

Soothing Music for Stray Cats

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For Mum

'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.'

Henry David Thoreau as quoted in Kurt Vonnegut - *Timequake*

'Human life lasts but an instant. One should spend it doing what one pleases. In this world fleeting as a dream, to lie in misery doing only what one dislikes is foolishness.'

Samurai, Tsunetomo Yamamoto - *Hagakure*

CHAPTER ONE

february 2005

KEEP PASSING THE OPEN WINDOW

My name's Mark Kerr, I'm 35, and one of what my dad calls '*Thatcher's youth*, and the generation who thought they could have it all'. I don't even know what that means anymore, I'm not sure I ever did. And now that my friend, Jim Jakes, has jumped from a window on the twentieth floor, all I do know is, I've been living the wrong life. I guess Jim was too.

When we were kids, me and Jim, we dreamt of writing songs together. We should have tried, should have given it a go, and written the songs, and lived the lives we wanted to.

The thing is, you're supposed to keep *passing* the open window. But once you need to keep passing it, in some ways it's already too late – because you start to notice it in that particular way, and then you notice it more, and the pull gets greater, and then you're stuck with finding *ways* of passing it, dodging it, putting it off, until finally it pretty much *sucks* you out. That's what happened, I guess, what must have happened, to my mate Jim. 'My mate Jim'. That statement feels so awkward, because it isn't entirely true. We *were* mates, when we were kids, teenagers. I'd never really given it much thought, but we must have been friends for quite some time, in fact right from being little kids until we were about eighteen. That's why his sister, Julie – *Jules*, had tracked me down. In the end she got hold of me through my dad. He was the only one who'd never moved.

Jim's family had moved to the other side of town when his dad

got a promotion, it had meant they could afford a semi, and later they planned to go detached. I guess me and Jim would have been about seventeen then, so it must have been just before I moved away to university. I think Jim stayed more local for that, truth was, neither of us ever dreamt of going to university, it was just that time when suddenly every Tom, Mark and Jim got the chance. Anyway, like I said, Dad was the only one who'd stayed in our old terraced street. I think he'd got stuck, specially after Mum left, and more so once she'd passed away. The big 'C' as people call it. And it hit Dad hardest because it meant finally facing the fact that she really would never come back. While she was alive he'd managed to fool himself that she *just might* come back, one day. She would never have come back, but people have to tell themselves lies, stories, that make life easier to deal with. And the possibility of *Mum's return* was his. In the end the house was all he had to hang on to. That and his mates. — He'd been there so long he'd taken root, and the only memories he thought to be of any value at all, belonged to that house. He couldn't ever contemplate the idea of new dreams, stuff that might make more good memories, he was too loyal to the past. Sad in some ways, but that's how it was, that was Dad. And that house contained the only sense of life he'd known or ever wanted to know. He loved it. I think 'I'd' loved it, well, sort of, but it was always too quiet after Mum had upped and left. Quiet, that uneasy, queasy sort of quiet that gnaws away and messes with your nerves — Dad said he liked it like that. But I think he just didn't have any way of filling in that empty sound without her around. It was as though it would have been an act of adultery, a betrayal somehow, to tune the friggin' radio in, or get a sodding disc player.

That was another thing, he lived in a different time. He even called the radio a sodding 'wireless'; it felt like he did it to annoy me, even me granddad never called it that, that word was well gone even before me dad's time, in fact that word's so well gone it's looped right round and come back in again — anyways, me dad, he was stuck, and not even in a time warp that was his, more a sort of *pre-warp*. And he lived it for real too, no 'half measures' with Dad (those old phrases crack me up, they sound totally lame now). But me dad, he did genuinely, and I suppose, legitimately, still inhabit a time when you bought stuff and

kept it forever and fixed it when it got broke. I kept telling him, no one, Dad, no one lives like that anymore. He never listened. And in some ways he was right, I could see that, and really, what was the point in finding more ways to *make a bleedin' racket*, when you didn't make use of what you'd already got? And he always added 'son' in that tone of his. I didn't mind. He was stuck, that was all. And what's so wrong with that? Thick with dust, his radio was. — Anyway, the reason I'd gone back up there, was 'cos Jules wanted me at her brother's funeral, 'Best mate he ever had,' she said. I must have looked as uncomfortable as I felt because she said it again, I suppose to reassure, '*His best mate, you really were, Mark.*' Yeah, right. Like I said, she meant it nice, but I'm telling you, when the guy's just chucked himself out of the glass of a twenty storey building, and the last time you saw him was... *was?* I don't even fucking know when it was. How long ago? Years. Years and fucking years. So 'nice' just doesn't come into it. Wasn't his fuckin' mate when all that happened, was I? Wasn't around when he jumped – to stop him jump. — *So where was I? — And just what the fuck was going through Jim's stupid bastard head?* I wasn't his mate, not anymore. I'd moved on. That's how it is. We've all got opportunities now, so-called *opportunities...* *yeah.* So things get all separated out, people move away, and lose touch. That's what happened with us. It was my fault. When I had a moment to myself I thought it through again, trying to make sure – exactly how old was I when I left? And was that really the last time I'd seen him? I bit into my lip. Tried to calm my breathing. Yeah, I reckon we'd just turned eighteen the last time we met, thirty-bleedin-five this year, seventeen years back.

I've always been useless at keeping in touch. Even with me dad. I go up from time to time but not that often. And no one sends letters anymore, I've never done cards, and Christmas, dunno but somehow that's always been more of a bird's thing. I suppose now though, I could've emailed, sent the bastard a text, but we didn't have all that then. Tell the truth, I don't care for texting much. It's not my thing. People send messages. I read 'em and I mean to reply, but then, then I can't be arsed. I'd made my lip bleed. Should have kept in touch. Should have done something. I read the details in the paper, Dad had kept the clipping. There wasn't hardly anything to read, it was like Dad

said, ‘Don’t write nothing special about you do they, not if you’re no one.’ I looked up and half smiled, agreeing. ‘Sad that,’ he added. And then he noticed the date, ‘Jim died on the Monday – *February Seventh*,’ he said, with some depth of meaning as though I ought to realise the significance, ‘That was Ellen MacArthur’s day, *the sailor*.’

‘Who?’ I said, but Dad wasn’t listening.

‘They’re making her a dame, 71 days, 14 hours, 18 minutes and 33 seconds.’ He got up and went into the kitchen, I could hear him shuffle through the recycling bin (recycling was one of the few things Dad approved of in the ‘modern world’), he gave a few disgruntled sighs and then a hushed and contented ‘Yees’, as he found what he was looking for. He practically waltzed back in, saying, ‘They described her as, “diminutive”,’ and he smiled approvingly, as though he was proud, like on a personal level, as though she was someone he knew. ‘The fastest person to circumnavigate the globe, *ever*. Don’t suppose it matters much what size she is, eh?’ and he laughed awkwardly, the way people do when they aren’t really sure about jokes, how to make them, how they work, the timing. I laughed along to keep him company, but he was no Dave Allen. And then I thought back to when I was a kid, and how I used to hide behind his chair; he’d forget I was there and think he’d already sent me to bed, but I’d be curled round the back of his armchair distantly taking in Dave Allen on the telly, and Dad would be laughing along, bottle of beer in hand to Dave Allen’s fag and whiskey, but you can’t get comic genius just from watching it, you can’t time gags like Allen if it ain’t already streaming through your veins. And despite smoking and drinking being the best punctuation that ever was, it don’t make every fag-ash-Harry and barfly a bleedin’ comic, despite all our delusions. — Dad was still on about Ellen — icebergs, oceans, whales, and he was right, ‘*What a bloody achievement!*’, and normally the whole *Moby Dick* thing would grab me, but I couldn’t stay with it just now. Too much other stuff had just happened, and I’m not like Dad, I can’t push it all away and pretend like stuff ain’t happened. I don’t blame him for doing that, in some ways I even envy him, but me, I don’t quite know how to do it. Can’t push death away. — I wanted a fag, and Dad knew I did ’cos he kept noticing my leg twitching. ‘Not in here son,’ he said in that

disapproving, whispered tone, ‘best go outside.’ I felt like the bleedin’ dog sometimes, as though he thought I was gonna cock my soddin’ leg or something. We didn’t even have a dog.

That was the last time I went up there. The funeral. — Jim had done well for himself, was how Dad put it, engineer, fully qualified and everything. ‘It’s not good,’ he said soberly, ‘not good at all’, and after that he didn’t say too much else about him. He looked at Mum’s photo a few times, but he didn’t mention her, and I didn’t. Didn’t know what to say.

I met up with Jules in the pub, it was the day before the funeral, she said it was going to be a burial, and Jim hadn’t left instructions — *instructions?* — so they’d thought that a ‘proper funeral’ was best. Jim hadn’t got as far as thinking about all that. Guess you wouldn’t. Guess he just wanted to be ‘gone’. — Jules had known his girlfriend, and at first I was curious, but the more Jules talked about her the more I didn’t like her, and the more I wished I hadn’t asked. *Girlfriend*, total fuckin’ witch more like. And what the hell kind of a name is *Trudy* anyway? — So, there we were, sitting in the pub, I had a pint, and Jules had a rum and coke. It didn’t matter, but it felt weird somehow, like we should’ve been drinking something else, I don’t mean like tea or coffee or anything lame like that, more as though there should be something... something different that you drink when something so big and tragic happens. But there isn’t anything, not that I know of. Bastard Britain. So there I was, sat in a friggin’ pub with a pint and a dead guy’s sister, and her rum and coke. I stared at the ashtray. — Jim had been depressed, yeah, ‘depressed’ was how Jules put it. Proper, full on depressed, I think the docs call it depression when it gets that bad. I ran the word round my head, swilling the last of my beer round the bottom of my glass. Better get another round in. But Jules’ glass was still full — Depression. Makes sense, the word, I thought, like you have a *de-press* switch or something and somehow it suddenly gets flicked, full — *on*. The whole thing had been getting on Trudy’s tits, Jules said. And it was weird, I couldn’t tell what Jules really felt. Not about her brother, not about Trudy. She carried on talking.

My glass was empty now. I’d have to get another, but Jules still hadn’t hardly touched hers. I’d have to wait it out a bit. It was fine,

we both smoked, loads in fact — funny the things that cover over the cracks, the time and distance, my guilt at losing touch, not knowing what had been going down, but it was easy with Jules somehow, it was like smoking covered that stuff over. It fills up pauses. Smokes 'em up. I took another drag. I never know what non-smokers do about all that, how they deal with pauses, awkward stuff. Guess they just sit there, knowing there's a fucking great awkward pause hovering, waiting to crush you or swallow you up. But then there's drinking. People drink a bit more I guess, that would cover it well enough. So, Jules talked, and I listened, both of us smoked. Match made in heaven, 'cept it was more like a graveyard. — We were back to talking about Trudy's tits again. And Jim, getting on her tits. Bitch. Jules said this bird had *tried and tried*, tried *everything*... but Jim, he was still fucking miserable, Trudy had said as much. I stabbed my fag out, that one hadn't tasted too good. I looked into the distance. I didn't want Jules to cry. Looked like she'd cried for England already. It's awkward when girls cry. I don't mind, but I think they do, and I think they feel awkward. I'd wait a minute. She'd got a tissue and that, I could see from the corner of my eye, she was dabbing. Yeah wait a minute, don't look at her, that way she'd get herself together again, *composed* I guess you'd say — then she'd be alright, then she'd carry on.

I thought it was time for another fag at least. I was feeling pretty crap by now. I should have kept in touch. I ought to come and see Dad more often too. — Jules still hadn't finished her drink but it was no good, I couldn't wait any longer, besides, I thought the time alone would suit her, she could sort herself out while I was at the bar. 'I'll get another one in,' I said as I got up, and I didn't look at her. I feel a bit bad about saying this, but frankly I was glad to have some time-out at the bar, I just didn't like sitting there seeing her hurting, and I felt like I should cry, but I couldn't, and it all felt weird. To tell the truth, I drew the time out quite a bit chatting to the geezer behind the bar, letting him wag his tongue about local shite, all that ordinary stuff that holds a place together.

I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket to pay him, and as I opened it a piece of paper fell out; it was ripped out of my old notepad with a name and a phone number scribbled on it, only I didn't

recognise either. It was my writing for sure: *Ron Pope*, I ran the name round my head, I hadn't got a clue, but then I vaguely remembered writing it, and I remembered copying it from an email, a chirpy looking mail in blue, but I couldn't remember anything else, not even who'd sent it to me. I was feeling pretty frazzled. — When I looked up again I realised the guy was still waiting for some dosh so I passed him a twenty and shoved the paper back inside my wallet, couldn't be that important and maybe it would come to me later.

Jules seemed a bit better when I got back to the table, just a bit lost looking, and now I worried that I'd been *too* long at the bar. — I sat back down and lit up again. It turns out that Trudy had encouraged Jim to take a promotion, in a city he didn't know. He found a bedsit. Jules said it was a hole, but the idea was that it'd be easier to save more money that way. Trudy didn't go with him, she couldn't leave her friends, and anyway he was good at making friends, he'd be alright, the move was what he needed, it'd be good for his CV, his career, and later he could come back, and it'd be so much easier to get a bigger first home after he'd been earning decent money for a few years, then they'd have a 'substantial deposit', get on the property ladder, get started; and it wouldn't be such a hardship them being apart, she'd come up at the weekends, when he wasn't working through, well, *some weekends*, she'd got her pilates class and the gym, oh, and her mates.

So there he was, in a hole, with an a-hole job, in some fuck-wit city. On his own. Staring at the walls. Saving up to *get started*. I was glad I'd got another beer. Then Jules said he must have got really down, *really* down, he was on Anti-Ds though he'd said they didn't suit him. He'd lost a load of weight; he'd never been big, not fat or anything, but 'cos of his height Jules said the docs might have miscalculated the dose, she said she'd looked into it since... and then she stopped talking. She looked down and fiddled with something, her fingernails I think, dead agitated. She could have done with a beer mat to tear up, that was always their best use, only there weren't any. I leaned back in my chair and let her be. This stuff wasn't easy for her to get out, and to be honest, it wasn't easy to listen to. It seemed like we had to do it in stages, steps. Slow, easy steps. I thought it best to leave it alone a while. For a few moments I tried to listen in to the conversation at

the bar, really it was too far away but some of the blokes were a bit pissed and acting up so I could catch some of it. Then after a while Jules took up from where she'd left off, saying as how, yeah, it might have been too high a dose, specially with his weight loss. Who knows. She finished up her drink and stared at the second one. We both watched the ice slipping. The pause was hellish long, neither of us said anything for ages. I scanned the floor, as though a pub's stinking, piss and beer ridden planks were gonna pass up any wisdom, *jerk*, but what can you do? And then the sun streamed in, all cheerful, and right there and then even that felt annoying. I turned my back to it. Then it fell across Jules' face and she tried to force a smile, but only for that moment, only to be brave, and maybe she was thinking the same as me 'cos then she shifted round and turned her back on it too.

She said she wished she'd known how far down he was, and known more about the drugs – sorry, *medication*, at the time, but then she wasn't sure what she'd have done about it anyway, maybe nothing. But at least she could have told him that sometimes Anti-Ds make it worse. Anyhow, even if Jim *had* known, he wasn't really in a state to deal with it, any of it, and most guys just don't do that kind of thing – ask loads of details, side-effects and stuff, that's just how it is. And I guess no one realises you're not in a state to deal with things until, well, until it's too late. She wasn't sure if anyone was to blame about the anti-depressants, and maybe it wasn't them, but at the time Trudy seemed to know more about that kind of stuff, and she'd said it would probably do the trick if you took them long enough. You probably just needed a high enough dose and to 'stick with it' in order for them to work.

When it got really rough Trudy took a day off work and went up there. So, she did her best. Jules was grateful, it can't have been easy. She'd offered to go, but Trude said it was something she needed to sort out, and in any case, she knew Jules was too soft, she'd probably get him to quit his job and move back home, and then everyone would just be back at square one. Square one — yeah right, and we can't have that, 'cos *fuck knows, if we have people back at square one the bleedin' sky'll fall in!* — Trudy spent three days with Jim, from Friday through Sunday. She knew he'd be hard work, and this had gone

on long enough. She told him to pull himself together, and then she went back home. On Monday, Jim went into the office as usual, he worked all day, and at 5pm he opened the window, and jumped. Jim died that day, and none too quickly. I lit Jules' cigarette. She drank down the rum, and I was glad I'd made it a large one. She said she'd be seeing Trudy later in the evening and didn't know what to say to her. What I wanted her to say was, '*Next time, try being kind!*' but I kept quiet. It seemed as though Jules had built some kind of compassion for Trudy, and I guess she needed to hold on to it, it wasn't fair for me to crush it, and I, I should have kept in touch. Jim was my mate. I should have been his.

CHAPTER TWO

the day after the funeral

TRAINS

The sun was out. I was looking out of the window, it was ten minutes or more before the train would be leaving, but I imagined it already in motion. The engine starting up, that strange rumble and hiss as it breathed into life. I like trains. I like moving. I like being out of my life a while, not being anything to anyone for a while, just sitting there, pondering, staring aimlessly out the window. And I never quite get it, I never really understand why people take stuff out of their lives and bring it with them on journeys – laptops, paperwork, and phones switched on. Don't they get it? 'Train time' is separate, time to be nothing and no one. Like pressing 'pause', and sucking back a bit of time for yourself. I love it. And I'd readily spend my life travelling, not in any backpacker kinda way, more simple than that, just moving over land, and it could be any land, anywhere, just contemplating things, watching stuff go by, letting the land shift by just like clouds and sea, towns and cities rushing past, and all the time, inside, you, keep still. — I was glad Jules had listened to me and decided not to come and see me off. I'd deliberately shied away from looking for her at the ticket office and on the platform, just in case. I figured she'd cry again, selfish I know but it was all a bit more than I could handle, and the funeral, that had been something else. And then after the funeral; back at their house, the sandwiches... the tea, the brandy, brandy *in* tea... and cake, *cake!* at a funeral... is that OK? I dunno. Does it matter? It's 'unfathomable' to me, all of it. Isn't there a rulebook somewhere? Or rather, the opposite, the bleedin' opposite,

isn't there a way of making it personal, singular, of marking out *Jim Jakes*' 'particular existence'? — *Cake!* Somehow, that was the worst of it for me. — One of the older ones said what a lovely spread Sandra, that's his mum, what a lovely spread Sandra had put on.

I went outside into their backyard, it was freezing but I couldn't care less. I had a beer and a fag. His mum came out to me, said I could smoke inside, said she and his dad were about to have one. But that wasn't it, I just needed to be outside, away from the 'spread'. She said as how it must be tough for me — *how'd she work that out?* I had it easy; her kids were her whole life and now one of them hadn't just died, he'd *jumped!* — I gave Sandra a cigarette, she smiled and said did I remember when I was a 'youngster' and used to nip round to their house for a 'sneaky fag'? — They'd lived just a few doors up. — I smiled, must have smoked round their place from when I was about thirteen, Dad would've gone spare if he'd realised, but then he went spare anyways. Sandra asked if I'd settled anywhere. I told her I'd moved about a bit, here and there, bit of time in London; she interrupted me then, wanting to know how that was, I told her it had been OK for a short while, 'til all my mates moved away, but it wasn't until I mentioned how they'd mostly got opportunities elsewhere, abroad and so on, that I noticed her looking down. '*Mates*'... '*opportunities*', these were to become two of my least favourite words. And if Julie bleedin' Andrews was ever lookin' for a new verse, I was sure I'd be the man to put it together. — We didn't speak for a minute or two, just smoked. I could hear the traffic going past the front of the house, a siren in the distance, people arguing in the street, it seemed noisy all of a sudden. I was glad. Then bit by bit it died off and the silence made things tricky. I scratched my foot around and tried to think of what to say, but everything seemed useless. — Eventually Sandra started to talk again, and somehow there was a note of brightness in her voice, forced of course, but stoical's much easier to deal with than tears. I really appreciated that. She said as how tall I was, and how she'd forgotten, and then how could she forget what with me always being able to do all the 'tall' jobs round their 'ouse, and then almost teary-eyed she blushed. I lit a fresh cigarette. And then it occurred to me that Jim wasn't really that much shorter, just that I'd always

been an inch or so in front while we were growing up, so it was like being stuck with a nickname when there was no need anymore, and now I came to think of it, Jim could just as easily have done the ‘tall’ jobs, or his dad for that matter, and that was it, wasn’t it? It suddenly hit me, of course it was; Jim or his dad could easily have done those jobs, but Sandra – she was just making me useful, making me *feel* useful. I knocked the ash off, and took a long drag, some cigarettes taste better than others, depends on all kinds of stuff, the mood, the company, the place, that sort of stuff. — It struck me as funny, what you don’t realise at the time. And now I knew that whilst me and Sandra were both mourning Jim, she must always have mourned for me – for me not having a mum. We smiled at one another, and for a moment I thought she looked dead young, like a teenager almost – it’s nice, how old women, I mean, *older* women, can still be filled with so much youth, I guess it’s always there, on the inside. She started to talk about how their lives had panned out since they’d left our street. And then her husband, Ray, came out to join us, he was half cut, mug full of brandy, long trail of fag ash falling away. He was a gentle sort of bloke, soft spoken. I hadn’t heard him mention Jim all day, in fact I think he’d barely spoken a word to anyone. He looked completely crushed. And Sandra, she’d kept herself busy talking to everyone about anything and everything, except Jim, anyone and everyone, except Jim, and I guess for a lot of people, it’s still an unspoken British rule, never to talk about what’s actually going on. Ray knocked the ash off his cardigan sleeve, and as he did, the cigarette fell from his fingers, he moved towards it, following its arc as though he might catch it, but then he seemed to give up halfway. He crushed the last of it with his shoe, and then warmly, he asked what we were up to. Sandra smiled and said she was just ‘filling me in’; she explained how she’d had to take on two extra part-time jobs to make ends meet; they’d had trouble keeping up the mortgage repayments once Ray had got laid off. ‘We never made it to a detached,’ she said and not unkindly, but the thin laughter running through her voice was sort of fake now, and awkward. ‘Should never have moved,’ Ray piped up. And like a complete arse, I said, ‘Or at least not to a street called, *Burn-hope*, eh!’ Ray looked away, catching me briefly from the corner of his eye with

a look that hovered somewhere between hurt and spite. I didn't mean any harm. — He hadn't worked in ten years, he'd be retiring soon, 'cept he already was. I wondered if he missed me dad. I wondered if they felt at home, round Burnhope.

I used to worry about me dad, but he always kept up with his mates, and enough of 'em had never moved away, maybe a street or two, but not out of reach, and not like these had done, and not like me. — Now Sandra, she was what my dad called 'a real good sort', it's funny, he idolised me mum, but I never remember him saying that about her. I suppose it was as though Mum was, what would he call it? — 'A cut above', as though she had nothing to prove, not to him anyway, she didn't have to live up to anything, she was beyond all that, above all that, whereas other people, other people's wives, husbands, sons, there was some sort of measure for them. Mum scored 110% just for ever having looked his way — even after she'd left him, the rest of the world didn't have it that easy, the rest of us still had to prove ourselves. At a rough estimate, I reckon Dad would've scored Sandra a meagre 60%, nothing too high, could do better. — I realised Sandra was still talking, but my head was derailed somewhere, useless.

Jules came out, her pretty eyes all swollen to bursting, like a boxer. I knew it was natural that she'd cried that much, of course it was, but still, it didn't seem right her being in so much pain. Sandra was doing all that old-fashioned brave stuff, she'd do her weeping in private, but that ain't right neither somehow. There she was, trying to take care of everyone, me included. I wasn't any good at this. Ray went back inside. Then Sandra said that she'd 'leave me and Jules to it'. Jules was coughing a bit so I stubbed my fag out, she said it wasn't bothering her, said she probably just needed another drink. And then she swayed, I think she was a bit pissed. I didn't know what to say. She leant against the wall, her head slightly heavy, still too many tears onboard. I started to wonder why she looked so different from when we were kids, because if she hadn't been the only girl sitting on her own in the pub the day before, I might not have recognised her at all. I tried hard now to picture her from before. And then it dawned on me, *ten*, she must only have been about ten when they moved to Burnhope, and me and Jim were seventeen, eighteen, and quite rightly never really

had anything to do with her, she was just a kid. She must be twenty-seven or eight now. The grown-up Jules. I felt myself blush a bit. Tossler. But she wasn't looking so it was alright. I noticed her hair, I'd noticed it, sort of guiltily, in the pub the day before. Long, dark, silky brown hair. Gorgeous. I wouldn't know how to judge, but I don't reckon it was dyed, too shiny and soft lookin'. It was dead long, but some shorter bits curled round her face. She was looking down at her shoes or something, maybe at nothing at all, but it meant I could keep watching, I shouldn't really have done that though 'cos they reckon, scientists that is, they reckon that people can actually feel you lookin' at them, specially if it's 'prolonged'. Fuck it. I carried on, anyways, I was concerned about her. — Her eyelashes, they were super long, and they curled up, like they were drawn on, like in comics. But then I haven't looked at any in ages — lately I keep reading novels, tons of 'em. And that's weird, 'cos I never read at all as a kid. But so it goes. And then I wondered if Jules read, and I wondered if she read novels, and I wondered whether to ask her. But I didn't. I might fuck it up, it might come out wrong, those 'random questions' and 'idle remarks' — sometimes they totally screw things up. And I think I'd been clumsy enough for one funeral. I wished I hadn't said that stupid thing about *Burnhope* to her dad. Best try and keep things steady.

It turned out that I wasn't the only one screwing things up; Jules said Trudy never showed up the night before, and that she must have had her phone switched off. I said I'd tried to pick her out at the funeral, only I hadn't a clue what she looked like. She wasn't there apparently. She didn't make it to the funeral, 'good ole Trude'. Jules said it must have been too much for her, too much to face, and then she added, 'Bless' — *Bless!!! How could Jules do that? How could she be that nice? And where did she dig out all that compassion from? — Bless my bleedin' arse, 'Bless!'*

There's something so automatic about being a smoker, half the time you don't remember lighting up, or even taking the pack out of your pocket, so it wasn't until Jules coughed again that I realised, 'Sorry,' I said, about to put it out. 'No, you're alright. Got a spare one?' she asked. I lit it for her. The smell of matches lingered in the air. There's something comforting about that smell somehow, I reckon

it's like that even if you're not a smoker. 'Not much of a funeral was it Mark?' and her words made me nervous, partly because it was as though she wanted me to agree with her – because she was right, it hadn't seemed like much of a send off, and then at the same time not wanting me to agree, because it hurt too much to acknowledge that as well as not being there for him when he was alive, we might have got this part wrong as well. It was cowardly I know, but I hid under my hair a bit, nodded occasionally and managed not to say the wrong thing on account of the fag in my mouth blocking the exit for my usual careless drivel. But soon enough my mind raced ahead, and before I knew it the fag was out and under my foot, and I was already halfway to suggesting 'all manner' of funeral alternatives. Jules looked up and smiled, as though she read my thoughts, 'Maybe,' she said, 'maybe the music could have been different... not so sad sounding,' and then we both fell quiet a minute lest we get the next bit wrong. 'Like what?' I asked after a bit, trying to come over gentle sounding. So far, so good. Things seemed OK, and after a moment she picked up, 'Like, something jokey,' she said, 'maybe from a cartoon or something...'

'The theme from: *Hong Kong Phooey* maybe... d'you remember that?'

'Sort of,' she said, and then she started to sing it a bit, and rather quiet and delicate considering how much she must have had to drink, '*Hong, Kong Phooey, number one super guy...*' and then I started the talking bit, and dead quiet so as no one indoors could hear, it wouldn't sound right to anyone else, and it might seem like we were taking the piss, and that couldn't have been further from the truth. So I quietly mimicked the voiceover from the start of the cartoon, like an arse of course, but Jim wouldn't have minded, he'd have laughed, and I'm no actor, '*Who is this super hero?*' I said, and luckily Jules knew the next line, I guess she must have heard it enough from us two bastards, and so she asked, '*Is it Sarge?*'

'No,' I answered, and now we were a double act.

'*Rosemary, the telephone operator?*'

'No,' I replied, and I liked having the shorter lines; like I said, I'm no actor.

'*Penny,*' and then she stopped a minute, 'is that right?' she asked,

‘Penry, not Henry?’

‘I think so,’ I said, ‘doesn’t really matter too much though does it?’ and happy enough she carried on, saying, ‘Could it be, *Penry, the mild mannered janitor?*’ and I wanted to say the next line, all cool sounding, ‘*Could be!*’ with that sort of mischievous rising intonation at the end, only I couldn’t get it out, I thought I might sound like an arse, and I felt myself blush, and now I had a knot in my chest. Everything seemed too quiet suddenly. I heard a door slam. Then nothing. And then just the wind distantly howling round the chimneys high up, cold and shrill, and a car screeching past at the front, and suddenly everything felt so lonely.

Jules started to cry. I put my arms around her. There was rain in the air and we should have gone inside, but I just couldn’t face it, I couldn’t face any of it anymore. My shirt was wet, right to my chest, and I tried to hug Jules like a father would, or like Jim would, and I wished that Jim was there to hug her, as though only he’d know how to hug her properly, how to handle it right, and then I realised how stupid that was. But Jim would have known how to be a big brother even if he hadn’t had any practice at all, and I felt like there were some things in life I could have all the practice in the world for and I’d still fuck up. — What was I thinking, trying to pull ideas together for a *jolly* funeral? Dickhead. Now I’d got Jules crying again and she must barely have stopped these last days.

I carried on holding her. And for a few brief moments, out there in the cold, I found myself imagining – that Jules was my girl, and that Jim wasn’t dead, as though he might just be inside chatting with his mum and dad, maybe having a beer, just how it might have been on a Sunday, and Jules, she was upset for some other reason, and being her bloke, I was caring for her, holding her, and maybe later we’d all go down the pub together, have a few more beers, a rum and coke, try and cheer her up. But then Jules spoke, and her voice brought me back, cutting me back to the scene we were really in, in a Burnhope backyard, light rain in the air catching your cheek.

Jules’ voice was soft, she said she remembered how me and Jim had wanted to write songs, she said that since *what had happened, had happened*, she’d had a dream about it, how we’d written songs and

never moved away, the way that it wasn't, but might have been, and she asked if I'd actually written any more songs or had I given up on that as well? I didn't answer, and then through her tears she whispered that she was sorry, but there wasn't any need.

I held her a bit closer as my hopeless way of avoiding saying anything, hoping she'd read it to mean all the things I should have said and would have said, if I'd had half a clue. Then, trying her best to put on a brave face, she said I shouldn't leave it so long before I came back up again and how they'd all like it if I kept in touch, if I wanted to, that was. She couldn't have been nicer, but it cut me to the quick, and all I could do was look back on our lives and dream them as better, and truer. Lives with songs. — That was one of the hardest days of my life.

The train still wasn't moving. Must be delayed. I looked out the window again, daft really, Jules wouldn't be coming to the station. It was probably for the best. I took a deep breath. And Dad, Dad never did goodbyes, it wasn't his thing, so we'd done what we always do, this casual, manly goodbye as we each crossed the living room, as though I was just popping out for a paper and might be back in a jiffy. Kinda nice in a way, 'cos I would be back, just not that soon. — *No Smoking* – can't have a fag on a train, not anywhere, not anymore, no separate carriages, not even the *one*, can't even have one in the bogs. And now my leg was shaking. I tapped the pack on the corner of the table; the bird sat opposite shot me a look, but people don't understand, it's not like issuing a challenge, I'm not about to piss her off and light up, and see if she's got the bottle to take me on, I just need to hold on to the pack to kid myself that maybe, maybe I *can* have a fag, soon-ish. Ah, fuck it. I got up, this train didn't seem like it was going anywhere soon, and as far as I knew, you could still get away with a smoke on the platform. — Anyhow, they taste best, forbidden ones, I felt myself grinning, *jerk*. But so it goes.

It was cold on the platform, the woman in the train was now giving me the once-over through the window, she blushed a bit when she realised I'd clocked her, and picked up a magazine. I turned away and looked about, but no, there was no one else coming down the stairs, no one on the bridge. We'd be going soon. Then I almost jumped out of

my skin as they made an announcement, some sort of problem, we'd be in the station a few more minutes, they'd give us more information as it came to them, bollocks they would, but that's alright, that's our trains for you, that's Britain. — And then without another bleedin' word, and in what seemed like no time at all, the geezer blew his whistle, and the doors started slamming one after another, hard and loud and somehow 'empty' sounding. Cold. What a wind-up. I felt a kind of panic, I looked about a bit, crushed the fag out with my foot; by now the geezer had his hand on the last door and he was giving me that look which meant I should get a bleedin' move on or risk being left behind. Steady on mate. I looked up at the bridge one last time, and the stairs, down the platform, and then opposite in case she'd made a mistake, but she wasn't there. She wasn't there. Jules wasn't coming. The guy shouted was I getting on or what? I shrugged and got on.

It was probably better like that, and in any case, I did tell her, I couldn't deny that, I told her not to come, she'd probably got things to be getting on with. She asked if I was sure, because she'd like to come and see me off, but I said I wasn't one for goodbyes — *not one for goodbyes!* — what was I on? Who the frig talks like that? (my dad!). '*Not one for goodbyes.*' — Note to self, and a word of advice: *try and stop saying shite you don't mean.*

CHAPTER THREE

soulmates

FURTHER DOWN THE LINE

I slumped down in my seat, my mouth was still full of the taste of that last ‘lusty’ cigarette, I had that nice tingly satisfied feeling that follows, and my head was finally growing empty, it had to, too much had happened, and I hadn’t eaten or slept properly in the best part of a week. There was too much to think about: Jim, and everything that had happened, his death, his life, his family – my dad – all of that, and then there was still all the other stuff, the stuff that had been shunted to the back, the stuff that had been happening before all of this, before Jim jumped and made the rest of us press ‘pause’ – because all of that was still there, my life – for what it was – was still running on in the background, and I guess it needed some looking at. Coming up here had pulled me out of it for a while, but now it was time to go back, time to face the life I had, the life I *have*, go back to the place I live, the friends, job, colleagues, you know, the ‘usual run of things’, only *now*, things had changed, everything had changed, except I wasn’t quite sure how, and for the moment I didn’t have the energy for it, all I could think of doing was leaving it alone a while. And just for now, that was alright. I was on a train, just sitting on a train, starting on a journey, and the rest would just have to wait. — I felt quite sleepy. — It would all come right – *somehow*, Sandra used to say something like that when we were kids, ‘*It’ll all come out in the wash,*’ that was it. I slid down a bit further in my seat trying to hold on to that thought, only lines like that, sometimes they’re just too flimsy, sometimes they simply *don’t* friggin’ wash, but right now they had

to because that was all there was. A few familiar words, sometimes, that's really all there is.

For a time there, someone else's crisis had taken the floor, and that wasn't even Jim's, we were all too late for that one, this had been Sandra's and Ray's, and Jules' crisis. Jim mate, you've left a mess behind. And I knew, I knew that the three of them were always going to suffer, always going to wonder, just as I would: *was it me, was it my fault, something I did or didn't do, said or didn't say?* – always, that's just how it was. — But then I tried to tell myself to let go of it, at least for a bit, to just stop thinking about it, stop driving myself insane. And as the train pulled out all I could do was repeat in my head, *'It'll all come out in the wash. It'll all come out in the wash.'* What a wanker. But what are you supposed to do? Sayings like that run way back, and lame as they sound, they try and cover all kinds of human tragedy; I guess it's some dopey means of survival, and it sounds like making light of things, but it isn't that at all, more like: light words for heavy matters – and I suppose they help convince you, trick you, into taking things easier, specially when you can't do anything about them. A small way of stopping stuff hurting so bad. The train moved on. *It'll all come out in the wash. It'll all come out in the wash.* Maybe now I could get some sleep. I hummed the line in my head, just to help it empty.

When I came to, I wasn't sure if I'd slept for long, the woman opposite was still clamped to the same magazine so it might only have been minutes, but at least it had felt like deep sleep. I always think a short deep sleep outweighs the long shallow kind, but I don't know if that's true, *scientifically*. And now that I was awake, my mind started to wander, but just so long as I kept it away from the tricky stuff just for a while longer, I figured that'd be fine. I sat up and pulled out my ticket to show the train geezer, and that piece of paper fell out of my wallet again, I looked at it hard: *Ron Pope*, and *Ron Pope's* number, which was a London number, fair enough, but I still couldn't figure it. I tried to picture the email I'd copied it off, but all I could remember was it being chirpy sounding and the fact that it was blue. What's the use in that? I posted Mr Ron back in my wallet. It'd come to me eventually.

I felt conscious now of a guy at the table opposite, I hadn't even

noticed him before, and for some total splice of a second I thought he had a look of Jim about him; my neck and spine ran cold. *Songwriting and suicide*, it suddenly occurred to me, though I didn't much like the idea, that if you did indeed have a real deep passion for the writing of songs, how not doing one could lead to the other. Jim, mate. — *Man*, I was doing a really rubbish job of keeping my head away from the dark stuff, total basket case. Things had to be kept a bit more steady. Yeah, so try a bit bleedin' harder mate.

I looked down the aisle instead. People were still moving up and down the train, hunting down that prime position, only I'd got that on account of getting on early and sticking my bag and jacket there, *yes*, it makes me a tosser, but I'm a tosser in prime position, which means: near the buffet, but not so near that the rank smell of microwaved meals can reach; a seat with a table and not one of those pull-down bastards; and a half-clean window so as I could watch stuff outside like I would have done as a kid all dead excited — *way* tall buildings, practically skyscrapers; factories, houses, and walls, *walls and walls and walls* with graffiti — some top tagging, and then finally, fields, and field stuff, what I think of as 'field furniture', because despite having legs or wheels, most of the stuff in fields looks pretty static to me: sheep, cows, tractors. Doesn't it? Doesn't that stuff stand still when you are moving? Seems that way, and I kinda like it because it increases my sense of moving, of moving away — it's good that mostly no one knows what goes on in another geezer's head and passes for entertainment, *what a nonce*, but that's how it is — and a part of me can't help feeling that there *is* some virtue in being easily pleased, finding some amusement, 'contentment' if you like, in the easy, ordinary stuff of life, I reckon even me dad would see the merit in that.

I sunk down again in my seat, cosy. And I wasn't far off from sleeping again when I spotted this kid running up the aisle, but then not so much running as skipping; he was the blackest little kid I'd ever seen, his whiter-than-white teeth inside the biggest, happiest, mother-of-all smiles, and he was chanting, cool and beautiful, bouncing the words along with his walk, eyes beaming, *I'm black, I'm black, I'm black, I'm black, I'm black...* total even pace. I looked at his dad and asked if the lad, who looked about six years old, had only just

noticed, or was he chanting it as a declaration that it was simply the coolest thing? He laughed and said his son was, '*Just nuts!*', then just as he moved on after him he added, 'The thing is, most of the time he wants to be *blue!*'

I could still hear the boy's voice as they trailed off behind me, and it helped me feel relaxed. Nice one. Two more kindred spirits, happy with the easy stuff. Somehow, the two of them looked all the blacker for being on an unusually white train, I scanned up and down, but no, so far everyone else I could see was white. — I stared back out the window. — Some days in the summer, me and Jim, we'd just buzz off like, take a train and head off to the beach. We'd only be about nine or ten, so we had no money, couldn't buy tickets or anything, but Jim had this brilliant uncle on the railways and he'd turn a blind eye; and if he wasn't on, one of us would just take a shuffy now and again for when the guard was about, and then we'd piss off into the bogs till the coast was clear. — People complain about stuff nowadays, but train bogs, I'm telling you, they used to be well worse. *Man, they were stinkers.* Can't be the case though can it, not really, I mean piss is just piss, it's just that it seemed that way back then and this one time when the pair of us were about as close as you can bleedin' get to passing out. We could hear the train geezers close by, some arse or other had snitched on us, or so we thought, and these big train geezers (unfortunately neither of 'em Jim's uncle), were muttering stuff about *knocking our little bastard heads together*, so we were rammed in the bogs there for friggin' ages. Terrified. The pair of us, damn near knocked out by piss fumes! Well nasty. I was wedged in the corner, we felt the train slow up just before the station, and we knew, we just knew, that this was it, this was where we had to make a major move, get off that train, or lose our sorry little heads to them big blokes. But when it came to it we were almost wasted from the heat and fumes and barely had the strength to even open that soddin' door, we practically had to bust the bastard open. But we ran for the exit, and afterwards, that sea air, oh man, imagine it, set against a background of train-bog claustrophobia and the scent of pure rancid piss, I'm telling you, that sea air, it was beautiful. And the seagulls, Jim said it was as if they knew, and it really was, it was like they really knew, and they screamed,

man, their wings splitting up the skies; and Jim running on ahead of me, singing away after them, his wings stretched wide. Free and full of life. I was always a bit more self-conscious like, so I watched from a distance and wished, wished I could just run out the same like, my arms in the air, splitting the skies, coasting along. And what was I worried about? It wasn't as though he looked like an arse, that wasn't possible, and maybes I wouldn't have either – difference is, I would have felt like one. Shame really, we were only little lads.

My mind drifted back again and I could hear that little lad still singing away in the distance. It seemed as though he must have been running down the next carriage and then back again, entertaining the troops, so to speak. His voice, distant and sweet, lulling me back into sleep, and I found myself dreaming about Jules, about me and Jules, and I was picturing the pair of us on a beach with warm yellow sand and pale blue waves in some place where everything was smooth and quiet, with just that gentle ripple of notes as the blue lapped over the shoreline. — But then there was this sudden evil jolt as the train pulled into a station and whiplashed me back to the moment. *I friggin' hate that. What is it with some drivers?* The things some bastards do for kicks, – but maybe it gets that way at times, even for train drivers. — People shuffled about getting on and off, and when I looked across I was almost in a state of panic, worrying if the guy opposite was still there. But why? Why should I panic? I didn't even know him! And why should he still be there? This might be his stop, for Christ's sake! Man, my head was all over the place. Right now, all I really needed was just some small way of keeping my thoughts from straying too far off the map. — *Was that really too much to manage?* Stop thinking about Jim, or the geezer opposite, or anything else. Just for a while, just so as I could breathe a bit, keep the whole anxiety thing under control. But straight off, and I got to thinking about Jim's bird, *Trudy*, speculating just how he got himself caught up with someone quite that crap. The thing is though, it's always loads easier to see how someone else might be just about to fuck up and get themselves saddled with a wrong un. When it's yourself it only ever seems to be something you can look at with hindsight, yeah, an after-sight, after you realise you've gone too far too fast, rather like me and that bird in my flat

back home. — I mean, really, what's that all about? I can't even sleep in the same room as her anymore, 'cos I talk in my sleep, I talk 'loads' apparently, and it bugs her. — But I suppose the bottom line is, she makes me feel used up, second rate. Spent. I can't explain. But she ain't a Jules or a Sandra any more than I reckon that Trudy is, and right now I don't even wanna think about her. Not her, not Trudy. Best if I could stop thinking altogether 'cos for no good reason I was starting to feel angry.

As we moved off I sat back up and distantly I could make out the little geezer still singing away there, *'I'm black, I'm black, I'm black, I'm black, I'm black....'* People started to smile, and sensing this as he entered, letting the electronic doors work their stuff, he blasted out, big and bold, *'Come on everybody!'* and this was his instruction to the rest of the carriage to *join the hell in*, his big eyes smiling; he jiggled his ass down the carriage, I turned and leant out, offering a look of approval and support like. He'd got himself a notebook and pen, and clutching these he ran to my table and started to drum out a beat.

The magazine woman opposite totally missed the vibe, and reading him purely as *'child'* and not as the *song writer-genius-in-the-making* that he was, started singing that rainbow song: *'Red and yellow and pink and green...'* and warmly so, to his ballsy, *'Black, I'm black... I'm black... I'm black... I'm black...'* — he stopped singing as she *'affectionately'* pushed on, *'orange and purple and blue, I can sing a rainbow, sing a rainbow...'* He butt in, he had to, his tone all round and soft, *'No, no, no,'* he said, and he knew she meant well, you could see that, but he wasn't speaking *kid*, he was speaking *tunes!* And he told her so. The carriage started to laugh, he shot them a look, unsure of what they took as funny, and checking that it wasn't him they were chuckling away at. And then some big old guy, a white guy, shouted loud and firm, *'I'm black!'* and that was how it started, soon the little guy had the whole carriage singing, *'I'm black... I'm black... I'm black... I'm black... I'm black'*, and he strutted up and down checking on the beat, tilting in and listening, correcting where it was needed, strumming his fingers on the tables or the plastic at the backs of the seats. Even I was singing, but happy that there were voices enough, and a few *real* voices too, to drown mine out. The boy spotted his dad in the

doorway, and the song reached its climax as the kid smiled big, and yelled, 'I'm blue!' His dad stood shaking his head, half proud, half embarrassed, the carriage, half laughing, half singing. 'You're nuts, boy!' his dad hollered warmly, his arms stretched wide. The boy ran and they hugged big to the approval of a sound and colourful carriage. From the doorway his dad said how he'd been 'up and down, up and down, chasing this boy, and maybe I shouldn't waste my energy, 'cos you can never lose a child who is always singing', and with that the boy took a bow, a few of us cheered, and the two were gone again, deeper into the train. A posh old lady got up, and as she did I heard her say to the bloke next to her (probably her husband), 'I rather like being black, Sidney,' Sidney smiled at her. I settled back in my seat, content, and I found myself thinking of Maya Angelou – I've got her smile on the back cover of a book of her poems. — I don't claim to know about poetry, not anything at all, I'm what you might call the *know what I like* breed of reader. And I like Maya Angelou. I like her poetry, and I like her smile. I closed my eyes and tried to see if I could remember any of the lines, maybe even a whole poem. I'd never tried to memorise them, but I guess bits get memorised anyhow, almost by themselves, some lines just sort of tiptoe in and find themselves a nice cosy home. 'Still I Rise' – that's one, one I like a lot, and how's it go again? I don't remember all of it, but there's a verse that goes:

*Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?*

I think Maya Angelou's genius with words. Once when I was reading that poem I felt all sort of seduced. And that verse especially, that 'particular' set of lines, I don't mean anything rude if you follow me, I just mean that the words had an effect, intense, sexy, – *argh shite*, this is gonna sound all wrong, but I know what I mean, and Christ knows, I couldn't write anything that would turn someone on – believe me, I've tried.

I must have nodded off again, we were at another station only it seemed too early. We were totally still, and this time I'd had no sense at all that we were stopping, must have been dead smooth – nice one,

driver, maybe he'd chilled out a bit. Then I realised the magazine woman had gone, so I must have been well out of it. But the guy opposite was still there and that was enough. Just a little continuity. He was sleeping, yeah, and like a great big kid; and for a moment I almost thought I could hear Jules saying, 'Bless,' like she would, all gentle and soothing. *Jules*. Maybe I'd write to her, say something, keep in touch like she'd said. I wasn't sure, like I wasn't too sure about anything anymore.

It was proving to be a strange ole journey. On the way up it was as though I had a purpose, I was going to Jim's funeral, but now, *now* where was I headed? I was meant to go back to my own home, get on with my life there, but really, that just didn't seem right anymore, it didn't feel that simple either, but I was so exhausted, brain-fried even, I could barely think. — It seemed we were already about to move off again. I glanced out the window and saw the black lad and his dad on the platform, they were looking right at me and started waving, I waved back, and just as I did I caught sight of the lad's notebook on the table in front of me. I held it up in a panic, but they'd already moved, turned to walk on, and just in that second, they were too far away. The train was moving off, gathering speed, and they were gone. I slumped back in my seat feeling a bit downhearted. I looked at the book and realised I'd panicked so much I'd nearly crushed it, I did my best to smooth it out, flatten it down again. It had a dark blue cover with thin, blue lined pages inside, and a margin in red. It reminded me of my 'rough book' at school, the kind we used to take notes in or use for what felt like dead-tough maths questions before doing them in the 'proper' book in 'neat', or we'd use them to try out essay ideas with the same thing in mind. I wondered if they still had rough books at school, maybe this was supposed to be one, only I reckoned this kid would probably have elevated it to the loftier task of songwriting. And maybe he was too little for a rough book, I wasn't sure. I had a flick through it, scribbles, sketches, words going round the page and back again, stuff written upside down, doodles, stuff written neat, stuff written messy and stuff crossed out, nothing too much like a song, but definitely the seeds for some. I looked at the cover again hoping to find his name, maybe a school name or an address so as I

could get it back to him. The initials: CA were scratched into the cover, but that was all. My little soulmate, separated from his book. I put it down, turning the corner of one of the pages, and just as I did I heard this woman's voice – an older woman, soft and sweet, she must have just got on, 'Don't bend it, you'll spoil the page', she smiled at me and then looked for somewhere to put her bags (they didn't look too heavy or anything, so I didn't offer to help), and then she took her coat off and folded it, dead neat. She had these really pretty eyes, blue, very pale blue. She was about fifty I suppose, or maybe even as much as sixty, it was hard to tell 'cos she was what me ole nan would have described as 'well kept'.

Nan, now there was a woman, 'formidable' I guess is the word. She was the only one who was ever honest about me mum, and maybe it seemed a bit harsh it being her daughter and all, but I always liked Nan's honesty, it was usually pretty brutal but it was a bloody welcome change from Dad's delusions. No flies on you, Nan. — 'All hat and no knickers' she called me mum, and that never made any sense to me as a kid 'cos Mum never had a hat.

Nan passed away just before Mum left. And I'd always had my suspicions about that. Not that I thought Mum had done her in or anything, nothing sinister like. But I reckon Mum must have been aching to get away long before, only she couldn't bear to face Nan, so she must have waited, wondering what to do, measuring up whether or not she could take her mother's wrath. Nan, the only person in her life who'd tell it like it was. You see, Dad, he'd forgive me mum anything. It's fucking mental when I think about it, but Dad couldn't see it, and now, I look back on it and I think about Sandra, and I wonder how Dad could possibly have looked down on a woman like her, and I really think he did. Didn't he know, that 60% of *something* counts for so much more than 110 of nothin'. You see, she hadn't wanted me, she was bored of him, and he was the only one around who couldn't see it – 'I almost missed the train,' the woman said, breathlessly but warm, snapping me back to the present; her voice, I suppose it was the kind you'd want to hear if you were a kid and someone was about to read you a story, like Sandra maybe only posh.

I realised I'd let go of CA's book, losing the page; and I suddenly

found myself sitting upright as though in response to this lady's voice, pulling myself up like, it was automatic somehow. It's weird how gentleness can be that powerful, and this woman seemed to embody something nicely old fashioned and worthy of respect, and respect in that old, true sort of sense, and not like the respect of now, which I guess is more like: *reeeeee-spec-me-man-or-I'll-smash-your-fuckin-face-in*.

I grinned to meself as I sat there 'behaving myself', and happily so – *and happily so?* – see, I only have to think of Julie bleedin' Andrews the once, and look what happens, stays with me for days – it's amazing to me that I'm not a soddin' cross-dresser. — Anyway, the lady, can't call her anything else, she took a book out of her bag, I couldn't see what it was but it had a posh bookmark in it, leather with some gold writing on it, she put it on the table as she started to read but I couldn't make out the writing on it too easily, too small, but then she caught me looking and pushed it over to me saying, 'I think you could do with one of these.'

'Yeah, maybe,' I said in my dead politest, and then I caught her glancing over at CA's rough book, and worried lest she think a six year-old's rough book was mine I pulled Calvino out of my bag. I know, I shouldn't care less, but I did, and I wanted to impress her, I wanted her to glance across again and think that what I was reading was top stuff – 'cos it was, I was reading *Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino. I took a proper look at her bookmark and the writing on it:

'I have nothing to declare, except my genius.' Oscar Wilde.

I figured that 'Wilde' must have been a right flash git, but what do I know, maybe he *was* a genius. Really, it looked like the kind of bookmark CA deserved, but it was no good for me, I'd look like a right arse carrying that about, and the thing is, people think things like that say something about you, only it all depends on who you are to start with. In CA's case it would be accurate, he *is* a little genius, and the lady who owned it, well it just added to the fact that she came over all sort of proper and cultured, but me, I'd look like a total prick with something like that. A plain bookmark would be more my style, if I was to have one at all. Anyway, I had to get rid of this fancy one. I picked it up, 'Nice,' I said, still trying to sound polite. I laid it closer to her side of the table, 'Nice squirly writing on it,' *squirly?* yeah I know, but I'd

already said it, some words just sneak out on their own. ‘Actually, I’ve almost finished this,’ I said, looking at Calvino and hoping to distract her from the poncy bookmark, stop her from insisting on me using it like. She looked at the Calvino cover and read the title. I felt dead nervous, and then I blurted out, ‘*You can have it if you want,*’ I pushed it over to her adding, ‘I’ve read it before, it’s dead good.’

‘In that case, you must have mine!’ and she gave me this dead big open smile, ‘unless you’ve already read it?’ I shook my head, but to be honest I still didn’t know what she was reading, I couldn’t see the title too well. She carried on talking, ‘I read it as a youngster, and I can’t get on with it just now, but that’s not to say it’s not a good read, I think I probably just need a change. It’s set in London.’ And with that she snapped the book shut and pushed it over to me. I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t actually wanted to part with Calvino, and neither did I want to rob this lady of her read, but it seemed like a done deal, the exchange already complete. Then she placed the bookmark on top of the book as though it was a *nice little added extra*, a freebie. So there I was, with a book, a lady’s sort of book, and a poncy bookmark, and don’t get me wrong, I was grateful, but my energy was so damn low I felt I had no sense at all of how this came about. I felt like I was coming off something, or going down with something maybe, hard to describe, but I wasn’t quite with it somehow. To tell the truth, I don’t think I was really with it *at all*, but I guess that sort of thing isn’t too easy to figure by yourself.

The ticket guy came along again, he remembered me from earlier so he concentrated on checking the lady’s ticket, but then his eye flicked across the book she’d given me. There was some posh bird on the cover and the title was actually a woman’s name, and then of course it happened to be written by a bird as well. *Bollocks*. The wanker grinned all superior at me as he gave her back her ticket, and like a total tosser, I dropped my jacket over the book to hide it, trying to make it look as though I didn’t realise what I was doing, all casual like. I breathed out and wished I’d woken up sooner, got off and had a smoke, a long deep smoke. *Argh, screw it*, what do I care what some arsehole thinks about what I’m reading? I can’t be a dick all my life. *Read what I fucking like, matey*. I moved my jacket, got hold of the book and placed it in

full view – and the bookmark? Well, everyone has their limits, ‘You’ll need this,’ I said to the lady, ‘for when you start Calvino. I can use me train ticket. Cheers though.’ She gave a half nod and a smile, I think she could read me, but it seemed OK.

I took out my ticket to demonstrate that I really did mean to use it (obedient to the last), and as I did I came across that *Ron Pope* again on that bit of paper. I began to run his name around my head, and all the while with the distant murmur of the lady’s voice in the background. ‘*It’s set in London,*’ she’d said, dead matter of fact, ‘*...in London... it’s set in London,*’ and suddenly I’d got it! Because ole *Ron Pope* there, he was also ‘*set in London*’. I knew him from London and I knew him from university. *Bingo*. And now that I’d made the connection, the rest came back easy as anything, and it made no sense at all that I couldn’t remember it before, but now I could picture the whole friggin’ email, clear as day. We’d gone to uni, not exactly *together*, but at the same time like; we’d shared the same halls in our first year, that was all as far as I remember. I’d never kept in touch with Ron, but from time to time I still got included on the geezer’s mass emails despite my never replying. — I always reckon that if you’re included on an email addressed to say 5–10 other people, it means something, it shows a little ‘discernment’ at least on the part of the sender, whereas being part of a list of 200 other sods just means the tosser who sent it out is a ‘quantity’ not ‘quality’ kinda guy. I pictured his email, it was blue, a cheery bloody blue. It said how ‘*Ron Pope*’ (written in a larger font *and* in italics, I kid you not) was taking time out from his job, *and what was his job?* I couldn’t remember, safe to say, chief arsehole somewhere, anyway, he was going off to ‘find himself’, ‘overseas’, and to top it all, the whole friggin’ mail had, *of course*, been written in the third person, I guess to suggest that his assistant: *Little Ron*, or *Ronda* had written it – I think that’s partly why I hate email, it’s far too easy to fuck up, and being a jerk really isn’t something to advertise; but anyhow, back to business, and it seemed Ron was on the lookout for someone to house-sit for a few months.

‘Do you live in London?’ the lady asked. I jumped, and I could feel myself not answering, I felt as though I was somewhere else, half dreaming, and then for some stupid reason I answered, ‘Yes,’ only

that wasn't true. I paused while I got my thoughts together, then I corrected it, 'No,' I said. 'No, I don't live in London, but I used to, a while back.' The thing was, we were in fact on a London-bound train, but I was supposed to get off at some stage and change, change and go back 'home'. I felt myself trying to explain, but I can't have made much sense. She smiled, and I think I must have interrupted her, it was as though she'd had a follow-up question that I must have cut in on, I wasn't totally sure. To be honest, I couldn't concentrate too well, and then I realised that now she was saying something else to me. It was something about me looking tired, but somehow I couldn't connect this with the idea of actual *sleep*, 'cos when you are that tired it's no good that people hint, it's just too subtle; and looking back I think that was what she meant, only like I said, it was way too subtle, and she was way too nice, and so I pushed to stay awake, thinking I should try and chat away, only I couldn't put the words together.

After a while the lady started to busy herself, going through a diary or something. I hoped I hadn't been talking shite. Half-heartedly, I flicked through CA's little blue book some more, backwards and forwards, reading some of the stuff written upside down, well, trying to; weaving back and to on the page like, and then, on the second to last page, almost as though it was meant to be hidden, there it was, CA's song, in full. *Sorted!* I felt this sudden rush. I was well made-up. I knew he was a star. And I felt dead weird, sort of emotional, like a rush of happy and sad feelings all mixed up. Then the lady's voice came back in again, and this time she was more direct, she said I should try and get forty winks before my stop, 'a wee cat nap' she called it, and warmed by this I finally let my eyes close, this was, after all, 'train time', time-out, time for sleeping. Beautiful. CA's rhythms drumming gently in my mind.

And I didn't know how, I can't explain it, but I began to feel like things were somehow different; and I didn't know by what degree, maybe not by much at all, but it felt like something inside me had changed; and maybe I wouldn't get off, I could stay on this train, maybe even go all the way. Why not? Head off to London – *and that life of mine in some place else?* – the so-called friends, the job, the colleagues – *leave that all behind.* Who knows, I couldn't quite decide, but right

now it made no odds; for the moment even the very thought was enough, and I felt like maybe something good was gonna come. Lulled to sleep by this, I felt like I'd been collecting soulmates: the lady; CA and his dad. Yeah, felt like collecting soulmates.