system, up in space and floating from satellite to satellite, or deep underwater, trapped in light, inside thick glass cables. I’d been sitting in my warm room, in the Hotel Ukraine, looking down at the maidan, sipping from the teacup I’d bought myself in the shopping centre downstairs along with a teapot and a packet of black leaf tea. I’d eaten dinner at the restaurant in the hotel and gone back upstairs, avoiding the girls outside the nightclub. I’d been letting my mind wander, trying to understand everything that had happened that day. There was too much. I am a straightforward man. I live a simple enough life. I had done what I had done. But that day, too much had happened.

‘I don’t know,’ I said to Sally.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘What have you done? When you were in Kiev, the first time. What were you doing there anyway?’

‘It was because of Felix.’

‘Oh,’ Sally said, ‘Felix again. The Russian friend. Simon’s told me all about him. That was your first mistake, right there.’

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘my first mistake was working for Mr Raymond. And I had Lanyard to blame for that.’

Sally said nothing, just waited for my explanation. Mr Raymond had sent me to Yorkshire, I went on, to photograph a sex and scarring session. There was a lot of blood. In fact, Felix—I began, but stopped—anyway, the point was that the police found out about it all. Put simply, although the mutilation was consensual, it was still criminal. Mr Raymond was in trouble because he’d had the images compiled in a book, and the police got hold of some copies. They had him down as the publisher, but he agreed to cooperate. He fingered me as the photographer. The police wanted to speak to me.

They'd seen the negatives, the shot with me in it when everyone was toasting. They wanted to do me for being an accessory. I'm sure, I said to Sally, the police wanted me to help them. I could have testified for the Crown, against Charles and the others. Said I'd witnessed them committing grievous bodily harm on each other. I paused.

Sitting in the hotel room, I realised that back then I must have been thinking about Lanyard. How Lanyard stood up to the school. How he'd told them to get lost when they wanted to blame him for photographing Bronwyn. He'd told them he'd done nothing wrong. And they busted him. How Mr Hitchens had tried to blame me, but I'd maintained plausible deniability. I believed I'd done nothing wrong, the same as Lanyard, the same as the four men. Anyway, there was a warrant out for my arrest. I managed to cross the Channel without being detected. I spent some days in Paris, then I went to Berlin. I went back to the bar where I'd met everyone when the Wall came down. I couldn't say why I'd gone there, just that it had been fun and I had nowhere else to go. Australia and Lanyard was a long way away. Anyway, Jutta was still there, in SO36. Dolph had moved to Moscow. Jutta gave me contact details for Felix. That was how it happened.

Sally was silent on the other end of the line. 'That Felix,' she said. 'He keeps coming up, in the story, doesn't he?' Lanyard had told her how Felix had contacted him in Melbourne, a month or so previously.

In the hotel room, I watched my reflection on the glass panes in the window. I could see it had started snowing outside.

I told Sally about the snow and she laughed and said it was about thirty degrees in St Kilda. But, she went on. I hadn't finished explaining to her what Nadya had said.

I hesitated. I'd blurted it out to Sally because, to tell the truth, I had been struggling to work it out myself. But as I'd related how I ran away from the UK in 1993, and found Felix in Kiev, how he'd offered me a room in his apartment and a job with him on the websites he was setting up, I had begun to understand what Nadya had meant.

'Websites,' Sally said. 'What kind of websites?'

Felix was clever, I said. He always saw the next thing coming. In school, he'd realised that the magazines everyone used were a commodity in themselves, long after they'd been sold by a newsagent or whoever. They still had value. They had to. He sold party drugs in Europe, he saw all of that coming. Then, in Kiev, he was starting another kind of pornographic distribution—the internet. Sally interrupted me: So, I had moved

from Mr Raymond to essentially the same thing but with Felix this time? I agreed. Had they been successful, she wanted to know.

They were, to begin with. At that time, the distribution of pornography on the internet was mostly amateur. Scans from magazines, copied videos, etc. The publishers themselves had been reluctant to get on board. But they did, and soon enough Felix's fairly amateur material was competing against slick sites from Germany and the US. When he copied sets from Playboy or Penthouse, they started to come after him. While he was safe enough in a different jurisdiction, he was still losing ground.

Sally told me to get to the point. She didn't want a history lesson. What was it that Nadya had meant? What had I done back then, in Kiev, when she was a girl? Sally's question seemed to freeze the room. I went over to the minibar and opened the fridge door. There was a bottle of wheat beer. I took it out and tried to twist the lid. Realising that wasn't working, I picked up the opener from the paper doily on top of the bar. I took a long drink.

Sally broke in on the headphones. 'I heard that,' she said. 'Come on, tell your Aunty Sal what happened.'

What was there to say? I was living in Kiev. I'd fled from London. Felix was agitated. The studio we were using, the property of Fotohrafichni Kyiv, had been raided. Only the room we kept stuff in was opened. Although I never left negatives there, taking them back to the apartment in my briefcase, we'd lost many prints. We used to digitise them with a simple desktop scanner he'd brought back from Germany the year before, and we'd upload the files onto the web. Now he'd lost about a month's worth of work.

The authorities would not give the prints back. Felix had argued with them, and when the argument had failed, he offered money. It would have worked, but he just wasn't offering enough money. Rumours had gone round, according to Felix's friend, Oleg. It was said that his sites pulled in ten thousand US per month. The truth was more like one thousand, but, either way, it was significant enough. The police wanted five thousand, plus two thousand a month. Felix told them to fuck off.

We had no choice but to go back to the apartment. It wasn't really suitable, it was too small for a proper studio and there were no lights or backdrops. More importantly, there was nowhere for the enlarger and sinks that we'd need for a proper full-scale operation. Oleg had an idea. Actually, I'd already thought of it, but I'd discarded the thought

immediately. Oleg wanted to know why we didn't just go digital. No film processing, no hours in red darkness over the enlarger, and digital-ready images, right from the get go. I said no, straight away. Digital was a fad, I said. It wouldn't last.

But Felix knew a sound business proposition when he heard one. He threw his hands up in the air. Of course! It solved everything. Why hadn't the photographic genius—he meant me—thought of that. I kept quiet. I didn't even bother with the artistic justifications. Purist bullshit, I could hear him saying. Complete nonsense. An image, he'd say, is an image. If it was easier to upload anyway, what the fuck were we doing? Get on with it. What did we need?

Oleg made a list of equipment. Graphics screen, twenty-two inches, full colour, Super VGA. A grunty processor with enough memory and disk space, at least a 200 meg hard drive. I tried to say that would be expensive, but Felix dismissed my objections. He knew a man who knew a man who worked for the weather bureau. They had good machines. One of them would be ours. Also, Oleg went on, we needed new servers. We'd host ourselves, not rely on the ISP Felix had been arguing for so long.

We both stared at Oleg. He'd come from nowhere, but he was suddenly full of ideas for expansion. And, we had to admit, nodding to each other, he was right. Host ourselves, buy some domain names, have total vertical integration of the business. Felix was salivating. He reached for the vodka. Oleg had his glass ready. I relented. What could I do? Reluctantly I went into the kitchen for glasses for Felix and myself.

Felix poured. He lifted his glass. We lifted ours. Fuck art, Felix said. Let's make money.

What I hadn't realised was that Kateryna was living in Kiev all along. One day, Oleg showed me some photographs he'd taken before I'd arrived. Well, they weren't very good and I could see why Felix was looking for someone else. I flicked through them, saying pleasant enough things. Then I saw her. I held the print up. Most of the others were nudes, but this one wasn't. I mentioned to Oleg that I liked the pose, the model was pretty. I was right, he said. But she wouldn't take anything off. He hadn't bothered with any more. I asked him if she was still around. Perhaps I could work with her. He looked in the notebook he always carried with him and then found a piece of paper and wrote something out. An address.

I never got round to going there, at least not then. Perhaps I was nervous, I can't say. We were certainly very busy. When the website reached the thousandth customer, Felix held a party in the studio. Kateryna came, with a girl friend, one of our best models. Eventually I went over and said hello. She looked lovely, of course she did, and I told her. I said I had a couple of photographs of her, from the days in Berlin. She laughed. She certainly remembered them. No, she said, she didn't want any photographs taken, not now. I laughed and said that wasn't what I meant. We talked instead about music and theatre, and her time in ballet. She invited me to a performance the following week; that was how it started.

She didn't like the fact that I was working for Felix, of course she didn't. When we used the studio, there was some pretence that what we were doing was legitimate. It was artistic. She understood art photos, everybody did, but she knew what we were really doing. And she definitely didn't like Felix. On days she wasn't working as a dance instructor, she'd come and meet me at the photographic centre, before we were kicked out. She'd only stay until mid-afternoon. She'd watch me in the darkroom as I processed films and made prints. Once, early on, she asked about the photographs I'd taken in Berlin. I said I had ones she posed for on the balcony before we went back inside. She remembered them. Then, I said, smiling, she was in another one as well. She watched me. Did she remember the party, how it got wild? She nodded. How she was completely naked, on the curtains over the mattresses? Yes, she said, it was pretty wild. We laughed. What about who she was with, that night, did she remember that? Again, she nodded. Yes, she said, she did remember.

We went for a drink that afternoon, and afterwards she came back to the apartment Felix and I shared. She would only come in if I was certain he wasn't there. It was okay, I said. He was with Oleg. They were buying equipment in Odessa. Some shipment from Istanbul. He knew a stevedore at the docks. They were picking up disks and power supplies.

She sat on my bed in the tiny room. She said her place was bigger than this, and it didn't smell. I nodded. This one was okay. She looked distant. Anyway, I said, showing her what I'd brought her to see. There, in the photograph that had been taken in Berlin on my Leica, was a pile of bodies on the mattresses—to this day, I have no idea who took the photograph. Prominent in the foreground was Kateryna's hair, wild over her

shoulders and down her naked back. Her hair also obscured the face of the person underneath, so much so that I hadn't recognised who it was. I should have done.

Kateryna looked up smiling. Well, she said. It seemed that we were already good friends. Hadn't I realised it was me? The moment hung between us, a strange kind of weight, drawing us together. We kissed. The photograph slipped from her hand and she lay back as I pressed forward. I am not a man for passion, as I said before, I can take it or leave it. And I do not believe in love. We come in the world alone and we leave it alone. If there are moments of happiness in between, that's a bonus, but it isn't all that meaningful, in the scheme of things, in the end. But I let myself go with Kateryna.

When we stirred, several hours later, I was sure Oleg and Felix would be back soon. Kateryna shivered with revulsion. She didn't need to say anything. We got dressed and left the flat.

On the other end of the Skype line, there was silence. Sally had listened to everything I'd said. I'd almost forgotten she was there. 'Go on,' she said. 'What about Nadya?'

Before I moved in with Kateryna, I went on, I had a surprise. Kateryna organised a party, in the Lavra. Just a small one, she said. Just us. A picnic. When I told Felix what was happening, he said that was very nice. A picnic. How civilised. Was I going to tell her how we'd expanded the range of our websites? They didn't just feature young women, they were covering other genres as well. Mature women. Lesbians. Couples, men and women. Even gangbangs. We shot all this in the main room of the apartment. It was hard work, and there was a lot of shuffling people around, but we managed it. Or we went out on location. The park, an industrial area, even the street, very early in the morning when there was no one about but the milkmen and the rubbish collectors.

No, I said. I wasn't going to tell her that. She knew what we did. It wasn't beautiful, but we earned money. When I said that, Felix nodded. I was right, he said. Too right. Anyway, he wished me a good day. It was sunny. It would be nice.

The surprise was the person she brought with her to the picnic, whose birthday party it was. I hadn't known. I hadn't a clue. When I look back I wonder if she'd tried to tell me before. Had I missed something? Was she worried I would no longer be interested? It was hard to say. But anyway, there was a little girl, at that stage she was only three, a serious-faced little thing. But she was already pretty, you could see that. A pert little nose. Bright blue eyes. With her long dark hair, she looked just like her mother. To be

honest, I wasn't sure at first. Perhaps I shouldn't get involved, I was thinking. But Kateryna had no doubts. She liked me. She called me the English photographer. I would be famous one day, she said. I'd win prizes and I would be someone to be proud of. I laughed at that and said I was just a worker, someone who had to keep going. No one would notice me, except her, and, of course, little Nadya.

It was a lovely day. The sky was blue. The grass was green. The air was pure. The sun shone. We had some cake. Nadya played and forgot about the strange man. She began showing off, singing nursery songs and doing little dances. Kateryna smiled indulgently. She must have seen it all before. We were happy, all of us.

So I moved into Kateryna's place. It wasn't big, but there was more room than in Felix's. We slept in the bedroom, with the child in a cot. Later on, Nadya would sleep in the living room on the sofa, tidying it up every morning. Of course, there was nowhere for my enlarger, so I had to set it up in the bathroom when I wanted to process prints. It wasn't ideal, but it worked.

In the mornings, Kateryna would take Nadya to the free childcare or later onto the bus for school, then she'd go to the college if she was teaching that day. About eleven, I'd go into the city to Felix's place. I came home in the evening to Kateryna. Nadya would have had her supper by then and we'd have a few hours before she went to bed. The days passed. We were a family.

Sally urged me on. 'It all sounds great. What happened?'

I said it was good, for a while. Too good, probably. Then the websites weren't working. In the late-nineties, the European and American sites got really professional. They started pulling in the money. People didn't want our sites. Women didn't want to be on our sites. Ukrainian women are known around the world for their beauty, and they didn't want to show it for us. They wanted something better. They wanted to hook a rich westerner and move to America or Australia.

Around that time, the three of us went for a short holiday in the Carpathian Mountains. We stayed in shabby place that had small wooden huts dotted around, bordering a section of river, complete with waterfall. The water was freezing, but you could stay in for a minute or so. And Nadya loved it. She'd play all afternoon, getting out to soak in the sun, then jumping back in. I was on holiday. Of course, I took photographs of everything. That was the start.

Nadya was eight years old by then. We'd gone up specially for her birthday, in August. When she'd had that birthday party in the Lavra, I'd worked back from August by nine months, and arrived at November. It was in November that Kateryna and I had slept together at that final party in Berlin. I'd said nothing, and Kateryna hadn't either, but it didn't matter. I was Papa, she was Mama. That was all that mattered.

I processed the images and took some of the best to show Felix and Oleg. I was proud. Nadya was very young, but she'd grown quickly, as children do. There was a set of pictures from the waterfall. Nadya wore a tiny green bikini. Her body was underdeveloped, of course, but she already had a feminine presence. Long legs, long dark hair, soulful eyes. And she was skinny, but not too skinny. Any father would have been proud of such a daughter.

Oleg saw the photographs. Felix saw them too. I don't know which one of them thought of it first, it doesn't matter. Oleg said she was like a model. She was beautiful. Of course, Felix said, she was. I picked one of the pictures up. Without anything more being said, I understood.

We talked it all through. Ukrainian Models. Young girls who want to be models. Young girls who already knew about Hollywood, and Vogue and all those magazines. It worked every way. The girls would want the glamour. They didn't know any better. An English photographer. Exposure to the internet and the world of modelling. The parents would want the money. They didn't know any better either, or they didn't want to know. We wouldn't have to give them much, five or ten dollars per photo session. They'd take it. And the clients, well, Felix knew the clients. They'd lap it up. They'd know what we were really doing. And they would pay and pay. That was how it all—

A voice cut in on the Skype call. It was Lanyard.

'How are you, Max?'

'I'm fine, you? What happened to Sally?'

'She's fallen asleep. Do you know what the time is here?'

I chided him for coming back late and not looking after his wife. And I wondered about Sally. How much had she heard? It didn't matter, though. In telling her my past, I'd laid it all out in front of myself. There it all was, the genesis of a holocaust.

19.

She was outside the cafe, where she said she'd be. Still wearing the pretty red coat with the fur hood, this time with black leggings and black boots. And she was not alone. There were two young women with her. One blonde, with typical Ukrainian features, almost Finnish in appearance. The other had dark red hair. She was plumper, but equally pretty. They too wore warm coats, the blonde with a furry hat, the redhead with a thick woollen beanie. They were laughing at something as I approached. When they saw me, they stopped. I felt their eyes on me. The blonde said something to Nadya, who laughed. She replied, then repeated in English for me. Yes, I did look a lot older. The redhead laughed too. They were having fun. I looked at Nadya. What was this all about? She looked back. Come on, she said, after a moment. We would get the metro.

The Kiev metro is not as grand as the Moscow one, nor as ornate as Petersburg's, but it is still a handsome piece of architecture. The tiling is beautiful and every station has its own theme. The brightly enamelled trains are boxy and solidly built—and comfortable enough. After waiting for me to buy a set of tickets, the girls led me down into the passages. When it became clear we were taking the number 1 line towards Akademmistechko, what they call the academy town, an area of institutes, laboratories and other educational and scientific establishments, I knew what our destination was. I'd taken this line many times. The girls were chatting now, ignoring me completely as we took our seats, the three of them on one side of the carriage, me on the other. I took out my phone and looked at it. I still hadn't got a local SIM. I looked around the carriage, at the adverts and at the other travellers. We could have been in any European city, but for the script on the adverts.

When we reached Nyvky I looked over. The girls didn't stir. We wouldn't be getting out there. Metro line 1 runs under Peremohy Prospekt, Victory Avenue, and Kateryna's flat was off that street, down towards an area of student apartments. Nyvky was her

stop. The flat had belonged to the family, that was all she'd told me back then. Anyway, we stayed on the train. Now I was certain where we were going. At the end of the line, at Akademmistechko, was another student area. That was where Felix had his flat. A 1950s concrete block, solid but dull, and probably even more crumbling than it had been when I lived in Kiev. The train clattered on. Students got in and then got off. Older people, probably lecturers and administrators, also came in and sat down. Eventually we reached the end of the line. The girls stood up. They had fallen silent.

We climbed the stairs and went out into the main hall of the station concourse. The pale marble, the recessed curving upper-level balconies between the massive pillars that held up the double-storey ceiling, the curiously atomic light fittings, were all still there, retaining the Art Deco and scientific feel. It was unchanged. We took the wide staircase up to the next floor. I turned left automatically, the girls alongside me. We were all going back in time.

When we'd walked the several blocks and reached the building and gone inside, the lift doors would not close. Nadya banged the control panel. As we waited in the confined space, I became aware of a smell of urine. This was the first neglected building I'd seen this time in Kiev. The doors started to close, hesitated, then opened again. The blonde girl Nadya had introduced as Oksana pressed the button furiously. Then Nadya stepped outside. The others followed. She didn't have to say anything. If the doors were that hard to close, how did we know they'd open? She led the way to the staircase. We all knew where it was.

How many times had I climbed those stairs, all four flights, because the lifts were broken. It was a terrible block, but it had served its purpose. Up the stairs, each alternate landing had windows looking out over a bleak estate and beyond to the mountains outside Kiev. Up the stairs, the same stairs that all those little girls—if the lifts weren't working, and they usually weren't—those little Ukrainian girls climbed, their enthusiasm, their childish energy, their aspiration, pushing them on. Behind, a long way behind, would come the parents, or more usually only one parent, a shabby father, his hat planted on his head, a cigarette between his lips, his wallet likely empty. Or a mother, careworn, in an old coat, thick stockings against the cold or barelegged in the heat, carrying a string bag, as always, in case some bargain shopping opportunity

presented itself on the way home. Or perhaps a grandparent, identical to the later generation, just more shabby and more careworn.

The girls would be waiting at the top, excited, chattering if they'd come together, but either way alive with nervous energy. That was how they started, anyway. As we went on, as they got used to the work, they were less and less excited. It was a job, in the end, even they knew that soon enough.

The doorbell would sound. *Babusya*, Grandmother, we called her, although she was nobody's grandmother we knew, would put down her sewing and sigh and get up off the chair and go to the front door. This was her flat. She was Oleg's idea. She lived in the same block as the apartment Felix had rented at first and Oleg had seen her poking through some thrown out household rubbish at the back of the building. She was happy to work for us in the old place, and when Felix suggested we use hers instead—he could save money and still give her some extra—she was perfectly willing. She'd proved to be very useful, lending an air of family normality, of general decency to the operation.

Grandmother would stand on the empty vegetable box left by the door for that purpose, and would put a suspicious eye to the peephole. If the parents hadn't arrived yet, or weren't going to arrive, she'd take time to squint down to see the girls on the other side of the door. Eventually, she'd climb off her crate and begin turning locks and bolts.

The door would open. Those outside would troop in. The girls scampered into the small room, the one where Grandmother had her sewing machine, where the clothes were kept on racks, where the props were stored. Oh, to start with there were no props. I just photographed the girls in whatever they turned up in. Grandmother would tidy them up a little, she'd brush their hair and wash their faces if they needed washing. She'd spruce them up. It was only later, when we realised people didn't want to look at the same girls in the same clothes, that we asked her to make costumes.

The girls would gaze in awe at the clothes Grandmother had made. Skirts and tops, leggings, bras and panties, capes, fancy hats, face masks, Grandmother could make anything. She liked bright bold colours and modern fabrics that were both cheap and easy to work with. The clothes had no durability—they didn't need to last. Often they were held together at the back with safety pins and tape. But before the camera, under our increasingly sophisticated lighting, they looked fantastic.

The girls would be given their outfits for the shoot. They'd giggle and take off their own street clothes and put on the new ones. Grandmother would comb their hair, often weaving in bright ribbons matching the colours in the clothes. She'd do the girls' makeup too. At first she was crude, but over time, she became very proficient. Of course, we'd have copies of the western fashion magazines. The girls would study them and realise how normal they were being made to look by Grandmother. Their skirts weren't too short after all. The tops were not too revealing, the tiny hotpants not too brief—everything was okay, everything was normal, everything was Hollywood. And that was better than anything.

Meanwhile in the main room, Oleg and I would be putting together the props. One of our themes was the Wild Garden. We had a bright mushroom made of papier maché, painted red and white. We had a huge orchid that a small girl could hide inside and appear from, in a moment of blooming. There were background trees, heavily stylised, and a waterfall backdrop that we often used as the final background. I'd be working on the lights and positioning the camera tripods. I'd have two set up, plus the camera in my hand.

And Felix? He'd sit and watch. He didn't care too much for the actual production of it all. It was simply something that had to be done, a tedious necessity. He had the cash in envelopes for the girls or the parents if they'd arrived. Of course, the parents couldn't stay for the shoot. We'd tell them there was no room—this was perfectly true—and that they'd influence the artistry that we were trying to create—true as well, although perhaps they'd have preferred to do exactly that. They'd go out the door, the potato-faced people, leaving their angelic progeny, poor mute fools, in our charge.

Oksana, the blonde, knocked at the door. We all listened. There was only silence. I looked at Nadya. She ignored me. Alina, the redhead, said something to Oksana. She tried again. We heard someone stirring inside the apartment. Nadya crossed her arms. The women's faces hardened. A voice came from the other side, muttering.

Then the locks were turning, one after another, and finally, a bolt slid back. The door opened. The face of an old woman looked out at us. To this point, the girls had been quiet, serious. When they saw the woman, there was a moment of hesitation. Then they were greeting her. I didn't recognise her at first, but of course it really was Grandmother. Nadya and the others hugged her and squeezed past and went inside.

Grandmother looked suspiciously at me. She said something over her shoulder and I heard Nadya reply. Then she stepped back further, letting me inside the flat.

The hallway was the same. There was even the same cooking smell, another homely touch that reassured the parents. And the decor was unchanged. The carpet had been replaced at some time, and the walls painted, but it looked identical and there was the same ikon on the wall opposite the door, and the same painting on the other side.

Grandmother was waiting for me to get out of the way so she could close the door. I was letting the heat out. I stepped into the small room, the one she used to do her sewing in. The machine was still there, and the rack had clothes on it too. But these were wedding dresses, all lace and fine stitching and pleats and all the rest. On the far wall, were bales of white and cream fabrics, and on the walls were pinned different dressmaking patterns. Above them, in the top corner, was still one of the red darkroom lights I'd set up way back when I still did some film developing in this room. No one had bothered taking it down when we set up Grandmother as our costume maker. And now she was making very different kinds of costumes. I smiled at Grandmother. She growled something back.

When I walked into the main room, the three girls were waiting for me. They'd taken off their coats, all of them. They were smartly dressed, attractive young women. I looked from one to the other. Their gazes were powerful. I wanted someone to say something. No one did. Grandmother watched from the door, leaning against the frame. I sat down on the sofa. The women remained standing. I opened my mouth.

'I never thought I'd come back here,' I said. 'It was a long time ago.'

The clock on the mantelpiece dinged for the quarter hour. The wallpaper was ornate, there were small paintings hanging, the curtains were heavy, there was a cot bed that Grandmother must sleep in at the back of the room. My eyes returned to Nadya's face.

'What do you want from me?' I said. 'Should I say something? It was a long time ago.'

Somebody slammed a door in the flat below. I looked at the girls. 'You are all—' I looked from Nadya to Oksana, then to Alina. Their faces were impassive. 'You are all very beautiful—' I remembered what Nadya had said on the plane. 'I mean, you are confident young women.' They just stared. The other two must have understood me, but Nadya translated a few words for Grandmother. The old woman snorted.

Suddenly, I wanted the girls to tell me about their lives. What had happened since those days, here in this flat? Did they have boyfriends? Were they married, did they have children? Were they loved? They deserved to be loved. I wanted to tell them, they'd always deserved it. Yes, they knew me as the English Photographer, yes, my finger was on the shutter release, but I was simply playing my part in the whole thing. They must know it was Felix who was behind it all.

They said nothing. I said nothing. Nobody likes a babbling loser. When you play a game, if you lose, you should show some dignity. I had lost this game. I'd been brought back to the scene of the crime and denial was pointless. I knew and my accusers knew I was guilty. And I knew I was responsible for my actions. I'd made my choices. No one had forced me do anything. I could have walked away. Other people, in other situations, might not have been able to walk away—or so they tell us in court, over and over again, they were only obeying orders, they say—but I had been able. Sure, I couldn't have gone back to the UK, without facing the police, but there were plenty of other places I could have gone.

Nadya looked to the other two girls. They nodded. They picked up their coats and scarves and began dressing for the outdoors. I waited for a signal. None came. The girls left the room. I stood up. In the hall, the girls nodded to Grandmother. Then they went out the door. It banged behind them.

A sequence of photographs tells a story. The sequences we shot in Kiev, in the main room, under the arc lights Oleg had sourced from a theatre company near the polytechnic, they told stories too. In the series we called Future Planet, strange alien girls populated a weird landscape. Their costumes were gaudy, silvery, had high shoulder pads and very short skirts. As the sequence progressed, the clothes came off. It was ever thus. It was pornography. The photographer's intention is always exposed, as the models become naked.

Sitting in the room, I tried to remember Oksana and Alina. We'd had so many girls, they came and went. A few stayed with us. They grew to understand what it was we wanted. They learned to use their bodies, to open their mouths and show their tongues, to widen their eyes in mock surprise, in lascivious intent. They learned what all models learn, how to cut through the surface and go under. How to mine the deepest seams.

This is the gold the pornographer seeks. This is the gold the viewer wants. It must come from the models. They learn to show what the rest of us are looking for.

One girl—perhaps it was Alina, I wondered, as I sat there, in the armchair, and Grandmother still watched me from the doorway—one girl, with a wonderful spread of rich red hair, a girl who'd never got rid of her puppy fat, who seemed an unlikely star, but under the lights and before the camera her eyes understood, you could see that immediately, she did whatever she was told. More than that, she did things she hadn't been told; and those things worked. The camera saw everything, my shutter captured everything. She made good money for us, that red-haired girl, Alina. We offered our regular purchasers what we called custom sets. The prices were higher, but the images were stronger. They sold very well, exclusively through email. Soon we were offering custom sets of other girls. And after that, content of the normal sets became harder too. There were only ever the girls, alone or in pairs or, very rarely, groups of three. They only ever acted. They were too young to be sexual. But they understood sexual. This is an important point. It is a terrible point.

I tried to remember the other young woman, Oksana. Of course it's a popular name, she could have been one of the girls I photographed as well. Thinking hard, there in the room where it all happened, I remembered one girl. She'd matured early, developing breasts and pubic hair earlier than you might have expected. But her eagerness compensated. She was still very popular. Was that her, the Oksana who'd just left the flat? Nadya would know.

Then there was Nadya. She'd started it all, unknowingly of course. Those photographs at the waterfall. The next trip, when her bikini bottoms had slipped off when diving and I'd carried on taking photographs anyway, as she'd stood in the knee-deep water trying to see where they'd gone. She stared at me, at what was I doing, her long limbs, her dark hair, her body glistening wet, taut, impossibly slim. I'd clicked away. Kateryna began by teasing her, then she realised Nadya wasn't happy with my photographing her. Kateryna was torn. I was only taking holiday pictures, I told her later. It was okay, she shouldn't worry. Every parent photographs their kids, at the beach, in a blow-up splash pool in the backyard. What did it matter if a few pictures were published? It was all the same. We never discussed it again.

Back in the flat in Akademmistechko, I stood up. It was time for me to leave. As I approached the door, I remembered that Kateryna had never come here, even after I'd moved into her place. Her instincts about Felix were right.

I caught the metro back to the maidan. When it reached Nyvky, I got out. It would only take a few minutes to walk to Kateryna's old flat. I intended to try to speak to Nadya, if she was there. I imagined her there, with her friends, laughing about how they left the English Photographer standing in the room, in the scene of his crimes. But when I got to the corner, where the block was, I found to, my surprise, that everything had changed. The building had gone and in its place was a larger one. Even if Nadya had lived here, I would have no way of finding her.

Kateryna's flat was gone. Where I'd slept for four years while Nadya grew up, where Kateryna had entrusted her in my care, where we'd lived just like any other young family. Kateryna, who'd hoped for nothing more than happiness, but who'd also envisaged success for me, her English Photographer. Back on the metro, I watched the doors close. The train jerked and pulled away. The station was behind me.

I knew it wasn't finished. I knew the afternoon's performance at Grandmother's wasn't the end. I had to respond. There was a question there, I had to answer. In Vladivostok, in the middle of winter, fourteen years ago, I had left them both, Kateryna and Nadya. Kateryna was dead now. Nadya deserved an explanation.

20.

I had no means of reaching Nadya except through the email address she'd originally used to reach me. I'd have to mail her and ask her to meet. Explain everything to her. Back at the hotel, I was about to go upstairs to my room and open the computer, but somehow I found myself diverting to the bar beyond the reception. It looked comfortable. It was empty. The big leather lounges, the heavy wooden tables, the dark beams, the cosiness of it all. I sat down near the great fireplace at the back. The fire inside was burning, but I could see the logs weren't real and the hearth was clean and tidy. Flames of Russian gas danced impotently. Still, it was warm and the flickering yellow was convincing enough. A waiter appeared. Would I like something?

I would. I'd have an espresso and a double brandy. I remembered Felix. *Brandy makes you randy, whisky makes you frisky and a stiff Johnnie Walker*—then I thought of the party in Berlin, and about Kateryna, and about her discovering she was pregnant and perhaps worrying how to look after the baby. I thought about how I turned up, four years later. How I lived with them—but not for long. It was all a mess. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself. Fortunately the drinks arrived, and almost immediately I felt better.

From my seat, I could see the entrance to the hotel nightclub. The thing about the nightclub was that it obviously didn't only operate at night. It was a twenty-four hour affair. People came and left at regular intervals. Men, swarthy, stocky, dark, Russian men came in, wearing loose jeans and casual sports gear and puffy ski jackets. You could practically feel the bulge of their handguns. I swallowed some brandy and laughed. Stick 'em up, I said to myself. Goddamn hoodlums.

Other kinds of men came and went. Business men. Suave, wealthy-looking men. Mean, tight-lipped men in bad suits that were a kind of uniform. Tall men, small men, men whose only value to anyone was the roll of banknotes in their pockets. Westerners

too, usually accompanied by a tout intent on receiving his reward from the doorman once he'd deposited his prey inside.

The waiter was standing beside me. Did I want another brandy? I did. He left.

And women too, of course. There are always women. Wherever there are men and money, there must be women. If they're not there in the flesh, they're there in representational form. That was the whole point of the industry I'd been a part of, all those years, from Mr Raymond to Felix. Beautiful women. Not so beautiful women. Older women, some. Younger women, many. Women across the entire spectrum, across the wide periodic table of women, up and down the line of Darwinian female distribution, a survival thing, a fittest thing.

My second brandy arrived. I sipped it, remembering.

It was Felix who'd used the phrase, survival of the fittest. Felix who'd left the Hotel Ukraine just the morning before, still clutching his head. Years back, when I lived in Kiev, we'd drunk in this bar, him, me and Oleg, many times. It was Darwin, Felix had said, the whole thing. Hadn't we thought so? We didn't have to feel bad, he said. I must have said something to him, I don't remember. But I remember his reply. Everybody was different, especially women. Had we never watched American film and TV? Had we never seen the cameras zooming in on the dresses as the women stars arrive at the awards ceremonies? Why don't they do the same to the men? They focus only on the women, on their breasts, on their arses. And, what a surprise, there's big pressure for women to be perfect. Plastic breasts, hadn't we heard of them? It was like Darwin, he said, competition. We were staring at Felix. He put out his hands, palms facing us. Hey, he said, don't blame him. He didn't invent this. He was just telling us how the world was. At the bottom were black women. Sure, there were some successful black American women, but mostly the industry put them at the bottom, where they have no names, no identity, no nothing. Just bodies. The darker the skin, the lower down. Did we think he was making this up? Didn't we know the world? It wasn't only men who think this, we knew that, right? We weren't stupid, were we? Felix was laughing. He went on. What about—

The waiter offered me an open cigar box. I shook my head.

—the whole skin-lightening thing, what about that? Women put chemicals on their skin. They burned, they caused cancer, maybe they didn't even work, but the women still did it. To lighten their skins. To climb the ladder. Didn't we get it? And, no, it

wasn't the same, South Asian women lightening their skin and Western women tanning, not at all. Felix was in full flood now. The difference was the same as the difference between polishing tin and polishing platinum. They were both silvery, but they didn't have the same value. We should go argue with a nation of skin-lightening women if we thought he was wrong. He looked at me. Oleg was laughing quietly. Surreptitiously, he tapped his temple with a finger. Felix kept going. When we'd realised, he said, that he was right, we should think about all the other women in the world. After the black women and the South Asian women, there were the rest of the Asian women, beginning with Filipino and Indonesian, climbing to Malaysian and Thai, then mainland Chinese, to Hong Kong and Taiwanese, then Korean and finally to the top of Asian women, they're almost Western, the inscrutable Japanese. And after Asians? Arab women. Then South American, Romanian and Bulgarian. Then Eastern European, then Southern European, and now we were close to the top. Western European, white American, Northern European, and finally, Felix licked his lips, at last, we'd reached the very top of the top: Californian blonde. Skin like honey, smooth and soft, yet still slim and curvy, that sweet gap between the inner thighs, that perfect narrow waist, the firm natural boobs, the big dirty blonde hair, the wide face, the smiling eyes, the open-mouthed Californian woman, ready to blow you to paradise *and* swallow, ready and willing for you to fuck her in the arse, wanting you to fuck her in the arse, not like her whimpering sisters.

I finished the brandy and stared into the fire. The flames curled and wove and proclaimed their glory and faded into nothing. What he'd said, those years ago, was brutal. But being brutal didn't stop it being true. Beauty is fascist, that's all. And the correlation between skin lightness and desirability was consistent across most, if not all, cultures. Then there was youth and slimness. You couldn't be too young or too slim. It was a fascism. A universal fascism. Dolph was right. And we all danced along, then as now, the women's magazine editors and the fashion designers, with their twelve-year-old, flat-chested models. They do the same as we did with our Ukrainian models website. Their customers love it, our customers loved it. We all take what we want, and we want white (mostly) and young (always) and slim (always). I knew that. I lived that. Me and Helmut Newton and Terry Richardson, we made our living—Terry still does—taking and selling photographs of women as objects. Cumming on their faces, and

laughing. Living the boy photographer's dream. You want to tell him we're all equal? You want to tell him there's universal justice? Fuck that. You know the truth.

My head felt light. It was only three in the afternoon. It was going to be a long evening. I called over the waiter. I'd have a whisky. Johnnie Walker. On the rocks. He nodded.

My phone must have picked up the WiFi in the foyer, because I finally noticed I had two emails. The first was from Lucia. I groaned. If I opened it, I'd have to reply. If I replied, what chance was there I'd make sense in my current state of mind. I opened it anyway. There'd been a problem in the office. Manuel had had a baking-related accident at home. He couldn't come in as both hands were burned. She didn't want to bother me and she was quite confident she could cope, but could she perhaps make the booking for my return journey? The accountant had found something in the books, she wanted to discuss with me. It wasn't serious, but I ought to contact her. I scratched my head. It'd have to wait. I'd be going back soon anyway, Lanyard's show was in a couple of days, but everything was still up in the air with Nadya. I began a reply, then gave up trying to decide a date. I'd wait until the next day, when my head was clear, when perhaps I'd been able to talk to Nadya one last time. If I could talk to her. I stared into the fire.

The other email was from Felix, forwarded by Lucia. He'd emailed our website, mentioning meeting me in Kiev, so Lucia knew it wasn't spam. But she wouldn't reply on my behalf unless I wanted her to. I read the forwarded message. Would I meet him? He'd like to talk to me. He had a proposition. He'd included a contact number, so I could reach him. I knew I'd contact him. He might be able to help me. I stood up. I needed to get a SIM card. The room swayed a little. The waiter appeared with the bill. I scribbled my room number and my name. I set course for the front door.

Felix was standing on the steps of the hotel when I got back from the shopping centre. I'd got a SIM, tested the phone, called him, arranged a meeting, all in ten minutes. Modern technology. While killing time, I found a commercial gallery in a street off the maidan. It had prints from Mikhailov's 'At Dusk' series, originally shot in Moscow in 1993. Of course I knew the work—Lanyard had raved about it—but I was very impressed seeing them in the flesh. The images were remarkable: ramshackle housing blocks, wide snow-lined or muddy streets devoid of traffic, tired and empty shopfronts,

an old woman leading a goat onto a bus, a man lying dead drunk on the side of the road while people walked by, an attractive young woman leaning against the door of a vacant shop, shambling men conferring before an abandoned factory, each picture seemed to document the collapse of the Soviet system better than any narrative. Each photograph suggested two stories. The first, that something had happened to the individuals in each one—they clearly were real, and had simply been captured on the film, but what exactly had happened was hard to tell. The second story seemed far more direct and unambiguous. Even though it too was only implied in the framing and composition and the use of the blue wash that tinted the monochrome images, it spoke eloquently about end times and collapse.

I could see Felix as I climbed the lower steps of the hotel towards the front door. In my arms was the large bouquet of flowers I'd bought. When I got to his level, he held out his arms. Felix the Carpathian brown bear.

'For me?'

'No, Felix. Not for you. Why would I—'

'Because you love me, you Australian bastard!' I felt myself grimace. He held out his hands, pulled a *who me* face. 'Come on,' he said. 'Relax. Don't be so English.'

I laughed. 'Make up your mind,' I said. 'Choose one nationality. Then abuse it.'

He shrugged. What did he care, he said. We went inside the hotel. I'd been thinking of going upstairs, but once again I changed my mind at the last moment. We could have some dinner, I'd pay. The food there was okay. We'd have drinks first, if he liked. He did. We sat down, me on the same lounge I'd been on before. I had a sense of *deja vu* all over again. The same waiter arrived, not batting an eyelid. I put the flowers carefully at the other end of the lounge. The waiter looked at Felix. Whisky? Felix nodded. The waiter's eyebrows lifted slightly as he faced me. I'd have the same, I said. He left.

'So, Felix. What is it you want?'

Felix leant forward. I was his friend, he said. We were like brothers. The old days, did I remember the old days? The Ukrainian Beauties? The US dollar revenues? I did. We worked well together, didn't we? Yes, I said. He stopped. He looked at the flowers. An idea seemed to have struck him.

'They are really not for me?'

'They're not.'

'Then who are they for?'

I told him it was none of his business. My voice was firm. Anyway, I said, what was it he wanted? His eyes looked bleary. He seemed to be making calculations in his head. He said nothing for a moment.

‘Why did you come to Kiev?’ he said finally.

I looked at him, confused.

‘Those flowers,’ he said, nodding to them. ‘They are for Nadya, aren’t they?’

There was no point in me lying. They were for Nadya. I had hoped Felix might give me contact details for her. If he didn’t, I was going to go to the flat in Nyvky.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Does it matter?’

His brow furrowed. An intensity had come over him. I was beginning to realise it did matter.

‘So,’ he said. ‘She is cheating me. She is a whore.’

I sat back in the seat and looked at him. ‘That’s a bit strong, isn’t it?’

‘She is a whore. A fucking Ukrainian whore. And they are all whores.’ He stood up. His face was red. He made as if to go, then turned back. He pointed now. ‘You, you are cheating with me.’

I stood up too. In the corner, the waiter looked concerned. I raised my left hand indicating it was all fine. Felix faced me in the bar room. He pushed his jacket open, quite deliberately. What I saw shocked me, although I wasn’t surprised. The handle of a grey metal pistol stuck out of his waistband. His eyes were on mine. A smile crossed his face. He seemed to relax.

‘Okay, Felix. Let’s sit down and talk. You had some business you wanted to discuss?’

The waiter took this opportunity to come over with the menus. We could choose now, he said, if we liked. He’d take the order, then tell us when the table was ready. Felix thought that was a good idea. He wanted breadcrumbed chicken and boiled potatoes with coleslaw salad. I picked the same meal I’d had the night before, steak and chips. Felix asked for red wine. He leaned forward. ‘She wants money.’

‘No, she doesn’t,’ I said.

‘Of course she does.’ He sat back, watching my reaction. ‘She is cheating me.’

‘No one is cheating you, Felix.’

‘You paid for her silence?’

‘What silence? What are you talking about?’

‘Of course you know. The award. Your past. Every man has a past, Max. And your past is a bad one, at least where you come from. They will crucify you when they find out.’

I saw back in the sofa. It was blackmail after all. But it wasn’t Nadya who was behind it.

‘She didn’t ask me for money, Felix. We talked. That’s all. But now she won’t talk to me. I can’t contact her.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘She did not ask for money? Then what—’ His eyes flicked to the flowers again. ‘So,’ he said. ‘She is marrying you. For her silence, she gets a western husband.’

‘Marrying me? Why the hell would Nadya marry me?’

He held out his hands, palms up, questioning. ‘I told you,’ he said. ‘Money. And she’s beautiful.’

‘Felix,’ I said, staring at him. ‘She’s my daughter.’

There was a pause. One of those moments when the world notices something’s happened.

‘Daughter?’ Felix looked at me for a moment, a slight frown on his face. Then he threw his head back and burst out laughing, his face bright, his eyes almost closed. ‘Daughter!’ Every time he looked like stopping, he started again. I watched him.

Eventually he stopped. ‘No, Max,’ he said. ‘Nadya is not your daughter.’

The room became very dark again. All I could see was Felix’s face in the firelight.

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘I mean she is not your daughter. Why do you think she is your daughter? Because you lived with her mother for some years, a long time ago. You think that is enough?’

I didn’t think that was enough. It wasn’t enough. But it had still happened. Kateryna and me, the bunker party in Berlin, in November 1989. And then, four years later in Kiev, Nadya’s birthday party, in the Lavra, in August, nine months after November. Kateryna had called me Papa. I’d never asked her, she’d never said anything. I’d meant to ask her, to talk about it with her. To sort out papers and all the rest. But time had moved quickly.

Felix was still looking at me. I felt my mouth moving. I had to ask him.

‘Do you know,’ I said, ‘when her birthday is?’ I wanted him to say August. It wouldn’t prove anything, but it would be consistent with what I believed. And what I’d

always assumed Kateryna—and Nadya—believed. I willed him to say August. He paused, looking at his hands. He would, he said, tell me the truth.

The waiter arrived. Our table was ready. We walked through to the dining room and took our seats.

Nadya was born, Felix said, on the day of the October Revolution, the year after the Wall came down. He must have seen my face. He leaned forward. November 7th, he said, in the western calendar. He'd taken Kateryna to the hospital himself. She'd had a boyfriend, but he'd disappeared several weeks earlier and had never come back. She didn't have a car.

I stared at Felix. Simple arithmetic put me out of the picture. Felix smiled and shrugged, as if to say, so what. Shit happens. Or doesn't happen.

The waiter arrived with the wine. We sat in silence while he removed the cork and began pouring a sample. Felix dismissed him with a wave and took the bottle, filling his own glass and then mine.

I wasn't Nadya's father. The belief I'd formed all those years ago was wrong. I took a deep draught of the wine. I didn't know what to think. Perhaps Felix was lying? But there was no reason to suspect that. It didn't make any difference to him. And his reaction had been so spontaneous.

'So. You say you did not pay her,' Felix was saying. 'Maybe she will still asked you for money. How can I believe you?'

The waiter brought the starters. Cold beetroot soup with cream and chives. I stared at the crimson soup with the slash of white. I was having dinner with my blackmailer.

I realised then why Felix was surprised to see me at the cafe the other afternoon and why he'd said she'd cheated him. She must have been in on the act. He'd come up with the plan to blackmail me, but he couldn't do it himself—it would only be his word against mine. No, he needed Nadya's help. And because blackmail works best delivered in person, he used her to give me the message. She should have returned alone—with the money—but instead she'd brought me back. I was the last person he'd expected to see in Kiev. And presumably because she hadn't explained to him what was going on, he played dumb that night.

'You are the one who had the plan,' I said. 'But she didn't carry it out.' I paused. 'She's not speaking to you, right?'

He was looking sullenly at me.

I lifted my glass to him. ‘And she’s not speaking to me either,’ I said. He lifted his. We clinked.

I tasted the soup. It was delicious. Felix hadn’t touched his. He was staring at me. ‘Are you lying to me, Max? To your old buddy?’

I put my spoon down. ‘I’m telling you the truth. Okay. Let’s see. She won’t answer your calls, but she won’t know the number of this new SIM. You give me her number and we’ll see what she says. Okay?’

He grumbled as he looked up the contacts on his phone. He read out the number to me. I typed it in and press call.

She answered on the third ring. ‘Hello, Nadya?’ I said. Silence. She was listening. ‘It’s Max. Can I talk to you, please? Just stay on the—’

I looked at Felix. ‘She’s hung up.’

‘It doesn’t prove anything.’

‘If we were together in this, she’d have spoken to me.’ I put my spoon down. ‘Look,’ I said. ‘I’ve had enough. Let’s be clear. There’s no money. No plan. If you’re in trouble, that’s your problem. Okay?’

‘But I need money.’ Suddenly his tone was whining. I saw him clearly at last. Not the blonde Rolex-wearing superkid who was so much ahead of everyone else in school. Not the flash dealer exploiting high excitement in Berlin supplying everyone with recreational entertainment, not the porno industry leader developing new low cost and high revenue business models. Here was a broken man, a man whom life had passed by, clawing at a last chance for cash.

He was watching me. ‘I will tell them all,’ he said. ‘What you did. With the little girls. You will be destroyed.’

I sighed and shook my head. ‘Maybe if you’d said that a week ago, I might have cared. I might have believed you.’ I picked up my spoon and began eating again. After a moment, I stopped. ‘Felix. I honestly couldn’t care less. Kateryna is dead. Nadya showed me the grave yesterday. Now there is only one person I care about, and it isn’t you. Of course she already knows everything. So—’ I heard my own voice, firm and confident ‘—you can tell anyone you like. Go ahead. Knock yourself out.’

He sat there. If he did expose me, there’d be nowhere I could hide, with Interpol and the rest. Cambodia maybe, like Gary Glitter. But my career would be over. Then again, so would his, such as it was. He was watching me. He took a gulp of wine.

I realised something. 'Did you pay for her flight to Sydney, Felix?'

He nodded.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll pay you back that money. A couple of thousand dollars. I owe you, in a way. I'll do that for you, but nothing else.'

We finished the meal. Felix was in no hurry to go anywhere, and I said we might as well enjoy the food. While we were eating, he told me how the video company he'd set up had lost money. He found complying with regulations difficult, it wasn't like the old days, plus there were competitors and they'd paid bigger bribes than him. Oleg had cheated him before running off to Brazil. Everyone had cheated him. It was a tale of woe. I felt sorry for him. We agreed he'd email me his Swift payment details so I could reimburse him for the air fare. I knew I'd give him a bit more. We parted in the foyer. He walked out without looking back.

Upstairs in the room, I sat for a long time at the desk, looking into the night outside the window. Through Felix, I had gained a daughter when I first came to Kiev. Through him, I had lost her when she was only eight, when it all went wrong. Then, a week ago, I'd found her again, only to lose her one more time. Now I had to explain to her.

21.

Back in the hotel room, I sat on the bed and took out my phone. I pressed Nadya's number in the contact list. The line rang a couple of times and then died. She knew it was me. I went over to the desk. The laptop sat there waiting for me. I sat down and lifted the lid. I was going to write to Nadya. I was going to set everything straight. The browser started up and I watched the newspaper headlines on the home page, crawling their way from Sydney to my screen in Kiev. The usual stories. Government in shambles. Budget deficit. Not our fault. It was never their fault.

Then a headline near the bottom of the screen. *Shock jock son sexting scandal*. I clicked the link and read the story. The teenage son of prominent Sydney shock jock Alby Mitchell was in trouble for taking photographs of himself naked on his phone and sending them to a girl. She hadn't deleted it and it was found by her mother. The report made light of the incident, but the parents had made a complaint to police, and the police in turn had passed the information on to the DPP. They wanted to press charges of disseminating child exploitation material. Mitchell had been outraged. Why should his son be charged? It was simply childish fun, a prank. There was no way on God's good earth his own son was a peddler of smut, a child pornographer. The girl's parents were obviously morons. The authorities ought to take a good long look at themselves and find some real criminals to catch.

I was still at the desk, wondering about Nadya and how to start explaining, when a Skype notification popped up. Lanyard, of course.

'Hello,' I said, 'which one of you is it?'

Sally answered. 'We're both here. How are you?'

'I'm good. But, well, it's been a long couple of days. You wouldn't believe ... but anyway, how are you guys?'

They were pretty much the same, Lanyard said, speaking for the first time. The show was definitely on. There'd been all that anxiety, and the Melbourne commercial radio stations had been hammering at the gallery. But then the story about Alby Mitchell's son—had I heard—yes, I had—the story had broken, and they went quiet.

Sally added that it wasn't that the police were in support of the exhibition, far from it. But in following up on the complaint from the girl's parents, they had no choice. The whole thing was a scream.

It served him bloody right, Lanyard said. I could hear the anger in his voice, all the way from St Kilda.

I said it was good for Lanyard, good for them both. I knew they were anxious. Lanyard scoffed, but I heard Sally agreeing in the background. Was the show, I went on, in four days? She confirmed. Same time, same place. Would I be there for the opening? There'd be some wine and finger food, nothing flash. Of course, I said, I would be there. I wouldn't miss it for anything.

Sally said she was happy. Then she said she had to tidy up the kiln, she was holding a pottery class, she'd done several already and they'd gone well. There were eight students and more wanted to come. It was generating good income. She signed off and I heard Lanyard putting on the headphones.

'So, mate,' he said. 'How are you, really? How's the Russian girl? Do I hear wedding bells?' When he said that, I laughed. Sally mustn't have said anything to him, yet. I replied that it wasn't about wedding bells, although he was the second person that day to ask the same question. That confused him.

Then, I did it, I broke the cardinal rule. I told him the story of what happened in Kiev the first time, what it was I really did, how I'd lived with Kateryna and Nadya. How I'd taken photographs, how the business had developed, the whole child models thing. And finally, the connection—Nadya was the young Russian woman. When I'd got to the end, Lanyard was silent. He whistled.

'Well,' he said. 'That's a story. What are you going to do next? Have you talked to her about it?'

'I can't. She's disappeared. I think she's done what she wanted to do. I'm a bit lost, to tell the truth.'

'Maybe that's for the best. Maybe you should leave her alone.'

'I can't do that. I have to explain. She deserves it.'

‘Deserves it? Your explanation? Think what you’re saying. Isn’t it too late for explanations now?’

I stared at the screen. The line was quiet.

‘Seriously, Max,’ Lanyard went on. ‘What you’ve told me, it’s bad, you know. It was child abuse, really, wasn’t it?’

I waited for a minute, trying to choose my words. ‘Look, it’s all about context, right?’

‘Context, shit. You knew what you were doing.’

‘But, mate. What about you? What about your photographs?’

He snapped back: ‘That was different. You know it was.’

‘Was it?’

‘This goes right back to the days when we were at school. Art, right? Versus—’ he hesitated ‘—versus pornography. You exploited them and you damn well know it.’

‘So did you, Lanyard. You think everyone doesn’t know?’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘All I know is that mine were judged legal by the New South Wales police. I don’t think you’d submit yourself to their examination.’

There were more things I wanted to say. About how common nudity was in the former Soviet Union. The story about the only way to be classless. The fact that I had the consent of the parents. They brought their children to us. And most of the pictures were what we called non-nude anyway—

‘You know,’ Lanyard went on. ‘You know why you took the photographs, and it wasn’t for art. It wasn’t innocent. You found the girls and lied to them and their parents that they could be modelling stars. Everything was commercial, exploitative—there’s no comparison to what I did, and you should admit that.’

I said nothing.

‘Maybe you were tricked by Felix and Oleg,’ he went on. ‘But either way, you knew what you were doing, you should just admit it.’

There was silence.

‘It was about beauty,’ I said. ‘That was all.’

He said nothing.

‘Anyway,’ I said. ‘I do owe her, whether she cares for my explanation or not. The universe isn’t complete yet.’

I thought he'd stop. Accept my position that I ought to finish everything. But it didn't go like that. He laughed at me.

'The universe,' he said. 'Isn't complete? Of course, it isn't fucking complete. It never is. How do you think I feel, listening to your excuses and your hope for redemption? All my life I've simply taken photographs, looking for some truth. And I have to listen to this guff.'

He didn't stop there. He went on. His work explored the fragility—and the strength—of adolescence. The lost domain of childhood, the place we've all passed through and, perhaps, we're terrified to think about except in rosy—dishonest—ways. Yes, using nudity to do that was confronting, being reminded of the vulnerability of youth, but wasn't that the very purpose of art? To shake us all up? To make us look again at the familiar and see the truths behind it? And the fuckers had shot him down, over and over again, accusing him of being a child pornographer or, at the very least, of being driven by what they called 'strange desires'. Public commentators, advocacy people, radio shock jocks, elected politicians—the highest position in the land—they'd all had a go at him. Sure, he understood the facile connection they'd made, but if they were grown up, if they knew their subject, they'd know there was simply no truth in it. I would know that, he said—he was right, I did—and I would know how wrong they were. How they were simply piling on to him, exploiting his situation for their own ratings or popularity. And all the time, he said, there was me, a successful and acclaimed photographer, and now I was revealed to have had a sleazy past that I wasn't willing to accept responsibility for, to take the tiny amount of blame I'd been handed. Instead, I wanted a fucking medal for that too. He stopped. I could hear his breath on the microphone.

The connection stayed open. There was a noise in the background. It was Sally's voice, muffled. Then Lanyard came back on. 'You're not going anywhere, are you?' he said. He had to help Sally move something. He'd ping me in a minute. The connection cut.

That major show of Lanyard's, the retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, eight years before, that was the one that stopped me dead in my tracks. I'd been to all the earlier ones, in commercial galleries, in regional centres. I'd been at the launches of

his monographs. They were all very arty, small-scale, in-group affairs. No one would ever be critical at those events, they were always love-ins.

But the big show was different. Oh, it was very different. The scale was enormous. Room after room, culminating in a huge gallery with wall-sized prints, the Light and Dark series. I hadn't seen that set before and it was very impressive. Shot outdoors at night or at dusk, and with carefully hidden light sources that flared up bushes and trees or a river bank or the sides of warehouses and station hoardings so that they were stark against the darkness. There'd often be two or more such placements of light, creating an artificiality amongst the natural outdoors setting, as well as a curious dynamic tension. And because the locations were themselves fringe, by a railway line, or around an abandoned car, or at the back of a small-scale industrial area with lit-up pipework and flaring exhaust chimneys, the clash of posed artificiality and dark nature was even more obvious. But these scenes were not the ones that generated controversy. It was the models Lanyard featured that were the issue. They always were. Young adolescent, or what you might call pubescent boys and girls appeared within these settings. Like street children, like foundlings, they seemed wild. More importantly, they were completely, visibly, naked. Lightly smeared and soiled, blue and green under cold lighting, their skins were marbled like the sculpture photographs they were counterpointed with, and their eyes, blank and empty, stared back at the camera or away into some strange distance, like the empty eyes of sculptures. Sometimes they held beer bottles. Sometimes they seemed to be drinking or were positioned with discarded bottles in the foreground. Their poses were languorous, sprawled, curiously static. Sometimes they lay in each other's arms, perhaps cuddling for warmth, perhaps clinging with animal intent. There was always a strange abandon. They were provoking, too. Did they need protection? Did they want clothes? Or—even more shocking—were they perfectly happy without. Were they abandoned or had they abandoned us?

He'd asked me what I thought, at the opening, after I'd had a chance to wander through the rooms. I was on my second glass of fizzy. What I thought, I said, was that he would be lucky to survive. He grinned. Come on, he said, I understood art, I got it, didn't I? I remember looking at him squarely. I understood very well. But, I said, surely there would be complaints. The good people of Sydney simply weren't capable of assimilating this kind of critique. They couldn't cope with it. He shrugged. There they were, he said, gesturing to the gallery-goers, strolling, musing, assessing. They *must*

see, mustn't they? They were in a gallery, I said. People in galleries were sheep. You show them a photograph of a field of fresh luscious grass, they salivate. He looked at me. Did sheep salivate? He thought about it. He supposed they must—three stomachs and all that. I laughed. I had no idea. He sipped his wine. In the end, he said, it was up to them. They had to decide. They had to work out what art was and what it meant to them. Whether they learned something from the artist's vision, however extreme or weird or apparently perverted, or whether the work acted like a mirror, letting them see themselves, perhaps for the first time. Or, when faced with truths about themselves, whether they would they deny them and instead see only what they wanted to see.

At that point, Lanyard's agent, Molly Rivers came up. She wanted to take him away, there was someone he had to meet. A very good client. Very interested, he was. Lanyard let himself be dragged away.

I went back to an earlier room in the gallery. Several images stood out. In one series, set in what looked like the Palace of Versailles, some European place of culture, all chandeliers and mirrors and gilt edging, naked children were the centrepieces of black-and-white studies of decadence. At least, that was how I read them. A key piece was presented as a triptych. On each of the two side panels were photographs of Renaissance madonna and child works, paintings in oil with elaborate gilt frames and hung in marbled galleries. In the centre, kneeling naked on the ground and facing away from us, her buttocks prominent, the barefoot soles of her feet dirty, was an early teens girl. As if the composition wasn't shocking enough, the key detail was the blood smeared on her inner thighs and buttocks. Given the image was in black-and-white, you couldn't be sure it was blood, but it looked very dark. Of course the message was violation. The young girl had been violated, the image told us, in the palace of high culture, for the purpose of high culture. Painters routinely gave us naked young figures, all violated in some way. It was called art.

The other images I noticed showed young men, thin, stick-limbed, lying awkwardly on the ground, shot from the side. I saw immediately the connection to photographs from Auschwitz, from all those terrible places. Whether Lanyard meant these references, I couldn't tell, but I was sure I'd read them correctly. The question was, would anyone else? Or would they simply see the nakedness of the young models?

Lanyard came back on Skype.

‘Are you still there?’

I said I was.

‘First thing,’ he said, ‘is I want to apologise for the outburst. The show being cancelled. It was too much. You know. Then today it’s all go again.’

I said of course I understood.

‘All I want,’ he said, ‘is to do my work and show it. People can think what they want to think. The important thing is that they think something. That’s all we can hope to do, isn’t it?’

I agreed. And it was okay, I went on, what he’d said earlier. Someone had to say it.

There was silence on the line. I could hear Sally in the background raising her voice. Her class had arrived. Did Lanyard have to go?

He said he was fine. There was no rush. When was I coming back? While we were talking, Sally came back on. Her students were in the studio now, slapping down the clay before beginning the day’s exercise. Lanyard and I joked about school and the stupid lumpen monsters, gonks, we all made. Sally said that was all she did really, just more sophisticated gonks.

Then Sally asked directly if Nadya had asked me for money. I said she hadn’t. I didn’t mention anything about how Felix had bought her ticket to Sydney and whether she might have agreed to the plan—it didn’t matter anyway. Nadya had asked me for nothing. I did tell Sally and Lanyard that she had hinted at blackmail when she was asking me to go back to Kiev with her, but it wasn’t about money. As I said that, I realised Nadya had played Felix brilliantly. Sally asked if I thought Nadya would have anything more to do with me. I hesitated. I could hear the class in the background. Sally said she had to go. I said I didn’t know. Nadya might or she might not. It was up to her.

22.

I am not a brave man, Nadya, even if I try to be, here in my hotel room. The truth is I was never a brave man. If I am anything, I am an artist, and artists are not brave. Bravery and artistry don't go together. Oh, perhaps sometimes an artist must subsequently be brave and defy some prohibition or another, take some risk or another, that's true. But the mental ecology required to breed art is completely different to that of a brave person. Our work, the work of all artists, comes from a darkness. It comes from a brooding. From a resentment, even a noiseless fury, a silence in the face of the awfulness of the world. It gestates, grows and eventually finds form in some kind of production. It utilises whatever it can find, internally and externally, stealing, appropriating, thieving, sometimes—hallelujah—inventing. Artistry is the antithesis of bravery. It is the production of a sulking mind. It is surly fury channelled into material production.

Bravery, on the other hand, occurs in the moment. When a situation arises, when an injustice is perpetrated, the brave person stands up—without thinking, that's the point—and does whatever it is they do, and we later recognise their bravery. There's no calculation. No weighing up pros and cons. No second thoughts. Even if the bravery is displayed over time, there is always—there must always be, for it to be bravery—a significant element of risk, of the unknown. The decision is always in the moment, even if the moment is stretched out. The brave woman does the brave thing, defying the risks. She lives in the bright, hard truth of her bravery. She may die or be wounded or imprisoned, but she is always illuminated, even if only from within, by that light.

I need to tell you this. You need to understand why everything happened the way it did.

You remember Vladivostok? The weak snow that lay grey on the ground—nothing like the real Ukrainian snow—the grey sky, the grey shipyards and the grey faces of the

men who laboured there amidst clangs and shouts and diesel spluttering and welding flares? The grey warships and the black submarines in the harbour. You never asked why we went there. You packed a few books, you made your bed for the last time, you stood outside Mama's flat, holding that old teddy bear and your backpack. We said we'd have the rest of your things sent on. We never did. We said we'd come back soon. We didn't go back soon, and, when you and Mama did, it was without me.

And all that was because of me. The internal security police came down on us, on Felix and Oleg and me. They nailed Oleg for illegitimate acquisition of state material. Felix disappeared for a week and although there didn't seem to be a mark on him when he reappeared he seemed shaken up. Me they wanted for production of unsuitable images. The fact that no one had bothered us before, that our websites proudly proclaimed they were completely legal, and despite the general tolerance that existed, suddenly they clamped down on us.

We knew why. The American government, the FBI, was leaning on our government. The British, the Danish, the Dutch, the Germans too. They were all pressing. No one likes to be told what to do, but, in the end, it was easier to attack our sites and arrest us. SL Models went down. Ukrainian Beauties and Nubile Nymphets too. We had our own T3 connection, but in the end they made the cable company pull the plug. And they knocked on Mama's door. That was when she and I decided to leave.

Perhaps I should have talked to the police. Taken whatever was coming. Left you both in your home. But I thought we could start again. Who doesn't want to start again? I've started again all my life, that's been my problem. I still had my camera, the Leica, and my lenses. That was all I took. We caught the train to Moscow, Felix helped us out, he still knew a few people. Then we got on train number 2, seven days across the continent.

I'm sure you remember that trip. It was a lot of fun for a young girl. I took photographs all the way. There were many things for me to photograph, inside and outside the train. I had a line of business. I had a family to support. I was heading to Vladivostok. There was an agency there, Vostok Studios. Of course, we all knew their work. Oleg and Felix had admired it many times. I was certain I could sell them material. That would enable me to earn a living. In time, Kateryna could teach dance as before. We had a plan.

Oh, but it was a long trip. All the way I was anxious. Every time the ticket inspector came along the corridor, rapping the compartment doors with his metal key, I was anxious. He knew us all by sight, if not by name, but what if he'd received new instructions at the last stop? What if he were to take me to one side, to tell me to get you both ready. We'd have to follow him, to the guard's van. They'd be waiting, he might say, at the next stop. They'd like to talk to you. And to your family. But I wasn't to let them know that, he'd go on. There'd be no need to worry them. The guard never did speak to me like that. Still I was worried, every minute of the way.

And those stops. You'd ask what each one was. We'd say, at this one there is a great forest, in the shadow of the Ural Mountains. You'd ask if we could walk in the shadow, in the great forest. We wanted to say yes. But we didn't. Or we'd tell you, here is the gateway to the Mongols, the great clan of warriors. You'd ask if we could see them. Again, we said no. And there, a meteorite fell, flattened the trees for hundreds of kilometres. No, I said, I was sorry, we couldn't go. Mama told you to be quiet. I kept my head down. We'd get to the Pacific Ocean soon enough. Then you could go outside and play.

And so we did get there. To Vladivostok, the grey city. Or so it seemed then, in 1999. Of course, it had only just opened up, it's probably different now. So we got a place, do you remember it, in Aleutskaya Street, just down from where Yul Brynner was born? Mama used to joke about me going bald. They could put up another plaque. Bald one and bald two. Yul and English Kojak. I didn't find it funny, but you did. She got a job at the Buddhist Centre, up on the hill. I worked in the tiny apartment we had. I made contact with Vostok, with Markov who owned the place. He let me use the facilities. He insisted on digital images, so I had to buy a black-market Nikon with an adaptor to take my lenses.

I worked hard in those studios. I photographed six or seven sets a day. They didn't bother with artistry, not like we did back in Kiev. There were no backdrops, no waterfalls, no fake trees or bushes or giant mushrooms. There were no themes, no creativity. There were just the models. Vostok had a huge supply of clothes and the models were dressed up in one after another set. The range of small-size high heeled shoes was amazing. Glossy red, patent black, even glamorous white, all with devilish sharp heels. And there were the girls, waiting to be photographed. The bright lights, the bland pastel backgrounds, curving flat towards the floor, presenting a horizonless vista.

They would pout and smile and stretch and flirt—that was what the camera wanted, and the good ones knew it instinctively, and the not-so-good ones learnt it quickly enough. They'd make the faces we wanted them to make to the camera and the camera would click. One after another, again and again.

Sometimes I find myself wondering, how did I do it—how did I photograph young girls in such a way, in such a sexual way? Their flat chests and their smooth hairless skin, unwrinkled, untouched, perfect. The answer is simple. In the book *Dispatches* by Michael Herr, about his time as a Vietnam War journalist—I read it that winter in Vladivostok—the writer asks a similar question. How, he asks an American helicopter gunner, did he shoot women and children? It was easy, the gunner said. You just didn't lead 'em so much. What he meant by leading was the way you have to shoot the gun ahead of where someone is running, to allow time for the bullets to fly down from the sky and into them. The women and children don't run as fast as the men. So you don't lead them so much. In the same way, shooting young girls, you just have to hold the camera lower down. If you shoot from normal height, from your eye height, you're looking down and the subjects seem smaller, weaker, pitiful. The trick is to lower the camera. Then the eye of the camera is at the same level as the girl's eye. Suddenly she's an equal. The viewer can comfortably look without being reminded of any power imbalance. This is the key to pornography. The power imbalance is always there, the trick is to use it. Sometimes you want to remind the viewer, to regenerate the power imbalance, to exploit it, to—let's be honest—to glory in it. More usually, you want to hide it, to suspend conscious recognition of it. Then the viewer can forget what he is seeing.

Did I take photographs of you? Oh Nadya. Do you remember? Here I have to be what I am not—I have to be brave. Of course I took photographs of you. The artist must find and use his material. He must make the most of what he sees. I saw. I knew it was material. I made use of it. Yes, I realise what I am saying. I reduced you to the status of material. But, and this is important, for something to be created, material is always required. No one creates out of a vacuum, no one at all, except God, and God does not exist. We all need material and we all are slaves to it, whenever we are lucky enough to find it. Of course I photographed you.

One time, we were going on a trip to the imperial palace. You didn't want to go. I'd told you to wear your yellow skirt. You wanted jeans. I said no. Mama said it was

summer, it was warm. You pouted. You frowned. I photographed you. We laughed. You shouted at us, Mama and me, we walked down the street, leaving you outside the apartment entrance. You were still scowling. You were so pretty. We walked on. You followed. I photographed you all the time. Your legs. Your smile. Your wonderful slim body, already so like your dancer mother's. You sat on the bronze lion, your skirt riding up, I photographed you. You reached up to touch the gun barrel of the tank, you couldn't reach it, but your thighs were taut, I photographed you.

Many times, you were swimming. Those tiny bikinis I made Mama buy you. I photographed you.

One time, one evening at home, you and Mama were playing with clothes. She was showing you how a stylish woman dresses. How to wear lingerie, the whole thing. It was my idea. She went along. I know, I realise, I condemn myself, but I am telling you what happened.

There were other sets too. God knows, I needed to produce. We needed the money. The studio was in full swing. They had several websites, they were desperate for material. And custom sets too, of course, I did them, as before. Those were expensive for the clients, but many paid.

The girls? What do they think now? What do your friends, Oksana and Alina think now? Even at the time it was awkward. In your school in Vladivostok, in your own class, was one of the girls I regularly photographed. Once, when I picked you up, she stared at me in shock. There I was, the English photographer, your father. I said nothing. She said nothing. I watched her leave, holding the hand of her little brother. Where is she now?

And then came the North Koreans. Markov had no idea what was about to hit him. The Koreans had been active in Vladivostok for a long time, but they'd stayed clear of us. They ran their operations, the massage parlours by the port, the women that walked the long warehouse streets at night, the men who stood on street corners offering dope. The regular lines of pornography, the traditional hard-core, they had their hands all over that. But they'd always left us alone. New technology is threatening to people who don't understand it. And criminal gangs are not known for being smart. But they are known for expanding their territory, or squeezing out competition. They began squeezing Markov. It was the same as the Ukrainian police, but a lot nastier and it happened a lot faster.

When Markov was really beaten, he was ready to quit. One side of his face was like a balloon. He couldn't stop shaking. I visited him in hospital. His wife was there, with their daughter. They were both very upset. The daughter was crying. When they'd gone, he told me to get out, get the fuck out. Leave those guys and get away. When he got out of hospital, he had a final payment for us all. It wasn't what he owed us, it was less than a quarter of what I should have got. I took it. I wasn't going to argue. The place was fucked, he said. The industry was fucked. Squeezed by the criminals on one side and the authorities on the other. Somehow I got blamed when a warehouse near the submarine base was burned down. Technically it belonged to the Russian navy, but the Koreans had been using it to hold merchandise. Now they were after me, and they'd got the military police on to me as well. I should disappear, Markov said. Get the hell out of there. He gave me the address of a Chinese forger near the chemical plant. He'd knock up papers to get me to Japan. Then it was up to me.

I went back to the apartment in Aleutskaya Street. I looked at Mama. She'd started work at the Buddhist Centre. She was earning some money. She was a good person. You were in school, the one in the shadow of those big flats. You were happy. You had friends. Should I move you again? Should I drag you both across the world, always running? I remembered Markov's daughter, at his hospital bed. He had brought that about himself. When you dance with the devil, you get burned in hell. I wondered about his wife. Did she know he was a devil? Later that night, I stood by the window of the Buddhist Centre and looked out over the city. Sometimes, not often, the air is clear over Vladivostok. The cold sharpened the lights into painful points.

I looked up from the laptop. I'd written enough. I almost believed I was a good man, setting the record straight, explaining the unexplainable. I almost believed I was a brave man, finally telling Nadya the truth. How the Chinese forger had found me a genuine European passport, substituting the photograph. If I stayed away from the scanners, I'd be okay. When I picked it up, there was an Armenian getting his papers. His English was good enough. He told me he had merchant navy papers. I could go anywhere with them. The forger could do me some too, right there. Did I want them? Suddenly it all seemed easy. I asked him the question that had been haunting me. Could I take my family? The Armenian laughed and translated. The forger shook his head. Obviously

not on the same papers. Anyway, it was better for me to go first. The Armenian agreed. I got the papers.

Together we went to the wharf, one of the ones the small fishing boats used, where a Japanese trawler was waiting. The Armenian was grinning like a fool. Still on the quayside, I hesitated. I couldn't leave them. I thought perhaps I should just go back to Aleutskaya Street. The Armenian pushed me. It was time to get on board. I told myself I'd come back for them, once I'd found somewhere safe. I'd come straight back.

The other passengers were a Mongolian, whom no one understood, and a North Korean. The Armenian knew enough Korean to find out he'd been a soldier and he'd swum the Tumen river, making his way to Vladivostok in search of an uncle. Now he was going to Tokyo. We sat in the bowels of the boat. It rocked. It plunged backwards and forwards. I was sick. My shirt was ruined. But I kept my camera bag out of the bilge water. We arrived at Sakaiminato two days later.

Instead of going to the port with its customs facilities and inspectors, the trawler stood by in the darkness while a small powerboat took us away, in two groups. The Mongolian and the North Korean left. We waited on the ship, listening to the outboard motor in the darkness. After a while, it returned. Then we were in Japan.

We crossed the country to Yokohama and stayed in a commercial hotel near the harbour. The television had a coin-operated video feed. The films were strange. Young women being raped with remarkable violence by tattooed men with pixelated genitals. The Armenian found us berths on a Taiwanese car carrier heading first to Hong Kong, then Macau, then Manila, then Bangkok. For several weeks, I worked like the rest, painting, swabbing, checking the restraint cables on the thousand cars inside the vast decks. I ate in the mess and watched satellite TV. No one asked me anything. It was a good life.

We got to Sydney. On shore leave, with my Leica and our forged papers with their false names, which the official glanced at and waved us through, the Armenian and I walked into a pub in Kings Cross. He was laughing. I laughed too. We drank. I'd forgotten everything. Really, I'd forgotten absolutely everything. Except one thing. Simon Lanyard lived in Melbourne. I decided I'd look him up.

There was a bang outside and I felt myself jerked out of sleep. After writing at the desk, I'd got up to go to the toilet and had lain down on the bed for a rest. That was hours

earlier. There was shouting in the corridor. I didn't care. The corridor lady could deal with it.

I went back to the computer and opened an email from Lucia. She'd been able to get me on a flight, via Dubai again, for the next day. I knew I had to take it. Although Lanyard's show was not for another week, with Manuel out of action, it wasn't fair to leave Lucia on her own. Besides, it was about time I did some work.

I re-read what I'd written earlier to Nadya. It was self-serving. It wasn't brave. It was shit. But it was my life, and I knew I had to say something. I couldn't apologise for what had happened—it simply was the way it was. And I knew I'd do it again. I'd fucked up and I was tired, back then in Vladivostok, I was tired of fucking up. Now, in Kiev, I didn't want to fuck up again, but I had to leave it with her. I could promise her nothing. I could expect nothing.

I made up my mind. I'd finish off the email with an offer. Whether she took it up or not was up to her. I'd offer to send her money for a ticket to Sydney. The agency used PayPal all the time to make irregular distributions of cash for contributors and rights holders. Lucia would fix all that up. All she needed was a PayPal account email. The rest was up to Nadya. Perhaps, I thought, she could come out to meet Lanyard and Sally at the show? She could stay in Cottage Point, with the cicadas. It'd be fun, wouldn't it?

23.

And then I was going home. Retracing my steps. I caught a taxi to the airport. For a while we drove alongside the railway. I saw the airport buses trundling along. How long ago had we caught one of those? Once checked in, I went through departures and found a bar and sat there for an hour. There was a local WiFi service and I checked my email every ten minutes. Eventually, I was on the plane. I couldn't tell if I'd seen any of the cabin crew on the earlier flight. I decided it didn't matter. Once, half asleep, I turned to the person next to me and started to say something, apologising when I realised my mistake.

The flight was interminable. They often are. In retrospect, we only remember the excitement, the thrill, the drama. We forget the pain. I was in pain. I tried to shut down my mind. I tried to think myself alert. Nothing worked. Time dragged.

Again I had to stop in Dubai to change planes. Given it was only two hours, there wasn't enough time to leave the airport. Actually, I didn't want to leave the airport; the desert could go hang. The fountains and the seven-star hotel, the world's tallest building, the fancy multi-level bar, the multi-ethnic wait staff, the hotel with the adjoining rooms, the whole fucking shooting match, it could all go hang. I just wanted to get home. I was very tired.

Finally I saw her email. I'd connected to the airport WiFi and hit refresh. There it was. I selected the message and opened it with trepidation. Would she come to Sydney? Could she come to Sydney? Could we rebuild something?

When I'd read it, I sat and stared at the phone. Had she stopped abruptly? Was there more she was about to say? Did she just want to shock me? I kept hitting refresh. Perhaps another more conciliatory email was on its way. Nothing came.

I bought a coffee and a chocolate croissant at the deli. The pastry was dry. The coffee was too hot. I watched people coming and going along the concourse.

I re-read the email. I would reply, of course. She'd told me not to, but I would anyway. There was still time. There is always time. Unless we are dead—and then I stopped. Nadya's words sunk in. Unless you are dead.

I read the email four more times before I got on the plane. I read it twice on the plane, once before dinner and once after. Then, after several brandies, I wrote a reply. I told her I knew I should not reply. I told her I was sorry. Not for what I had done, it was too long ago, I was another person, it would be dishonest to apologise for what happened in another century. No, I would apologise for not understanding what she was telling me in Kiev. That I hoped she could come to the opening, to Lanyard's do in Sydney. Yes, it was crazy, I knew it was crazy, but could she? I hoped, I said, that Serguei would be able to look after their son—or even bring him, bring them both, why not—the brandy was kicking in—I said I could pay, of course I would pay, it was only money, what was money. They must come, I wrote. Please come, I wrote. Please.

Mr Argent. You sent me an email from your hotel, in Kiev. After everything, this is how we communicate. In words. In a language which is not my own. But I choose not to listen. I did not read your message, not after two lines. What is this you say about bravery? What do you think I care about bravery? This is not about you, Mr Max Argent, or Mr Ian Maxwell, as we called you, when you lived with us. Whatever your name is, whoever you are. This is not about you.

Did you think it was about you? And did you think it was about your money? Of course Felix thought it was. When he told me about you, I was shocked. In my head, you were dead. But of course you were not dead. It takes time for people to die, even the time since you lived with us, it was not enough time.

No, I did not come to you about your money. Felix was wrong. He came to me about your money, with his ideas, with his plane ticket. So, let him. I had my reasons. He is a fool.

No, your money cannot help you. You cannot buy people with money, Mr Argent. You cannot come to Kiev and buy little children or buy them when they have grown up. You cannot turn us into something for you to sell. Perhaps I do not understand

capitalism, as you said, back in the airplane, you made your joke. But I know when someone is trying to buy and sell me.

So, it is not about money. And it is not about you. This was about Mama. Did you even think why I took you to see the grave? I took you there for one reason. When we buried her there, I promised her you would come back at last, even if it was too late. She had waited for you, Max. She had waited for you all that time. You were our hope. That was what she said. She trusted men too much. You were our hope. Perhaps you did not know then, perhaps you will never know. But I will tell you now. This is what you were. She did not care if you were rich or poor. She said you were good with photographs, she said you would be famous, she said your name would be known in the world. She was right. But she was wrong.

I do not expect you to be sorry. I do not care for you to be sorry. I wanted to finish, in the end, what I started. I wanted you to know some more, so when you think of me, if you think of me, you will know who I am, as well as who I was. I went to Sydney to bring you back to Kiev, to the cemetery. That is all. My husband was happy for me to go. He knew only about Mama, but of course that is enough. Serguei looked after our son. He thought we could all meet, but I told him I didn't want you inside my life. He agreed.

Of course sometimes I think about those days. About those photographs. I remember them. What did you think you were doing? When I interviewed you, you did not speak about that kind of photograph. Do you think they are not with you now? Do you think they are just gone, into the air, into history? But they are with you, Mr Argent. They are always with you.

And they are with me. For this, I hate you. I can never be free. I know, I always know, someone can see me, in ways I never wanted them to. In ways you made possible. I must think of them. I must know they are out there, for people to find, for people to see, for people to think those thoughts about me, even if they do not know me. I must live with this. I have no choice.

I want you, Mr Argent, to live with this too.

Did you enjoy taking those photographs? Did they make you excited? This I could not imagine at the time. I did not understand at the time. Of course, I understand it now. But still I wonder. What did you think? You claimed to be only interested in the beauty,

in what you called the aesthetic. But I ask myself, how could that be true? How could that be the whole story? Did you find taking those photographs erotic? Did you?

So. I will send this email. I do not want a reply.

24.

I didn't expect to see, I never thought for a moment I'd see, perhaps I should have expected, had I thought of it, to see, standing next to a man, who looked successful in that Australian bull seal way with his expensive suit, his open collar, the slight weight on his jowls, the hint of man-boobs under his pink silk shirt, the short but not too short distinguished-looking grey hair, the strong blue eyes, the tan, the teeth, the smile, standing next to that man, looking comfortable even intimate with him, and elegant as always, there was Caroline. I turned away. I didn't want her to see me. Of course she was there, Sally was one of her best friends, even if she had been incommunicado. Why hadn't I thought she'd be there? But, then, so much had happened.

A waiter passed, paused, looked at me. Did I? I did. I finished the glass I was holding and picked up a fresh one. With my back to Caroline, I studied the other side of the room.

There was no sign of the Lanyards. Now that the show had moved up to Sydney, I'd invited them up to Cottage Point, but they decided to stay in the city. They'd be around somewhere. This was his big event. Over by the merchandise table were Lucia and her partner, a severe looking woman called Bettina, and with them, Manuel and his family. His wife was small and pretty. His son was only fifteen but already he was the same height as his father. The daughter was younger. She was staring at Lanyard's photographs on the wall. She said something to her mother. The mother just pulled the girl away.

A young woman approached Manuel. She nodded her head in greeting, almost deferentially but also with a smile. I liked her already. I wondered if perhaps she was the intern we'd got rid of while I was in Kiev? I tried to remember her name. Meena? Marcella?

'Are you fucking her?' a familiar voice said by my side. I turned.

‘Caroline. What a thing to say—’

‘Sorry, Max. But the way she’s behaving with Manuel, obviously she’s in the office.’

‘Actually, I’m not sure. I’ve been away for some time. Anyway. This is a surprise. I didn’t think—’

She smiled. I drank her in. She was as poised as ever. ‘Michael,’ she said. ‘Do you know Michael? I’ll introduce you, he’s the CEO of Eternal Vision.’ She paused. ‘He and I—’ She looked at me. ‘You know.’

I nodded.

‘Anyway, they sponsor the Art Gallery, they’ve been doing it for years. Always get invites. Can you imagine my delight when I found out Simon was showing?’

‘Well,’ I said, nodding. ‘He very nearly didn’t. The NGV backed out after all the fuss.’

‘Yes, I know. The injunction. The report on 7.30 was hilarious.’

I agreed. A waiter with a silver tray of canapés went past. We both helped ourselves. They were very good.

‘So,’ she went on, when we’d finished eating. ‘Are you?’

I looked at Meena Marcella. ‘No, actually. I believe she’s an intern at the office.’

‘Oh. So she’s on your bucket list then, is she? Lucky her.’ Caroline smiled just enough to show she could be joking. She stung, often, but she kept you alert.

I stared at her. ‘I miss you,’ I said, surprising myself. ‘I mean that.’

I must have surprised her too, because she turned to face me. ‘I know. I miss you too, in a way. But it was your fault. You shouldn’t—’

As is the way in social events, conversations get interrupted, despite the best intentions of those involved. Caroline said a few more words, just as Manuel brought the woman I was now certain was the intern up to meet me. ‘Mr Argent,’ he said—

‘I know,’ I said. ‘It’s Mia, isn’t it?’

She smiled broadly.

‘I remember the day you started. You did a good job, I recall. It’s the pits, doing the slush pile. Everyone hates it. Such a waste of time. And to not even get paid.’

She shrugged. ‘That’s not unusual.’

‘Anyway, welcome to Argent Images. Glad you could come. What a nice way to start.’

She agreed. Her eyes were bright. She was excited. Her fiancé, she said, was talking to Mr Lanyard. Perhaps she could introduce him later on? Of course, I agreed. She left. Manuel apologised for interrupting my conversation with Caroline, who'd gone back to her bull seal. I said it was fine. Then I remembered his hands. How were they? He held them up. They were okay, he said. The fingers on the right hand were usable, so email was no problem. It was all his fault. He smiled. He seemed in good spirits, so I told him to not go slapping any girl's bottoms or we'd have to cut them off altogether. He made some polite response and left to rejoin his family. I wondered if I'd offended him. Then I finished the champagne.

And then I saw her, striding into the room, tall, slim, black hair in a neat bob. She was facing away from me, paying attention to the man beside her, a tousle-headed blonde young man in a relaxed cotton suit. I knew straight away it was the surfer from Manly—who else. I'd forgotten about Serguei, about the son, about everything. And I felt a surge of goodwill go through me. A kind of electricity. In spite of everything, all the time and all the hurt, she'd been prepared to forget it, after all. It was going to be okay. Except that it wasn't Nadya, nor was it the surfer or Serguei. When she turned to face me, I knew for certain. I looked down into my empty champagne glass. A waiter passed.

Quentin walked round behind the lectern. He welcomed us all to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As we knew, it wasn't the original venue for the show, so we were very lucky, and he thanked the gallery management for their flexibility. What a wonderful gallery it was. Over the years, how many different shows it had it seen. How many different styles and themes and aspirations in invoking the highest aims of human artistic endeavour. It was wonderful to see so many people here. So many people willing to stand up and be counted as supporters of one of Australia's finest living artists. A man whose work had been neglected. Admired overseas but dismissed here. Whose work had been seized and examined in a reflexive response to ignorant criticism from wowers and Philistines. Lanyard's name and reputation had suffered terrible denigration. And simply because of his art. A true explorer, a trailblazer, a man who followed his own compass and wasn't afraid of the direction it pointed, a man who would go, and take us with him.

Simon Lanyard's work, he went on, was hollowed from the darkness, from the half-way locus between day and night, the liminal space where anything could and had happened. In this twilight, imaginations found fertile soil, germinating both fears and fantasies, horrors and yearnings. As Persephone returned to Hades, having tasted the fruit of the underworld, and descended repeatedly away from sunlight, these part-ghost, part-vagrant children drew the viewer close into darkness and into their curiously static dance; we needed to follow. They had much to teach us and we had much to fear. For these reasons, if not for the sheer aesthetic splendour, we did follow. The very youth of these Lanyardian figures was both their weakness and their strength. They were proud, vigorous, even in their quiescence, and we were reminded uncomfortably of our own vulnerabilities at their age. Childhood as a social topic and a lived experience was necessarily confronted. No answers were given. The settings of the photographs were also disturbing. They echoed the ascetic modality of high religious art, almost monochromatic, beneath the implied flight of cathedral vaulting, shrouded by the light-trapping swirls from the swinging censer, yet in their juxtaposition with the natural world, in the evidenced knowledge that everything would fall and was part of the continuing externality, we were reminded that we too were only small, briefly warm creatures in the wilderness. And there was a questioning incurred in our interactions with these pieces, one that gave no guidance or certainty: in a word, Lanyard was amoral. He was without thesis, without conclusion. Everything was open, even as it remained veiled. Yes, Quentin said, there were concerns about the subject matter and the tone of the work, you'd have to acknowledge that. But if art meant anything at all, it meant retrieving from the dark the very brightest of the light.

Everyone clapped. With the change of mood, the lights in the gallery around us, and the ceiling spots picking out each of the photographs, all seemed to burn brighter. They burned cold and steady, like the lights of Vladivostok on the night I decided to leave Kateryna and Nadya, to begin my journey here. They burned like the lights of Berlin, as Kateryna and I stood on the balcony of the bunker in Teufelsberg, all those years ago. I know, of course, making a meal out of a bunch of lights is pathetic, it's lame, it's a sad appeal to the aesthetic. But that was what I saw.

'Enjoyed the speech?' Sally had come over to where I was standing.

'A bit bloody theatrical,' I said, swirling my drink, 'the lights at the end.'

‘I thought you’d like that, Max. You like a bit of drama.’

I smiled. ‘But still. The State Art Gallery.’

She shrugged. We were standing before one of Lanyard’s biggest pieces. A teenage girl and boy stood in shadows, the lights of the city behind them. In the gloom, his penis is quite visible, passive, tender. The photograph is exquisite, full of adolescent longing and uncertainty, yet with a dark confidence. The gallery was emptying. Caroline and the bull seal had gone. Manuel and his family, Lucia and Bettina had gone. Mia appeared before us, with her partner. He congratulated me on winning the award for contribution to wildlife photography. He thought it was great that Quentin had mentioned that in his speech. I smiled. It had been announced the previous night. It wasn’t something I’d expected, nor did I think I deserved it, but I admitted it certainly was very pleasant. We talked for a minute or so and agreed he’d send in a portfolio.

‘It *was* good of Quentin, wasn’t it?’ Sally said after the couple had left.

‘Well. Probably Simon told him to, but, yes, of course it was. He’s a good egg. They both are.’

‘He made a point about photography, about Simon’s work. He was pretty rude about all the—what did he call them?’

‘Wowers and Philistines.’

‘Yes,’ Sally said. ‘And so they are. Picking on Simon. And out there, so many real offenders.’

She went quiet. I sipped my champagne. Lanyard was making his way over. People kept stopping him and shaking his hand or clapping him on his back. ‘It’s good to see, isn’t it?’

Sally nodded. ‘Tell me about it. He’s been a nervous wreck. But they can’t take this away from him now.’

She looked at me. ‘What happened to the Russian girl?’

I tried to look nonchalant. ‘Well,’ I said. ‘I left her the option of coming over. For this, actually. I mean, if she could make it. She might still be coming, I really don’t know—’

Sally smiled. ‘I’m sure she is. I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘No problem.’

We watched Lanyard. He was beaming.

‘Did you see Caroline?’ she went on. ‘I thought perhaps—’

I looked at Sally. Caroline must not have told her. I breathed a sigh of relief. Sally smiled. She turned and saw Lanyard, still surrounded by people. Kissing me on the cheek, she said she'd go and rescue him. We hugged briefly.

Caroline had told me, in those few last words before Manuel came up to me with Mia. I simply hadn't processed what she'd said. To be honest, I still couldn't. She told me she'd found the web pages, those images, on that trip to Bali, I'd left a browser running on my laptop. She didn't want to know, but I'd better be careful, she might still tell someone, it had better have been research, a one-off, I'd better not do it again, whatever it was. When she said that, my mind went blank. I almost didn't believe her. I couldn't face the possibility. I was always so careful. All those hours, on the secure web, searching, looking. They were easy to find, the photographs, the ones I'd taken—she wouldn't know they were mine, that would have made it worse, much worse.

Try as I might, and God-who-does-not-exist knows I've tried, I cannot destroy them all, then or now. They are still there, my pictures, all over the internet, in the special places, the dark places, hidden from normal sight. So many photographs, so much light. There's nothing I can do. I could search for them and view them and confirm they were mine all I liked. I could ask one site or another to remove them, yes, I've tried. They even did remove some, or so it seemed; but soon enough, they reappeared; collectors love to share. No, I can do nothing. They are out there now, they will always be out there, poor mute fools. Photographs from Kiev, of Oksana, of Alina, of all the others. Of the girl with the little brother in Vladivostok. Of Nadya, of course, so very many. In studios, in the outdoors, at home, yes, even at home. Bright bursts of savage electricity, every one of them. Out there, in the darkness, forever.

Exegesis: ‘Lacanian Psycho: analysing transgressive fiction’

Introduction

In 1990 a *New York Times* critic described a novel he read prior to release as: ‘pointless [...] themeless [...] everythingless [...] loathsome [...] don’t buy it’ (Rosenblatt 1990). Other pre-release reviews were similar. The novel was Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and the original publishers, Simon & Schuster, changed their minds and declined to proceed with the work. The title was picked up by Random House/Knopf and upon publication met with widespread disapproval¹. Even now, twenty-five years on and despite re-evaluation², it is still a controversial work³.

The problem was its depiction of violence, torture and murder against, but not limited to, women. Feminists in particular were outraged⁴, some suggesting extreme responses to Ellis’s work⁵, which they saw as having the potential to trigger copycat behaviour⁶. Ellis himself still claims the novel was misread.⁷

This thesis does not investigate the role of literature in condoning, validating or provoking human behaviour, but it begins with the observation that this view is

¹ For a full account of the responses to *American Psycho* see (Brien 2006).

² ‘Some recent critical reappraisals have begun to appreciate how *American Psycho* is an “ethical denunciation, where the reader cannot but face the real horror behind the serial killer phenomenon” (Baelo Allué 2002, p. 8), but Ellis, I believe, goes further, exposing the truly filthy causes that underlie the existence of such seemingly “senseless” murder’ (Brien 2006).

³ Rated ‘Category 1 Restricted’ (Australian Law Reform Commission 2012, 9.16) and sold shrink-wrapped in Australia to people aged 17 and older.

⁴ In December 1991 in a letter to ‘Sonny’ Mehta, *American Psycho*’s Knopf publisher ‘New York feminist leaders Gloria Steinem, Phyllis Chesler, Andres Dworkin, Merle Hoffman, Kate Millet, Sidney Abbott and others exploded: “We are appalled by your poor taste, bad judgment, and inability to hear what feminists for the last 20 years have been saying about violence toward women, what causes it, and what it causes in return”’ (Brannon 1993, p. 241).

⁵ ‘I would prefer to see [Ellis] skinned alive, a rat put up his rectum, and his genitals cut off and fried in a frying pan, in front of – not only a live audience – but a video camera as well’ (Baxter & Craft 1993, p. 249).

⁶ ‘So, You Believe That a Book Will Cause Women to Be Assaulted? No, the facts [...] don’t necessarily mean that this book will directly cause additional assaults; however it might. There are often “copy-cat” crimes against women after highly-publicised media portrayals’ (Brannon 1993, p. 243).

⁷ ‘The novel was misread. The feminist reaction was an overtly emotional response to a text that was more on their side than they realised at the time. I don’t think the book is anti-woman, as I’ve said many times. But even if it was – so what? It’s a novel, it’s not a creed’ (Ellis 2010).

commonplace. The thesis investigates how it is that writing like Ellis's—described hereafter as 'transgressive fiction'—is so distressing for many readers⁸.

Chapter One discusses the term 'transgressive', introducing key theorists from the field of transgression studies, Chris Jenks and Nick Land⁹. It looks at a case-study—the 2008 Henson affair—which, although concerned with the visual arts, has significant transgressive elements, in terms of both its subject matter and the public response to it. There then follows a discussion of both anthropological¹⁰ and sociological¹¹ research applicable to the field of transgression studies, before the central methodological approach of the thesis is introduced: Lacanian psychoanalysis. The work of Jacques Lacan has been widely critiqued, not least from a feminist perspective¹², yet its identification of both the centrality of language in human consciousness¹³ and the notion of desire as the primal human drive provides keys to the question of transgressive fiction. This thesis argues that the operation of transgression in a fictional text can be viewed as a confrontation within the psychoanalytic field, and we begin by articulating this idea using Lacanian theory. We then apply it to both published examples and to the creative component of this work in order to identify the stages of response to the experience of literary transgression, those being: announcement, erotic engagement and ethical conclusion.

The first chapter culminates with a discussion of three primary texts that are categorised here as transgressive: the aforementioned *American Psycho* (Ellis 1991), *Platform* (Houellebecq 2002) and *The Kindly Ones* (Littell 2009). There is a brief

⁸ Some academics are unconvinced. Julian Wolfreys in his *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* says: 'perhaps Brett [sic] Easton Ellis wished to be transgressive when he wrote *American Psycho*. I do not know. But if I did not find it so when I read it, and instead merely found it boring, banal, predictable, mundane, obvious, then was it transgressive?' (Wolfreys 2008, loc 309).

⁹ Nick Land asserts that literature itself is a transgression: 'Literature is a transgression against transcendence, the dark and unholy rending of a sacrificial wound, allowing a communication more basic than the pseudo-communication of instrumental discourse. The heart of literature is the death of God, the violent absence of the good, and thus of everything that protects, consolidates, or guarantees the interests of the individual personality. The death of God is the ultimate transgression, the release of humanity from itself, back into the blind infernal extravagance of the sun' (Land 1992, p. xix).

¹⁰ Mary Douglas

¹¹ Emile Durkheim

¹² Feminist critiques of the psychoanalysis of Lacan and Freud focus on the apparent essentialist fixation on gender. De Beauvoir for example identifies this in *The Second Sex* when she attacks the Freudian notion that libido is exclusively male and that there is no female version as such (De Beauvoir 1989, p. 39).

¹³ Ellis—interviewed about the film adaptation—recognises the role of consciousness in the first-person narration: 'I think that book is unadaptable because it's about consciousness, and you can't really shoot that sensibility' (Giroux 2013).

explanation of the selection criteria of these texts, namely that each uses a male first-person narrator as a transgressor. Finally, the creative component of this thesis is discussed: a novel set in Australia, Dubai, London, Kiev and Vladivostok and featuring the confessions of a pornographer, entitled *A Thousand Points of Light*.

The second chapter begins the methodological application of Lacanian theory to literary transgressions studies. It looks at how texts announce themselves to readers, specifically when there are transgressive elements of subject matter. The Lacanian concept of the symbolic order is more fully described, and the openings of each of the texts are examined for signs of the announcement of transgression. As the chapter explains, the requirement for announcements is twofold: first to warn readers of what is to come; secondly to advertise to, and then tempt, the willing reader onwards.

Chapter Three extends the Lacanian analysis of the transgressive novel by exposing its central motif: desire. The psychoanalytic model developed by Lacan asserts a central drive, erotic in nature, that motivates and impels human consciousness onwards as a consequence of the symbolic order of meaning within which the subject is constructed. In attempting to discharge the stimulation, the subject is driven along metonymic paths inexorably towards *das Ding*¹⁴, the intrusion of the Lacanian real into the symbolic order. This is where transgression occurs, and is linked with Sade, identified by Lacan as the true ‘man of pleasure’ (Lacan 1992, p. 79), the individual who first recognised the subject’s right, indeed obligation, to satisfy his own desires at whatever cost¹⁵. The chapter identifies the action of desire in the four texts, citing Peter Brooks from his chapter ‘Narrative Desire’, in *Reading for the Plot* (Brooks 1992). The chapter locates the Sadean transgressive moment, the point when transgression becomes visible: readers are either repelled or proceed towards new knowledge. Further, the utterance of the transgressive voice is discussed, through the examination of the writing of *A Thousand Points of Light*. The transgressive moments identified by this thesis are fulcrum points: once crossed over, the reader has accepted transgression. The promise of new knowledge, positioned against the reactionary force of censorship, is one of the main positive outcomes of transgressive fiction.

¹⁴ The concept of *das Ding* was adapted by Lacan from Freud. As noted in Chapter Three, *das Ding* is replaced by *objet petit a* in Lacan’s ontology post-Seminar VII, but because that work is central to this thesis, *das Ding* is retained for consistency.

¹⁵ It is noted in Chapter Three that this right is possessed not only by the libertine, as conventionally assumed, but also by women who are equally liberated from convention.

This brings us to Chapter Four, which asks what the consequences of transgression are. It begins by introducing the idea of an ethics of (literary) transgression, using Lacan's own definition of an ethics, and applying this to the notion of the novel as a psychoanalytic encounter between reader and text. The question is: can texts whose narrators commit transgressive acts be allowed to end 'well', by which I mean, can the transgressive narrator escape the novel without suffering? Can Good¹⁶ be produced through transgression? This is an important question, not least because the conventional societal response to transgression is censorship. Sade, says Lacan, writes that the individual must follow his desire, at the expense of everything else¹⁷, and Lacan observes that this is 'a kind of inverted harmony' (Lacan 1992, p. 197), despite its expenditure of 'everything else'. Each of the four texts is examined for the consequences of the narrators' transgressions. As is discussed in the chapter, there are quite marked differences. One is found to have escaped unchanged, albeit psychologically damaged. Another is trapped within his 'hell' despite confessing and seeking an end to his pain. One simply wills himself to death, his object of desire having been violently removed from him; he has no further will to live. This leaves the hero of the creative component of this thesis: Max Argent also survives his ordeal, but is a changed man.

The novel component of this thesis appears before this exegesis, but it is appropriate to present a summary of it here. *A Thousand Points of Light* is set in the present day and narrated by a photographer in his late 50s. Short-listed for a major international photographic award in the wildlife category, Max Argent has successfully hidden his earlier life as a pornographer in London, Kiev and Vladivostok. This is threatened when a young woman arrives, ostensibly to interview him. He recognises her immediately, and is plunged into a to-and-fro interaction in the course of which he reveals his dark past, both to us and his interlocutor. In keeping with the selection criteria of the other creative texts in this study, Argent narrates his story directly: the first-person voice locates us within his consciousness. As the story progresses, the reader is exposed to the transgressive acts the narrator has committed, beginning in his childhood and

¹⁶ Here 'Good' is used in the Lacanian sense (and typography), meaning conforming to the Kantian notion of the moral imperative.

¹⁷ Lacan cites Sade in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as follows: 'Let us take as the universal maxim of our conduct the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure' (Lacan 1992, p. 78).

continuing through school, his work for a magazine in London, to his involvement in the production of illegal underage pornographic websites of the sort produced in Ukraine in the 1990s. These acts were committed in the past, and the intention is for the reader to find themselves approaching the site of the *das Ding*, following the pull of the psychoanalytic energy so released. As the novel progresses, the reader is invited to judge Argent, if not to sympathise then, at least, to witness his attempt to atone for his crimes.

Chapter One: Transgression and the real

Chris Jenks provides a simple but comprehensive definition of transgression: ‘to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention [...] to violate or infringe’ (Jenks 2003, p. 2). This definition immediately raises questions: who sets the limits, what social functions do they serve, and what are the consequences of breaking them? This thesis provides answers to these questions, focussing on the domain of literature and specifically long-form fiction, using both established and new examples. It applies the work of leading transgression studies theorists such as Jenks and, in a new contribution, brings to the field of transgression studies a key concept from the realm of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: the real.

Lacan proposed a tripartite ontology of the human mind, consisting of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, the latter lying beyond language and therefore beyond symbolisation. Consequently, the real is a dark and terrifying place, specifically because we cannot describe or quantify or even apprehend it. We know it is there, because we know that our words are only logical constructions of meaning, laid on top of the brute reality of existence. Language through signification allows us to make sense of everything we perceive, but the real lies beyond the signifier. Words, through culture and language, construct our universe; anything that threatens that construction by exposing us to the real threatens us. This thesis proposes that transgressive fiction has the power to threaten our fragile universes, and further that Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts such as the real, and *das Ding*¹⁸, which is its intrusion into the symbolic order, explain both the attraction and repulsion of the transgressive. In all our four texts, we will identify first the announcement of transgression, secondly, the enjoyment of its erotics as it drives us through each narrative, and finally the ethical consequence for the principals: a judgement for each of our transgressing narrators.

The threat of transgression is not to be underestimated: Nick Land is characteristically direct when he says transgression ‘opens the way to tragic communication, the exultation in the utter immolation of order that consummates and

¹⁸ *Das Ding* is explained later, but essentially it represents the ultimate object of desire, for which all other desires are only proxies. *Das Ding* is partially in the symbolic domain, at the end of the metonymic chain of meaning, but it also in the real; it is therefore terrifying.

ruins humanity in a sacrifice without limits' (Land 1992, pp. 41–2). This may be overstating the case, but the assessment of the impact of transgression is valuable. Likewise, the extent of societal responses can be significant: ostracism, punishment, imprisonment, expulsion. The following case study, that this thesis refers to throughout, demonstrates both the impact and the response to transgression.

On the 22nd of May, 2008, columnist Miranda Devine wrote an opinion piece, given the headline, 'Moral backlash over sexing up of our children' (Fairfax 2008). The article's context was the discussion about the sexualisation of children in corporate advertising and culture in general. Devine's point was firm: 'it is now impossible to shield children from a culture dripping with sexual imagery' (Devine 2008). But it is the first sentences that are of interest here:

Opening tonight at the elegant Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in the heart of Paddington is an exhibition of photographs by Bill Henson, featuring naked 12 and 13 year-olds.

The invitation to the exhibition features a large photo of a girl, the light shining on her hair, eyes downcast, dark shadows on her sombre, beautiful face, and the budding breasts of puberty on full display, her hand casually covering her crotch.

Such images presenting children in sexual contexts are so commonplace these days they seem almost to have lost the capacity to shock (Devine 2008).

This was the first introduction to the wider community of a particular interpretation of the photographic work of Bill Henson.¹⁹ With nothing more than these sentences, Devine triggered a response against the artist which had far-reaching consequences. That same day, radio shock jocks and tabloid journalists railed against him, child advocacy groups joined in, even Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made his comment: 'absolutely revolting' (AAP 2008). The gallery opening that evening was 'dramatically cancelled after police visited the Paddington gallery to investigate child pornography claims' (Bibby 2008). The gallery owner, Roslyn Oxley, protested that 'she had been showing similar work by Henson since 1990 "and they have never offended people"' (Bibby 2008). Further, when asked by Channel Seven television whether she'd would

¹⁹ Although Henson has exhibited since 1974 (Oxley9 2014), it is likely that this exhibition in 2008 was the first introduction to his work for most people.

be willing to have her daughter pose for Henson, Oxley replied: ‘She’s been in some of his shots’ (Bibby 2008).

What is important here is that an artist who had been exhibiting similar work for several decades was now identified in the media as a potential criminal. The general concern about the ‘sexualisation of children’ had found a focus: one individual and one art gallery. With mounting pressure on them to act, NSW police shut down the exhibition and removed several pieces for examination. Amid furious commentary from all sides, Henson went to ground. After ten days, the works were returned: Henson had no case to answer and the exhibition was allowed to continue. Yet the incident is significant, not least because it can be seen as an example of transgression—one committed by Henson when he photographed and exhibited naked and semi-naked images of fourteen-year-old children—and the public response. It was as if Henson’s work *exulted in the utter immolation of order that consummates and ruins humanity in a sacrifice without limits*, to apply Land’s words (1992, pp. 41–2). Humanity was consummated and ruined, the narrative would suggest, and ‘the children’ were sacrificed.

A key outcome of this event is that the NSW Crimes Act has been amended so that producers of ‘child-abuse material’²⁰ no longer have the defence of ‘artistic intent’, but instead should submit to a test which determines ‘artistic merit’. This must be done in advance of publication or exhibition. Except for a few cases, many artists have withdrawn from the area of representing children in any form.²¹

The Henson case, despite being concerned with visual arts and not literature, is significant here because it demonstrates a societal response to a perceived transgression; it also provides material for the creative component of this thesis.

²⁰ That is ‘material that depicts or describes, in a way that reasonable persons would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive’ specifically, in Henson’s case, ‘the private parts of a person who is, appears to be or is implied to be, a child’ (*Crimes Act 1900*).

²¹ In Victoria in 2013, artist Martin Yore exhibited a large-scale installation, *Everything is F---ed*, at the St Kilda Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts. The artwork featured the photographs of children’s faces superimposed on those of adults engaged in sexual activity. A complaint from a member of the public resulted in police removing part of the collage and Yore was charged with producing and possessing child pornography. The work had previously been viewed by the Australian Classification Board, who had ruled the image was Category 1 Restricted, and therefore could be exhibited with restrictions on the age of viewers. The case was thrown out (Russell & Cooper 2014).

Clearly the Henson photographs distress people; society consistently responds almost violently to transgression. One reason for this lies in what anthropologist Mary Douglas calls ideas of ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’, and hence the ‘risk’ or ‘danger’ of ‘contamination’ or ‘pollution’. Here the social order is preserved through a fear of pollution caused by transgressive material, but the pollution beliefs also help define social values:

[A]s we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load. This is a more interesting level at which pollution ideas relate to social life. I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order (Douglas 2002, p. 4).

Our attitudes to the ‘sanctity’ of childhood are part of the construction of a social order which cannot be attacked or critiqued. Henson’s photographs were considered by some to do just that. The nudity of his models spoke of sexuality, and sexuality or its repression has long been a central element in societal formation, going back, as Michelson notes, as far as ‘Aristophanes and Petronius [who] probed the connection between sex and social order’ (Michelson 1993, p. 39). Henson’s work was seen as polluting at best, and at worst corrupting: a prime example of a ‘dangerous contact’ in Douglas’s analysis.

In sociology, Emile Durkheim has written of a structure of interdictions and taboos that has evolved to keep apart the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. Durkheim says ‘[t]he sacred is par excellence that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity’ (Durkheim 1971, p. 40). Breaking these laws causes ‘sickness or death’, ‘the natural consequences of every transgression of this sort’ (Durkheim 1971, p. 320). Those who transgress and taint the sacred with the profane risk great consequences, the sickness of exclusion. As noted before, the ‘sacred’ in the Henson case was the notion of ‘children’, a specific group essentially different to any other. Henson’s crime, then, was to taint or profane the sacred by introducing ideas of sexuality²², animality and even

²² Henson examines the transition between childhood and adulthood, one taking place partly in, and not restricted to, the domain of sexuality. Critics such as Hetty Johnston of the child rights advocacy group Bravehearts assert Henson did ‘the work to achieve economic gain and notoriety by taking nude photos of children to satisfy his own purpose’ (Johnston 2008), ascribing a sexual motivation. The question of intent is paramount.

depravity. For decades Henson had worked in this way, without attracting attention, but once the wider community became aware, the response was inevitable.

Durkheim also distinguishes between two categories of crime, one ‘directed against collective things (whether ideal or material), of which the principal examples are public authority and its representatives—mores, traditions, and religion’ and the other which ‘offend[s] only individuals (murders, thefts, violence, and frauds of all kinds)’ (Durkheim 2004, p. 41). The first category, he describes as ‘religious criminality’ and he suggests these ‘comprise, almost to the exclusion of all others, the penal law of lower societies’. Henson’s crime falls into a religious category, not least because, paradoxically, he was found to have no legal case to answer. Religious crimes speak of belief rather than reason.

Henson’s photographs involved real models, often the children of fellow artists, and potentially he was committing real crimes (and recording them on camera). Literary works—specifically fiction genres—may have transgressive elements and, being only textual, we can say that no one can be directly impacted. The question then is, what law or social convention is being transgressed?

This question can be explored by building on the anthropological and sociological ideas from the previous section. Transgressive fiction would be, it follows, writing which represents the crossing of some boundary, whether legal or of convention. Importantly, the text merely evokes or stands in, symbolically, for a transgressive act carried out in the fictional world of the narrator. Something is represented which ‘goes beyond’ what would be considered acceptable or decent, and the reason this is problematic is that it might corrupt readers and/or induce them to commit illegal, dangerous or otherwise inappropriate acts.

Of course, readers are in general unlikely to behave in such a way. What is happening instead is that function described by Slavoj Žižek in his essay, ‘Superego by Default’, and drawn from Bakhtin:

What most deeply holds together a community is not so much identification with the law that regulates the community’s ‘normal’ everyday circuit [here the injunction against the portrayal of transgressive acts], but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the law—of the law’s suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of *enjoyment*) (Žižek 1995, p. 926).

In other words, a narrow form of transgression is tolerated and indeed demanded by society so that the rest of the Law (the vast majority) remains intact. Transgression in fiction is only transgression by representation, yet there is often a social resistance. The “specific form” of enjoyment Žižek mentions is of course *jouissance*. We are allowed to transgress, even if only vicariously, and in return we enjoy our transgression. Societal norms are preserved.

Henson’s detractors saw his material as transgressive, threatening the Law. Yet prior to the 2008 incident, it had been tolerated. After all, despite producing material that contravened conventional views of childhood, there was no legal infringement, the models were photographed under supervision and with the express permission of their parents, and the exhibition, taken as a whole, clearly had serious artistic intent. Nevertheless, Henson was socially charged, if not legally. The proposition here is that the motivations behind this attack on him are psychological in nature, operating within the realm of the unconscious. But first, a digression into the obscene.

Will Self, in his introduction to *Blue of Noon*, a novel by that prime transgressor, Georges Bataille²³, asserts:

that pornographic literature is a genre in which the involuntary sexual arousal of the reader is used to propel her into a commensurately involuntary subsuming of her own identity to that of the text’s protagonist. Pornography—as art—achieves its effects by rape rather than seduction (Bataille & Self 2001, p. x).

This accords with the original classical usage of pornography as decorative wall imagery in brothel waiting rooms, to stimulate the sexual appetite as a precursor to actual activity. And Self’s claim that the reader absorbs the identity of a pornographic protagonist is also supportive of this thesis’s assertions on the nature of the first-person narrator in fiction. But, for the present, it is valuable to consider the last sentence cited above, on the involuntary effect of pornography and the violence implicit in his use of the word ‘rape’²⁴. It seems reasonable to state that pornography is transgressive, if only

²³ Bataille was a close friend of Lacan. The latter began his lectures in Bataille’s apartment in 1951. Subsequently, Bataille’s wife Sylvia became Lacan’s second wife (Homer 2005, p. 9).

²⁴ The problem of the acceptability of pornography, which Self here precludes by describing its mechanism as ‘rape’, had long dogged the feminist cause, from the militant rhetoric of Andrea Dworkin’s

because, while ubiquitous, it is generally considered outside convention, hence ‘unsayable’; but it is these forceful aspects to the genre, identified by Self, that puts it firmly in the transgressive space. Without that effect of force, there would simply be depictions of things that people do in private, either together or alone: hardly earth-shattering. But it is precisely in the consciousness-altering impact of pornography—the very depravity and corruption society’s moral arbiters are worried about—that it attains its effect. Pornography is obscene, in the sense that it intends a reaction. Therefore it is transgressive. Yet, as Linda Williams notes, ‘pornography is a “drive for knowledge” that takes place through a voyeurism structured as a cognitive urge’ (Williams 1999, p. 48). We ‘desire’ to see/know what it can show/tell us. And we need to know: after all, ‘Pornography is central to our culture’ (Kipnis 2006, p. 118).

Questions of intent lie at the heart of transgression. Can it be assumed there is intent, either on the part of the creative producer, or perhaps on the part of the consumer? By this I mean, is it not possible that there is a misunderstanding, a cultural value unknown to either party? Can it then also be claimed that the work itself, the text or the photograph, has its own intent (beyond any authorial purpose) and its own desires, as it were. Barthes says in *The Pleasure of the Text*: ‘The text you write must prove to me that it desires me. This proof exists: it is writing’ (Barthes 1990, p. 6). What does the transgressing text want?

Consider some examples. A writer describes an erotic scene, using explicit language. For the sake of argument, it can be considered that the intent of the writer—or of the text itself—is to transgress, to cross some boundary and therefore invoke some kind of response. Transgression is occurring and it is with intent. But consider a person with particular sexual tastes who derives sexual stimulation from material not created for that purpose: say images in a catalogue of children’s clothing. Where is the intent there? There is none on the part of the photographer or the cataloguer.²⁵ Instead, it is in the mind of the viewer.

Pornography: men possessing women (Dworkin 1981) to the struggle of present day feminists to accommodate the phenomenon e.g. ‘In order to reform the pornography industry, we must first work to destigmatize it, starting with accepting it as a legitimate method of employment and sexual enjoyment for women’ (Levine 2014).

²⁵ Of course, the universality of that assertion has been challenged with the criticism of catalogues produced by major retailers showing children in what have been interpreted as sexualised poses, see (Smith 2006). This was the issue addressed in Miranda Devine’s Henson article.

Extend this example to Henson's photographic images. They hang on the gallery wall for viewers to decide. There is no evidence Henson intends to be transgressive: he has chosen his field of artistic exploration. He has chosen his models. He sets about creating the mood and atmosphere of his works, and he produces the images. There they are. Yes, the models are often unclothed and positioned, if not provocatively then ambiguously so, yet naked models of all ages have been used throughout the history of art. To find self-evidently transgressive fine art, one could view a painting such as Balthus's 1934 *The Guitar Lesson*, featuring a girl splayed over a woman's lap. The woman, apparently a music teacher, holds the girl's hair in one fist; her other hand appears to strum the naked upper thigh and torso of the girl. Meanwhile one of the girl's hands rests close to the woman's single exposed breast. This is overtly sexual, even pornographic²⁶.

Of course, the point of this question of intent is that the viewer can never know—even when the image is as unambiguous as the Balthus painting just described. Indeed, the question of intent about Henson's work is raised in *A Thousand Points of Light*: a subplot concerns the question of whether an exhibition by the character Simon Lanyard will proceed or not. In the novel, Lanyard has had an exhibition temporarily closed due to the child pornography concerns, exactly as happened to Henson. Argent, the narrator of the novel has seen Lanyard's earlier work. He recalls being surprised that there were no objections at that time. The question of intent is present throughout *A Thousand Points of Light*.

Inevitably, the reader or critic looks to the author for a signal of intent. The question is raised in a recent PhD thesis analysing *American Psycho* as both satire and a postmodern parody of sadomasochistic pornography, crucially inadequately distinguished from pornography itself: 'It is argued here that *American Psycho* was not clearly enough signalled as a parody, making it easy to miss' (Ettler 2013). Here Ettler places the burden of intent-signalling firmly on the author's shoulders. Yet poststructuralism, and specifically Roland Barthes, has taught us not to look to the

²⁶ *New Republic*, in covering the late 2013 Balthus exhibition 'Balthus: Cats and Girls: Paintings and Provocations' at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, describes the work more frankly as 'a painting of a female music teacher sexually assaulting a girl' (Perl 2014).

author for answers about a text.²⁷ In the end, the story is told and it is the characters, specifically the narrator, who do the telling.

The question of intent remains a valuable one and this thesis looks for intent within the text, asking whether the moment of transgression can be identified. Can the narrator or the text itself be seen to be obeying unconscious drives and desires, even to the extent that transgression occurs, meaning actual physical or moral crimes? We turn to Jacques Lacan for answers.

The main methodology of this thesis is the application of the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, specifically the ideas of desire²⁸ and the notion of the real, the third of Lacan's orders. The assertion is that transgressive literature positions the reader at the very edge of the Lacanian symbolic order of the fictional world represented by the text, proximate to the real, forcing the reader to either extend knowledge or turn away in revulsion with concomitant censorious response.

Over fifty per cent of the world's psychoanalysts use psychoanalytic techniques developed by Jacques Lacan (Homer 2005, p. 1) and his ideas have been harnessed in criticism of both cinema and literature by theorists such as Laura Mulvey²⁹, Jacqueline Rose³⁰, Shoshana Felman³¹, Peter Brooks³², Louis Althusser³³ and Slavoj Žižek³⁴.

Literary critics employing Lacanian psychoanalysis tend to analyse either character or writer or both. In *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks says exactly this, and goes on:

It is not that I am interested in the psychoanalytic study of authors, or readers, or fictional characters, which have been the usual objects of attention for psychoanalytically informed literary criticism. Rather, I want to see the text itself as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires (Brooks 1992, p. xiv).

²⁷ 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes (Barthes 1977).

²⁸ 'Desire' is identified by Lacan as 'the essence of man' (Lacan 1978, p. 275).

²⁹ 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey's 1973 essay, drew heavily on Freud and Lacan, see (Mulvey 1975).

³⁰ Mitchell and Rose interpret and re-evaluate Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality. Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (Lacan, Mitchell & Rose 1982).

³¹ Felman's *Literature and Psychoanalysis* carries out psychoanalytic readings of texts from *Hamlet* to Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw' (Felman 1982).

³² Peter Brooks' *Reading For the Plot* introduces Lacanian concepts to narratology (Brooks 1992).

³³ Althusser applies Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to the Marxist critique of capitalism (Althusser 1971).

³⁴ Žižek has published many works drawing on Lacanian thought, beginning with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek 1989).

This thesis proposes a similar approach: to regard the fictional world of the novel not just as Brooks' *system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires* but as an aggregate of these things, the Lacanian symbolic order.

First an understanding of what Lacan means by 'symbolic order' is required. This is one of the three domains of psychoanalytic space (imaginary, symbolic, real). The symbolic order is a network of symbols—signifiers—which allows the construction of meaning, enabling subjects to make sense of whatever is encountered in the real world, providing of course that the object encountered is represented (signified) in the symbolic domain: without signification there can be no comprehension. Lacan notes that 'Freud's discovery is that of the field of the effects, in the nature of man, produced by his relation to the symbolic order. To ignore this symbolic order is to condemn the discovery to oblivion' (Lacan 2006, p. 275).

The last domain, the real, is that which cannot be represented symbolically because it is not signified, and hence is beyond comprehension. The real is always present but cannot be seen. More specifically, it cannot be understood, because there are no signifiers with which it can be interpreted and located, '[the real is] the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation' (Lacan 2006, p. 324). It follows that were an object in the real to be signified, it would no longer be outside the symbolic order and it would no longer be real. Laura Mulvey explains this concisely:

Lacan used the term 'Real' to represent those conditions of being that create the human subject but are totally inaccessible to human consciousness. That is to say, its matter can never be translated into either Imaginary or Symbolic systems of representation or signification (Mulvey 1996, p. 2).

The emergent subject is thrust into the symbolic order at the point of the acquisition of language. The subject has previously been present in the imaginary order, the domain of images and sensations. Within this space, the subject conceives of the world only insofar as it relates to them. This is the duality that emerges during the Mirror Stage and the subject's first awareness of the 'big Other' (the location of 'otherness' in the

Lacanian model, initially, the primary caregiver³⁵). It is the acquisition of language (between the ages of three and five) and the ensuing transition into the symbolic order that triggers the entry of the subject into the Oedipal phase.

The most important feature of the symbolic order is that it is pre-existing. The subject enters this network of signification and derives all comprehension from it:

Freud's discovery was that of the field of the effects in the nature of man of his relations to the symbolic order and the tracing of their meaning right back to the most radical agencies of symbolization in being (Lacan 2006, p. 227).

Within the symbolic order, the subject is 'an animal at the mercy of language, man's desire is the Other's desire' (Lacan 2006, p. 525). A given symbolic order embodies the morals of the culture or society that produced it, and there are values within any given culture that cannot be challenged, as we saw with the anthropological and sociological perspectives.

According to Lacan, the authority behind the symbolic domain is that of the big Other. As previously stated, this is initially the primary caregiver³⁶, but then, as the Oedipal phase progresses, the other parent³⁷ assumes the role. Subsequently, the authority of the big Other can be seen as coming from God, or simply the Law. It is in defying ultimately the authority of God, by 'polluting' the 'pure' or by mixing the 'sacred' and the 'profane', that transgression gets its power.

The other key term Lacan uses is *jouissance*, the sensory affect akin to orgasm, released as a consequence of succumbing to desire, the psychosexual motivation or drive that propels the human organism.³⁸ In 'The death of God', Lacan positions transgression as the inevitable consequence of the pursuit of uninhibited *jouissance*: 'without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and, to return to Saint Paul, that that is precisely the function of the Law' (Lacan 1992, p. 177). The transgression

³⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, both Lacan and Freud are criticised for holding and perpetuating gendered world views. Lacan's theories lose none of their power when the term 'mother' is replaced with 'primary caregiver'. Infants always relate most directly to primary carers, just as ducklings reared by a human will follow that human, as if he or she were the mother duck.

³⁶ Remembering Lacan's usage is gendered: 'the mother'.

³⁷ As previous footnote, Lacan would say here 'father'.

³⁸ Lacan directly draws on Freud's Pleasure Principle, defined by the latter as mental stimulation 'set in motion by an unpleasurable tension [...] [taking] a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension - that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure' (Freud & Reddick 2003, p. 45).

Lacan is talking about here is the sin against the commandment, ‘Love thy neighbour’. The commandment asks us to put another’s interests on at least an equal level to our own, and Lacan finds in Sade the best example of the transgressive system:

[a] doctrine he advances in words that at different moments in the work express the *jouissance* of destruction, the peculiar virtue of crime, evil sought for evil’s sake, and, in the last instance, the Supreme-Being-in-Evil (Lacan 1992, p. 197).

It is for this decision, the intent to transgress, driven by the power of desire and ultimately directed towards *das Ding*, that each of the novels under consideration in this thesis will be analysed. These narrators murder or are otherwise completely detached from normal social behaviour: they are transgressors; their pursuit of *jouissance* goes beyond—transgresses—their universes.

Lacan suggests that ‘*jouissance* is evil. Freud leads us by the hand to this point: it is suffering because it involves suffering for my neighbour’ (Lacan 1992, p. 184). It is precisely the ‘death of God’ that creates ‘lack’ and this undermines the Law expressed in the symbolic order, ‘the meaning of that Law articulated in the depths of the unconscious’ (Lacan 1992, p. 193).

The symbolic order provides the subject with opportunities for *jouissance* but at the same time demands that the Law is obeyed, which means not taking those opportunities. Indeed, Morel says that traditionally we see the criminal as possessing an inherent desire for crime (‘*jouissance* of transgression’ using Lacan’s expression on Sade), but in fact Lacanian transgression is not about societal or legal interpretations. Rather, it is the subject’s internalisation of the Law (Freudian Oedipal) to which he yields to obtain ‘a smidgen of *jouissance*’, in order to cause desire. In this sense, Morel suggests, desire inevitably assumes an ‘accent of perversion’ (Morel 2003).

This understanding of the Lacanian symbolic order and how it relates to the Law demonstrates how the search for *jouissance* and the consequent transgression can be applied to the world of fiction.

Narrative, like a primitive myth, is seen by structural analysts as free from all mimetic constraints. It is that form which is not enslaved to reality. This freedom (of will; the arbitrary) is crucially important for structuralism. Narrative is, however, also the locus of a certain lack of freedom. In narrative one discovers the existence of certain bindings and

constraints: to wit, the constraints of the linguistic code, or grammar itself (Saussure), and of the social order (Durkheim) – in short, the structures of that which Lacan has named the Symbolic (MacCannell 1983, pp. 910-1).

Here, MacCannell makes clear that the structure of narrative can be viewed as a Lacanian symbolic space. Importantly, a given book has its own symbolic order. Although much is shared with other symbolic spaces (specifically language itself), the particular arrangement, and therefore values and meanings, can be found nowhere else and, like the general Lacanian symbolic order, is constituted only by language, in this case, the language of the book. The language, or *langue* as the structuralists use it, is ‘both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty’ (De Saussure 1966, p. 9). Importantly, this is different to the *langue* outside the book, if only because the book is self-contained, in a real sense sealed from the outside. The same medium is used (English, either natively or in translation) but the body of social relations and conventions is different.

The symbolic order the reader confronts, as envisaged by MacCannell above, is otherwise passive and static: after all, it exists only in fixed textual form. This can be contrasted with the general symbolic order encountered by a human subject, inasmuch as the latter is mutable and perpetually reinforced, reconstructed and retransmitted by other human subjects acting collectively as the big Other. So how does this relate to transgression?

The principal theoretical contribution of this thesis is a statement of how the transgressive moment occurs in the consumption of a literary text. Transgression here does not imply a distortion of the text in some surface linguistic manner, as for example in so-called ‘experimental writing’, but instead means that, through reading and internalising the text, the reader is situated close to and exposed to a transgressive element described or embodied within the book. This proximity triggers the reader’s reaction, be it a desire for more (*jouissance*) or repulsion. This is the central function of the transgressive in transgressive fiction. The argument of this thesis proposes that the reader initially apprehends the book as an external object, but then begins to internalise the text. There is at first a collaborative encounter, between the authority of the text, the Law, and that of the reader’s own symbolic register. The reader is drawn—through the function of desire—in search of *jouissance*. When transgression is encountered, that is

to say when the reader encounters something bordering or beyond social or other boundaries, this can be seen as a (violent) clash with symbolic Law, as an Oedipal moment, analogous to the point of the actual Oedipal encounter³⁹. This is a moment of trauma, an approach to *das Ding*. It is this moment of trauma that this thesis seeks to uncover, the moment of transgression. How is it approached? How does it manifest? What exit, what ethical consequences, can there be for a narrative that has encountered transgression? These are the questions the research will answer as it interrogates each of the four texts, applying the thesis's argument.

In order to examine the question of transgression in a work of creative production, this research analyses several texts. These are from different cultures (French in translation, and English-speaking). They span different subject matters (the Holocaust, 1980s Wall Street and Asian sex tourism). All have generated controversy because of their transgressive content. All feature male narrators: their gender is relevant. Recent novels have featured female transgressive narrators⁴⁰, but the narrator of *A Thousand Points of Light* is male, as am I. Restricting gender diversity in this instance helps narrow the field of study, amplifying conclusions. A more significant criterion in their selection is that all feature narrator characters, that is to say, accounts delivered in the first-person voice. This voice can be said to locate the reader within the text, specifically within the novel's symbolic order. The effect of this is to render visceral the moments of transgression when they occur.

The first novel is *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and comprises the apparently insane thoughts of a Wall Street yuppie living a life of leisure and serial homicide. As discussed in the introduction, months before its release in 1991, the book gained notoriety from a review that appeared in the *New York Times* that was almost hysterical in its condemnation. The headline runs: 'Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?' Roger Rosenblatt decided the book was 'so pointless, so themeless, so everythingless [...] that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest' (Rosenblatt 1990). The humour Rosenblatt

³⁹ The Oedipal encounter is the moment when the emergent subject, absorbing meaning from the symbolic order, realises there is no signifier for him or herself. Meaning must be sought, and this is achieved through the desire to place oneself in as the desired object of the primary caregiver.

⁴⁰ These include: *Season To Taste or How to Eat Your Husband* Natalie Young (2014) and *Tampa* by Alissa Nutting (2013).

acknowledges is indeed a key part of the book, but the review refuses to acknowledge the book's contribution as a critique not only of a time and place but more widely of capitalism itself as a force that reduces individuals to aggregations of items of expenditure.

It is the 'loathsome' aspect that is valuable to focus on in this general discussion on transgression. Rosenblatt has reacted strongly, that much is evident. He catalogues briefly some of Ellis's literary crimes: a lack of characterisation, lack of motivation, lack of plot. He then focuses on those of the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, killer of homeless men, colleagues and callgirls in murders that are gruesomely detailed. 'Bateman is never brought to justice, suggesting that even justice was bored. Nor is Mr Ellis' (Rosenblatt 1990). The book's transgressions are so extreme, Rosenblatt is saying, that the writer himself should be punished. Rosenblatt ends the review with: 'It would be sweet revenge if we refused to buy this book. Thumb through it, for the sake of normal prurience, but don't buy it' (Rosenblatt 1990).

There was considerable societal response to Ellis's book. Indeed, twenty years later, the title is still published in Australia shrink-wrapped with the label: 'Category 1 Restricted' (Australian Law Reform Commission 2012, 9.16). It cannot be bought by a minor, nor can it even be thumbed through prior to purchase. Yet *American Psycho* is a savage satire, not a handbook for a misogynist psychopathic murderer. The restrictions probably only increase its attraction to both juveniles and adults alike: facts which are doubtlessly welcomed by the publisher, Picador.

The transgression in Ellis's novel is central, acting as a metaphor for greater social consequences.⁴¹ For the present it is necessary only to note that there is direct evidence of an intent to shock and to cross boundaries, even to violate the reader at some level. *American Psycho* seems to have been written with deliberate intent; clearly Roger Rosenblatt feels that too, in his call for the author to be punished.

The second book this thesis analyses in detail is *Platform*, by Michel Houellebecq, first published in translation in 2002. Houellebecq has something of an *enfant terrible* reputation, being described as 'a racist, a nihilist and a drunk' (Campbell 2010). He is the author of six novels, most of which feature unconventional sexual behaviour

⁴¹ All of Ellis's novels are transgressive to some extent, depicting drug use, delinquency and various levels of moral corruption, but *American Psycho* takes this to an extreme degree, utilising prolonged bloody and visceral descriptions to make its point.

described in matter-of-fact tones, as if the acts were perfectly normal.⁴² This thesis focuses on *Platform* because of its perceived misogyny, its anti-Islamic attacks and general critique of multiculturalism, and its spirited representation of contemporary European society as worn-out, enervated, in terminal post-industrial decline. The narrator, Michel Renault, leaves his comfortable government job after the death of his father. On a holiday tour in Thailand, he meets Valerie, a young executive in a travel company. After their return, they get together and Renault gives Valerie the idea of introducing a new kind of package holiday, incorporating sex services. Combining these with the narrator's loathing of Islam and his cheerful sexism, *Platform* is every bit as loaded with intent to shock as *American Psycho*.

The final text under consideration here is *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, which won the Literary Review Bad Sex in Fiction award in 2009 (beating Philip Roth's *The Humbling*) and more importantly the Prix Goncourt in 2006. It is also a work of fiction, but with a historical setting: the Second World War, specifically the horror of the Holocaust. Dr Max Aue was a Nazi SS officer and in his later years he decides to set down his side of the story, as a complicit participant in ethnic cleansing operations. After a long opening section, written in the present time and detailing arguments explaining the narrator's purpose in writing and his defence for having been involved in the killing, the novel goes back to the beginning of the war and charts his progress as a new recruit in the SS, through the Caucasus, Stalingrad and Poland, to end in Berlin as the Russians make their final assault. It's a long book (300,000 words) and very detailed. Again written in the first-person and also with intent to shock, this novel completes the selection of primary texts for analysis in this project.

Each of these novels is transgressive in different ways: *American Psycho* features the ravings of a madman, whose accounts of the horrific deaths he causes are shocking; *Platform* is the story of an outsider, a man who finds love despite his own anomie; *The Kindly Ones* is the autobiography of a mass murderer who is also a deeply cultured, educated man. What they have in common, besides their use of the transgressive, is their use of the first-person voice. Each narrator sets out his world before us, taking us along his journey, either in the present tense (*American Psycho*), or in near-retrospect

⁴² As will be discussed later, key themes present in *Platform* have been explored by Houellebecq in all his novels. For example, *Whatever* (1998), his first novel, covers much the same territory: a cynical narrator, awkward sexual relationships, dismissive attitudes to women.

that ends with the present tense (*Platform*) or in straight simple past-tense narration delivered after a present-tense introduction (*The Kindly Ones*). Each of these novels challenges the reader to understand—and this is the central focus of this project—the internal consciousness of the transgressive narrator. Repulsive though this is, we experience vicariously the thrill of the narrators' transgressions, the magic of *jouissance* works on us, drawing us further along the narrative, promising, but fortunately never delivering, the traumatic release of engagement with *das Ding*.

Besides the three texts already mentioned, a significant component of this thesis involves the production and analysis of a novel entitled, *A Thousand Points of Light*. This takes the form of the first-person narrative of a photographer, now in his 50s, whom a young Russian woman has arranged to interview. Max Argent, the photographer, recognises Nadya immediately: this is the woman he knew as his daughter, whom he hasn't seen since the early 2000s. The novel is in part his reacquaintance with Nadya and his discovery of what happened to her and her mother after he left them. It is also the biography of a now successful, and soon to be awarded, wildlife photographer who has a dark past: previously, Argent was a pornographer. It is this aspect which introduces and explores transgression, a transgression that reaches a deeper level when Argent admits that the young Nadya, then pubescent, was one of his many nude models.

A Thousand Points of Light draws on the Henson case discussed earlier in two ways. The first is the novel's subplot storyline of Simon Lanyard, a photographic artist similar to Bill Henson. Lanyard is about to exhibit again after a hiatus following the temporary closure of his previous show. The second parallel is in Argent's nude photography of underage girls, for the purpose of publication on a Ukrainian website, for commercial gain. This is based on websites that operated, primarily in Ukraine, in the 1990s, and this subject matter is clearly transgressive. Argent's photographs were ultimately created with exploitative pornographic intent, notwithstanding any aesthetic purpose he might also have had in mind. In the novel, Lanyard (like Henson) has been criticised for his work; Argent's story has not yet been uncovered. It is the arrival of his estranged daughter Nadya that threatens this, introducing risk and conflict and exposing him to the possibility of censure, if for nothing else than because of the implied incestuous/abuse context between the two. The danger of *das Ding* is perceptible and already drawing us, and, as per the argument of this thesis, we necessarily follow.

Chapter Two: Beginnings or warning: transgression ahead

Novels announce themselves. Setting (era and location), type of story (genre), balance of description and dialogue, character names, action versus observation, internal versus external focus, and use of language, are all aspects of writing that are encountered somewhere in the opening pages of a novel. Each encounter can be seen as an announcement, informing the reader of what is to come.

The central proposition of this chapter is that novels featuring transgressive writing also need to tell readers what is coming, both so that readers are not unduly shocked and also to lure a certain kind of reader onwards. While the marketing, reviews, promotional interviews and the back cover blurb, as paratext, all serve the function of informing/warning potential readers, they are all external. The text itself also prepares readers for what it to come.⁴³ In entering the symbolic order of the book, readers need to be warned: what lies ahead could be distasteful, completely repellent, or may actually provoke trauma. Given there is not inconsiderable potential for the novels under examination in this study to do all of these, the importance of warning is all too clear.

Of course, there are different kinds of transgressions in these texts. First, we have the serial killer⁴⁴, the psychotic murderer, although because we only have Bateman's narration to rely on, we cannot know whether the events he describes actually occur. Nevertheless, the crimes described are gruesome. The crimes committed in *The Kindly Ones*, the memoir of an SS officer⁴⁵, are gruesome too, but they have the added horror that they speak of historical truth. On the other hand, *Platform*'s transgressions are more cynical and might even be called *acte gratuits*, without motive. The subject matter of *A Thousand Points of Light* is criminality and that is of significant contemporary social concern. Despite these different types of transgression, the requirement is the same:

⁴³ This is an interpretation similar to that of Reader Response theory, extending the work of Poulet, who described the action of reading as animating the text, revealing: 'the subject which presides over the work can exist only in the work' (Poulet 1969, p. 53).

⁴⁴ Talking about *American Psycho*, Jenks describes the contemporary serial killer as a 'postmodern celebrity', with the status of 'unique and heroic signifiers. [...] The scale and obscurity of their transgressions [...] defies all moral, linguistic, epistemological and ontological narratives' (Jenks 2003, p. 180).

⁴⁵ The Nazi officer can also be seen as a serial killer, and Jenks, still talking about Bateman, might also describe this type as 'Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in the age of mechanical reproduction' (Jenks 2003, p. 181), although we should replace 'reproduction' with 'murder'.

how is the reader warned? How does the Lacanian symbolic order model of transgression alert readers?

The psychoanalytic subject enters the Lacanian symbolic order at the moment of the acquisition of language. This means being subjected to the Law of the Other, which surrounds and constrains the subject, defining their world and providing both the constraints of meaning and the freedom to escape the imaginary binary duality that constricts self-knowledge. Developing the idea that the text of a book can be considered a symbolic domain, how does the reader enter the symbolic domain of the novel?

The novelistic symbolic order the reader confronts is otherwise passive, silent, uninhabited, static.⁴⁶ But it is pre-existing, exactly as Lacan says of the general symbolic order: ‘language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject’s entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development’ (Lacan 2006, p. 413). It awaits the reader, indeed it is consumed/absorbed/reconstituted by the reader, as Barthes explains:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination (Barthes 1977).

As discussed in Chapter One, the symbolic order of the book is necessarily quite unlike the general symbolic order into which the human subject is fully immersed from the moment of the acquisition of language (Oedipal phase). Indeed, the Lacanian symbolic order proper is continually reinforced, reconstructed and retransmitted to and from other subjects. The book’s symbolic order, in contrast, is only constituted briefly during the reading.⁴⁷ A book is its own ontology, sealed from the outside world, immutable in the face of ages. So how does it work?

An answer is given by Deleuze and Guattari. ‘A book is a small machine’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 4) they say, and the machine is inactive before and after the moment of reading, only functioning and being productive during the reading process. They identify subjects as desiring production, producers of their own motivation. Lacan, on the other hand, sees the subject as finding desire through submersion in the symbolic

⁴⁶ Poulet says of books: ‘Made of paper and ink, they lie where they are put, until the moment some one shows an interest in them’ (Poulet 1969, p. 53).

⁴⁷ ‘Book’ here is intended to mean any long-form fiction writing, although arguably any kind of book can be described as constituting a symbolic order, simply by virtue of the linguistic nature of all text.

order, deriving *jouissance* in the pursuit of desire as a consequence of the operation of the Law of the Other. Either way, what is of interest here is the Lacanian or Oedipal trauma produced when the book is in read.

So far we have seen the book as containing or embodying a symbolic domain, uniquely formed by its own culture (internal to the text), constructed in language and populated with characters, events and locations. Either this domain can be regarded as a collection of discrete elements or can it be seen instead as a singular, albeit complex, entity, almost as a psychoanalytic subject in its own right.⁴⁸ In this model, reading can be seen as a process of psychoanalysis. The book discharges its history, revealing over time through anecdotes, descriptions and narrations, whatever it is most concerned about, whatever drives it forward.

If the book can be said to be a machine generating a sequence of utterances, it is straightforward to connect these to the deeper drive of desire:

Desire always becomes manifest at the joint of speech, where it makes its appearance, its sudden emergence, its surge forwards. Desire emerges just as it becomes embodied in speech, it emerges with symbolism (Lacan 1988, p. 234).

Lacan here explains the formation of desire as a consequence of the signified structure that is the symbolic order. Barthes too has written clearly of this desire, the desire of the text, in his *The Pleasure of the Text*, ‘the text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me’ (Barthes 1990, p. 27). The text chooses the reader, the text reveals its desire, the reader seeks also to find the release of *jouissance* that had generated desire. This is how the beginning of the book speaks, revealing its desire, opening out its symbolic order to the reader. The reader responds and is drawn in. A kind of psychoanalysis has begun.

Unlike the relationship between the analyst and the analysand, where the ultimate goal of the process is to relieve the subject of their *dis-ease*⁴⁹, the relationship between

⁴⁸ Poulet sees the text exactly as a consciousness: ‘I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of licence, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels’ (Poulet 1969, p. 54).

⁴⁹ As we shall see in Chapter Four, Lacan calls this objective of the process ‘travers[ing] the radical phantasy’ (Lacan 1978, p. 273).

reader and book must be static, if only because the book is forever trapped in immobility; it can only offer insight into its world. The reader progresses through, incorporating the new symbolic structure within their own. This is how the book makes its symbolic order visible. The announcement comes first, as the awakening of the subject upon encountering the symbolic domain. Desire is triggered, with the promise of *jouissance*. The transgression lies deeper within. We shall now see how the four novels under consideration announce their transgressions.

Michel Houellebecq's narrator, Michel Renault, begins *Platform*: 'Father died last year', an opening recognised as a homage to Albert Camus by James Buchan in his *Guardian* review (Buchan 2002). *Platform* resembles *The Outsider* in a number of ways, not least that both feature the journey from a point of Freudian significance (death of parent) to the death of the narrator. Both have intent from the outset, but perhaps *The Outsider*'s 'Mother died today' is more direct. Meursault, the protagonist of the latter, is calm and unaffected by his mother's death. It is this attitude that leads him, in concert with his willingness to go swimming with a new girlfriend instead of mourning his mother, that sways the jury against him in his subsequent murder trial. Meursault is condemned to death, an ending that he faces not only with equanimity but with a curious joy: he makes a discovery about life, its arbitrariness, the 'benign indifference of the universe' (Camus 1946, p. 127), and he feels liberated. Camus' novel is valuable in the examination of Houellebecq's, not least because of Renault's almost placid acceptance of the untimely end of his own life, but there are interesting differences.

Houellebecq's *Platform* is saturated in ennui, as are all his novels⁵⁰, and the use of the simple past tense and the distance implied by the temporal reference ('last year') compound the Houellebecqian languor. Camus' novel, in contrast, is written in the present tense. While *The Outsider* is transgressive in the sense that the protagonist kills a man apparently without motive, Houellebecq's introduction of the transgressive—as we shall see—makes *Platform* different.

⁵⁰ Consider the tone in Houellebecq's *Whatever*, as the narrator tells us: 'In fact, since my breakup with Véronique two years ago I haven't been acquainted with any women; the feeble and inconsistent attempts I've made in that direction have only resulted in predictable failure. Two years is a long time. But in reality, above all when one is working, it's no time at all. Anyone will tell you: it's no time at all' (Houellebecq 1998).

Renault leads the reader to this in steps. He begins with humour: ‘I don’t subscribe to the theory by which we only become truly adult when our parents die; we never become *truly adult*’ (Houellebecq 2002, p. 3). As in Camus, the reference to a parent’s death is treated matter-of-factly, in defiance of social norms. Using humour, Houellebecq goes beyond this, introducing a worldly, even common-sense, tone. The effect of this is to compound the transgression of the first sentence; the reader is warned. Indeed, the very next passage leaves us in no doubt of Houellebecq’s transgressive intent. He wants to shock us:

As I stood before the old man’s coffin, unpleasant thoughts came to me. He had made the most of life, the old bastard; he was a clever cunt. ‘You had kids, you fucker ...’
(Houellebecq 2002, p. 3).

This use of the first-person voice is important here. The ‘I’ voice locates the opinions and perspectives of the character within those of the reader. Despite avowals to the contrary, readers often unwittingly subsume narrator’s identities into their own⁵¹ and the tendency for the reader’s self to become immersed in the narrator sets the stage for transgression to become personal.

After the briefest of warnings in the form of the bland phrase ‘unpleasant thoughts’, Renault proceeds to describe his father in robust terms, translated as ‘old bastard’ and ‘clever cunt’, before crudely asserting that simplest of Oedipal relations: ‘you shoved your fat cock in my mother’s cunt.’ This is followed by an explanation of sorts to the reader:

Well, I was a bit tense, I have to admit; it’s not every day you have a death in the family. I’d refused to see the corpse. I’m forty, I’ve already had plenty of opportunity to see corpses; nowadays, I prefer to avoid them. It was this that had always dissuaded me from getting a pet (Houellebecq 2002, p. 3).

Renault (or Houellebecq) acknowledges his crudity, making light of it and sliding away from dwelling on it, by alluding to his decision not to own a pet. This act of

⁵¹ As per the citation from Self in Chapter One (p. 197). Also, as a corollary, in creative writing workshops, a common objection to the use of the *second*-person voice is: ‘But I *don’t* think like that, yet the story says *you think* this or *you think* that.’

displacement can be seen as the Lacanian *métonymie*, as a ‘diachronic movement away from one signifier to another along the signifying chain [...] in a perpetual deferral of meaning’ (Evans 2006, loc 3297). Renault is sliding away from one meaning into another. As a narrator, Renault is hard to get hold of, for good reason: the symbolic domain is a slippery structure, built only on an endless array of signifiers, each pointing only to the next one. The text too, and this is the point, is both hinting at transgression, yet shying away.

The effect of this opening is to shock, but in a restrained, languid, almost passive manner. This of course is the tone of the book. Given the unorthodox opinions expressed by the narrator already, the symbolic order of Houellebecq’s book has announced its nature very clearly. Indeed, readers do take note: a substantial proportion will go no further, finding Houellebecq offensive: ‘Well, someone has to make porn perusable on the subway, before one ditches it unfulfilled on the platform; it’s not the kind of book you read once’ (Clover 2003), or, ‘A grown man, Houellebecq reads like an adolescent’ (Buchan 2002). Yet the crudity and the profanity of Houellebecq’s narrator thrills a certain kind of reader: the possibility of transgression is close.

If Houellebecq’s *Platform* begins with straight narration and identifiable announcements of transgression to come, Ellis’s 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, ought to be even clearer, if not only because of the title and the reputation the book had earned even before release. Yet because the signs are hidden in reported speech—and therefore located within story—they take longer to surface.

The novel begins with a taxi ride from Wall Street to the apartment of Evelyn, the girlfriend of Patrick Bateman, the narrator. Bateman is a Wall Street yuppie earning a fat salary; he does no apparent work at all throughout the book. He spends his money on designer clothes and accessories, and expensive meals and entertainment, and expensive home wares for his apartment. His encyclopaedic—and obsessive—knowledge about all of these is one source of the book’s dark humour. But in this opening scene, Bateman’s character is all but obscured.

It is his co-worker, Timothy Price, another ‘master of the universe’, to use Wolfe’s phrase from *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Wolfe 1987)⁵², whose voice we hear as the taxi

⁵² This novel predates *American Psycho* and addresses many of the same concerns.

leaves the financial district heading uptown. Price is bemoaning the state of the city. In a savage monologue, he lists the stories from the day's newspaper, including

[...] strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis [...] baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis (Ellis 1991, p. 3).

Although this is clearly the quoted voice of a character, a third-person rendered speaker and therefore not strictly the focus of this research, many of the obsessions of Bateman himself are elucidated here, namely: strangled models, brutal killings, Nazis, faggots, the homeless. The reader is receiving an announcement; the concerns of the narrator, Bateman, and the novel itself are being made clear.

Also apparent in the early pages is the confusion about character identity from the very outset, evidenced and, at the same time, masked by Price's monologues on the opening pages: Bateman is our narrator, yet his point of view is not explicitly revealed until page 8: 'I shiver and hand her my black wool Giorgio Armani overcoat' (Ellis 1991). Before then, his observations, and descriptions of action and dialogue, are effectively rendered by an unidentified third-person narrator. This makes the reader's identification with a singular consciousness initially less likely, perhaps withholding that truly transgressive aspect of the text.⁵³

Additionally, the opening scene is fast and noisy, and there is the introduction of an ambiguity that sustains throughout the novel: sometimes Price is introduced once as 'Timothy Price', thereafter is referred to as 'Price', but also as 'Tim' and 'Timothy'. The effect of this is important: in that opening scene, it can appear that there are more than just two people, not including the taxi driver. In a sense, an entire class of person is being portrayed, this being, arguably, one of the key intentions of the book. It is as though the characters, beginning with Price and the multiple tags used to denote him, are interchangeable or, rather, unfixed, always floating. This helps create a particular kind of symbolic framework, one lacking in constants or certainties, and can be seen as an illustration that the narrator is struggling to amass and categorise the sensations he

⁵³ Meaning precisely the first-person immersion that later becomes obvious.

experiences. Bateman's mind is attempting to absorb these into a coherent symbolic order which might allow the emergence of a healthy psychoanalytic subject. This, in turn, can be seen (because of the function of the first-person) as the assembling of the symbolic order of the book into which the reader has been plunged: confused, a mass of sometimes violent imagery, of apparent casual violence.

This theme of the confusion of character identity is manifested *within* the text itself. On page 7, Price wonders if they have seen another financier, Victor Powell.

'Is it Victor Powell? It can't be.' The man passes under the fluorescent glare of a streetlamp with a troubled look on his face that momentarily curls his lips into a slight smile and he glances at Price almost as if they were acquainted but just as quickly he realizes that he doesn't know Price and just as quickly Price realizes it's not Victor Powell and the man moves on. 'Thank god,' Price mutters as he nears Evelyn's. 'It looked a lot like him.' (Ellis 1991, p. 7).

And earlier on, page 5, the narrator sees:

a guy who looks a lot like Luis Carruthers waves over at Timothy and when Timothy doesn't return the wave the guy – slicked-back hair, suspenders, horn-rimmed glasses – realizes it's not who he thought it was and looks back at his copy of *USA Today* (Ellis 1991, p. 5).

The point is made explicitly right at the beginning and continues to the end: the 'masters of the universe' don't recognise each other, nor themselves.

In concluding the examination of the opening act of *American Psycho*, the question of transgression has been skirted and largely implied. Yet close reading reveals that brutal killings are already happening, and the close reader can legitimately ask whether Bateman has already struck. In particular, his interest in a story in the paper about a killing on a yacht (Ellis 1991, p. 5) seems to imply he knows more, and the similarity to the ways he later describes his own killings suggest that he could be connected. But *American Psycho* is a clever book, never answering the question of the reliability of its narrator. In any event, it isn't until the dinner at Evelyn's that the reader encounters an indication of what might be Bateman's true nature. Evelyn is teasing him:

'Patrick is *not* a cynic, Timothy. He's the boy next door, aren't you honey?'

'No, I'm not,' I whisper to myself. 'I'm a fucking evil psychopath.' (Ellis 1991, p. 20).

This is our first encounter with Bateman's authentic voice. It is also the first overt announcement of transgression to come: the many earlier instances have been mere hints. Later, we see more clearly his warped world, an inconsistent solipsistic mess from which Bateman eventually seeks escape through confession. At this dinner party, he is unheard. His later confessions are ignored. Bateman has gone through the gates of hell, referenced in the first line, and he has no way back.

The Kindly Ones opens very differently to both *American Psycho* and *Platform*. While the former ushers in the voice of madness and the latter the bored tones of a cynic, *The Kindly Ones* starts with a flourish: 'Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened' (Littell 2009, p. 3). The narrator, Dr Max Aue, asserts a kinship with the human race and the reader, an assertion questionable given the subsequent revelation that Aue is a former SS officer and willing participant in the genocidal killings of the Second World War. Aue acknowledges the problem, on the next line predicting the reader's response: 'I am not your brother, you'll retort, and I don't want to know.' Yet he is quite serious, even as he puns: 'And also, this concerns you: you'll see that this concerns you' (Littell 2009, p. 3). His story is indeed concerning. These early phrases are not yet announcements of transgression, but they are clearly assertions of intent.

This first section of the novel is 10,000 words long and is set after the events that constitute the subsequent narrative take place. Writing in a reflexive, autobiographical mode, Aue tells us he's now living in France. The Nazi project has collapsed. He's the manager of a lace factory, he's married and has children, twin boys. Despite this, he still pursues homosexual liaisons, describing them as 'mainly as a matter of hygiene, so to speak' (Littell 2009, p. 12). He has a twin, his sister Una, and she is a key figure in his story; indeed the narrator alludes to (announces) incest through cryptic phrases: 'another sad episode in my *family romance*—maybe I'll come back to it at some point' (Littell 2009, p. 10) and 'it is also true that I have loved a woman. Only one, but more than anything in the world. Yet she was precisely the one I was not allowed to have' (Littell 2009, p. 22). He goes on to state: 'that love is probably the only good thing I've ever done' (Littell 2009, p. 22).

This complexity: his repressed homosexuality and the, as yet only hinted, incestuous—and subsequently forbidden—relationship with Una, provides the erotic drivers for the novel. The introduction of Una sets up an unresolved dynamic, a rupture in Aue's childhood, one he yearns to resolve throughout the book. The reader is invited

to share this desire. Of course, incest is transgressive. Here is one announcement, obscured, but nevertheless tangible. This strange desire is a powerful engine, for readers who have the stomach.

Of course, in *The Kindly Ones*, Littell has that important historical seam to mine: many novels have been written using the Holocaust as a setting, but few serious works have adopted the point of view of a perpetrator. This is the main transgressive thread, and Aue announces that transgression many times. On page 5, he states: 'I do not regret anything: I did my work, that's all'. He quotes Nazi propaganda officer Paul Karl Schmidt: 'The Jewish question is no question of humanity, and it is no question of religion; it is solely a question of political hygiene' (Littell 2009, p. 13). In categorising something as being only required for cleanliness, rather than any higher purpose, it emulates the callous thinking of a Nazi. Aue gives himself away.

After an exhaustive numerical comparison of the deaths of the Second World War, Aue concludes that the war achieved nothing and there was nothing special about it. He declares his links to the Nazi state:

I can guess what you're thinking: Now here's a truly bad man, you're saying to yourselves, an evil man, a nasty piece of work in every respect, who should be rotting in prison instead of wasting our time with the muddled philosophy of a barely half-repentant former Fascist (Littell 2009, p. 16).

Here Aue manages to be defiant, yet also almost pleading for understanding, even as he announces his transgressive world-view and locates us close to the horror of *das Ding*. He is a complex character. He constructs a sophisticated argument questioning who really is to blame when a modern mechanised state causes the death of many people: 'So who is guilty? Everyone, or no one? Why should the worker assigned to the gas chamber be guiltier than the worker assigned to the boilers, the garden, the vehicles?' (Littell 2009, p. 19). He wants to defend his actions, he acknowledges them fully, but he also wants the reader to concede that they too would have acted as he did: 'I am guilty, you're not, fine. But you should be able to admit to yourselves that you might also have done what I did' (Littell 2009, p. 20).

As if this legalistic admission of guilt in genocide, coupled with a pugnacious assertion that his critics would have behaved the same way, was not enough, Aue throws in another admission: 'Like most people, I never asked to become a murderer'

(Littell 2009, p. 22). This is only a passing reference and somewhat disguised, but he does commit murder in order to secure his escape from Berlin as the Russians closed in at the end of the war. The reference here is another lure, another announcement of transgression, similar to Humbert Humbert's notorious admission, 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style' in *Lolita* (Nabokov 2006, p. 9). There's no doubting murder takes place, the question is who dies and why.

In the final lines of the first part of *The Kindly Ones*, Aue makes his last plea and acknowledges the futility of even the writing process itself:

These words are of no use either, they disappear like water in the sand, this wet sand that fills my mouth. I live, I do what can be done, it's the same for everyone, I am a man like other men, I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you! (Littell 2009, p. 24).

Aue is not a man like other men. He made decisions to end human life and he survived the consequences; he is now motivated to tell the reader. Despite his pleas to the contrary, he is appealing for understanding and perhaps in the end for forgiveness. This plea—at some level and despite denials to the contrary—is arguably common to all the texts. Will the reader forgive any of our narrators, cynical Renault, mad Bateman or traumatised Nazi Aue?

This chapter on beginnings has uncovered a variety of ways of announcing the transgressive and setting up the encounter with the Lacanian *das Ding*. Houellebecq is deadpan, matter-of-fact, in-your-face, relating in simple past tense the story of an outsider, but strongly flagging his interests. Ellis is ambiguous from the start, overtly offensive yet somehow playful, even amusing, wrapping everything in a story-voice that obscures his real intent. Indeed, by confusing identities as a plot device and at the textual level through multiple 'tag' references to the same character, the reader is uncertain to whom the story belongs and who they should care about. Additionally, in his use of the present tense, Ellis keeps the action always-imminent and uncertainty is all around. Littell, in contrast to both these, is clinical. His narrator is in control of his narrative and delivers it in memoir form, looking back on the transgressive events, but at this stage only hinting them; and all the time arguing his lack of repentance. In each of the texts we have seen how transgression announces itself: the bait is before us, the lure of *das Ding* draws us on, powered by the fundamental law of desire and the possibility of *jouissance*.

*

A Thousand Points of Light begins *in medias res*. The narrator, Max Argent, is sitting in a hotel bar with a young woman, Nadya, who is to interview him. Nadya has taken care to hide her identity from him in their earlier email contacts, using a friend's address. But as he tells us, he recognised her as soon as they met. More importantly, he believes she is his estranged daughter. The story is then one of rebuilding a broken relationship, but it is more importantly the story of his transgression, how a young man might come to be in Ukraine in the 1990s, photographing under-aged girls for illegal websites⁵⁴. It's a long story, as Argent says to Nadya during their first meeting in the first chapter (Rossiter 2014, p. 3), and the novel tells it: Argent's life from school to the present, how he came to be a pornographic photographer in Ukraine, and how he lost touch with Nadya and her mother. The biographical journey is interwoven with the present-day story of Argent accompanying Nadya back to Kiev, to discover what he has lost.

One key aspect of the story parallels the Bill Henson story discussed in Chapter One. The central relationship is between Nadya and Argent, although his two friends from school are also important, and we see their development as well, over the years. One of them, Felix, is pivotal in how Argent ends up in Ukraine. He is also the reason Nadya catches up with Argent in Sydney. The other friend, Simon Lanyard, can be seen as a Bill Henson figure: devoted to his art, pursuing images of young girls shot in the badlands of the urban fringe, the same kind of images that Henson was persecuted for. Lanyard is therefore an important counterpoint to Argent. The latter was unambiguously a pornographer; Lanyard, like Henson, an artist. The story itself runs up to the point of Lanyard's new exhibition, creating an ongoing tension as to whether this will be banned or allowed to go ahead.

As this chapter is about beginnings, how *A Thousand Points of Light* introduces the question of transgression must be demonstrated. As per the thesis, announcements are required. This proved a vexing question for the researcher. The transgression in question, pornography in general and specifically the exploitation of girls, classified as 'models' but photographed semi-naked or actually naked, is obviously controversial,

⁵⁴ So-called non-nude websites, featuring girls anything from eight-years-old upwards, were illegal in most countries, but were tolerated in former Soviet countries, notably Ukraine, at the end of the 1990s until 2004. Whilst the girls were usually clothed, the poses were unambiguously sexual. Private or custom sets of photographs could be purchased through the sites; these often featured occasional 'unintended' nudity or near-nudity (Mr X 2009) (Wikipedia 2014).

perhaps even more so after the Henson affair.⁵⁵ The problem I faced was how to introduce these ideas without simply turning away potential readers. The case is made here that the subject matter is genuinely transgressive, representing a border over which Argent has gone and which we, readers, do not dare to go, except perhaps through the vicarious self-indulgence of fiction. The transgressions are represented; *das Ding* is invoked. Readers enjoy *jouissance*, importantly only at second-hand.

The answer was to use a progression of announcements, as discovered earlier in the novels discussed in this chapter. Each announcement is innocuous enough, but in sum they add up to a clear warning of what's to come. Additionally, like *The Kindly Ones* and *American Psycho*, it is anticipated that a reader will have encountered paratext information that helps warn of the contents.

The first indication, in the opening pages, is that there is an estranged relationship between Argent and Nadya. 'It was fourteen years, since I'd seen her last, a young girl, in Aleutskaya Street, getting ready for school.' (Rossiter 2014, p. 2). This is confirmed when he asks after Nadya's mother: 'Is it your mother?' (Rossiter 2014, p. 4). On the same page, he addresses the reader, in a tone halfway between confession and defiance: 'Yes, I left her, when she was eight, and her mother. It was a long story, as I said to her in the bar, but, believe me, I had no choice'. These are by no means direct assertions of transgression, but they do set up a context; clearly something is not right.

The question of identity is also part of the announcements: Argent questions Nadya as to why she'd used a different name when contacting him. She explains that he might have refused to meet her. This is a sign of something problematic. And she reminds him that he also has been living under a different name from the one she originally knew: this too raises questions that Argent acknowledges even as he doesn't answer them:

It's true. I had changed my name, all those years ago. Became a new person, began a new career, lived on the other side of the world, left everything behind. We do what we have to do. It wasn't fair of her to trick— (Rossiter 2014, p. 3).

The cumulative effect of these signals is to create an atmosphere of complexity, if not direct indication of transgression. On pages 5–6, Argent's cold and even clinical nature, the kind of nature that would allow him to be a child pornographer, is on display

⁵⁵ And the subsequent amendment to the *NSW Crimes Act*.

when he summarises the story of the photographs he took of a pair of orangutans, mother and child, that were captured on a freshly-made palm plantation in East Kalimantan. In answer to the question of whether the apes had been killed, Argent is matter-of-fact. He was, he says, just an observer (Rossiter 2014, p. 5). This comment is key to the novel: Argent always sees himself as an observer not an actor, suspended and distinct from the Law, as in Žižek's essay (Žižek 1995). This aspect is arguably central to his character.

Nadya's almost forensic questioning explores her putative subject, the great wildlife photographer, but as it progresses both Argent and the reader begin to realise she has a deeper agenda. On page 6, Argent lets slip that perhaps a photographer takes something from a person in the act of photographing them.

Nadya was still looking at her questions. 'What have you taken?' she said quietly. 'From your subjects?'

I wondered what she was doing. Finally she glanced up.

'Let's say that I stick to animals. Their world is outside of us, of me and my camera. They can't know or care.' (Rossiter 2014, p. 6).

Whether the reader suspects that Nadya herself has been a subject of Argent's camera is a moot point: she is building a case against him and the reader is a witness, if not the judge. The first chapter ends ominously as Nadya says:

Tomorrow, I will ask more questions. Tonight was just some background. I will ask about your youth. I will find out what embarrassing secrets you have hidden, believing no one will ever uncover them. I want to know more. This profile will be the truth, it will be everything about you. You are a great photographer and the world should know (Rossiter 2014, pp. 8–9).

In the second chapter, things become more explicit and Nadya's purpose clearer. Argent describes the first photographs he took, including one of a girl his own age (then eight years). In indirect speech, he tells Nadya and the reader:

I took the photograph, her standing by the curtains, in my parents' room, the light coming sideways, the flash bringing out the fine hairs on her arms, the pale pink of her flat nipples, the smooth young skin (Rossiter 2014, p. 13).

This description introduces a transgressive note. Whatever else the reader is supposed to think about children photographing each other naked, the potentially adult reference to the physicality of the child is almost certainly transgressive. But it is Nadya's question, two pages later that seals it: 'So it was not, like paedophile?' (Rossiter 2014, p. 15). Argent's response, slamming down and spilling his beer, is intended to indicate that her innocent-enough comment has struck home. He knows what she's saying. She knows him. He has been transgressive, although we don't as yet know how.

It's important to restate: this is not a moment of transgression itself, that is still to come, and is the subject of the next chapter. But here is a clear statement of the intent discussed in Chapter One. As in all the texts, the symbolic order of this novel is entered, and transgression has been implied. The reader is theoretically confirmed in their analysis thus far that this story is going to deal with 'difficult' material. The structure chosen (the parent and child reunion) should have generated the narrative interest and drive; the subject matter should be becoming disturbingly clear; the reader should, if the plan has worked, be fascinated to discover more.

Each of the novels studied here has carried out the function of both warning and luring readers: transgression ahead. Just as the psychoanalytic subject confronts their own lack, for which symbolisation is required if one is to live a balanced adult life, so the novel's symbolic order is ruptured by the following key fissures in conventional social norms: (1) the discussion of death, and specifically that of one's parents, in vulgar, almost savage tones in *Platform*; (2) the crazy, confusing, hateful-yet-hilarious world of the *American Psycho*; (3) the chilling clarity of Max Aue's analysis of the numbers of war dead in the Second World War and the prospect of a defence of his actions as an SS officer, in *The Kindly Ones*; (4) the suggestion in *A Thousand Points of Light* that Argent has been involved in the production of child pornography. Each of these areas, these prospective transgressions, are sites of attraction, potential loci of the release of *jouissance* for the willing reader who wants to see more, to witness more, to know more. This is not to condone in anyway: fiction is about exploring what one is not. Each text has announced its area of transgression. Readers are either repelled or intrigued. Whatever the response, readers have entered the symbolic domain, both have tasted the rupturing that is to come. Some will continue reading.

Chapter Three: The erotics of transgression

This chapter proposes an erotics of transgression, a framework that turns away from ‘a discourse of knowledge (rationality)’ towards one of ‘erotics (irrationality)’ (Burke 2004). The acknowledgement of irrationality is useful in the study of transgressive writing because it allows for—even expects—the crazy, the driven, the insane: Bateman’s sadism; Aue’s incest and his calm defence of Nazi murder; Renault’s ferocious anti-Islamic and sexually depraved musings on contemporary culture; Argent’s dark child-exploiting past. More importantly, an erotics is a system that puts desire as a central motivation, beyond reason and logic. The nature of desire, and an erotics that evaluates it, is sexual in the sense of a deep primal motivation, not sexual in the more common connotation implying sexual relations and associated stimulation. Throughout this chapter, the terms ‘desire’ and ‘erotics’ refer to the Lacanian and Freudian usage.⁵⁶ When these are applied to literature, ‘desire links the content of the novel to its consumption: promiscuous eroticism offers us a way to talk both about what people do in novels and what people do with them’ (Kurnick 2007, p. 586). The text has its desire, and the reader does too. Everything, says the erotics of transgression, is about desire.

Brooks bases the thesis of his *Reading for the Plot* around this idea: the centrality of desire in narrative as both reader motivator and plot motivation. He says first that plot is ‘the organizing line and intention of narrative’, the structural textual arrangement that allows readers to generate meaning (1992, p. 37), and then that it does this through the operation of desire: ‘Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification’ (Brooks 1992, p. 37). This notion of a text telling and also generating desire as a device to lure the reader forward is of great interest here; the key texts will each be analysed for its operation.

⁵⁶ Paradoxically, the psychoanalytic use of desire and erotics does of course relate directly to human sexuality, but it is not restricted to this area. The question of the desire to see, for example, a burning corpse, ‘because it is there’, can be assessed as part of an erotics. Erotic in the conventional connotation, it is not.

Brooks is an adherent of Lacanian thought, and the study of desire, irrational and unreasonable, called here an erotics, is at the heart of Lacanian, and before him, Freudian, thought. As Lacan says:

Freud said somewhere that he could have described his doctrine as an erotics, but, he went on, ‘I didn’t do it, because that would have involved giving ground relative to words, and he who gives ground relative to words also gives ground relative to things. I thus spoke of the theory of sexuality.’ (Lacan 1992, p. 84).

An erotics is an analysis which recognises the primacy of desire as a motivator of both reader and character (or, per Brooks, plot itself), and the task is to identify the sub-genre, the erotics of transgression. Lacan tells us that: ‘Desire is always the desire of the Other’ (Lacan 1978, p. 235). The subject’s desire, for anything all, is articulated and signified beyond the subject’s boundary, in the realm of the symbolic. Without this process of signification which enables the subject to articulate desire, to name it or construct it using symbols, the subject simply doesn’t know what he or she wants⁵⁷.

More than that, the dynamic energy field of the symbolic draws from simple needs far greater imaginings of desire. Subjects find themselves trapped in a swirl of desire, represented symbolically and always pointing metonymically to one or another object, yet when/if attained, such objects immediately lose their allure.⁵⁸

This mechanism, the forever drawing of the subject towards the unattainable, is an erotic mechanism, and Lacan tells us that at its heart is what he, and Freud before him, calls *das Ding* (the Thing). *Das Ding*⁵⁹ is the memory the subject retains of the certainty of the love and nurture that came from the primary caregiver⁶⁰, back before the Mirror Stage. Lacan says:

⁵⁷ This desire may be beyond basic needs, but even basic needs are themselves translated into symbolic objects—for example the need to eat is transformed into a desire for expensive cuisine or for overconsumption of unhealthy food. The important point is that once identified by the subject symbolically the subject’s desire becomes the ‘desire of the Other’.

⁵⁸ The dynamic field generated and maintained by the advertising industry is intended to have this exact effect: to locate the subject in a state of perpetual desire which can only be assuaged through endless consumption.

⁵⁹ *Das Ding* is used by Lacan until the end of 1960, during Seminar VII. It is subsequently replaced by the term *objet petit a*, performing much the same function (Evans 2006, loc 5609).

⁶⁰ Remembering here that we substitute Lacan’s ‘mother’ for ‘primary caregiver’. In doing so, we do not alter the original meaning, but we remove it from the gendered context.

It is to be found at the most as something missed. One doesn't find it, but only its pleasurable associations. It is in this state of wishing for it and waiting for it that, in the name of the pleasure principle, the optimum tension will be sought (Lacan 1992, p. 52).

Das Ding is located partly in the symbolic order (otherwise it could not generate a vector for the subject to follow) and partly (importantly) in the real. Lacan confirms this:

Das Ding is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified. It is as a function of this beyond-of-the-signified and of an emotional relationship to it that the subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression (Lacan 1992, p. 54).

The subject's desire is a field whose endpoint is *das Ding*. This is the sink to which all desire is ultimately drawn. The location in the real is significant because it identifies both the actuality and the unattainability of desire. The subject is condemned to try forever to acquire *das Ding*, by traversing the currents of desire. It is this journey, described by Lacan as the exercising of the pleasure principle and in which *jouissance* is released, that motivates the subject into any action at all. Furthermore, the constraints of the reality principle force the subject to abandon excessive pursuit of pleasure and keep the subject in a healthy state, neither too repressed nor too exposed to the excesses of pleasure, as Freud says:

an ego thus educated has become 'reasonable'; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the reality principle, which also, at bottom, seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished (Freud 1920, p. 160).

Non-psychopathic subjects, the majority of healthy human beings, are 'educated', living in Freud's 'reasonable' balance. But what happens if the reality principle is not followed? If subjects elect not to allow themselves to be constrained? What happens is they approach *das Ding*, the part-symbolised aspect of the real. What happens is Bateman's bloody obsessions, Aue's incest and ethnic cleansing, Renault's racism and sexism, and Argent's pornographic child exploitation. The subject/reader has been

brought to the threshold of the real and is confronted by its terror. What happens is transgression. Specifically, Lacan recognises that:

[T]he step taken by Freud at the level of the pleasure principle is to show us that there is no Sovereign Good – that the Sovereign Good, which is *das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good, and that there is no other good. Such is the foundation of the moral law as turned on its head by Freud (Lacan 1992, p. 70).

If Lacan is right, and the pursuit of the unrestrained subject is the Sovereign Good—*das Ding*, or the primary caregiver, the ‘object of incest’—then this is a world indeed turned upside down, one in which the unrestrained aim of the human subject is also the most perverse. This is of course the Sadean premise. In Seminar VII, Lacan identifies Sade as the ‘man of pleasure’, defying moral law and ‘extolling incest, adultery, theft, and everything else you can think of’, by obeying only the Symbolic Law and its drive to *das Ding*. Sade, Lacan says, defies the Commandments, acting to only satisfy himself. Lacan paraphrases Sade: ‘Let us take as the universal maxim of our conduct the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure’ (Lacan 1992, p. 79).

In this Sadean world, the individual has not only the right but the obligation to satisfy his own desires at whatever cost.⁶¹ The important point is not that Lacan endorses this⁶², but that the drive towards *das Ding* is recognised. The erotics of transgression is the framework that situates the narrators of the texts under review as proponents of Sade, in effect as model sadists. Each of the texts will therefore be subjected to this erotics, to determine the extent to which the protagonists bear out the Sadean principle. The question of the ‘good’ and what the consequences are of this transgressive pursuit of desire articulated by the narrators, and harnessed by the authors to motive readers, will be discussed under the rubric of ethics in the next chapter. Here, an examination of the

⁶¹ As an aside, it is worth noting that Lacan sees Sade’s position as being entirely democratic and—intriguingly—free of gender discrimination: ‘Sade demonstrates with great consistency that, once universalized, this law, although it gives libertines complete power over all women indifferently, whether they like it or not, conversely also liberates those same women from all the duties that civilized society imposes on them in their conjugal, matrimonial and other relations. This conception opens wide the flood gates that in imagination he proposes as the horizon of our desire; everyone is invited to pursue to the limit the demands of his lust, and to realize them’ (Lacan 1992, p. 79).

⁶² Lacan observes that ‘[t]he naturalist liberation of desire has failed historically. We do not find ourselves in the presence of a man less weighed down with laws and duties than before the great critical experience of so-called libertine thought’ (Lacan 1992, p. 4).

deployment of desire is undertaken. The task now is to identify mechanisms by which the texts manifest desire and how transgression is articulated. We are looking for the points of savagery, when the conventional and the acceptable are discarded.

Patrick Bateman, the *American Psycho*, is a driven man, but he is also deeply troubled. This is not immediately clear from the outset; indeed as noted in the previous chapter it is hard to even identify the narrator amidst the swirling descriptions and monologues in the first scene in the taxi. The fact that throughout the novel he is repeatedly mistaken for other brash, young, Wall Street financiers reminds the reader of his cipher-like nature, and his wild narration throughout the novel makes him a hard character to pin down: it is only through his acts that the reader begins to appreciate his madness. Authentic character, as Aristotle tells us in the *Poetics*⁶³, manifests itself as a consequence of plot events, whether they are dialogue or scene actions.

What then is Bateman's drive? What does he want? There is the loathing of the homeless, the homophobia, the viewing women as objects, the racism, the coveting of the 'Fisher account', the inability to develop meaningful relationships, and above all the sexual perversity. While the reader is unlikely to share these desires, simply watching them, even experiencing them vicariously, locates us also near the limit of the symbolic order. This is the payoff of transgressive fiction.

Yet the reader is likely to be unprepared for the truly transgressive element that is to come. Ellis's technique is to take scenarios which are distasteful and then to push them to an extreme. The sight of the homeless is distressing to Bateman, disrupting his psychic balance (such as it is, given his use of drugs and alcohol). Approaching just another bum, a black man, Al, and his dog Gizmo, a third of the way into the book, Bateman introduces himself and attempts to shake Al's hand (his own is gloved). Bateman offers him a ten-dollar bill, before changing his mind for a five and then after asking the man why he doesn't have a job and whether he had been an insider-trader⁶⁴, he places the bill back in his own pocket. Bateman abuses the man for being smelly. Then:

⁶³ 'Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions' (Aristotle 350 BCD, Section I, Part VI).

⁶⁴ A telling detail: Bateman would view homelessness as a perfectly predictable outcome of being caught insider trading.

I reach out and touch his face gently once more with compassion and whisper, ‘Do you know what a fucking loser you are?’ He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina (Ellis 1991, p. 131).

Ellis’s choice of the eye as the initial place of Bateman’s attack is reminiscent of Bataille’s infamous ‘eyeball’⁶⁵ scene in *The Story of the Eye*, where the unfortunate priest, freshly strangled, lies before the narrator, Simone and Sir Edmund. The latter ‘removed a pair of fine scissors from his wallet, knelt down, then nimbly inserted the fingers of his left hand into the socket and drew out the eye, while his right hand snipped the obstinate ligaments’ (Bataille 1982, p. 64). Whatever the reason for the choice of the eye, Ellis’s scene is every bit as visceral as Bataille’s, more so because of the helplessness of the bum. The passage in *American Psycho* seems calculated to disturb as much as possible.

This is the same for each of the killings, the second of which is the ‘old queer’, described as ‘late fifties, pudgy, with obscenely healthy-looking pink skin, no wrinkles, all of this topped off with a ridiculous mustache that accentuates his feminine features’ (Ellis 1991, p. 164), who makes the mistake of trying to pick up Bateman. Bateman is profoundly offended. He kills the man’s dog in front of him, then the man himself. He walks back to check he’s ‘really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do)’ (Ellis 1991, p. 166) and shoots him ‘with a silencer’ twice in the face. The absurdity revealed in these details, particularly the notion the victim might be pretending, followed by the justification ‘they sometimes do’, and also the surprising detail of the silencer all introduce the possibility that the narrator might not be reliable, but there’s nothing at any point to definitively prove this, and after all he is the American Psycho.

Bateman’s motivations are of course not rational, and they certainly fit the model of the Sadean ideal: devoid of empathy, obsessed with self and with appearance, and detesting ugliness, helplessness and, most of all, weakness. The ‘old queer’ wants something from Bateman. The bum too. Both are ugly (in his eyes), neither fits into his world of beautiful ‘hardbodies’. He is unable to restrain his loathing. He is unable to attain the Freud-approved state of being ‘reasonable’. In trying to cleanse the world of

⁶⁵ There is also of course the famous ‘eyeball’ scene in Bunel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

ugliness as he sees it, he is driven to destroy. His own desire for aesthetic purity (in his eyes), fitness, smartness, being well-dressed, heterosexuality, and wealth causes him to want to eliminate everything that does not match his ideals. He has the power.

The transgressive killings of assorted escorts and models that follow and have triggered most of the objections to Ellis's book are similarly the product of desire. Despite the warnings the reader has already encountered of Bateman's misogyny, for example, to a female nightclub bartender, 'You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood' (Ellis 1991, p. 59), when the violence comes, it is shocking: and it can be seen simply as the expression of Bateman's perverse eroticism. A street prostitute, Christie, picked up in the meat-packing district, is assaulted by Bateman along with an escort, but she is allowed to leave with 'a terrible black eye and deep scratches across her buttocks caused by the coat hanger' (Ellis 1991, p. 176). Surprisingly, she lets herself be picked up again by Bateman⁶⁶. This time she's not so lucky: she's tied up, tortured with electricity and pliers and Bateman 'laugh[es] when she dies, before she does she starts crying, then her eyes roll back in some kind of horrible dream state' (Ellis 1991, p. 290). The reader is assaulted, but again there's the possibility the narrative is a joke. Immediately after describing scooping Christie's eyes out, Bateman is feeling 'utterly spent' and thinking about cancelling a lunch appointment. Additionally, during the earlier torture of Christie and Sabrina, Bateman's narrative lists the consumer items he is thinking of giving his colleagues as gifts. Mindless consumer culture is intercut with mindless torture. Desire for the tortured death of another is accorded equal consideration with the desire for material consumption. Desire is the desire of the Other.

The key killing, or at least the one with the most rational motive, is that of Paul Owen, one of Bateman's colleagues, who has the 'Fisher account'. Bateman covets this account, mentioning it several times in the narrative. The first time, at Harry's, sees Preston calling Owen a 'Lucky Jew bastard' (Ellis 1991, p. 36), the second in the restaurant, Pastels, when Bateman 'lazily wonder[s] about how Owen got the Fisher account' (Ellis 1991, p. 49). Later, Owen fails to recognise Bateman in the boardroom (Ellis 1991, p. 110), calling him Halberstam, a crucial misidentification provides a kind of alibi when Detective Kimball asks where Bateman was the night Owen went missing,

⁶⁶ Again, a hint that the narrator's account may not in fact be true: his state is so psychotic he cannot tell the reader the truth.

believing that Owen had dinner with Halberstam. As the reader has already been told, Bateman was with Owen⁶⁷ and later killed him with an axe.

Whether or not the motives for the killings are credible, the way they are described is forensic, exposing Bateman's perversion and criminality, but also leaving Ellis open to charges of exploitation. Yet, either way, there's an erotic purpose to all of this, desire taken beyond its limits. However, there is one death that doesn't seem to serve even Bateman's perverted desire: the child killed at the zoo (Ellis 1991, p. 298). This can only be explained in context, occurring as it does later on in the book when Bateman's world is in an advanced state of collapse. Falling apart, he is unable to restrain himself and does whatever comes into his head, hence the scene with the boy. Arguably at this stage he is trying to be caught, but no matter how absurdly he behaves, this doesn't happen.

The question raised by the transgressive novel in general is the following: it is possible to be sympathetic with the transgressive character? At some level, are all the narrators, in the end, objects of the reader's pity and sympathy?⁶⁸ Something as simple as Bateman's humour, his compulsive sense of detail, even his savagery can be compelling; all these combine to keep the reader following, with either fascination or disgust or both. The reader continues⁶⁹, wanting to see an outcome, some resolution, some escape for Bateman from his madness. The escalating narrative ensures that each subsequent event is more transgressive than the last, and the pressure on the story to end Bateman's pain, greater. Each killing postpones this, without making it impossible, indeed making it more likely. The erotic drive and the release of *jouissance* as the reader encounters the increasingly—and exhilaratingly—violent events pushes the narrative on.

Michel Houellebecq's *Platform* deploys transgression in a less direct manner than the other texts. The often crude—but frequently incisive—humour of his narrator, Renault, is quite different to the manic, crazy, apparently unintentional humour of *American Psycho*, and the former has the effect of diluting the impact of the narrator's statements

⁶⁷ Or at least he claims to have been. He believes it. Bateman is probably an unreliable narrator (we cannot be certain) and ironically he deceives himself.

⁶⁸ This could be a question for further research: the degree to which sympathy is invoked for the willing reader, despite the transgressive nature of the acts.

⁶⁹ Readers who do not find the narrator or his actions interesting on some level usually simply stop reading.

and observations. Renault's voice is also less bold than that of Aue and Bateman; the sum effect is to establish him as a cynical, even lonely, character⁷⁰. Concessions about the strength of voice aside, *Platform* is still powered by an erotic drive, by desire: it can be seen in three areas.

The first is Renault's frankness about sex and the female politic. He has a view of women as essentially sexual objects who ought to defer to men rather than demand parity. Given that such a position is unacceptable in the urbane modernity Renault inhabits, this is an irrational, indeed transgressive, position; the erotics are of course immediately apparent. But Renault is not an everyday chauvinist pig: he wants her to be a submissive sex object who also respects him, shares his values, and despises other women who do not; further, he wants her to be a successful woman in her own right, an unlikely combination. This strangely weak position of the narrator can be seen early on, when he tells the reader he often passes time after work at a peepshow. 'Watching pussy in motion', he exchanges money as he 'gently emptied [his] testicles', an act of which he is neither proud nor apologetic, ranking it on the same level as his colleague 'stuffing herself with chocolate cake [...] our motives were much the same' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 17). With this gentle, self-deprecating humour, Renault is able to be frank about sexual politics, and even reasonable. But irrationality is lurking: the only Western woman he really respects is Valerie, and he paradoxically identifies her early on as naturally submissive.⁷¹ Other Western women are 'bitches'⁷², 'bimbos'⁷³ or 'sluts'⁷⁴. Adding together these items of evidence, Renault's erotic purpose and relation to the world is revealed: he, like Bateman, is needy. His desire drives him onwards.

In *Platform* Houellebecq often uses a 'second-hand opinion' mode of writing that allows the narrator to appear less driven and prejudiced than he otherwise might seem. An example of this is when Valerie and Renault are sitting together on the beach at Phi Phi island. Valerie, a kind of cipher for Renault's and perhaps Houellebecq's perfect woman, is asking the narrator what Thai women have that Western women do not. He

⁷⁰ This aspect of *Platform* is very similar to all Houellebecq's narrators: it is of course tempting to draw biographical conclusions from such patterns, but either way the observation is valid. Houellebecq's characters are loners.

⁷¹ 'She was just submissive in general, and maybe just ready to look for a new master' (p. 43).

⁷² Stewardesses, (p. 28). Joisane, (p. 48), with 'a face that was nasty, world-weary and flabby', (p. 42).

⁷³ Fellow tour group members, (p. 35).

⁷⁴ Babette and Lea, in the tour group: 'I stared attentively at the two sluts so that I could forget them forever' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 39).

doesn't answer. Instead he thinks he sees 'her nipples harden'.⁷⁵ He reads from her magazine that 'Western men [...] are unappreciated and get no respect in their own countries' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 126). Valerie agrees with the article, albeit sadly. She says she doesn't like the writer. Renault offhandedly observes that '[h]e's not stupid'. Valerie responds by repeating her dislike and then contrasting the article writer with Renault. 'He goes out of his way to shock people, to make himself unpleasant; I don't like that. At least you try to fit in' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 128).

There is irony here in that Houellebecq, the writer, is presenting shocking ideas, but pretending they're coming from someone other than his protagonist. He then invites the protagonist to receive praise *within the text*. Houellebecq too, like Renault, is trying to 'fit in', to find ways to subvert his narrative, to appear less didactic, more reasonable. He wields the transgressive, his character is still expressing his desire and articulating the irrational and the Sadean ideal, but does so in a passive-aggressive manner, using other characters to do the 'dirty work'.

The second area of transgression delivered by Houellebecq is a sustained attack on the religion and culture of Islam. Even in a sophisticated, pluralistic liberal democracy, attacking religious or ethnic minorities is still a taboo. But Renault does it anyway. His desire here is for the exclusion of certain cultures; it is essentially a fascist outlook, in this case directed at Islam. And his hatred of Muslims has a strong sexual overtone.

This can be seen when he's interacting with Aicha, the former maid to his recently deceased father. Renault ponders the 'threat' from Muslims migrating to Europe, 'clots' in 'a vision of migratory flows crisscrossing Europe like blood vessels' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 20). He suggests Islam is going to give Europe a heart attack. Again, Houellebecq's 'second-hand opinion' methodology can be seen at work, when Aicha says of her family:

They're not only poor, they're bloody stupid. Two years ago, my father went on the pilgrimage to Mecca; since then, you can't get a word out of him. My brothers are worse: they encourage each other's stupidity. They get blind drunk on pastis and all the while they strut around like the guardians of the one true faith, and they treat me like a slut because I

⁷⁵ Renault is never free from revealing his own erotic compulsions. Houellebecq plays these for laughs, but the erotics are obvious.

prefer to go out and work rather than marry some stupid bastard like them (Houellebecq 2002, p. 19).

Renault's response subtly reinforces the message: 'It's true, Muslims on the whole aren't up to much' and he follows this with the crude: 'Intellectually, I could manage to feel a certain attraction to Muslim vaginas' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 22). With these two short quips, the second metonymically reducing Aicha to a single racially specific organ, Houellebecq-as-Renault is able to weld sexism and Islamophobia together into an attack on multiculturalism. The erotic drive of his perspective⁷⁶ is palpable, yet even as his transgression is brutal, its frankness is striking: 'the Taliban were probably all in bed stewing in their own filth' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 32), muses Renault, looking out the aircraft window on the way to Thailand.

Besides the critique of Western liberal feminism and multiculturalism, Houellebecq's third area of investigation is of the parlous state of Europe as a cultural and economic force. Here Renault's desire is for the kind of security that values him and his middle-class European values, which he perceives to be under threat. As gang violence escalates in the suburb where Valerie and Jean-Yves' company, Aurore, has its offices, the pair work on a new business model, from a suggestion originally made by Renault: sex tourism as an integrated part of the package holiday business and exploiting local cultures' more relaxed attitudes to sex. The analogy is clear: old Europe has become impotent and requires the fresh blood of the less developed world. The sterility of the old world is shown in the sanitised visits to S&M clubs, which Renault clearly enjoys, but which he can also see the emptiness of. Renault's business idea is to revitalise Europe's flagging libido, to reinject energy into it through the exploitation of cheap and willing third-world bodies.

These opportunities are not only illustrated in Renault's early massage scenes in the Thai hotel health club (Houellebecq 2002, p. 46), but also when he and Valerie are interrupted making love in their hotel in Cuba (Houellebecq 2002, p. 214). The chambermaid, who at least is given a name, Margarita, is quite willing to disrobe and have sex with the couple. Again, Valerie is not only perfectly amenable to the idea, she rewards the chambermaid with a gift of forty dollars. Renault is of course only

⁷⁶ That is, to say the unsayable.

demonstrating the new holiday style he'll suggest to Valerie, one that will transform the fortunes of Aurore not once but twice⁷⁷.

The curiously flat tone in which Renault's narration describes the transgression of sexual norms is manifest in all the sex scenes, from Renault's massage experiences to the ones with Valerie, to the sex club and also Jean-Yves' brief affair with a babysitter. All are rendered in typical Houellebecqian mode: matter-of-fact, forensic, yet at the same time conferring an air of vulnerability, even when most crude. The frankness with which they are portrayed might be, to the reader unfamiliar with Houellebecq's style, somewhat confronting. Yet the writer is subtle in his employment of the form. He often uses the moments to expose fragilities about his character's position, courting sympathy. An example is just before Margarita arrives; Valerie is disrobing and Renault reflects on the human (sexual) condition:

A source of permanent, accessible pleasure, our genitals exist. The god who created our misfortune, who made us short-lived, vain and cruel, has also provided this form of meagre compensation. If we couldn't have sex from time to time, what would life be? A futile struggle against joints that stiffen, carries that form. All of which, moreover, is as uninteresting as humanly possible — the collagen which makes muscles stiffen, the appearance of microbic cavities in the gums. Valerie parted her thighs above my mouth (Houellebecq 2002, p. 214).

The graphic directness of the ending of this passage contrasts with the plaintive tone of the preceding text, emphasising it. In general, Renault's transgressions are significantly more muted than those of Aue or Bateman, yet they still work within the paradigm of *jouissance*, rewarding the reader who gasps, sighs or chuckles at each one.

There is one more transgression in *Platform* that has not been mentioned so far. The narrator, Renault, wills himself to death at the end. Whether this redeems him or not is a matter for the reader, but it is interesting to note again how plaintive this ending is, in its weak transition from the narration of past events to one set in the present, and therefore

⁷⁷ The first time is commercial success; the second, following the terrorist bomb, sees an abandonment of the policy.

looking forward to a future: 'I imagine, I don't know why, that I will die in the middle of the night' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 362).

The parallel with Camus' *The Outsider* is confirmed. Meursault lies in his cell listening to the sounds of the world waking up on a morning which might well be the one of this execution. He is at peace and ready for what will inevitably happen. Just as in *The Outsider*, Renault's willingness to die is perhaps the ultimate transgression: fictional characters are generally supposed to endure and triumph, even in failure, embodying the best in us, not surrender. Having lived his life submitting without qualm to his desires and in a Lacanian sense honouring them fully, Renault finally surrenders. He yields to *thanatos*, the Freudian Death Drive that sees the organism seek the end of agitation and stimulation through death. Whether Renault can be seen, like Meursault, as a kind of hero will be considered in the chapter on ethics, but, here at least, his transgressions in the economic, cultural and erotic domains, driving towards annihilation and expressing clearly the Freudian Death Drive, are clear.

The Kindly Ones is a novel about murder. The novel's central concern is the problem of evil and the riddle of the highly educated sophisticate, Dr Max Aue's, willing participation in Nazi ethnic murder followed by, decades later, the construction of a self-justifying defence. Aue certainly tells his story with candour, richly detailing the transgressions he commits on behalf of the regime. But he also reveals the nature of his incestuous relationship with his sister, Una. The rage he felt against his parents for stopping this is expressed directly when he travels to France and murders his mother and step-father, an act which he himself does not acknowledge. Nor does he acknowledge the parentage of the 'twins', two children who are living with his mother at the time.⁷⁸ These are the product of the relationship with Una.

Aue says he intends to tell his story 'to set the record straight for myself, not for you' (Littell 2009, p. 3). It is therefore an act of confession, but also an act of defiance; Aue defends his part in the Nazi atrocities, saying any one of his readers would have done the same thing. This confessional and defiant tone has much in common with both *Platform* and *A Thousand Points of Light*, each of which features a self-conscious narrator writing in memoir mode. *American Psycho* is the odd one out: it is an interior

⁷⁸ Littell works hard to make it clear that the twins are Aue's own, despite the character's inability to acknowledge this, even when writing years later.

monologue. But all the novels feature a narrator needing to tell their stories: ultimately they're all the product of the desire to reveal.

The reader of *The Kindly Ones* knows that mass murder will be described. Of the other books, only *American Psycho* also promises this visceral violence. Like the latter, *The Kindly Ones* harnesses the dark drive towards the destruction of the other, a true Sadean objective. And it is interesting that, also like *American Psycho*, *The Kindly Ones* features perverse sexuality as a through line.

In the opening section, Aue is defensive: anyone would have behaved as he had done, he says. Readers should consider themselves fortunate not to have been born in the circumstances he was. In short, Aue says he did what he had to do. But it is one thing to avoid blame rhetorically; it is quite another to take the reader through the events, commenting on each as Aue does. Even in simply documenting his participation, Aue describes events equally as shocking as those Bateman's feverish mind produces. And however distressing the latter might be, the reader of *American Psycho* can find relief in the fact that what is being read is made up. Littell's story, on the other hand, is fictional in the sense that the narrator and many characters did not exist, but all the key events certainly did occur. Reading the novel, the reader is located within historical truth.

The majority of Aue's narrative is set in the frame of the Second World War, which begins with the narrator arriving at Sokal in Western Ukraine, recently liberated from the Russians as the German forces sweep eastwards. It is in Ukraine that many of the early mass executions occurred. The reader may be expecting Nazi atrocities already, but the narrator describes first the uncovering of the mass killing of Ukrainian and Polish prisoners by the departing Russians.

The dead were already swelling up, I gazed at their green and yellowish skin, their faces gone shapeless, as if they'd been beaten to death. The smell was vile; and this smell, I knew, was the beginning and the end of everything, the very signification of our existence. This thought filled me with dismay (Littell 2009, p. 33).

Aue is observing a historical fact, that atrocities did not begin with the Nazis; there have been mass killings as long as there have been humans. It seems the reader is meant to see Aue as a philosophical man, reflecting on the transience of human existence, doomed as it must be to return to the elements from which it is made. Aue's confession

will tell the reader of the terrible things he has done, but his desire is to set them in a wider context.

This moment of reflection over, Aue provides the back story of how he found himself in the SD, the security division of the Nazi SS. After a fleeting homosexual encounter in a Berlin park, Aue was arrested for suspected immoral acts; intervention by his best friend, Thomas Hauser, facilitates his release. In return, Aue enrolls in the SD, 'And that is how, my ass still full of sperm, I resolved to enter the Sicherheitsdienst' (Littell 2009, p. 70).

Aue's humour is amusing⁷⁹, and has the effect of distracting the reader from the bleakness of the task. And the concreteness of the sexual drive Aue reveals (he feels it to be as a substitute for his love of his sister) is firmly established as another narrative driver in the work. The desire for Una is sublimated into his disavowed homosexuality.

After the flashback, the reader's wait is over: Aue takes part in his first *Aktion*. He already has doubts about the methods, and in the first instances they're brutal and inefficient. But he is resigned:

And undeniably, we were killing a lot of people. That seemed atrocious to me, even if it was inevitable and necessary. But one has to confront atrocity; one must always be ready to look inevitability and necessity in the face, and accept the consequences that result from them; closing your eyes is never an answer (Littell 2009, p. 80).

Aue obviously recognises the brutality, but he remains sanguine. He shows the reader the inevitability of the situation. Whether the reader would do the same thing is of less importance; what matters is understanding the narrator. Of the contradiction between those doing the killing and those being killed, he says:

This was what I couldn't manage to grasp: the yawning gap, the absolute contradiction between the ease with which one can kill and the huge difficulty there must be in dying. For us, it was another dirty day's work; for them, the end of everything (Littell 2009, p. 81).

⁷⁹ Again, an important similarity between *The Kindly Ones* and *American Psycho*, the use of humour by narrators whose actions otherwise would render them repulsive.

None of this stops Aue. Later, he observes three different temperaments amongst his colleagues: those who killed with sensual pleasure, those who were disgusted but obedient, and those followed the ideology that their victims were nonhuman and should be slaughtered (Littell 2009, p. 106). Tellingly, Aue doesn't place himself in any of these categories. Instead he is evasive:

Passion for the absolute was a part of it, as was, I realized one day with terror, curiosity: here, as in so many other things in my life, I was curious, I was trying to see what effect all this would have on me (Littell 2009, p. 107).

This is an ambivalent attitude, for a man who is sensitive enough when observing two fellow officers sexually abusing two Ukrainian peasant girls in front of him to note that they were all already skeletons and would 'be buried under the cold earth, the soft earth, just like all those Jews mowed down in the prime of life, their mouths full of earth would laugh no more' (Littell 2009, p. 88).

As the narrator-witness, his role is to both place us as close to the action as possible, yet also comment on it in a constructive and illuminating way. He knows that readers who have come this far want to see what he has seen. In perhaps the most important sentence in the book, Aue says: 'the desire to see these things was also human' (Littell 2009, p. 98). He cites Plato's *Republic*, the scene where Leontius comes upon dead bodies at the scene of an execution, wanting yet loathing to look, finally exclaiming 'There! you devils! gaze your fill at the beautiful spectacle!' (Plato 1998). Readers of Littell's book also want to see. Aue is covertly exposing their desire, their interest in what he has to show them. He is acknowledging that awful desire to view the atrocious: simple human prurience, the instinct that compels many drivers to slow down to view an accident on the other side of the motorway. The release of *jouissance* precisely at these moments of confrontation with terror—proximate to the real—is a powerful drive.

Further, Aue reflects on the problem of bearing witness:

I was always observing myself: it was as if a film camera were fixed just above me, and I was at once this camera, the man it was filming, and the man who was then studying the film. Sometimes that astonished me, and often, at night, I couldn't sleep; I stared at the ceiling; the lens didn't leave me in peace (Littell 2009, p. 107).

Here Aue could be paraphrasing ‘I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking’, the famous start of the second paragraph of ‘A Berlin Diary’ in Christopher Isherwood’s *The Berlin Stories* (2008). And reference to photography in *The Kindly Ones* is of great interest, given that the narrator of the creative component of this research, Max Argent, is a photographer and it is through that medium, through his desire for aesthetic beauty, that his transgressive acts are carried out.

Aue notes that some soldiers took photographs of what they had done, exchanging them for tobacco or other items, some even sending them home to their families. Here is a deeper form of transgression. The killers recorded their acts, perhaps seeking to normalise them by this means and through sending them back home.⁸⁰ This instinct to record and preserve the evidence of transgression, of ultimate power, can be seen in Lacanian terms as an attempt (always failed) to take a hold of the unattainable, that symbolic structure that marks the central lack in the human subject, namely *das Ding*, ‘that is to say, the place of desire’ (Lacan 1992, p. 109).

Aue himself has an interest in photographs, compiling an album, as part of his report on the Ukrainian operations, which impresses his commander. The latter assures him it will be sent back to Berlin, perhaps even to be shown to the Fuhrer himself. Indeed, the album makes a ‘very good impression’ and Aue is promoted as a result (Littell 2009, p. 137).

Beyond the *Aktion* and the later concentration camp killings, Aue finds other ways to be transgressive: during his recovery after Stalingrad, in Berlin, he meets Dr Mandelbrod⁸¹, a senior German figure who is also on the board of the German industrial IG Farben⁸². Aue delivers another transgressive statement claiming the Jews were, ‘the first genuine National Socialists, for almost three thousand five hundred years they’ve been so, ever since Moses gave them a Law to separate them forever from the other peoples’ (Littell 2009, p. 455). He goes onto explain that is why the Jews were the ‘only

⁸⁰ Such practices are not limited to the Second World War. CCN reported that in Afghanistan an American soldier was ‘charged with the premeditated deaths of three civilians, possessing a dismembered human finger, wrongfully possessing photographs of human casualties, and smoking hashish’ (Silverleib & Zamost 2011). The instinct to preserve the terrible reality of a dead person, or in the broader sense to hold in perpetuity a moment of profound transgression, is of central interest to this research.

⁸¹ At this meeting is Mandelbrod’s ‘partner’, Herr Leland, described as a British germanophile forced to turn his back on his native country. Whether Leland is also the homosexual partner of Mandelbrod is not clear.

⁸² IG Farben was founded in 1925 and was a leading German chemical industry conglomerate. The firm was directly involved in the exploitation of concentration camp slave labour.

serious' competitors to the German race. This is why, he says 'we must kill them down to the last one, extirpate their stock' (Littell 2009, p. 455). The notion that Jews shared the philosophical, that is to say both economic and racial, theories as the Nazis is undoubtedly transgressive: saying the unsayable. Littell has created a character who can say anything, in part because of the historical evidence and also because, like the other narrators in this study, Aue retains a certain insouciance: he knows his words will shock us; he doesn't care. His need to tell the truth outweighs any notion of propriety, and it drives the narrative onwards as he disburdens himself of his anguish. For the reader too, there is the strong release—the thrill as taboo topics are torn open, as ethnicities are slandered, at the rape of the Ukrainian girls, at the mass killings. Aue believes he is simply telling the truth. We witness his assertions, bathed in *jouissance*, both horrified and also compelled as we approach *das Ding*.

To summarise the previous: the drive of *American Psycho* is Bateman's progressive loss of control as he obeys the dark forces he can neither repress nor sublimate. In *Platform*, Renault's desire (freely exchanged sex at market prices) leads him first to see his vision implemented on a commercial scale and then to such disaster that he loses his love object, Valerie. Aue, in *The Kindly Ones*, is also driven by desire for his sister, a drive that is frustrated: he is never allowed to live the way he wants and as a consequence he destroys his mother and step-father, arguably a metaphor for the Nazi destruction of Jews and other 'undesirables' who 'stood in the way' of the successful Aryan civilisation. He also desires to witness the atrocities of which he approves. What then is the desire that drives *A Thousand Points of Light*?

The novel opens with a mystery: Argent believes he's going to meet a Russian journalist, whose name he has checked on Google. But the young woman before him is not the one he expected. Instead it is Nadya, whom he last saw fourteen years earlier. Immediately, levels of questioning are set up: what does she want, why did she pretend to be someone else, why is he estranged from her, why has she arrived now, what does she know? The intention in this premise is to generate the desire for narrative resolution in the reader's mind. The deeper concerns of the novel, questions of photography and pornography, emerge later, although they are present even in the first chapter when Nadya asks Argent about his photography and what he has taken from his subjects. Of course, he knows, and we subsequently realise she does too—the reader is the only one in the dark at this point—but Argent doesn't know *why* she is asking or *what* she wants.

Argent has opportunities to evade the questioning, but he elects to proceed, admitting his curiosity: ‘But she was hiding something, and it niggled at me’ (Rossiter 2014, p. 7).

The device of the interview that structures the first third of the novel was chosen to facilitate exposition in a natural manner, whilst maintaining two levels of plot development: Argent really does tell Nadya about his past, but he is also trying to understand the dynamic of the interaction; she also knows some of his past, but only up to a point; she wants to know more. So the first driver is the desire to know and to understand. We can also regard this as an opportunity for confession: in Lacan, the subject attempts to escape the torture of *das Ding* through the process of psychoanalysis.

The main thematic force of the novel is the question of the transgression of pornography and what exactly Argent has done, and the erotic desire—on the part of the reader—to ‘see’ what he has seen⁸³, exactly as Aue shows us what he has seen, in *The Kindly Ones*. The link of photography in both texts confirms this parallel.

The pornography element emerges in the second chapter, although Nadya can be seen as fishing for it earlier on, when she asks whether he had photographed models and Argent evades the line of questioning (Rossiter 2014, p. 6). In the second chapter, Argent tells Nadya about his first nude photograph and then about Jessica, the next-door girl, the same age as him. The description of the photographic process and Argent’s attempt to emulate the art books he likes builds his defence against the charge of perversion: he is only ever attempting to capture beauty. This aspect of Argent is one we have to take on faith, and it sets up the central question of the novel: when he photographs first Jessica, and then all the other girls later on in Kiev, is it for erotic pleasure, and thus obeying the Sadean dictum of using the other’s body⁸⁴, or is it in the pursuit of and appreciation of aesthetic beauty? This question is itself a driver, but its energy comes from the erotic implications it conceals, themselves highly transgressive, inasmuch as the very framing of the question in the necessarily mimetic form of fiction implies—to some degree—vicarious immersion.

It is at this point that the idea of what could be called the transgressive voice emerges. The transgressive voice is a mode of speaking (in the sense of narration) in a

⁸³ In this sense, the reader is the voyeur; Argent is the perpetrator.

⁸⁴ ‘Lend me the part of your body that will give me a moment of satisfaction and, if you care to, use for your own pleasure that part of my body which appeals to you’ (Lacan 1992, p. 202).

savage voice, terrifying and monstrous, importantly in self-acknowledgement of one's own monstrosity. It is the voice of the serial killer, the mass murderer, the paedophile, the Nazi who is knowing, even proud of his actions. Of course, these types mostly speak the same way everyone else does, but when located deep within their transgressive activity, if they speak, they do so with the transgressive voice. I hardly need to illustrate this with the narrators we've seen so far: Bateman's voice is obviously savage, even as it makes us laugh. Renault's too is amusing, so that we almost don't notice the savagery of his assertions. Aue's voice, cultured and measured, and somewhat nostalgic, is also savage, not only when he tells us of his crimes, but also when he describes his love for Una.

The question of the transgressive voice emerged as I re-read *A Thousand Points of Light* and found the voice of the narrator less confident or assertive than those of *American Psycho* and *The Kindly Ones*. Argent seemed too ambivalent. In experimenting with this, a new opening chapter was written which gave full voice to a knowing narrator, much like Aue in the opening of his narrative: speaking directly to the reader *as a fellow traveller*, one who sympathises or at least who could be won over by force of reason. This construction initially appeared highly productive in *A Thousand Points of Light* because it allowed the unselfconscious emergence of a transgressive voice, indeed even a kind of celebration of it. The new first chapter was entirely written in this voice, and subsequent points in the novel were amended to feature it as well. These often included an exhortation, 'my friends', as the narrator addressed his colleagues directly.

After review, this approach was abandoned: the first chapter proved too expositional and, more importantly, too distracting from the original plan of the mystery of the opening interview with Nadya. Another reason was the risk that potential readers might simply be repelled and not proceed any further; without Humbert Humbert's baroque rhetoric, my transgressive voice seemed too bare. Having removed the new first chapter, the subsequent points in the text where it appeared were also toned down so that the narrative voice remained consistent throughout.⁸⁵ But the exercise was valuable, because it had revealed precisely those points where the transgressive truth was spoken, where the terrifying face of the (Lacanian) real made itself visible. It was also valuable

⁸⁵ Whilst still allowing for the natural rises and falls in intensity necessary in a novel.

because there was a certain liberating joy to be found in the use of the transgressive voice itself.

This liberating joy—consistent with the Lacanian methodology—can be seen as the release of *jouissance* accompanying the pursuit of erotic desire, specifically proximate to the real. In my removal of the more overt transgressive voice, the novel has not lost the enjoyment of the release of *jouissance*, rather it becomes more subtle and, in keeping with the rest of the work, more ambiguous but no less significant. After all, the real is always present and the moments of transgression always expose it to us, whether with a rhetorical flourish or a subtle exposition.

In the present text, the transgressive voice still occurs first in the second chapter, when Argent nearly drops his beer glass after Nadya questions his motive for taking the photograph of Jessica: ‘So it was not, like paedophile?’ (Rossiter 2014, p. 15). This utterance⁸⁶ of the keyword ‘paedophile’ is the first note of transgression and the reader is entitled to question what it is that Nadya knows and also what Argent is hiding (and revealing through the ‘physical’ parapraxis⁸⁷ of his overreaction when he slams down his glass). Argent’s apparent reluctance to show any intimacy with his daughter when meeting her after so long will have been a source of mystery to the reader, and this moment should confirm that there are dark reasons behind his behaviour.

By the end of the second chapter, the Nadya complication (she is intending to leave and it appears Argent will not go with her) has been bypassed. It is time for the second plot line: Argent has photographed underage girls (although the reader is not directly aware of this at this stage), as has the character of Simon Lanyard, a school friend of Argent, who went on to become a landscape and life photographer (Argent jokes about ‘clouds’). One of Lanyard’s exhibitions had been shut down years earlier and police removed several works to examine them as potential child exploitation material. This is of course a fictionalisation of the 2008 Henson case⁸⁸. The question is: are the works of

⁸⁶ My original concept of the transgressive voice was that it articulates the narrator’s self-knowledge of his evil actions. The keyword ‘paedophile’ here is uttered not by Argent but by Nadya. On reflection, this is less significant: the essential point is that the utterance is made. Transgression is stated. *Das Ding* has been approached and the threatening real is palpable.

⁸⁷ Parapraxis is the slip of the tongue identified by Freud in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1914), and is specifically linked to a linguistic phenomenon. However perhaps it can be stretched to a physical gesture or other action, on the basis that the triggering mechanism in all such instances remains the mind, responding to specific information. The key point is that the reaction—whether linguistic or physical—is involuntary and revealing.

⁸⁸ Mentioned in Chapter One, also see David Marr’s *The Henson Case* (2008).

Lanyard (standing in for Henson) morally equivalent to Argent's? The novel's purpose, in part, is to directly address this question, coming down firmly in defence of Lanyard, but also clearly exposing the permanent damage caused by people like Argent, knowingly or otherwise. This issue is one of the drivers of the novel, as plans for an exhibition by Lanyard are continually in doubt. His wife, Sally, plays a facilitating role in the narrative: she's a vehicle for the production of some of Argent's musings, and his conversations with her sew together the panels of the work.

Lanyard also allows the introduction of the third important male character: Felix. Felix is a Ukrainian who went to the same school as Argent and Lanyard. The images taken at the photography club they set up result in Lanyard's expulsion. Felix's significance is even more central: through him, in Berlin, Argent first meets Kateryna, the woman who will be Nadya's mother. Later he flees the British police investigation of a group of four consensually self-mutilating men⁸⁹, going back to Berlin and then on to Kiev. There, Argent works for Felix, meets Kateryna again, and moves in with her and her young child, Nadya. Towards the end of the novel, we discover that Felix helps Nadya to fly to Sydney, the action that kicks off the present day narrative.

Felix is the character that changes most in the novel: he begins as a cocksure young man, controlling everything; he ends up a shambles, in poor health physically and financially, having seen his businesses fail due to harsh competition. He is willing to try several times to blackmail Argent, his old friend from school. Felix's character arc is very useful to the novel. He represents, much more so than Argent, the consequences of unrestrained (capitalist⁹⁰) exploitation of the erotic drive. From his early days as a trader in men's magazines in school, to his orchestration of the production of pornography, first in school with Alison, Bronwyn and Bates and then through the Ukrainian websites, and also during his period as a party drug trader throughout Europe, Felix has continually exploited human desire. Through him, specifically through his fall at the end, we can see the consequences of being 'too close' to the searing energy of the (Lacanian) real.

⁸⁹ This incident is based on the 1993 British case when five men were successfully prosecuted for 'consensual sado-masochistic homosexual encounters which occasioned actual bodily harm' (Lord Jauncey of Tullichettle et al. 1993). Argent's participation here further illustrates his willingness to photograph transgressive acts: once again, he believes he is simply doing his job.

⁹⁰ This point, the critical examination of capitalism as a harnesser and exploiter of erotic energy, investigated by Georges Bataille, provides a potentially rich area for future research. I had intended to elaborate further here; nevertheless there is an implied critique of capitalism throughout *A Thousand Points of Light*, from the title itself (from the Neil Young song), to Dolph's joke (Rossiter 2014, p. 99).

On a lighter note, Felix is the fall guy in the ‘spermnog’ section in Chapter 16. This can be seen as a *mise en abyme* for the whole novel. Argent remains aloof, simply taking his photographs, as passive as ever. Felix is still making money, couriering drugs. And his impetuosity means he ignores Argent’s attempts to prevent him drinking the spermnog: the running joke in the section being whether Argent will be forced to drink it or not. Felix falls for it in the end.⁹¹

Felix also lets us see the brutal and fascistic truth about beauty, which he articulates at the height of his powers in Kiev, and which Argent recalls later for us. Beginning with an observation that, ‘[w]herever there are men and money, there must be women. If they’re not there in the flesh, they’re there in representational form’, Argent remembers Felix’s speech, which asserts a Darwinian hierarchy that places white women at the top and black women at the bottom (Rossiter 2014, pp. 152–3), and all to some degree in service of men. Felix’s speech, related in the transgressive voice by Argent, represents a central concern of the novel, something that transcends both the Ukrainian websites and the Henson case, although both are instances of it in action⁹².

During the writing of *A Thousand Points of Light*, some readers felt that the Darwinian hierarchy speech, originally in Argent’s voice as he sat in the bar wondering how to contact Nadya, was simply too much. It wasn’t in keeping with the more ambiguous tone he uses overall; it was out of character and he is not an assertive man. I acknowledged this, yet I knew I couldn’t remove it. It presents a brutal argument, one that explains any manner of prejudices directed towards women⁹³. The argument is necessary: after all it explains the erotic attraction of the Ukrainian websites, not to mention pornography itself as a medium, and even the general lure of photography, at least as asserted by the ever-wise Dolph during the trip to Berlin (Rossiter 2014, p. 89). Further, the argument is itself a moment of Lacanian rupture, the positioning of the

⁹¹ The chapter proved almost too much for one reader, who regarded it as more transgressive than anything else in the novel. I believe the reader was focusing more on the explicit imagery than on the arguably more subtly presented, but in my opinion more transgressive, scenes where Argent confesses his exploitation of his daughter and other girls. For me the fact that the acts in the spermnog chapter are committed by consensual adults must make it less transgressive. I do also note that the people involved in transgressive activity in this section are gay men, and there is arguably a disproportionate weight due to the greater detail in which the acts are described, compared to other transgressive scenes. My only answer is that the scene references a real legal case involving transgressive activity, it works to explain why Argent has to leave Britain, and it provides a counterpointing break in the Kiev narrative.

⁹² I don’t mean here that Henson’s work exploits women or youth per se, just that inevitably it plays with such possibilities; his critics might well believe he is such an exploiter.

⁹³ Prejudices including size, weight, skin colour, ‘attractiveness’. These prejudices are real and always present for almost all women and, in one form or another, for men as well.

reader close to the threat of *das Ding*. If this section was removed, the novel would be like any other ‘ordinary’ work; I had no choice but to harness the erotic energy of *jouissance*, inherent in Brooks’ ideas of the forward motion of narrative, and deliver on the promise of transgression made earlier in the novel. However, as above, the speech is not entirely contiguous with Argent’s character.

In the end, I accepted that Argent could not introduce this idea. Felix is the right person to do it. Thanks to the novelist’s tool of analepsis, Argent remembers the speech for us and then takes it over, delivering the final aspect himself, that of the acknowledgement of the inherent fascism in the idea of beauty as well as the notions of whiteness and slimness. Argent is able to tie together key ideas: fascism, desirability, pornography, and finally capitalism, fulfilling my intention of harnessing the transgressive narrator, saying the unsayable:

Beauty is fascist, that’s all. And the correlation between skin lightness and desirability was consistent across most, if not all, cultures. Then there was youth and slimness. You couldn’t be too young or too slim. It was a fascism. A universal fascism. Dolph was right. And we all danced along, then as now, the women’s magazine editors and the fashion designers, with their twelve-year-old flat-chested models. They do the same as we did with our Ukrainian models website. Their customers love it, our customers loved it. We all take what we want, and we want white (mostly) and young (always) and slim (always). I knew that. I lived that. Me and Helmut Newton and Terry Richardson, we made our living—Terry still does—taking and selling photographs of women as objects. Cumming on their faces and laughing. Living the boy photographer’s dream. You want to tell him we’re all equal? You want to tell him there’s universal justice? Fuck that. You know the truth (Rossiter 2014, pp. 153–4).

The passage above gives the clearest statement of the theme of the creative work: that ‘pornography is in fact the embodiment of the liberal-capitalist order, not a transgression of its boundaries’ (Examiner A 2015, pp. 5–6). This notion is perhaps the most important product of this work: Lacan gives us the tools to explain the drive towards *das Ding* (the unattainable-yet-ever-alluring object of desire), to explain the profoundly shattering impact when in its proximity, and yet at the same time the value to us in recognising the function not only of pornography as an all-pervasive element, product and consumable, but of the arguably hierarchical structure of the contemporary human socio-sexual order.

Indeed, it is only now, finishing off my exegesis, sitting on the back deck, that I realise this is what I wanted to say. The Henson case was the motivation, the stimulation, the instantiation of unfairness that impelled me to begin *A Thousand Points of Light*. What I wanted to address was the inherent transgressiveness of capitalism—of a find it, use it, flog it culture—that leads, through the Lacanian desire/drive, ultimately to *das Ding* (unbearable) phenomena like the Ukrainian child model websites.⁹⁴

The point remains significant: there is a difficulty in voicing transgression. Fiction almost always demands identification with the narrator, if only because most readers won't continue with narrators they find genuinely repellent. Hence Humbert Humbert's artful rhetoric, Bateman's crazy worldview, Renault's politically incorrect humour, even Aue's lofty sophistry and his wistful nostalgia: in every case, the narrator—for the willing reader, anyway—is to some degree found sympathetic. The writer who genuinely breaks with this takes a risk. More than that, the pressure experienced by the writer himself (me) to allow Argent to be a 'decent' person and have a 'good' ending is surprisingly strong. More will be said about the ethical outcomes of the novel's investigation in Chapter Four, including the necessity for Felix to have to pay a price for his transgressions, but in the meantime he is an essential figure, setting up the blackmail operation that sees Nadya fly to interview Argent.

The transgressive voice emerges periodically throughout the narrative, reminding the reader that Argent did indeed know what he was doing, even if he chose to ignore the consequences. This is most apparent when he takes Lanyard's old job, working for Mr Raymond: 'So I worked in Soho, in Old Compton Street, in pornography (Rossiter 2014, p. 82).' Later, in Berlin watching a pornographic film with Kateryna and Dolph, Argent considers the erotics of desire manifest in pornography:

[P]ornography is the art of the (sexually) possible. If it is possible, it is featured, somewhere, somehow, in one film or another. The only question is, would it be this one. The seed of desire is sown. We wait to see it flower. Whether it flowers or not, the viewer will return (Rossiter 2014, p. 102).

⁹⁴ To clarify, I don't mean that Henson's work is a critique of capitalism per se, although it could be. Indeed, paradoxically, it too could be viewed as an inevitable artifact of capitalist drive, one which, exactly like pornography, harnesses too readily a fundamental need/desire. Yet in doing so, and by exceeding (transgressing) what is societally acceptable, it exposes truths about capitalism.

Argent's analysis of pornography is disturbing enough: being explicit about the matter is transgressive; again the voice is very useful. We see it in action when Argent finally shows us what he did with the Ukrainian girls. In Chapter 19, Argent is led by Nadya and the other two women back to the scene of his crimes. He remembers climbing the stairs because the lifts were almost always out of action. This time, he sees from the point of view of the girls, telling us what the girls themselves could not know, at least not until they'd been inside the flat. Argent reveals several tricks of the trade, the grooming necessary before victims can appear complicit in their own abuse: the bribery of the children's guardians⁹⁵; the reassurance of the girls' doubts about scanty clothing, by showing them Western fashion magazines. I had considered the forced use of either drugs or alcohol on the children⁹⁶ but from the research available it seemed that these were not necessary: Ukrainian culture in general appears more accepting of child nudity than in the West and was seemingly less aware of the potential for abuse.

Here, at last, Argent is telling us what he and Felix and Oleg were looking for:

They grew to understand what it was we wanted. They learned to use their bodies, to open their mouths and show their tongues, to widen their eyes in mock surprise, in lascivious intent. They learned what all models learn, how to cut through the surface and go under. How to mine the deepest seams. This is the gold the pornographer seeks. This is the gold the viewer wants. It must come from the models. They learn to show what the rest of us are looking for (Rossiter 2014, pp. 148–9).

That use of the first person plural, '[t]hey learn to show what the rest of *us* are looking for [my emphasis]' is an example of the 'my friends' transgressive voice, but in fact this sentence was written prior to that experiment. The 'us' was my attempt to implicate the reader—all readers—in the crime of desire, as defined in this erotics and as central to Lacanian thought.

Argent continues his exposition of his methodology: he describes to us how he photographed Nadya herself. We see his transgression.

⁹⁵ Argent describes them leaving: 'They'd go out the door, the potato-faced people, leaving their angelic progeny, poor mute fools, in our charge' (Rossiter 2014, p. 146).

⁹⁶ Often used in child exploitation in the West, e.g. in Rotherham, for example: 'Children in the town were systematically identified by gangs as vulnerable, seduced with drugs and drink, brainwashed into believing they were in a relationship with an adult and then used for sex, often raped before sometimes being trafficked to nearby cities to work as prostitutes' (Ramesh 2014).

Then there was Nadya. She'd started it all, unknowingly of course. Those photographs at the waterfall. The next trip, when her bikini bottoms had slipped off when diving and I'd carried on taking photographs anyway, as she'd stood in the knee-deep water trying to see where they'd gone. She stared at me, at what was I doing, her long limbs, her dark hair, her body glistening wet, taut, impossibly slim. I'd clicked away (Rossiter 2014, p. 149).

This is the transgressive voice. For me, this is uncomfortable material.⁹⁷

Equally uncomfortable, in my opinion, is the passage describing life in Vladivostok, where Argent has taken his family to escape the Ukrainian police and the efforts of international law enforcement to shut down his activities. Argent is writing his apologia to Nadya from the hotel room in Kiev. He ruminates on his photographic process:

Sometimes I find myself wondering, how did I do it—how did I photograph young girls in such a way, in such a sexual way? Their flat chests and their smooth hairless skin, unwrinkled, untouched, perfect (Rossiter 2014, p. 171).

He goes on to answer his own question, referencing the Vietnam war memoir of journalist Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, in which Herr recounts a helicopter gunship gunner explaining how he killed women and children. I read the book years ago and remember vividly the directness of the explanation: all you have to do is not fire as far ahead of them as they run, compared to the men.⁹⁸ I have applied the same logic to Argent's description of how he photographed children: both intentionally ignore the obvious transgression, focusing instead on the technical details, as if they were the important ones.⁹⁹ Argent's conclusion, about power imbalance, is again fictional, but it is central to the thesis of the novel.

The last remaining part of the 'my friends' experiment is the section where Argent recollects Lanyard's major retrospective show in the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

⁹⁷ It is one thing to write material like this in a novel, couched as narrative, in a fictional voice, but another to extract and discuss it in the cold light of an exegesis.

⁹⁸ 'There was a famous story, some reporters asked a door gunner, "How can you shoot women and children?" and he'd answered, "It's easy, you just don't lead 'em so much."' (Herr 1991, p. 35).

⁹⁹ Argent's technique came from my imagination rather than from practical experience, but photographing from a child's level is common advice: 'While it is a common rule to get down to the child's level in order to obtain killer images, you can also try a couple of things against common rules. Snap some pictures standing up, snap another laying down and snap some more sitting on child's level. Remember, creativity is your friend' (Elise 2010).

Argent remembers: ‘But the big show was different. Oh, it was very different’ (Rossiter 2014, p. 165). Here the voice assumes something of a rhetorical flourish, reaching beyond its function as the narrator’s testimony. The transgressive voice still wants to be heard.

The final chapters see the dissipation of the novel’s energy that has culminated with the Felix speech, subsequently affirmed by Argent. His *mea culpas* to the reader, to Lanyard and to Nadya progressively lowers the agitation. The question of ethical judgement for Argent is the subject of the next chapter. For now, we can close thinking about the transgressive voice, about how it frees character, narrative, writer and, finally, the reader to glory in the erotic drive of transgression. It is through this voice the desire of the novel is made visible and the unsayable is said, allowing the positioning of language and symbolisation beyond that constrained by the conventional author-writer relationship. The transgressive voice gives the writer—and reader—licence to enjoy the unenjoyable, whilst exercising/exorcising the drive of desire.

Chapter Four: Endings or the ethics of transgression

The previous chapter has detailed transgressions—murders, incest, sexual exploitation—and the question now is, how can such stories end? No one gets to do those things, or see those things, or write about those things, or perhaps even just read about those things, without paying a price. But what is the price? What is the consequence of transgression? A framework is again required, one which can be used to test each situation to determine a judgement. What is required now is an ethics of (literary) transgression.

Lacan gives us a succinct summation of the question of ethics:

[A]n ethics essentially consists in a judgment of our action, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgment, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgment on both sides is essential to the structure (Lacan 1992, p. 311).

Lacan is saying that an ethics is a judgement of actions only if those actions were carried out themselves through the exercise of judgement. This summary is already useful: of the four narrators examined here, only three can be considered to have acted by their own judgement; the fourth, Bateman, is, I suggest, insane¹⁰⁰. The question of judgement, for all four narrators, will be examined in more detail in this chapter with the aim of determining to what extent the narrators can be seen as monstrous in yielding to their desires, the extent of the damage they've caused, and finally the mode of ending of each of their tales—well or badly—that being the productive purpose of a literary ethics.

The question of a 'good ending' is central. Can the narrator, or perhaps the narrative itself, be judged? Can it have a 'good ending'? This is an ethical question, and Lacan's position on ethics, as given at the end of Seminar VII, can be paraphrased as follows: the Good (of conventional morality) is a function 'situated athwart the pleasure

¹⁰⁰ The possibility that Bateman's narration is unreliable, meaning that the events he describes do not actually take place and are only fantasies doesn't diminish the charge of insanity: from a psychoanalytic point of view, his story still reveals a pathological yielding to his own desires. Of course, of the four narrators, he is the one in most need of psychoanalysis.

principle and the reality principle' (Lacan 1992, p. 224) and that it 'erects a strong wall across the path of our desire' (Lacan 1992, p. 229). The Good, he says, is 'the object [...] that one pays for the satisfaction of one's desire' (Lacan 1992, p. 322). If one obeys one's desire, one will necessarily transgress the Good. Conversely, in order to remain Good, one must suppress one's desire, one must fail to obey the central driver of psychological existence. Lacan is unyielding: he says 'the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire' (Brivic 2008, p. 318), meaning that failure to follow one's desire means surrendering or 'giving ground' to it¹⁰¹. What Good, then, have the narrators sacrificed in obeying their desires? Conversely, what Good is retained if, or when, they broke the spell of desire?

The field of transgression studies proposes Good outcomes of transgression which are noteworthy: in their seminal text, Stallybrass and White (1986) cite Foucault and Kristeva positively¹⁰² but remain unconvinced, particularly by the latter. Foucault, who eschewed conventional morality and perpetually embodied a radical alterity, says of transgression:

Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future (Foucault 1977, p. 33).

Foucault is seeing transgression as a (future) key tool in logic and philosophy as much as the dialectic: this is an ambitious claim, but it supports the assertion made earlier¹⁰³, that the driver of (Lacanian) desire through the stratum of conventional morality widens the sum of human knowledge. Kristeva too is cited by Stallybrass and White in her application of the carnivalesque as a radical positive force:

Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but

¹⁰¹ The paradox Lacan outlines is that the subject should follow their desire but also escape its lure, as we shall shortly see.

¹⁰² '[W]hereby bourgeois writing smashes the rigidities of its own identity by projecting itself into the forbidden territories of precisely those excluded in its own political formulation, has come to seem a positive and desirable kind of romantic politics' (Stallybrass & White 1986, p. 200).

¹⁰³ In the introduction (p. 188) and also in Chapter One (p. 199).

rather identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law (Kristeva 1980, p. 65).

The Good outcome, says Kristeva, is in the breaking of existing linguistic codes enabling new formulations of class identity, but Stallybrass and White are less sanguine, seeing the celebration of the 'Low Other' of the carnivalesque as a sophisticated reassertion of the elitist rights of bourgeois democracy (Stallybrass & White 1986, p. 202).

Carnival is of course primarily a site of laughter, and Land is unequivocal on laughter as the key production of transgression, seeing it with nihilistic venom:

Laughter is a communion with the dead, since death is not the object of laughter: it is death itself that finds a voice when we laugh. Laughter is that which is lost to discourse, the haemorrhaging of pragmatics into excitation and filth (Land 1992, p. xvi).

Jenks too is positive about the outcomes of transgression. He also applies the Bakhtinian prism of the carnival's social inversion producing, as it does, 'carnival laughter' which is universal in scope revealing everyone anew in its riotous gaze, albeit transiently, and is also ambivalent, unconstrained, beyond channelling and therefore profoundly democratic (Jenks 2003, p. 7). He goes on: 'Transgressive behaviour therefore does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them' (Jenks 2003, p. 7). In its irrepressible force, the desire of transgression makes whole the otherwise incomplete social structure.

These outcomes are valuable because they explain the power of transgression in a sociological context. But what about the internalisation of desire and the necessary transgression it generates? The question of desire is always central here, in an ethical consideration as much as ever. The goal of psychoanalysis is to enable the subject to understand desire as a function of the Other, one powered by the Pleasure Principle attraction of *das Ding*. This attraction becomes too great as the subject approaches *das Ding*, to the extent that the subject exhibits the pathologies that lead to the requirement for analysis. The goal of analysis, as Lacan says in Seminar XI, is to 'traverse the radical phantasy' (Lacan 1978, p. 273) by breaking the subject's always-doomed identification with the Other (or how the Other 'sees' the subject) in a migration Lacan calls the 'crossing of plane of idealization' (Lacan 1978, p. 273). This is the aim of the

psychoanalytic process: the escape from the ever-circling of *das Ding* into a healthy distancing so that the analysand views him or herself as a subject distinct from that reflected in the Other. Indeed for Brooks, the psychoanalytic literary critic, the question is clear: '[if] the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*' (Brooks 1992, p. 52). The plot, he says, drives ever onwards, desiring its conclusion, its relief from agitation or, in Lacanian terms, relief from the overwhelming desire of the Other, propelling the subject into transgression.

The question for a (literary) ethics of transgression then is: in reaching the ends of their stories, have the subject-narrators been 'cured' of their compulsions? Do they cross the 'plane of idealization'? At the end of their narrations, have they found relief from the drive of Desire?

'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' shouts the last line of *American Psycho*, bookending, as it were, the opening, 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE'. But Bateman is not a man who has ever hoped; he's been damaged from the outset, even admitting to himself his deteriorating condition¹⁰⁴. Insofar as the reader believes his narration, his victims are also obviously damaged. Their Good has been sacrificed for Bateman's Desire: his dislike of the homeless and homosexuality, his sexual and other compulsions. So is there a way out for him?

When Detective Kimball is questioning him about the missing Paul Owen, Bateman believes he's close to being caught: 'I'm laughing still, but I'm also dizzy.' When the alibi comes, he recovers his composure quickly, but the tension he feels is obvious: it is as if he *wants* to be caught. Later, visiting Owen's apartment, Bateman reflects on how much time has passed since he spent time there with the escorts, and there'd been nothing in the news. He has even taken to asking colleagues, dates and business acquaintances 'if anyone has heard about two mutilated prostitutes found in Paul Owen's apartment' (Ellis 1991, p. 366). Again, he's advertising his apparent knowledge of the crimes. But, no one has any idea what he's talking about. People are, he says, more interested in the poor quality of drugs available in Manhattan. At the apartment,

¹⁰⁴ Bateman's own sense of deterioration surfaces repeatedly, e.g. 'I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy [...] my mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage' (Ellis 1991, p. 279).

he meets Mrs Wolfe, the realtor, and his behaviour is very suspicious: she tricks him, asking if he'd seen the ad in the *Times*. When he says he has, she reveals there was no ad. But instead of raising concern and informing the police, Mrs Wolfe simply asks him to leave. Bateman is in a terrible state: 'feel sick, my chest and back covered with sweat, drenched, it seems, instantaneously' (Ellis 2010, p. 369), but there is no breakthrough for him.

The tension continues to build: at lunch, Jean, his secretary, says she thinks she's in love with him. Bateman has something of an epiphany: he reflects on the prospect that there might be some good people in the world, he wonders that emotions like sympathy and guilt are not felt anymore, he concludes he is in fact 'some kind of abstraction [...] something illusory' (Ellis 1991, p. 376). In this scene, he can be seen as describing the raw anguish of the Lacanian subject, constructed by language, aware of its own central Lack and close to the point of traversal, 'My pain is constant and sharp' (Ellis 1991, p. 377), yet for all his circling towards *das Ding*, he cannot escaping the force of desire and perhaps because he lacks, at that moment, an analyst figure to oblige him to capitalise on these thoughts, he backs off, telling us there was no reason in his confession and that it 'mean nothing'. Bateman cannot find escape from *das Ding*.

American Psycho is a satire, but Bateman's path is a tragic one: while he cannot be redeemed by a love-object, he does try to escape his pain. During the cinematic 'Chase, Manhattan' chapter, he leaves a voicemail message for the lawyer Harold Carnes 'admitting everything, leaving nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders' (Ellis 1991, p. 352). But when he speaks to Carnes in the new club and repeats the confession, instead of the release he has actively sought, Carnes refuses to take him seriously, telling him he'd had dinner with Paul Owen twice in London. The tragedy is confirmed: Bateman cannot escape his pain.

In the penultimate chapter, Bateman almost faces justice when his taxi driver recognises him, apparently from a wanted poster, as 'the guy who killed Solly'. Instead of taking Bateman to the authorities, the cabdriver robs him. The novel concludes with Bateman and his gang going through the same old routines at Harry's bar. Patrick Bateman had his chance to redeem himself first through love and then through confession, but neither path works. He recognises his own emptiness—and guilt—yet cannot find help or anyone to take him seriously. He escapes retribution, but is also prevented from attaining the Lacanian cure, the traversal of the phantasy. For him, there truly is no exit.

*

Michel Renault is a man whose desires have enabled him to see created the world of his fantasies: one where sex is included as part of a package holiday. Renault's enthrallment to desire, he says, is 'a technical matter' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 92), one without meaning and just 'a question of hormone levels'. He goes on:

[...] other human beings apparently similar to me, seem to feel nothing in the presence of a woman's body, something which plunged me at the time, and still plunges me, into a state of agitation I can't control. In most circumstances in my life, I have had about as much freedom as a vacuum cleaner (Houellebecq 2002, p. 92).

He is clear that he doesn't believe humans can be happy but sees himself moving 'through a universe of gentle desires and limitless moments of pleasure' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 208). Renault's transgressive thesis is both gender and racially determinist: women should serve his needs (over which he has no control). This is illustrated perfectly when Renault says to Valerie: 'suck me' and she does so without hesitation (Houellebecq 2002, p. 244). But some characters do pass judgement on Renault's gender determinism: on the first holiday in Thailand, when Renault meets Valerie, there is discussion of sex tourism. Unsurprisingly, the women are critical.

Josiane's whole body was trembling, she was starting to unsettle me a little. 'Well!' she shrieked in a very shrill voice, 'It makes me sick, that any fat pig can pay to shove his cock into a kid!' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 71).

The morning after the meal, Sylvie questions Renault: "'Surely you don't approve of the sexual exploitation of children! ...'" she exclaimed anguishedly' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 79). But Renault and the other men laugh at this. Yet Renault is aware of the limitations of his position, later seeing Robert as 'finished, a broken man' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 117). He knows his own fate is the same: declining libido, a transition to death. Nevertheless, Renault pays the waiter the charge, and takes a Thai bargirl upstairs. Renault never sacrifices his desire for the Good.

And he recognises his vulnerability: as a European travelling overseas, he 'could obtain food and the services of women more cheaply' and 'as a decadent European, conscious of my approaching death, and given over entirely to selfishness, I could see

no reason to deprive myself of such things' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 300). Yet he is able to state 'that people like me were incapable of ensuring the survival of a society, perhaps more simply we were unworthy of life' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 297). In short, he knows his position is untenable, yet he simply doesn't care. In a long passage on p.146, he explains that while men and women are different (the former 'men don't give a shit about romance, they just want to fuck' and the latter are 'still very hung up on romance') they are changing. Women are becoming more like men; they too will turn to sex tourism. Valerie accepts this saying that 'things are in a bad way'. She concludes, and Renault agrees, they were lucky to meet. This passage sets up a sense of doom and end times: the pair have found each other. Happiness is possible, but is it attained?¹⁰⁵

Renault tells us he has found love: 'It is very rare, in life, to have a second chance; it goes against all the rules' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 318), but this epiphany occurs exactly at the moment he pays the price for his impossible transgressions: the judgement comes in the form of rockets launched by Islamic terrorists whose boats land on the tourist island.¹⁰⁶

The erotic drive of the novel is over—Valerie is dead, as is the sex tourism dream—and Renault has no further purpose. For the judgement to be complete, he must die, just as Meursault has to die in *The Outsider*. Renault tells us:

I no longer really had a life; I had had a life, for a few months — that in itself was something, not everyone could say as much. The absence of the will to live is, alas, not sufficient to make one want to die (Houellebecq 2002, p. 272).

Later on, Renault states:

There was nothing much left for me to do in this life. I bought a number of reams of A4 paper with the intention of putting the elements of my life in order. It's something people should do more often before they die (Houellebecq 2002, p. 353).

¹⁰⁵ None of Houellebecq's novels can be described as 'happy'. In *Atomised* (2000), the two brothers struggle with the legacy of their hippie parents. The narrator in *Whatever* (1998) suffers mental illness and, once recovered, embarks on an apparently metaphorically terminal trip to the country. The protagonist in *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) seeks only to end the reincarnation loop he's trapped in. In *The Map and the Territory* (2012), Jed Martin fails to maintain a successful romantic relationship.

¹⁰⁶ This event is not without precedent. Earlier a German tourist had been killed and sexually mutilated, along with the young Thai girl he was with. The judgement of Renault is predictable and severe.

At this point, the self-generating logic of the text-as-document reveals itself: Renault is not a simple first-person narrator, but has been composing his memoir/suicide letter which, in its final utterances and true to the genre, is mawkish and sentimental:

To the end, I will remain a child of Europe, of worry and of shame; I have no message of hope to deliver. For the West, I do not feel hatred; at most I feel a great contempt. I know only that every single one of us reeks of selfishness, masochism and death. We have created a system in which it has simply become impossible to live; and what's more, we continue to export it (Houellebecq 2002, p. 361).

In these grandiose words, Renault certainly enacts Brooks' 'desire *for* the end' (Brooks 1992, p. 52). But he also appears to accept responsibility. He had exported the European disease, and as a consequence Valerie was dead and his dreams in tatters. This is judgement. The cynical misanthrope has paid his price.

The text switches from the retrospective simple past to the present and then to the future tense at the end: 'I will have been a mediocre individual in every possible sense', he says. 'I'll be forgotten. I'll quickly be forgotten' (Houellebecq 2002, p. 362). Houellebecq's novel is curiously moralistic and in Lacanian terms Renault does not escape the lure of *das Ding*: although he comes to self-awareness, the damage has been too great, and his own life-drive is extinguished.

The same cannot be said for Max Aue. His need to tell his story is evident from the outset, as is the dis-ease with which he remembers it¹⁰⁷, the same ailment he suffered during the ethnic killings he participated in¹⁰⁸. The driver of the narrative act is Aue's need to expose his past and to persuade us (although he affects not to care whether we agree or not) that, while he is a monster, any one of us would have done the same as him.¹⁰⁹ The erotic drive of the narrative content is, as has been shown, the desire to view killings and the narrator's unresolved erotic desire for his sister.

¹⁰⁷ 'A brief interruption while I go and vomit, then I'll continue. That's another one of my numerous little afflictions: from time to time my meals come back up, sometimes right away, sometimes later on, for no reason, just like that. It's an old problem, I've had it since the war' (Littell 2009, p. 9).

¹⁰⁸ Aue tells us this in Kiev: 'I was seized with a terrible retching: finally I vomited a little' (Littell 2009, p. 242).

¹⁰⁹ This is a perhaps the key point of the novel and it situates the work in the genre of holocaust literature.

The question then is: what damage has been done by Aue in the memoir he relates? What Good has been sacrificed in the pursuit of his drive? In *The Kindly Ones* the answer is arguably more uncompromising than the earlier texts: lacking Bateman's likely defence of legal non-competence to be held responsible (due to the apparent insanity) and also lacking Renault's passive-aggressive acknowledgement of guilt, Aue relates his crimes willingly enough, refusing to accept ethical judgement. At the end of the first section, which is to say the last we hear from the present-day narrator, he says: 'I am a man like other men, I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you!' (Littell 2009, p. 24). He is telling us he feels no guilt, insofar as what happened to him could have happened to anyone, and anyone would have responded the same way. He claims he is, in a specific sense, innocent.

This is not a sustainable proposition: Aue participated in the murder of many Nazi victims in the course of his job. Additionally, he murdered his own mother and stepfather because they had deprived him of his only love, his sister, Una. In doing so, he deprived his own (albeit unacknowledged) children (the twins) of their carers. Aue also murdered the Romanian Mihaï with whom he'd had a homosexual affair, at the same time as he was seeing Helene¹¹⁰, purely because Mihaï flirted with him in public (Littell 2009, p. 946). Finally, and most significantly, he murdered Thomas, his best friend (Littell 2009, p. 947). This is a significant act: Thomas helped Aue throughout his adult life, releasing him when he was caught in the Tiergarten gay cruising area (Littell 2009, p. 70), rescuing him from Stalingrad (Littell 2009, p. 439), finding him holed-up in his stepfather's empty house and taking him back to Berlin (during which Aue kills an elderly man playing Bach in an abandoned church) (Littell 2009, pp. 917–9). At the very end, Thomas saves Aue from arrest by shooting the surviving policeman, Clemens (Littell 2009, p. 972). Yet Aue kills Thomas because the latter had equipped himself with French clothes and papers which Aue knew he could use to escape the imminent Russian capture of Berlin. This murder is arguably the central transgression committed by Aue.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Helene is a woman recently widowed by the war whom Aue meets in Berlin towards the end of the novel. They go swimming together and have a physical relationship. She represents, like Valerie for Renault, and like Jean, Bateman's secretary, a opportunity for normality.

¹¹¹ Indeed, the murder could be seen to represent the destruction of Germany's ambitions and its 'good' Wehrmacht (Thomas) through the madness of the Nazis (Aue).

To evaluate ethically the transgressions in *The Kindly Ones* we must consider first the incestuous relationship between Aue and his sister. This is the causal damage borne by Aue, but its allegorical purpose in the story is to illustrate the fundamental transgression of Nazism, the allegedly necessary and murderous focus on the Jews and all other ‘undesirables’. As Germany is afflicted by Nazism, with its murderous core, so Aue is afflicted with his impossible desires. As Aue, the Nazi officer, participates in the mass killings, Aue, the son, must seek to eliminate the name-of-the-father, embodied by his own mother and stepfather, who had forced him to live apart from his sister. The crime is committed and the parents are dead, but Aue is not free: he can never be free. The extent to which Aue cannot be absolved of his crimes (the accident of his incest-lust, the accident of Nazi-history) is ultimately brought home by his murder of Thomas. In this character arc, Aue shows his failings as a human being: his need to survive trumps all other needs. Without a moment’s hesitation he kills Thomas when he realises that, by doing so, he will have his best chance of survival.

Aue is the truest monster in the novels under scrutiny here. Throughout, he has choices and constantly chooses only to benefit himself. That this might be Littell’s intention does not absolve the character. Aue is profoundly ethically culpable for the damage he has done. He sacrifices Good unthinkingly in the pursuit of his own desire, specifically when that desire is his own desire for life. He has not been ‘cured’ of his compulsions: post-war, all he has to do is survive. Una is beyond him. There’s no need for murder. Even his homosexuality is compartmentalised into ‘a matter of hygiene’. In Lacanian terms, Aue has failed to ‘traverse the radical phantasy’ (Lacan 1978, p. 273), remaining trapped within it. The only redemption Aue seeks is our understanding of his story, our willingness to believe him when he says: ‘I tell you I am just like you!’ (Littell 2009, p. 24). The novel’s ethical judgement of Aue is harsh, but he himself escapes censure.

There is one aspect of *A Thousand Points of Light* that distinguishes it from the other novels and that is the presence throughout the story of other characters with significant narrative agency. Whilst *American Psycho* features a large cast, and they all have agency inasmuch as they are in control of their own destinies, none exercises agency on the narrative itself, by which I mean impacts on Bateman’s own story and his sense of himself. Even, or perhaps especially, his secretary, Jean, who provides him with a chance of love and a normal life, is not able to deflect Bateman in his path towards *das*

Ding and help him traverse Lacan's 'radical phantasy'. It is true that his few moments of self-realisation occur in her presence, but there's no sense that she could judge him or trigger his self-assessment. He is oblivious to everyone around him. In *Platform*, Valerie also has agency, but at no point does she oblige Renault to face up to his obsessions and transgressions. Instead, she accedes to his pornographic requests. It is only after her death that Renault begins to change, and then it is too late. Finally, Aue is also never brought to realisation by any character, not even Helene, with whom he had the best chance of self-awareness, nor with Thomas who has been his protector all along. Instead, as discussed, he remains defiant to the end, refusing to even acknowledge the possibility of the psychoanalytic cure available to him, if he were willing: he tells us everything but only on his own terms. Like Renault—and unlike Bateman—he could traverse the phantasy. Unlike Renault, he survives.

A Thousand Points of Light is different to the above in terms of ethical judgements because at least four characters have agency on the narrative itself. The first two are the Lanyards, Sally and Simon. Both are what E. M. Forster describes as flat characters¹¹², serving as a narrative device facilitating Argent's confessions¹¹³. Although Sally's primary interest is in supporting her husband, her interaction with Argent reveals much about him, and therefore she is positioned to question him. Early on, she asks what happened to Caroline, Argent's partner who'd left him several months prior to the start of the story. Sally is also present right at the end of the novel, being the last person to speak to Argent. She almost finds out his secrets, but he avoids telling her. Nevertheless, her part in his story as an inquisitor is significant. Simon Lanyard's role is also significant. Besides representing what could be called the 'legitimately transgressive' artist, he provides a counter-argument to Argent when the latter attempts to excuse himself. Despite their cipher-like roles, both the Lanyards have the capacity to

¹¹² Forster defines what he calls flat characters as those 'constructed round a single idea or quality' (Forster 1956, p. 67) and arguably both Lanyard and Sally are not flat, because they have agency over Argent inasmuch as he accepts them both as interlocutors who can make demands on him to varying degrees. Nevertheless, neither character changes over the course of the novel, as both their main concerns remain the same: Sally wants Lanyard to be happy; he wants to show his work. They are each constant in this sense. Hence, they can be described as 'flat'. In contrast, although Nadya's concern also does not change over the story, the reader's perception of her changes considerably: she reveals depth, if only due to the fact that she conceals information from the narrator. In this sense, she is a 'round' character.

¹¹³ Although the key confession Argent makes within the text is to Lanyard on p. 162 when he breaks the 'cardinal rule' and tells Lanyard the full story.

influence Argent. Both have narrative agency and therefore the potential to be ethical actors.

Caroline is significant as well, despite only appearing early on in retrospect (since she has already left Argent). It is her absence that in part fuels the questioning tone of the narrative: why did she go? Her surprise appearance in the final scene allows her story arc to be completed and it transpires that she does not play an ethical role because she didn't know the full truth about Argent. She knew enough to know she wanted to get away from him, though, and she refused to play the part of the analyst, which would entail questioning, listening to and facilitating Argent's therapy. Whether the potential for her to exercise her narrative agency assists in the drama of the novel is a moot point: she didn't know and she didn't want to interact with Argent.

It is Nadya who is the Fosterian fully rounded character and whose protracted interlocation with Argent triggers his own realisation of the damage he has caused, triggering his attempt at redemption. From her covert appearance at the very beginning and the questions she raises, to the plot turn when she elects not to leave Sydney but remain to persuade Argent to come back with her, through to her leading him around Kiev, Nadya is firmly in control of her narrative, and, in turn, of Argent's as well. In fact, his role is unusually passive in the present-day parts of the novel. Even in the retrospective areas, Argent is directed by other forces.¹¹⁴

In this sense, it is harder to assert that Argent could be subjected to Lacan's definition of judgement, being that of someone who themselves exercised judgement in any particular action. Nevertheless when Lanyard says to Argent, 'You know why you took the photographs, and it wasn't for art. It wasn't innocent. You found the girls and lied to them and their parents that they could be modelling stars. Everything was commercial, exploitative' (Rossiter 2014, p. 163), Argent's response is to say nothing, then muster the aesthetic defence: 'It was about beauty [...] That was all'.

The fact that Nadya is the key antagonist in *A Thousand Points of Light* is of interest from the psychoanalytic perspective. Lacan says of the male-female binary:

Freud placed in the forefront of ethical inquiry the simple relationship between man and woman. Strangely enough, things haven't been able to move beyond that point. The question of *das Ding* is still attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our

¹¹⁴ At school, Lanyard and Felix. At work in London, Mr Raymond. In Kiev, Felix.

desire. I would say – you will forgive the play on words – that we need to know what we can do to transform this dam-age into our ‘dame’ in the archaic French sense, our lady (Lacan 1992, p. 84).

Porter’s translation reproduces Lacan’s typical playfulness in the punning of the French word for woman, ‘dame’, with the word ‘damage’ (‘dommage’ in French). The point is that the male-female (or the ‘sexual opposites’) binary is core to the psychoanalytic worldview.¹¹⁵

So where does this distinction between *A Thousand Points of Light* and the other novels leave Max Argent? In his interaction with Nadya, representing the desire that Argent’s story has embodied, we can see the pornographic impulse, the need to see everything, and the binary struggle between desire and the Law, per Lacan:

The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes our desire to flare up only in relation to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death (Lacan 1992, p. 83).

Argent begins his story giving away nothing. He claims not to know why Caroline left, or what it is Nadya wants, or the import of his actions throughout his career as a pornographer (Mr Raymond’s studio and the endless stream of nervous women) and the special assignments he was given. He claims not to see the significance of the initially innocent photographs of his own daughter that led to an entire industry sub-genre, or even his complicity in the abuse of Alison and Bronwyn, the schoolchildren who were photographed naked, albeit consensually. It is only through the purposefulness of Nadya that he travels through his own history, seeing again (or perhaps, being generous, for the first time) what he has really done.

It is when Argent is taken through Kiev by Oksana, Alina and Nadya, and subsequently in the flat still occupied by *Babusya*, Grandmother, that he faces his first trial. He narrates to us not only the events of that moment, but also those he remembers from the days of the website. He is able to imagine what it must have been like for the

¹¹⁵ Again, recognising that such a binary need not be biologically male and female, but rather that profoundly distinct opposites be harnessed. Freud was criticised for reinforcing patriarchy: a valid criticism, but unfair given the times in which he wrote. Lacan updates Freud, but still fails to understand that in the central Oedipal drama, the role of ‘mother’ can be replaced with a gender-neutral ‘primary caregiver’ without losing meaning. In short, and this is a failing of both Freud and Lacan, the biological sex distinction is unimportant. What matters is heterogeneity not a perception of homogeneity in the consideration of (for example) two persons of the same sex.

girls as they made their way to the front door. Argent is here replaying history, reliving it, but from another perspective. He is reliving too the transgression, but this time as in a psychoanalysis session, seeing it from the outside, talking through the lure of desire and the rupture of *das Ding*. Like Jesus in the wilderness, Argent is tested, but unlike Jesus he fails: he relents and asks the women what they want from him. He apologises, but still claims: ‘I was simply playing my part in the whole thing. They must know it was Felix who was behind it all’ (Rossiter 2014, p. 148). Nevertheless he knows it was his moral failing.

Argent suffers a second time, when he writes his apologia to Nadya, in the hotel room in Kiev. He believes all he has to do is explain to Nadya what happened, from his point of view, and she will forgive him. In fact, he is subjecting himself to a trial. He mounts a novel defence, claiming artistic licence:

Did I take photographs of you? Oh Nadya. Do you remember? Here I have to be what I am not—I have to be brave. Of course I took photographs of you. The artist must find and use his material. He must make the most of what he sees. I saw. I knew it was material. I made use of it. Yes, I realise what I am saying. I reduced you to the status of material. But, and this is important, for something to be created, material is always required. No one creates out of a vacuum, no one at all, except God, and God does not exist. We all need material and we all are slaves to it, whenever we are lucky enough to find it. Of course I photographed you (Rossiter 2014, p. 171).

In this passage, in claiming artists are slaves to the material presented to them, Argent utilises what might be called the Nazi defence, namely *I had no choice*. And there is much Sadean defensiveness: the denial of moral responsibility, the tendency to hurl insults at God, the slipperiness of self-justification. In fact, the other three narrators have their weak moments too, as they face the enormity of their actions, now exposed in the Lacanian light. They have followed desire and brushed the surface of *das Ding*: Bateman, in the chapter ‘Tries to Cook and Eat Girl’, towards the end of the book sees his life unravelling: ‘I’m weeping for myself [...] I just want to be loved’ (Ellis 1991, p. 345); Renault when his condition descends into platitudes at the end; and, despite his confidence, Aue as he appeals to us to understand him, claiming human commonality with us. That said, Argent most resembles Renault: they both lack the rigour and confidence of Aue and the bravado of Bateman.

As a writer, I couldn't find Argent guilty, a bad person. Fiction, by which I simply mean the overall genre, wouldn't let me do that. Fiction asks us to love our characters and to forgive them; to write forgiveness for them. Readers, too, don't actually want protagonists to be judged evil, not ones they are truly sympathetic to. At the end of *American Psycho*, I hoped Bateman would be relieved of his anguish. I wanted Renault to live happily with Valerie. And despite the fact of knowing that Aue survives the war, at the end of *The Kindly Ones* I still had the strong desire that he not be caught by the police or the Russians. I wanted him to survive.

Of the perpetrator characters in *A Thousand Points of Light*, it is Felix who suffers the most. He begins with the most promise, and he seems to succeed at whatever he does. Throughout he drives economic exploitation of whatever comes to hand: a true capitalist. Soon enough, it is the Ukrainian girls. Yet, he loses control, fails in business, stages two abortive blackmail attempts¹¹⁶ and generally deteriorates significantly. Whether this is sufficient suffering for his, and Argent's crimes, I don't know. But, like the guilty Quilty in *Lolita*, who is shot by Humbert Humbert in revenge for having 'stolen' Lolita, someone has to suffer: the moral code of fiction demands payment for transgressions committed.

Perhaps Argent's suffering is not so different to Renault's. It is telling that Nadya is not present at the end of the story, and her absence is evidence not of her weakness, but of her strength. She has already superseded the story. Argent is left with his memories and his regrets, shown most clearly in Chapter 20:

Through Felix, I had gained a daughter when I first came to Kiev. Through him, I had lost her when she was only eight, when it all went wrong. Then, a week ago, I'd found her again, only to lose her one more time. Now I had to explain to her (Rossiter 2014, p. 160).

This tone of regret at the damage Argent has caused and the realisation of all he has lost is important. It shares a good deal with *Platform* in the sense that Renault too is regretful at the end of his story. Its outcome embodies Lacan's dictum quoted above about desire and the Law: for Renault, when the Law in the form of the Muslim attackers exacts judgement on him, he can only desire death. He wills himself to die.

¹¹⁶ Both against Argent, one via Nadya and the other directly in the restaurant.

Arguably Bateman wants to die too, at least to end his pain. His very real hell (the *Inferno*, referenced in the opening lines) is that he cannot escape. Aue is perhaps the only truly transgressive narrator of the four examples here: he is defiant to the end, proclaiming, if not his innocence, then mitigating circumstances which would apply equally, he argues, to any of us. Importantly, he has been able to discharge his story, just as Argent and Renault do, albeit without their regret. And Aue asks not for forgiveness, only for understanding. Argent is a different again: his tale exposes dark truths in the transgressive mode, but he does ask for forgiveness from his victims, despite knowing the impossibility of that outcome.

This conclusion was not what I originally intended. Initially I wanted a narrator like Aue: one who would remain unmoved by the outcome, one who knew the consequences of his actions and revelled in amorality: a Sadean hero. But, as the writing progressed, something strange happened. The temptation to have a ‘happy’ ending was overwhelming. Nadya would, I felt, she really could—and even that she had to—make her appearance in the final scene. In the end, I resisted.¹¹⁷ In theory, Nadya could still, if not forgive Argent, then at least re-establish some kind of relationship with him. Knowing her though, I doubt it. Argent committed crimes. He was complicit in generating trauma. Consequently the ethical judgement must, and does, reflect this. Argent is condemned, and he knows it.

¹¹⁷ My decision was bolstered when I read a victim impact statement written by ‘Amy’, republished on a Fairfax website. Amy had been abused as a child by her uncle. She says: ‘Every day of my life I live in constant fear that someone will see my pictures and recognise me and that I will be humiliated all over again. It hurts me to know someone is looking at them – at me – when I was just a little girl being abused for the camera. I did not choose to be there, but now I am there forever in pictures that people are using to do sick things. I want it all erased. I want it all stopped. But I am powerless to stop it just like I was powerless to stop my uncle.’ (‘Amy’ 2013)

References

- 'Amy' 2013, *I am a real victim of child pornography and it affects me every day and everywhere I go*, Daily Life, viewed 2 Apr 2014, <<http://www.dailylife.com.au/life-and-love/real-life/i-am-a-real-victim-of-child-pornography-and-it-affects-me-every-day-and-everywhere-i-go-20131216-2zgn4.html>>.
- AAP 2008, 'Rudd revolted', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May 2008.
- Althusser, L. 1971, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, New Left Books, London.
- Aristotle 350 BCD, *Poetics*, trans. S. Butcher, MIT, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>>.
- Australian Law Reform Commission 2012, 'Classification—Content Regulation and Convergent Media (ALRC Report 118)', 1 March 2012 edn, Australian Government, <<http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/classification-content-regulation-and-convergent-media-alrc-report-118>>.
- Baelo Allué, S. 2002, 'The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working Against Ethics in The Silence of the Lambs (1988) and American Psycho (1991)', *Atlantis*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 7–24.
- Barthes, R. 1977, *Image Music Text*, trans. S. Heath, Fontana Press, London.
- Barthes, R. 1990, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Basil Blackwell; Hill and Wang, Oxford, New York.
- Bataille, G. 1982, *Story of the Eye*, trans. J. Neugroschal, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Bataille, G. & Self, W. 2001, *Blue of Noon*, Penguin, London.
- Baxter, T. & Craft, N. 1993, 'There are Better Ways of Taking Care of Bret Easton Ellis Than Just Censoring Him ...', in D.E.H. Russell (ed.), *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, Teachers College Press, New York, pp. 245–53.
- Bibby, P. 2008, 'Henson exhibition shut down', *The Age*, 23 May 2008.
- Brannon, R. 1993, 'Torturing Women as Fine Art: Why Some Women and Men are Boycotting Knopf', in D.E.H. Russell (ed.), *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, Teachers College Press, New York, pp. 239–44.
- Brien, D.L. 2006, 'The Real Filth in American Psycho', *M/C Journal*, vol. 9, no. 5.
- Brivic, S. 2008, *Joyce Through Lacan and Žižek: Explorations*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York; Basingstoke.
- Brooks, P. 1992, *Reading For the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Buchan, J. 2002, *The Sum of Private Parts*, Guardian Newspapers, viewed 3 April 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/07/fiction.michelhouellebecq>>.
- Burke, M. 2004, 'Review of Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory, by Nicholas Andrew Miller', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 96–9.
- Campbell, M. 2010, 'Has mad, bad Michel Houellebecq come in from the cold?', *The Australian*, 30 August 2010.
- Camus, A. 1946, *The Outsider*, Hamilton, London.
- Clover, J. 2003, 'Uncertain Regard', *Village Voice*, July 15, 2003.

- Copyright Collection (Library of Congress) 1929, *Un Chien Andalou*, s.n., United States.
- Crimes Act 1900* (NSW).
- De Beauvoir, S. 1989, *The Second Sex*, Vintage edn, Vintage Books, New York.
- De Saussure, F. 1966, *Course in General Linguistics*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Douglas, M. 2002, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, New York.
- Durkheim, E. 1971, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, George Allen and Unwin, London.
- Durkheim, E. 2004, *Readings from Emile Durkheim*, Rev. edn, Routledge, London; New York.
- Dworkin, A. 1981, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Perigee Books, New York.
- Elise, L. 2010, *How to Photograph Children*, viewed 9 Sept 2014, <<https://photographylife.com/how-to-photograph-children#step5>>.
- Ellis, B.E. 1991, *American Psycho*, Picador, London.
- Ellis, B.E. 2010, *American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis (Week three: Bret Easton Ellis on the misreading of American Psycho)*, Guardian Newspapers, London, viewed 1 Dec 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jul/10/book-club-american-psycho-ellis?intcmp=239>>.
- Ettler, J. 2013, 'The Best Ellis for Business: a Re-examination of the Mass Media Feminist Critique of American Psycho', PhD thesis, University of Sydney.
- Evans, D. 2006, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London.
- Examiner A 2015, 'Rossiter Examiner Response', UTS.
- Felman, S. 1982, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: the Question of Reading, Otherwise*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Forster, E.M. 1956, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harcourt, New York.
- Foucault, M. 1977, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.
- Freud, S. 1914, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, T. Fisher Unwin, London.
- Freud, S. 1920, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Boni and Liveright, New York.
- Freud, S. & Reddick, J. 2003, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, Penguin, London.
- Giroux, J. 2013, *Bret Easton Ellis: 'American Psycho' Doesn't Work as a Movie*, Film School Rejects, viewed 3 Nov 2014, <<http://filmschoolrejects.com/features/bret-easton-ellis-american-psycho-doesnt-work-as-a-movie.php>>.
- Herr, M. 1991, *Dispatches*, 1st Vintage International edn, Vintage Books, New York.
- Homer, S. 2005, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge, London; New York.
- Houellebecq, M. 1998, *Whatever*, Serpent's Tail, London.
- Houellebecq, M. 2002, *Platform*, trans. F. Wynne, Heinemann, London.
- Houellebecq, M. & Bowd, G. 2005, *The Possibility of an Island*, Knopf, New York.
- Houellebecq, M. & Bowd, G. 2012, *The Map and the Territory*, Knopf, New York.
- Houellebecq, M. & Wynne, F. 2000, *Atomised*, Heinemann, London.
- Isherwood, C. 2008, *The Berlin Stories*, New Directions, New York.
- Jenks, C. 2003, *Transgression*, Routledge, London.

- Johnston, H. 2008, *Hetty Johnston: Henson debate a healthy sign*, Crikey, viewed 6 Nov 2014, <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2008/06/02/hetty-johnston-henson-debate-a-healthy-sign/>>.
- Kipnis, L. 2006, 'How to Look at Pornography', in P. Lehman (ed.), *Pornography: Film and Culture*, Rutgers, New Brunswick, N.J.
- Kristeva, J. 1980, *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Kurnick, D. 2007, 'An Erotics of Detachment: Middlemarch and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice', *Elh*, vol. 74, no. 3, pp. 583-608.
- Lacan, J. 1978, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, Norton, New York.
- Lacan, J. 1988, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. S. Tomaselli, Norton, New York.
- Lacan, J. 1992, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter, Routledge, London.
- Lacan, J. 2006, *Ecrits*, trans. B. Fink, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Lacan, J., Mitchell, J. & Rose, J. 1982, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, W.W. Norton: Pantheon Books, New York.
- Land, N. 1992, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism: an Essay in Atheistic Religion*, Routledge, London; New York.
- Levine, S.L. 2014, *Feminist Debates: Pornography*, Ms Magazine, viewed 7 Nov 2014, <<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2014/06/10/feminist-debates-1-pornography/>>.
- Littell, J. 2009, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. C. Mandell, HarperCollins e-books.
- Lord Jauncey of Tullichettle, Lord Lowry, Lord Mustill & Hadley, L.S.o. 1993, 'Regina v Brown [1993] 2 All ER 75', House of Lords.
- MacCannell, J.F. 1983, 'Lacan, Stendhal and the Narrative Form of the Real', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 98, no. 5, pp. 910-40.
- Marr, D. 2008, *The Henson Case*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Michelson, P. 1993, *Speaking the Unspeakable: a Poetics of Obscenity*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Morel, G. 2003, 'Transgression and Identification in the Passage to the Act', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 24, no. August, pp. 2441-9.
- Mr X 2009, *An Insight into Child Porn*, viewed 2 Apr 2014, <http://www.wikileaks.org/wiki/An_insight_into_child_porn>.
- Mulvey, L. 1975, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 6–18.
- Mulvey, L. 1996, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Indiana University Press; British Film Institute, Bloomington; London.
- Nabokov, V.V. 2006, *Lolita*, Penguin, London.
- Nutting, A. 2013, *Tampa*, Faber and Faber, London.
- Oxley9 2014, *Artists: Bill Henson*, viewed 6 Nov 2014, <http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/446/>.
- Perl, J. 2014, 'Don't Bowdlerize Balthus's Paintings—Or His Mystical Ideas', *New Republic*, November 29, 2013.
- Plato 1998, *The Republic*, Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/>>.
- Poulet, G. 1969, 'Phenomenology of Reading', *New Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 53-68.
- Ramesh, R. 2014, 'Rotherham: a putrid scandal perpetuated by a broken system', *The Guardian*, 26 Aug 2014.
- Rosenblatt, R. 1990, *Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?*, NY Times, NY, viewed 6 Dec 2010,

- <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1DB1738F935A25751C1A966958260&scp=6&sq=bret+easton+ellis+american+psycho&st=nyt>>.
- Rossiter, M. 2014, '*A Thousand Points of Light*, a novel, with accompanying exegesis: 'Lacanian Psycho: Analysing Transgressive Fiction'', UTS.
- Russell, M. & Cooper, A. 2014, 'Child pornography charges against artist Paul Yore dismissed', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Oct 2014.
- Silverleib, A. & Zamost, S. 2011, 'Photos published of alleged U.S. atrocities in Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Crossroads*, weblog, viewed 25 May 2014, <<http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/21/photos-published-of-alleged-u-s-atrocities-in-afghanistan/>>.
- Smith, B. 2006, 'Ads using 'sexy' children condemned', *The Age*, 10 October 2006.
- Stallybrass, P. & White, A. 1986, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London.
- Wikipedia 2014, *LS Studio*, (Wikipedia entry), viewed 3 Apr 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LS_Studio>.
- Williams, L. 1999, *Hard core : power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"*, Expanded pbk. edn, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Wolfe, T. 1987, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Farrar, Straus Giroux, New York.
- Wolfreys, J. 2008, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York.
- Young, N. 2014, *Season to Taste*, Tinder Press, London.
- Žižek, S. 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London; New York.
- Žižek, S. 1995, 'Superego by Default', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 3-4.