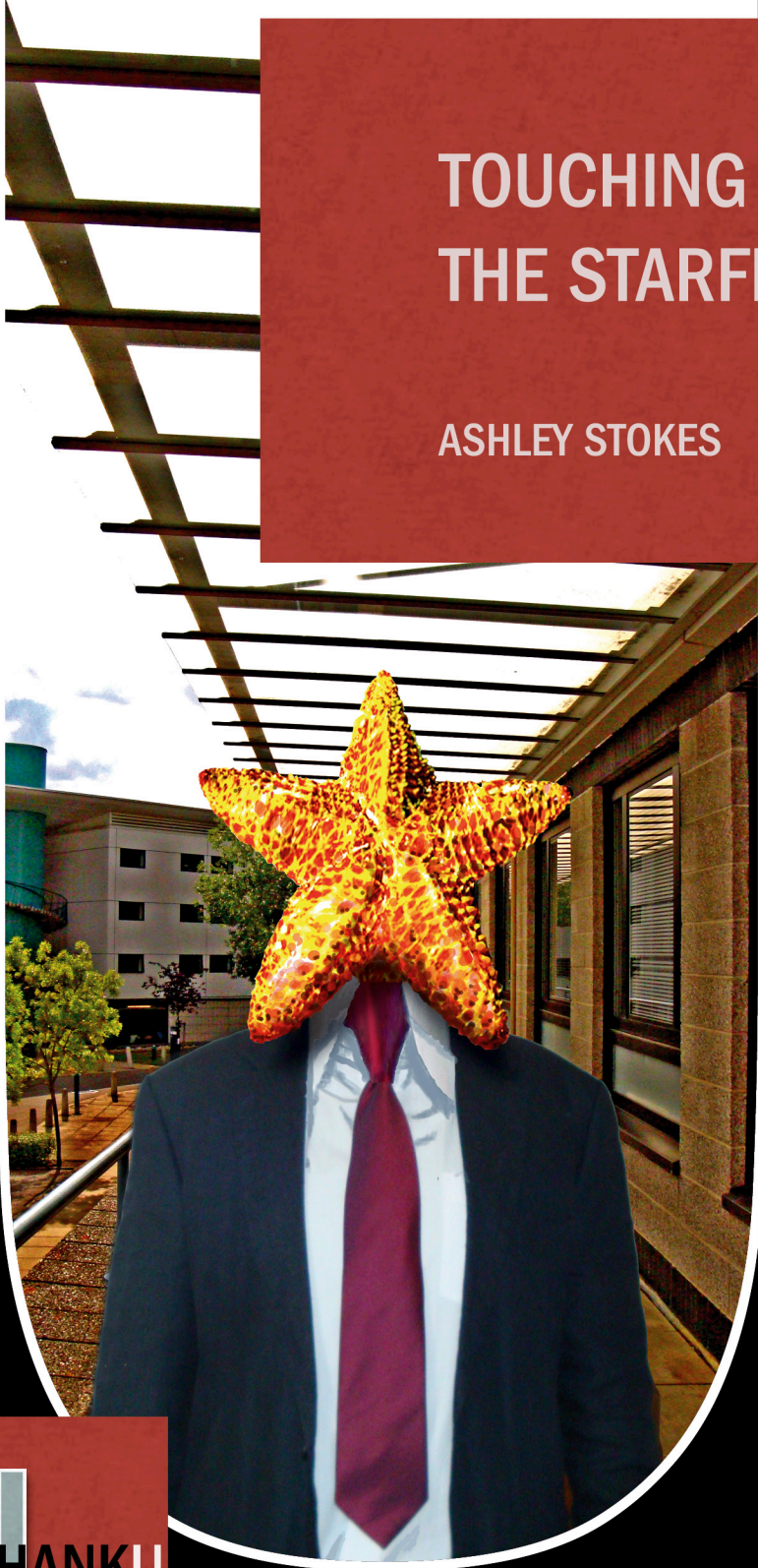


# TOUCHING THE STARFISH

ASHLEY STOKES



FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

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*Touching the Starfish*

**ASHLEY STOKES**

[FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER]



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*These little setbacks, amounting sometimes to thousands of dollars' worth of time wasted, writers must learn to take like Spartans. A brief curse, perhaps, then tighten the belt a notch and on to something new – of course with enthusiasm and optimism, because without these elements, you cannot produce anything good.*

Patricia Highsmith.

*Fumigate them all!*

James O'Mailer

# How to Begin



## Word Games, Confessions and Dead, Dead Silences

Never start a novel with a sentence like: *Locally respected creative writing tutor Nathan Flack strode out through the double doors at the back of the Endora Doon Building and watched the Folder-Holders<sup>1</sup> as they arrived in the famous university's carpark below.* Rethink a first line that utilizes the blunt, inanimate 'was', like: *Nathan was very hopeful*, or: *Nathan was in a well chipper good mood as he met up with his beautiful yet impossible ex-girlfriend, Frances and speculated on the new Folder-Holders and their potential for foibles*, or *'Nathan Flack – John Cusack in a crap leather jacket – was leaning forwards hopefully and in a well chipper good mood because he knew, and the much-admired poet Frances Mink knew that this was the last time he would have to do this job.* Don't, like one student of mine, trigger a novel with: *On the one less than half a dozenth storey of the building somewhere in the eastern city in the country exotic, she patted her fat belly pregnant and said, 'C'mon, we've got to stop the genetically-modified Jesus from porking the nuns.* Or, like another, kick off with: *She needed his hot enormity suddenly inside her like she needed Coldplay on rainy afternoons.* Never emulate the ex-student, a retired Deputy Chief Constable no less

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<sup>1</sup> **Folder-Holders:** Generic term for creative writing students. First used on the night we met by the poet Frances Mink after we'd escaped from The Writer Formerly Known as Sharon Plum and Hieronymus Ponce, The Enemy of All That Breathes and just before we invented James O'Mailer.

whose opening gambit was: *The thatch of her pubic hair resembled a red squirrel's arse hanging from a laburnum tree in a small back garden on the outskirts of Hull*<sup>2</sup>.

Opt instead for something crisp and simple that locates our protagonist just before a moment that changes the status quo, and then try to hint at something consequential to come. Suggest that something *has* happened, *is* happening and *will* happen. If you can also supply a sense of the narrative voice, your unique style, your personality and moral perspective as it filters through your prose, then you're laughing.

So there I was, Nathan Flack, standing with Frances on the concrete walkway at the back of the Eudora Doon Building. It was the first day of the autumn term, a blustery evening in late September, and we were hoping for some advanced intelligence on the new creative writing students about to arrive in the carpark below. I was slightly apprehensive and vaguely energized; safe in the knowledge that this would be the last evening class I would ever have to teach. *The Penelope Tree*, my fourth and best novel was all finished and edited. It had landed on desks in *The Arctic*<sup>3</sup> a month ago, and a month is as long as any writer should have to wait for an answer.

'The next few months are going to be so exciting,' said Frances.

'Oh sure,' I said. 'Word games, confessions and dead, dead silences.'

'Good title. I'd write that down if I were you.'

'Never start with a title.'

'Your teaching autopilot is already switched on. Exciting for your novel, I meant.'

'Oh sorry, yeah. I'm excited.'

'Who's it with now?'

'Fred Malone. ZY and Haggard.'

'It will be exciting, I promise. I can feel it.'

I could feel it, too. Finally, I'd written something commercial, a simple modern love story, with likeable characters, straightforward prose and high

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<sup>2</sup> You may think this has something arresting about this opening, and although I might agree that it straddles the border between genius and madness, you didn't read the rest of *The Truncheons of Humber Vise*, of which I will say no more than it involved an Al Quaida sleeper cell in deepest Immingham, a plan to inject cod in butter and parsley sauce sachets with a deadly nerve toxin and a jive-talking prostitute called Zizi Le Flaps.

<sup>3</sup> **The Arctic:** Flack-speak for London. I grew up there, in the southern suburbs, and after university lived there for a few years with my first serious girlfriend Johanna. One night, ten years ago, we were walking home from a restaurant. It was mid-winter, during a terrible cold snap, and the pavements were icy and treacherous. When she let go of my hand in the street I knew things had become insurmountable. Ever since then, I've always thought of London as the Arctic: the ice core, the explorer's grave.

stakes. I'd reigned in my more immature, experimental instincts and this time produced something accessible. There were no games with form or typeface; no passages that borrowed from textbooks, poetry, screenplay or role-play games; no slang dictionary or asides assembled in footnotes; no obscure literary references, foreign words or italics and no cranky sub-texts (or semi-colons).

Yet I didn't feel I'd compromised myself. I had avoided the clichés I hated in contemporary popular fiction. No serial killer devised an astrological clocklike puzzle for the worn-out investigator to deconstruct. No occult, age-old institutional conspiracy underpinned the history of Western Civilization. No apocalyptic medieval fantasy battle decided all at the climax. A super-powered child did not endure a procedural rite of passage. Nor did an everyman grumble about his ex in pub-monologue style then solve all his problems by acquiring the love of a good woman (or step-fatherhood of an irritating pre-teen). There was no unlikely love affair and *Penelope* was refreshingly free of wizards, creepy monks and grotesques. It was not set in the past or abroad to appear exotic or erudite, or in the world of media and celebrity to appear slick and fashionable. I had not patronized the smack-and-firearms underclass to appear gritty and relevant. I also felt I'd dodged the commonplaces I found in the stories of those around me who posed as 'literary' writers. There were no gender identity confusions, no pared-back, minimalist prose, no camping it up, no magic and no dream sequences. Nor was *Penelope* 'relentlessly salacious' as one of my more success-hungry colleagues once insisted that fiction must be to secure a deal. I'd just wanted to write something vivid. I wanted to feel that things could work out. I wanted to feel something.

I glanced sideways at Frances. Her jet-black Louise Brooks bob was newly styled for the start of term and her red leather jacket obviously waxed. Her black skirt was as ever short and tight to her hips. Three years ago we'd split up and I moved out, in theory a temporary arrangement while I focused solely on writing *Penelope* and a moneymaking side-project. That's what I'd told her anyway.

'You're going to be very rich and famous,' she said, 'and then you won't speak to me anymore. You will still speak to me, won't you? When you're a rich and famous novelist?'

'Course,' I said. Down below, cars had started to arrive. According to the register, eight students had enrolled for *An Introduction to Prose Fiction with Nathan Flack*. Not all of them would arrive by car. Some would come in

through the front entrance unsighted by me before the class started <sup>4</sup>. I liked to have an idea of who I was going to get, just in case the impossible happened.

‘Do you think tonight is the night?’ I said. ‘Will he come tonight?’

‘O’Mailer?’<sup>5</sup>

‘At the back of the class, slashing the air with his sword stick, quoting from unavailable texts as soon as I enter.’

‘Heavens to Murgatroyd, look at that!’

A low-slung lime green shorts car spun into the carpark, *Animal* by Def Leppard blaring out of the stereo until it pulled up. The handbrake crunched and after a brief pause a huge beardy in a double-breasted suit unpacked himself from the car, punched the air and waddled into the building.

‘He’s mine,’ she said. ‘Poetry incarnate. ’Tis fated. He has that magnetically austere Ted Hughes quality about him. The scent of the moors. Bracken stains on his palms. Eyes brimming with baby animals being born. You’re on the edge of a maelstrom, you could easily fall, lose yourself in him, that voice, those eyes. I am, at last, relieved to be a woman.’

‘No, he’s even not ours,’ I said. ‘He’s the MD of a cleaning or catering franchise. Think of it, the mirrored ceilings and cork walls in his bedroom, the stuff under the bed. Look, she’s one of yours.’

A woman with long auburn hair slipped out of a hatchback. Her kitten heels clacked across the tarmac under a billowing scarlet pashmina.

‘Oh no,’ said Frances. ‘“I want to be a lady poet and stand upon a balcony in Bloomsbury”?’

‘And you don’t, right?’

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, only six ever showed. Mr Trevor Chodd and Ms Pravina Mantlestein, the absentees, lingered on the register like ghosts for the duration of the course. I would often wonder, as I skipped over their crossed-out names, if either of them realized what they missed out on here, how they could have been witnesses to history.

<sup>5</sup> **James O’Mailer:** On the night we met, Frances and I, working through a bottle of wine and several Brian Eno albums, drew up a composite of the worst possible person who could attend one of our classes. In this way we came upon James O’Mailer. James O’Mailer would be a literary martinet with James Joyce’s talent and eyeglass, the insight and caustic wit of Flannery O’Connor and the temperament and pugilistic skills of Norman Mailer and he would speak in a way that combined the wisecracking self-confidence of the young Orson Welles and the ornate braggadocio of Shakespeare’s Falstaff. James O’Mailer’s talent would far outstrip my own. I would have nothing to teach him. In front of the world he would reveal me as a hack, a bluffer and a charlatan. So far, James O’Mailer had never showed up in either of our classes. We knew he was out there somewhere, though, patrolling the night with his chihuahuas and swordstick and the killer lines that throbbed through his brain. I often found myself talking about James O’Mailer with Frances to avoid talking about ‘us’ or what happened to ‘us’ or getting back to being ‘us’ now that *Penelope* was on Fred Malone’s desk.

‘It would have to be Florence now.’

‘I’ll have her if you don’t want her.’

‘Nathan, you’re still like a character in a thirties novel who gives all his money to a prostitute.’

‘Yes, I am.’

On the far side of the carpark the backdoors of a white Transit van seemed to forcibly eject a hulking bald man. He sniffed the damp air and the first spits of rain before stomping towards the building, head down, shoulders hunched, hands deep in the pockets of a sheepskin car coat.

‘Now he’s mine,’ said Frances. ‘There’s sensitivity beneath the brutish lumbering gait, a lovely temperament.’

‘The birdman of East Anglia?’

‘Yes, he and Ted will have a duel over my favours. That one’s prose. You can see it a mile off.’

A dodderly old soul, his gabardine overcoat done up to his chin to shield himself from the breeze meticulously checked all the doors of his Volvo before he marched across the carpark as if it were the parade ground at Trooping the Colour. On his way he nodded at a dumpy, middle-aged woman in oatmeal-coloured sweatpants and a brown cardigan as she shuffled out of a battered, beige Fiat Panda. As she followed Trooping the Colour towards the doors below us, she hesitated, taking a forlorn look back at her car, then let off a sigh so loud that I’m sure the lamps flickered.

‘Nathan, I think we have a Sensitive Plant,’ said Francis.

On the night we met, the night we ran away from The Writer Formerly Known as Sharon Plum and Hieronymus Ponce, the Enemy of All that Breathes, and invented James O’Mailer, Frances told me her system for classifying creative writing students. The Folder-Holders, she explained, fall into categories: Minor<sup>6</sup> and Major Arcana<sup>7</sup>. Oatmeal Sweatpants here was a Major, a Sensitive Plant<sup>8</sup>. There’s always a Sensie, at least one.

‘I always wonder what they think they’re going to get here,’ I said.

‘She sees,’ said Frances, ‘a high-ceilinged library with a circle of ornate chairs.’

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<sup>6</sup> **Minor Arcana:** Polite, intelligent, unobtrusive students who are a joy to teach and rewarding to know. Ninety percent of students fall into this category.

<sup>7</sup> **Major Arcana:** Deluded souls and troublesome nutjobs. The Ten Percent of Doom.

<sup>8</sup> **Sensitive Plant:** Type of CW student prone to thinskinness, theatrical stropping out of class and falling in love with wafty past/abroad novels; continually desirous of more feedback/vocally resents feedback; allergic to plotting, planning and preparation. Professional moaner.

‘And crimson velvet drapes that keep the draught from unsettling the fire that crackles purposefully in the grate . . .’

‘And books piled up on the floor.’

‘There’s an understated but definite charge to the atmosphere.’

‘A legendary grouping comes into existence . . .’

‘. . . the Eudora Set . . .’

‘. . . whose crosscurrents . . .’

‘. . . cross-fertilisations . . .’

‘. . . will be analysed by the literary historians of the future.’

‘The tutor will conjure spirits from the vasty deep and impart the how-to secrets of the art, setting them on their way to success and celebrity.’

What was imagined, or what Francis and I imagined might be imagined, or at least what some Folder Holders, and Sensies in particular probably imagined of a short taster course in Adult Ed was what they expected went on somewhere on the other side of the campus from the Eudora Doon. It could be reached by a short walk through the carpark and across the grass in front of the arts centre and up the concrete spiral staircase to a concrete gangway that passes the utilitarian concrete chunks of science departments and pyramid-shaped accommodation blocks. Somewhere along this elevated thoroughfare, with its view of the lake and the treetops, and its bustle of undergrads in their stripy scarves and parkas, is Humanities Faculty I and Humanities Faculty II. If you make your way into Faculty II, on the second floor, you come to the Department of English and Creative Writing and the hallowed chambers of *The MA*<sup>9</sup>, where six years ago I arrived, imagining tall-backed chairs and life-transfiguring conversations and the kiss of success.

‘And what do the Folder-Holders get?’ said Frances. ‘Us.’

‘No one’s going to turn up tonight anyway,’ I said. ‘England are playing Luxembourg.’

‘We’re jaded,’ said Francis. ‘It’s not even started and I’m already jaded. I’m going green with jadedness. I’m lilac to the gills.’

‘It’s always like this now,’ I said. ‘It’ll seem normal in a minute.’

‘That’s all right for you to say. Your autopilot’s already on and you’re going to sell your novel and make loads of money. Me, two volumes of

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<sup>9</sup> *The MA*: Redoubtable, world famous programme, founded in the early 1970s, that jump-started the UK’s creative writing industry; makes 5% of its students, breaks the remainder; faculty cash-cow.

poetry and still flat broke, still single and lilac to the gills with jadedness. I need curing, Nathan.'

'You cure the Arcana, Fran, that's your gift.'

'But not my mission and, yes, Nathan. I cure. You're The Fumigator<sup>10</sup>. There's a kind of male/female contrast going on here. We better go in.'

I picked up my bag. As the weight bumped against my hip, it happened for the first time. A painful pulse jabbed at my temples. For a second, I couldn't quite see straight. Someone had spoken my name, but I couldn't actually remember it being said. The 'than' of the 'Nathan' and the 'ack' of the Flack seemed to buzz between my ears. I looked at Frances and was about to ask her if she'd said something, but clearly she hadn't.

'Don't lie to me,' she said. 'You've got the last-minute terrors, too.'

'Something like that.'

The pain subsided. I thought little of it. Stress has lots of side effects and I was under a lot of stress. I thought that maybe I'd pressurized a nerve when I repositioned the bag. Or I was suffering psychosomatic precursory reactions to the conversation that I knew I was going to have with Frances some day soon about the turning point and the change in the status quo. She strode ahead of me and I followed into the foyer of the Eudora Doon.

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<sup>10</sup> **The Fumigator:** Francis-speak for Nathan Flack. When we lived together I worked as a book doctor, writing reports on unpublished novels. I had gained a reputation for taking on any job, however dirty, nasty or plain unreadably stupid the novel because I was so short of money. *The Truncheons of Humber Vice* was like *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* compared to some of the things I had to assess: novels by sex tourists; by right-wing cranks planning kitchen table revolutions and militia *aktions*; by unwitting misogynists and pitiful bores; by lunatics and Boo Radley-type creatures hiding in attics who hear voices, whose works are written by articulate spirits and novels by accountants and pension fund managers, their low-grade thrillers and alpha male fantasies. One of the worst things about teaching creative writing is that you become party to the things that actually go on in people's heads. It drives you a little mad. You go beyond jaded. They start to whisper to you when you least expect them.

## With Stupidity the Gods Themselves Struggle in Vain

But we stopped almost as soon as we started and both instinctively shunted into the wall of the little passage between the walkway and the foyer. Out front, backdropped by a swathe of plate-glass and concrete pillars, a dozen or so students milled around beneath the striplights, all lost or in a fluster about misallocated rooms. We could pass by them unhindered, no worries. We were wary, though, of their helpmeet. Sharon Plum blocked our rat-run to the stairs as she remonstrated with a tall, eagleish-looking, grey haired woman in a tweed jacket and pearls. As ever, I wasn't sure what I should be calling Sharon Plum now. She changed her name often and, according to Frances had done so recently. Here, she was wearing some sort of identity-specific costume again, though it was a less obvious one than her pizza delivery girl uniforms or her boots-jeans-vest building site garb of functionalism. Sharon is an engineer of human souls. She dresses with the masses, the reading public. Tonight, she'd zipped a rather odd baggy black tracksuit top with white piping tight to her chin and wore prison-white trainers, a 'street' and ironic look in keeping with her new name and her fiction's inevitable about-turn.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> **The Writer Formerly Known as Sharon Plum:** Sharon is a writer, in that she writes things on a word processor, but none of these words, to my knowledge, have ever appeared in print. No book bears the name Sharon Plum or that of her varied aliases on its spine.

'My giddy aunt,' said Frances, 'she looks like she's dealing crack at the Conservative Women's Conference.'

'If she was, would you buy it?'

'Alps of it. So I don't remember anything of the next two hours. Shhh.'

'You're the one bitching, I'm not.'

'She might go away.'

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Neither she, nor her pseudonyms have ever appeared in any anthology, journal, magazine, fanzine or newspaper. She didn't, then, even have a blog, something that always surprised me, given her instincts. As I say, Sharon used a lot of pseudonyms. These she adopts as soon as the literary fashion changes, as if she's always been honourably ploughing her own furrow and suddenly she's part of a movement that's suddenly hot and bleeding edge. When I first met her she was simply Sharon Plum and had for some time been writing feminist magic realist stories of a vaguely Angela Carterish nature. There was a novel called *Scarlet Dante and Chairman Miaow* that did the rounds and never found a loving home. Since then she's reinvented herself and her concerns with every fashion in the book trade. Her first volte-face occurred in the mid-nineties when backpacking thrillers were all the rage. She'd always been 'post-colonial', she told me, and wrote a novel about going on holiday in Spain called *The Towel* under the name Magenta Fleet. After I whinged to her that my then agent, Squinty Hugo had told me that he didn't care what I wrote as long it was set in the 'past or abroad, because that's what they want,' (i.e., the commissioning editors and corporate publishers based in The Arctic), Sharon consoled me by agreeing that this was vulgar. No agent could expect you to write as if you're taking an order for a pizza. She then changed her name to Meryl de Sommelier and penned *Lieutenant Lapislazuli's Lyre*, a love story set against the Nazi occupation of Cyprus. When Hugo passed on this as well, she became Bru Gore and wrote *Flyposting*, a fragmentary story, partly written in dialect that centres on four Edinburgh girls on smack that ends with a cross-double-cross drugs deal. Then came chicklit and poor Bru Gore died young and horribly after ODing on correcting fluid. In her wake came Sharon's inner chick, Tabitha Vacanta who penned *Janet Doubloon's Journal*, in which a pleasant enough but slightly overbearing thirtysomething woman who works as a creative writing teacher worries about her weight, age and daily wordcount and has a few romantic mishaps. Perhaps realizing this was all a tad superficial and needing to get closer to the fringes where the real lives of real people happen, the reaction came as Pauline Thigh, writer of gritty, realist stories of gender identity problems and lesbian awakening (*Cats of Iron and Other Stories*). Pauline didn't last long, though, and probably married Bru Gore in an alternate reality, as Sharon then decided we should be candidly sexy. As Prunella Givit she penned *Sex in the Market Square* in which four local lasses have drinks and some tiffs with several local men. It was during the writing of this I had the infamous 'salacity sells' conversation, followed by a conversation two months later in which she claimed 'salacity is vulgar and hates women' and she'd only been indulging in 'disassociation through over-identification'. Now she was finally going to write what she'd always wanted to write: soft fantasy featuring theological speculation. She was working on something in which an occult, age-old institutional conspiracy underpinned the history of Western Civilization and an apocalyptic medieval fantasy battle decided all at the climax but with streetwise, ordinary characters (hence the tracksuit, I assumed). It was the best story ever, apparently. And she'd changed her name again, but as I stood there watching her give directions to a woman who looked a bit like the eagle out of *The Muppets* I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was though I did know she was serious this time. She'd changed it by deed poll.

‘She’ll never go away. She’ll be at our funerals, shagging the legs of the mourners, sniffing for contacts like a pig after truffles.’

The Writer Formerly Known as Sharon Plum was our boss. She was Head of Creative Writing at the School of Adult Education. She doled out the teaching contracts. She sat in meetings with other people. She went to lunch. She had an office. No one quite knew how she got to sit in that office and leave it for lunch, how she wheedled that one. Sharon is an expert operator, a networker, and a ruthless game player. I often imagined the networking software was imbedded in her brain, a mesh of electrodes and microchips called **plumcam** that analyses and advises: who is to be worked; who is to be undermined. It would be a lit-up green screen visible only to her inner eye, like that scanner in Schwarzenegger’s head in *The Terminator*. Plum, rather tragically, we thought, would do anything to get published. Anything. Anything to associate with the right people. Anything to find the right tack that accorded with the direction of the book trade at the right time. And if you were around Sharon, you ought to be helping Sharon.

This was my problem. We first met just after I finished *The MA* and stayed on to do a little undergrad teaching. Sharon, starved of feedback, asked me to look at her stuff. I looked at it. I made helpful suggestions. Sharon liked my suggestions, changed her pen name and offered me a job teaching in Adult Ed. Around the same time that I started out on this particular adventure a literary agent called Hugo Cornwallis was sniffing around the famous university looking for new writers and somehow ran into Sharon. Sharon mentioned a few names, including her own (or whatever name she was using at the time) and mine. Hugo passed on Sharon, of course, but he signed me up, poaching me from another list. He said big things. He promised. We’ve since parted company; hence *Penelope* was on Fred Malone’s desk, not his.

Sharon, though, seemed to hold it against me for not becoming the next big thing under the auspices of Squinty Hugo and letting her ride my coattails, provide those tasty contacts, those opportunities to schmooze the influential. She’d always seemed over-interested in my tails, I felt, especially before I met Frances at one of her parties. In fact, I met Frances in Sharon’s bathroom – I have never, ever had a relationship with any woman that didn’t start in a bathroom, washroom or some sort of toilet – and Sharon seemed most put out that I hadn’t stayed with her to help with the coattails and that Frances too had failed to audition for a similar supporting role. Sharon’s spoken desire was to be part of a ‘power couple’ and she didn’t

care whether she was coupled with Firework Flack, the squib that until now merely gazed at the firmament, or with twice-published Frances Mink. It didn't really matter. When she was seventeen she used to sit all day outside Jeanette Winterson's house yet she'd marry Jeffrey Archer in a minute. She'd be Dan Brown's slave and wear a French maid's costume for him while she buffed up his silverware and yet still insist that she's a radical feminist. She'd live in the toilet on John Grisham's private jet, a place where I hoped we'd never meet. And given this history of disappointment she took an undue interest in my performance as a teacher. There were always vague threats that she could get someone else, someone with better contacts, a fuller pocket book of contacts in the Arctic for **plumcam** to download. But I could manage Sharon. Sharon was merely Sharon, or was she? Here, though, hesitating in the corridor, aware that I was going to have to stand up and actually talk intelligently for two hours to complete strangers, I really didn't want to field *The Question Two*<sup>12</sup> from Sharon.

'What's she called now?' I whispered.

'Juliet Largo,' said Frances. 'Seriously, I kid you not. Don't ever call her Sharon again. She goes nuts.'

'The Eagle looks like it's landed out there. Maybe we can coolly ghost past her.'

'Operation Ostrich.'

'She won't notice us.'

Sharon's back was turned. The Eagle's head lifted and fell. Side by side now, we adjusted our bags, then I quietly opened the door and we slunk past The Plum and The Eagle out of *The Muppets*. I held my breath until we reached the foot of the stairs that led up to our classrooms and only exhaled

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<sup>12</sup> **The Question Two:** Ephemeral annoyance that comes around about once every four years and lasts for about two months, during which every Jack and Jill, every Jock and Sharon from here to the Arctic will continually buttonhole you with: 'Have you sold your book yet?' Not to be confused with the much more irritating yet ubiquitous **The Question One:** 'What do you write about?' Don't go to parties if you can't handle *The Question One*. The first time it's asked, you're calm and reserved and merely say, 'I don't write about things, I write through them.' The second time, your tongue is dry from the cheap red wine and you mutter something about 'failure, I suppose, big dreams coming to nothing, peculiar lights, I'm a social ufologist, being English is horrible, isn't it?' The third time you'll shout 'fuck off, you're tearing my head off' and then go and cry in the toilet and probably fall in love with a woman stuck in there doing the same.

halfway up when I felt confident that we were out of earshot and her line of sight.

‘I clipped some trees back there,’ I said, ‘but the fuselage is intact and I’m heading back to base.’

‘Well, I hope you are,’ said Frances.

‘Intact?’ I said.

‘No, coming back to base.’

I couldn’t help it and paused on the step. She took one pace ahead and then turned, stopped and looked down at me with her enormous brown eyes. This sort of remark was a Frances stealth tactic for getting me to talk about ‘us’. When I suspended our short-lived relationship of three summers ago and told her that I needed space to write it was a cowardly way of not saying upfront that Frances, despite her brilliance and charm and Jazz Age hair is impossible to be around; or at least she’s impossible to be around once she starts to rely on you. I wouldn’t want to be in her crosshairs if she ever found out that I thought her impossible; or that I’d had another girlfriend while I was writing the novel and the TV scripts. I’d be chopped and dissected into a thousand couplets and stanzas. I’d be hung, drawn and versified. I was already quite suspicious of a poem she’d placed in *Rialto* called *When You Were the Only Boy in the World and I was the Only Girl* and still alarmed by the phrases she underlined in the poetry of Nest Darkle.

‘Fancy a drink later?’ said Frances. ‘I’ll need one, I think.’

I tried not to look shifty. After two glasses of red wine Frances would pull out all our stitches again. She would start going on about coming back with her because she hates the empty flat. I would give in, and once there something horrible would appear, like a retsina bottle, and she’d ever so self-consciously hold a naked flame to the tea-lights on the bookshelves and the coffee table and put on Scott Walker – probably *Always Coming Back to You* from the first album; she knows I’m still an adolescent sucker for that type of sentiment, that song in particular – and then she’d sit crossed-legged in front of me to analyse why she can’t be on her own for long, and it would get very late and we’d get sleepy and a layer would sneak from her shoulder, and for all that time, with its snags and snares and easy temptations, seriously, there might have been messages back at my place waiting to be picked up.

Her nose crinkled and her mouth tensed. I hadn't replied quickly enough, I knew, but it crossed my mind that I really would like a drink after work, especially if the question of 'us' stayed in its kennel, but if it did slope into the house I would just have to be honest and say that I didn't want a relationship with anyone at the moment, even though this, too, would be a dirty great lie. But just as I was about to speak that pain stabbed at my forehead again.

'Ugh.' I dropped my bag. Its thump on the stairs echoed around the foyer.

'Well, by the look on your face,' said Frances, 'the suggestion's repellent.'

'Steady on, old girl,' I said.

'I was only trying to be nice.'

'Wait a minute.'

'"One of these days you'll miss me, honey"?' She turned tail and swept back up the stairs.

Before I could recover my bag and go after her, I heard the voice in my head, the same tone of voice that had spoken my name on the walkway, but this time it was clear and coherent.

Who said that?

My arms stiffened at my sides as I tried to look around for the speaker but my spine and neck were rigid and I found myself flicking my eyes left and right. I saw no one and could feel no presence behind me.

It spoke again.

Who said that?

Said what? I thought.

This. Who said this?

What?

Who said this?

You?

And who am I?

'Nathan!'

A filmy sweat heated my scalp and clung to my cheeks. This was not my inner voice or a daydream. I could hear it, but I didn't think that anyone else could. It was inside my head, unlike the voice had called up from the foyer. I looked down. Sharon Plum, surrounded by sundry eagles and Folder-Holders peered up at me, wagging her hands around. 'Oooooo, Nathan. Have you sold your book yet?'

The filmy sweat froze over. My head shrunk. I struck out my arm and prodded the 'V' sign at the crowd.

'Piss off, Sharon.'

I ran up the stairs before the effect registered. Why did I say that? Why did I say that? Why did I do that? I couldn't see Frances. I wanted to apologize and explain to her but I was already five minutes late for class and I was hearing voices. I always hear voices, but this was a voice I could actually hear, not one that I imagined for the sake of imagining it, for some scene as yet unwritten or column of dialogue.

*Who said that?* said the voice. It was gruff, reverberating, authoritative and between my ears.

What?

With stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain?

I don't know. Oscar Wilde? Richard Madeley?

I did, or at least I whispered them to Friedrich von Schiller.

Who are you?

Why, you've known me forever, Kiddo.

No, I haven't.

Let me introduce myself. James O'Mailer, at your service.

I was stock-still outside my classroom now, hanging in the artificial light. Everything now seemed extra-solid yet simultaneously flimsy and fake, like things do in a dream of childhood places, your first school, the house you grew up in, your baby room. I was becoming a creative writing exercise. I could hear murmur from inside. I could hear murmur inside my head. I waited, tried to work out what was going on. It was merely my imagination running away with me. I controlled my breathing, but until then hadn't realized I was panting. I wiped my face on my sleeve and slicked back my hair. I would look like I'd run to class in a panic. James O'Mailer. Don't be stupid. My imagination running away with me. I vaguely remembered the

Schiller quote from somewhere else. Frances and Plum. First night of term. *The Penelope Tree* and *The Question Two*. Turning points and changes to the status quo. Making me nervous. Stress in a bucket. I waited for the voice to speak again. When it didn't I crept into the classroom, assuming that once I got this over with and launched into some nice, safe icebreaker exercises, it would never speak to me again.

## Are You The He?

Shutting the door behind me, I paused when I hadn't intended to and found myself staring at the backs of the students' heads. They were chatting; at least some of them were chatting. This was a good sign. Sometimes they don't talk to each other. Sometimes they don't talk to each other or to you for the whole course, as was the case with the now-legendary Ipswich Group of Death. I was still sweating, though. The crown of my head and my shirt collar were damp. Even without voices in my head and shouting 'piss off' at Sharon Plum in front of the new cohort, these were the most uncomfortable moments of any course: first contact, then the transition from by day haunting the interior world of the flat, with its grey ashtray light and hammerhead silences to by evening wearing the clothes of instructor, performer and affable guide to this particular underworld.<sup>13</sup>

Rain now drizzled against the black windows. No one seemed to notice me. They murmured. They shifted their shoulders. The room was not like the one Frances and I had conjured in our approximation of a Folder-Holder's fantasy of *The MA*. It was airless and over-lit, with a wall-length blackboard and lines of spine-wrecking plastic chairs scrutinized by the eye

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<sup>13</sup> **Note to Self:** A title; no story yet, no plot, no trigger or stakes and no sense of how this is to be approached. *The Double Life of Nathan Flack*.

of the television that loomed in the corner. It was, in fact, identical to the seminar rooms of *The MA*, except here there would be less rancour and gladiatorialism (not on my watch), and on *The MA* you never have to touch the starfish.

Calmer now, I made my way along the aisle. As I rounded my desk, just as I was about to make sure I was smiling as I took my 'How to Begin' lesson plan and my handouts and the register from my bag, before I could nod and smile at each of the students in turn, especially anyone my internal intelligence gathering system told me was a Sensitive Plant, as you always have to make a Sensie feel loved, just as I was about to weigh up an opening gambit and go either for something formal and professional, like, 'Good evening. Welcome to Prose Fiction. I'm Nathan Flack,' or informal and light, like 'Why are you here, this rain-swept evening? Shouldn't you be watching England get hammered by Luxembourg?' just as I lifted my eyes and fixed my gaze and the heads began to firm-up into faces and I was beginning to anticipate that in a minute or so I was going to kick-off this course by telling them about the schedule and a little about myself and my writing career to date, my temples throbbed.

Look at this merry shower, Flack. Minions of misapprehension, Diana's moonbeams, popinjays to a man and a maiden.

'Oh God, not you again!' I thumped my head with the heel of my hand, and then gasped as I found peering back at me, Trooping the Colour Man, the woman with the pashmina, Lime Green Sports Car, the Bird Man of East Anglia, who this close up, I noticed, wore a white spade-shaded beard that seemed to jab out at me, and next to him the Sensie with the oatmeal sweatpants. The full set. Royal flush. I'd copped the lot.

With their wide eyes, onion-white faces and pursed mouths, they looked like I'd just swanned in and nonchalantly hurled a bucket of cow piss all over them. The old bloke, in particular, gripped the armrests of his chair and shuddered like he was fighting the blast of a wind tunnel.

I pushed out a really mimsy smile and tried to use my internal intelligence gathering network to devise a damage limitation strategy. I could be straight. 'Sorry, there is a fictional character talking audibly in my head. It's a tad disconcerting.' No. I could pretend it was an elaborate exercise. 'Now, get your pens out and rant on the page for five minutes about how rude that was and how humiliated you feel. Get it all out of your system, now.' I could carry on as if it hadn't happened, hoping they'd forget. 'Good evening.

Welcome to Prose Fiction. I'm Nathan Flack.' Or I could scarper, pant and scream, go home and e-mail Sharon Plum and quit, then wait for Fred Malone to sell *Penelope* and meanwhile I could concentrate on my new novel, *The Girl on the Millennium Bridge*. Or I could, instead, apologize and beg their forgiveness, make them feel sorry for me. Never. I could bang my stick on the floor and say, 'writing costs and this is where you start paying' and we could break out into a pre-choreographed dance routine all around the Eudora Doon. Or I could just shrug and say 'rejection is a rite of passage, get used to it.' Before I could open any of these hatches, the door smashed against the wall with a crack.

The shoulders of the students jumped. Their eyes seemed to pounce out at me before en masse they whipped around towards a figure in the doorway. A rotund, fridge-shaped woman marched into the room wearing a fluorescent orange woolly hat forced down over shaggy, unkempt brown hair. She struggled with five or six bulging carrier bags and sprayed chairs in all directions as she found her way to a seat behind the others. At the head of a trail of overturned chairs, the newcomer seemed to spend a long time rummaging in the bags but produced nothing and merely unzipped her electric blue puffa jacket and folded her stumpy arms.

'Are you The He?' she said. 'Are you The He?'

'Pardon,' I said. 'Can I help you?'

'You are The He! At last. I have searched.'

I took a deep breath and forced a smile. My internal intelligence-gathering network computed straightaway that this was a Major Arcana: The Moon-Barker<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> **The Moon-Barker** is the giant among us and the future of literature. This should be recognized at all times. On the appearance of The Moon-Barker, the tutor should start a fund for the commission of a public statue of The Moon-Barker to be erected in the city centre where future generations can lay flowers and hold vigils. The Moon-Barker's arrival signals that the world is now flat and the sun and all heavenly bodies now orbit The Moon-Barker. The struggles of The Moon-Barker to write will be greater and more heroic than those of say, Kafka, the Gulag poet Osip Mandelstam or the state-oppressed writers of Iran or benighted North Korea. Each class should start with a minute's silence to acknowledge the sacrifice of The Moon-Barker. The Moon-Barker will expect twenty-four hour support from the tutor, who only exists to service the needs of The Moon-Barker. Telltale signs: often seen weighed down with heavy bags; a life of perpetual calamity (lightning will not strike merely twice but on the hour); obsession with rubbish bins; self-destructive networking skills; no boundaries.

It wouldn't be the same without a Moon-Barker. Moon-Barkers can be of great value. They prevent the dead, dead silences (the Ipswich Group of Death was crying out for a Barker). They force the other students into anti-Barker alliances where otherwise they might be cagey with each other for weeks. Frequently, Barkers provide a working example of how not to write and how not to think and what delusions of grandeur not to entertain. In some ways, the tutor needs The Moon-Barker, though a Barker can also ruin the tutor's life. Here, though, her entrance gave me an opportunity, even though it did strike me that I, hearer of voices, was a bit hypocritical for doubting the faculties of anyone else.

'This is Prose Fiction,' I said. 'Are you here for prose fiction?'

'Thank The He,' she said. 'I am arrived here now and it took me such a time to find and you are The He.' She took a pocket watch on a chain from inside the puffa jacket, stared into it with a concern like that of a wary new mother checking on a sleeping baby. Looking up, she said, 'You may continue. Later, we discuss.'

Now I had The Moon-Barker's gracious permission, I picked up the thread. 'OK. OK, OK,' I said, flourishing my hands and pacing a little behind my desk to recover my equilibrium. 'Given that this has been the most unusual start to any class ever, you should all have something to write about tomorrow. Good evening. Welcome to Prose Fiction. I'm Nathan Flack. And why are you here anyway, shouldn't you be watching England get hammered by Luxembourg?'

The heads in the front row seemed to regain some of their anticipatory smiliness. Lime Green Sports Car Man suddenly turned to The Moon-Barker and said, 'Hey love, what's in the bags?'

The Barker leant forwards. 'Well, I tell you . . . ?'

'Excuse me,' I said. 'Is there going to be another interruption? Anyone else going to fire themselves into the room through a howitzer? No . . . Wait for a bit. Hold on. No. OK, as I was saying . . . Welcome to Prose Fiction. I'm Nathan Flack, and to start off here I think it's best that I tell you something about myself and how I come to be involved with this course.'

Now that I had their attention I took a deep breath before I launched into my little speech about myself, my well-honed, very abridged

autobiography that omitted anything about my childhood traumas<sup>15</sup> and illnesses or anything true and interesting, my self-deprecating version that concentrated on trial and error, the translatable material. I opened my mouth and just as I was about to say that for as long as I could remember I only ever wanted to be a writer, the throb came at my temples.

And why on earth was that, Flack? Why on earth would you of all people feel that this was your calling?

‘Because,’ I said, ‘even when I was seven I was writing my own comics, wasn’t I? *The Astounding X-Ray Man*. The *Jamie Regal* stories.’

And they were your best work. It’s been downhill since then.

I realized I’d turned and was remonstrating with the rain drops on the black windows. My head was hot. I swallowed a breath and made myself look at the class, at their stiff postures and the concerned restlessness of their faces. My mouth made some sort of raspberry-cum-whistling sound, as if I’d merely stumbled over my words.

‘What I was trying to say,’ I said, ‘is that I always wanted to be a writer, from a very young age. Always scribbling and drawing. Couldn’t help it. When I was fourteen

I wrote in purest biro a 400-page fantasy epic called *Quest of the Hellbonds*.’

I paused, for the voice to come and for anyone who wanted to leave to do so. They could probably get home in time for the second half of England versus Luxembourg. Nobody picked up their folders and walked out. They just sat there looking nervous. But they always look nervous. When the voice didn’t come, I continued and found myself kind of smiling.

‘Later still I wrote poems with titles like *Highland Fling of Love* and *Elegy for Us Under Cedar Trees* that I gave to the girls on the bus. And you can laugh, you’re laughing, I can see, I’m laughing, it’s hilarious, but you have to own your early forays, because they are all stations on the way. You have to start somewhere.’

I perched myself on the edge of the desk and hung my hands between my knees, the tried and tested creative writing tutor’s informal pep talk position.

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<sup>15</sup> I won’t go here at all. Judging by the reaction to my third novel, *The Best Man*, no one’s interested.

‘The thing is, although I always wanted to write and was always thinking of stories, I didn’t think people like me became writers. I thought writing was for other people.’

It is, said James O’Mailer. You were right all along.

Balling my fists, I tried to ignore him.

‘Writers were from some other place, a special place, a place gated off and restricted. And I made excuses not to write. I didn’t have a desk. I didn’t know how to start. I ought to get a career first.’

And what a career you had? I was there. I remember every barnstorming minute of it.

I knitted my fingers together and kept looking at the group, surprised that the pashmina woman and the Sensie were taking notes. Hoping that I looked like I was merely pausing for effect I dug my fingers into the backs of my hands and concentrated on my temples. Some sort of cough or yelp clicked in my skull, then my ears popped and a warm wave passed through me. Everything seemed to lift.

‘I took a degree,’ I said, ‘and a succession of jobs in publishing, but I constantly felt that I should be doing something else. I was dreamy and unfocused at work, and I couldn’t find anything that I wanted to do that didn’t seem pointless. Know that feeling?’ Nobody answered. The voice didn’t break in. He’d gone. I was back on track. The moment of madness had subsided. ‘No. OK. Just me then.

‘Anyway, three things happened. I was about twenty-five. I actually started to write, just in exercise books after work; I got fired, excellent! Which gave me nine months on the dole during which time I wrote my first novel; and I met the writer Sebastian Harker, the author of *Snow on Parnassus* and *Kill Cyclops*, and after the second of his workshops I attended, he said to me, “you have it, Nathan, you have the voice.”’

I paused, unclasping my hands. The group seemed to have shuffled in closer together.

‘You’ll be pleased to know,’ I said, ‘that Sebastian has agreed to come and talk to you at our residential weekend at the end of the course.’

‘Oh how wonderful,’ said the woman in the pashmina.

‘Never heard on him,’ said Lime Green.

‘Look him up then,’ I said.

He sniffed. I continued, rattling through the rest. Within a year of meeting Sebastian, I was publishing short stories in magazines. Rather than get another office job and stare out of the window dreaming about the desk at home and *The Drowners*, the novel I was working on, and avoiding any mention of Johanna and what happened between us, I simply said that I bought myself some time to write and took *The MA in Creative Writing* here. I was asked to stay on and do a little teaching, which led to book doctoring work, all of which allowed me to keep the mornings free to write. I'd sold twenty short stories, written four novels and written for television.

Trooping the Colour's face had crinkled, giving it a walnutlike texture. He huffed and obviously wanted to interrupt me.

'Wow,' said Pashmina.

'What did you write on the telly then?' said Lime Green.

'I think you mean, *for the television*,' said Trooping<sup>16</sup>.

'It was called *Gentlemen's Relish*<sup>17</sup>,' I said.

'Oright. That was good that. Loved it to bits.' He folded his arms high on his chest and nodded around the room.

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<sup>16</sup> Internal intelligence gathering network sent out a code red. We have a **Grammar-Stammerer** in range. A Grammar-Stammerer is more of a pain than a Moon-Barker. Every single thing I said from now on in would be contradicted and every day my inbox would be full of complaining messages from the Stammerer. Any writer or novel I referred to would be spluttered over as indicative of a decline in 'standards' and the twilight of Western Civilization. The Grammar-Stammerer is obsessed only with usage, syntax and the formal conventions of English and pre-war, public school Latinate grammar at that. The Stammerer is almost universally male, elderly and votes for the UK Independence Party. The Stammerer needs rules when in the writing of prose fiction there are none (principles, yes; rules, no). The Stammerer writes cleanly and clearly but never creatively because he can't write about people and can't withhold judgement. The Stammerer tells but never shows. The Stammerer wants to switch places with the tutor and take the class himself. The Stammerer here was no doubt champing at the bit because in my little speech there I'd used low and beastly colloquialisms and wretched slang terms that wouldn't even be acceptable in the public bar of the Tinker Shooter's Arms in Seething.

<sup>17</sup> **Gentlemen's Relish**: a short-lived, universally derided cable channel drama about three stud-hunks working for a male escort agency called, funnily enough, Gentleman's Relish. It was centred on Sylvester 'Sly' Ramos-Pintos: a right dirty, ripe-and-ready, half-Portuguese, half-east London geezer shagmonster in it for the fun and the riot and the birds when one of his co-stars does it for the money (wife, kids, debts etc) and the other is a bit pretty, a bit confused and a bit of a bender, and deep-down has a thing about Sly. Squinty Hugo had found me this writing job. My inability to turn out what the production company really wanted was one of the main reasons we fell out. I was still living off the fee (just about; I needed to sell *The Penelope Tree* sharpish).

‘Well, I only did two episodes,’ I said. ‘It wasn’t a big deal. Anyway, that’s me. That’s how I got here. Any questions?’

Trooping put up his hand.

‘Reginald,’ he said, as if offering his services to a high-ranking police officer at a crime scene. ‘Reginald Carnaby. I listened to what you were saying there, and although it’s all very interesting, it seems to me that you’ve done nothing in your young life apart from write. Now, I’ve always been told that one writes about what one *knows* and . . .’

My face pushed a smile at him. I wanted to say that if that was so, Grammar-Stammerers ought to stick to writing about syntax, though I couldn’t, having developed a long fuse and, post *The MA*, prior to this evening, an addiction to politeness in class.

‘Hang on,’ I said. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’ll be talking about ideas and where they come from in a minute. I’d just like us to get to know each other first.’

‘You see, Jane Austen only wrote about what she knew. She only wrote about the world in which she lived in . . .’

‘Reginald. We’ll move onto to this, I assure you.’

He clawed his knees and his face tightened until it looked like it belonged on the top of a walking stick. Even though he relaxed, he kept staring at me as if storing up a series of cutting observations to be used when he inevitably wrote a complaint to Sharon Plum. I stared back, trying to smile, be friendly, but the throb bashed my temples and I realized I was now scowling, my mouth hanging open. I knitted my hands together and concentrated and no voice came. No one spoke. I looked at the clock. I’d been here for years already, I felt. It was a quarter past seven.

## A Stealer of Comforts

‘Well,’ I said. ‘That’s enough about me. What I’d like to do now is go through the register and I’d like you to tell us about yourself. Let us know what you do and how much writing you’ve done, what sort of things you like to read and maybe what you want to achieve on this course. Take your time. We’re not in a hurry.’<sup>18</sup> I looked down at the register. ‘So, do we have a Trevor Chodd?’

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<sup>18</sup> Never do what I am about to do here – list your principle characters in a static situation without movement, thurline or scene. During my long pre-*Gentleman’s Relish* stint as a book doctor/fumigator I noticed that this often happened in would-be ladlit novels where a group of trendy wideboys is introduced thus: *In his local*, *The Melons*, *he met his mates*. *Shagger* (known as *Shagger* because he liked to shag a lot of birds), *Skag* (known as *Skag* because he liked to shoot up lots of heroin), *Porno* (called *Porno* because he had a lot of dirty mags in his flat), *Hard Drive* (called *Hard Drive* because he had a lot of porn on his computer), *Dog* (called so because he went with a lot of dogs/ or because he looked a bit like a mongrel) and *Mikey* (a name typed on a page). Here, though, things actually happened like this, so if I want to stick to my instincts as a writer and tell the truth I’m a bit stymied. Similarly, earlier, I could have avoided giving us first sight of Reg etc as Frances and I met up before class, but Frances was being so entertaining and, again, it happened like that. For maximum impact, to foreshadow what occurred subsequent to this, I really should have started with O’Mailer. O’Mailer was the start of it. Everything afterwards would be coloured by my struggle with O’Mailer.

I scanned across the line, through Lime Green to Bird Man, through Reg to Pashmina to the Sensitive Plant, who at that moment looked like a chasm of fear had opened up beneath her, but it was the Barker who thrust up her hand.

‘Er, you’re Trevor Chodd?’ I said.

Her chair grated against the floor as she struggled up. The bags rustled and slid against one another. She ripped off her woolly hat and let her hair sprawl across her shoulders and then she fixed her eyes on me, her deep-set, almost whiteless eyes with glinting, glassy pupils.

‘I am the Erika Gretsch.’

‘OK Erika, you can get the ball rolling,’ I said. ‘Tell us about yourself.’

‘Hi, I am Erika, and I am an Aries and The Herald, and I am not from England but from Königsburg in Eastern Prussia but in the beginning I was from a city called Aleppo.’

Reg turned his head, his chin shaking with disgust. ‘That’s in *bloody* Syria.’

‘Reg,’ I said, lowering my hand and spreading my fingers. ‘Briefly, Erika, we’ve a lot to get through.’

‘Yes, I was born in Syria, which is a most terrible place with a dreadful, dreadful hot weather and I was born there and when I was eleven I found myself separated from my Mutti in a street full of baskets and pots and camels, and there I wandered into a stable, and there was a wise woman sitting on a lumpy of hay, and she said to me suddenly, she said, you, you girl, go away from here because you are the Herald of The He and must serve him with your words.’

‘Jesus wept,’ huffed the Sensie, and fell against her armrest, shutting her eyes.

‘Erika,’ I said. ‘Just keep it concise. What do you do? What do you write? What sort of things do you read?’

‘No. After all this time, it obviously does not matter to you. Are you The He?’ She gave me a look more venomous than disgruntled, then sat down and began to poke about in the bags again.

‘There’s only one question we want answered, love,’ said Lime Green. ‘What you got down there?’

Erika looked up, about to speak, about to climb to her feet again. I had to nip this in the bud.

‘People,’ I said, trying to inject as much unflappable joviality into my voice as possible. ‘We’ve got all term to get to know each other, so please here, just the salient facts. Less is more, as no doubt I’ll be saying over and over again from now on in, I should imagine. Now, do we have a Frank Denbigh in the house?’

The Bird Man of East Anglia, the man with the white spade beard sat up and laced his pudgy fingers together. A pink flush ballooned across his cheeks as he smiled broadly and fondly, and for a second, if you could ignore the beard, he looked like a man-sized baby, all ruddy and smooth-skinned and happy-to-see-Daddy.

‘Hi everyone, I’m Frank. Er . . . I used to be an ambulance man, until I retired three years ago.’ He paused. We waited. It’s not easy this bit. Everyone is allowed a little shyness. I kept up my smile. Everyone was watching him. He stared back at them until his frame jerked and he slammed down his fist on the armrest. The wood vibrated. Everyone ducked. His face crunched into a mask of terrible frustration and his voice became more hiss than accent.

‘I’m a bitter man, I’m an angry man, I’ve got no friends.’

And with that he unclenched his fist, looked at me beseechingly for credence, and then flipped his hand as if to say ‘move on to the next one’.<sup>19</sup>

My stomach crawled as I struggled for something to say. There was no sound in the room apart from the rustle of bags from the second row. Then Pashmina woman clicked together the sides of her shoes and as she straightened herself she started to clap, not rapturously, not bravo-encore, but respectfully, impressed until everyone followed suit.

‘That was brave,’ said Lime Green. He put his hand on Frank’s shoulder and gripped it manfully.

No, don’t do it, I thought, please, this is not AA or a support group. There are no Twelve Steps here. Don’t encourage him. He’s in the wrong room. He should be lying on a divan listening to a calm voice ask questions about his toilet training. He should be weeping in a counsellor’s conservatory with the yuccas and vines, nursing a complimentary cup of free trade decaffeinated tea. I waited for the clapping to subside and the blush to drain from Frank’s face and his gummy smile to recover.

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<sup>19</sup> **Wrong-Roomer:** Type of CW student who really needs to see a therapist of some sort. Expect confessions and disconcerting opinions.

‘OK, OK, OK,’ I said. ‘OK and er, thank you for that, Frank. Thanks very much. And Chodd, do we have a Trevor Chodd? No. No Chodd. No. OK. So you . . .?’ I indicated Lime Green. ‘. . . must be M. MacMahon. What’s your story?’

‘I’m Mac McMahon. Estate agent by day . . .’ Howling glee lit up his face as he punched the air. ‘Best-selling author by night.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘And what’s the basis for that statement?’

‘I used to be in a rock band, me. Drummer out of Ruiner. Played all over the world. “Night of Medusa.” Remembers that?’

‘No,’ I said, and I was pretty sure, judging by the bemused faces ahead of me that no one had heard of Ruiner either.

‘Oh come on, guys,’ said Mac. ‘Classic British Heavy Metal band, us. Straight outta Birmingham. We were big in Europe, anyway. Scandinavia. Got to number twenty-one in the Norwegian charts.’

‘Any ideas about what you want to achieve from this course, Mac?’ I said.

‘Well, this bloke a few years back, right, we were on tour, or like we were halfway through this tour and it, well, I won’t go right into it, but the tour got pulled, the kids were too into death by then, and we were in this hotel in Spalding for three days and it went off and when it stopped, this weird bloke comes out of nowhere and says to me, “you will be a writer, Mac”, so I went off and retrained as an estate agent, moved to Norfolk, lovely part of the world, but that’s why I’m here now.’ He stroked his beard against his throat. ‘I am going to write a novel.’

‘Have you got a clue, I mean, an idea?’ I said.

‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘You might think, Mac, that a novel is a big undertaking. If you’ve not written before, you might think about cutting your teeth on something shorter.’

An irritated look passed across Mac’s face. His hair was long at the back, and smeared into gelled-up spikes, which all made sense now.

‘No, you don’t understand, Nate. If I can write a drum part in a minute, I can write a novel in a week.’

There was no point going into this.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘And what are your favourite books, Mac?’

'First Blood, Spinal Tap and The Matrix Reloaded.'

'Those are films,' said the Senseie.

'Yes, they are,' I said. 'Books, Mac, novels?'

'Have you actually *read* any?' said Reg.

'No,' said Mac. 'Well, I've read *Jaws*, but it was shit.'

I found myself chewing on the joint of my thumb to keep the laugh indoors. Eventually, I said, 'Well, it's hard to write if you don't read. Perhaps you ought to start by . . . ?'

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

'Try some of the classics, Dickens maybe.'

'Classics is shit.'

'Or try something more modern, maybe like the sort of things that you'd like to write, then at least . . . ?'

'No, I don't read. It's all shit.'

'I think you'll find that writers tend to read.'

'I don't read. I don't read. I don't read. I've tried. It's all shit.'

'So if some young kid came to you, Mac, and said that he wanted to be a rock drummer, but he'd never picked up the sticks, or even heard a song before, but he'd heard that U2 have a vacancy for a drummer, what would you say?'

A ripple coursed from the tip of his beard to the underside of his drooping stomach.

'Go for it, sonny-me-lad.'

I blew up my fringe, then checked the line of faces. Mac was sitting imperiously now, arms folded, head up, as if he'd proved me utterly wrong. The others seemed to be looking to me to carry on with this, apart from the still-rummaging Erika, but having encountered several Literature-Deniers<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> **Literature-Denier** – Breed of CW student, relatively uncommon, with an almost pathological dislike of all printed matter, no ability to see the quality of any novel, play or poem, ignorant of all subtlety of language or situation, sees only the inherent emptiness in all literary works, yet is in possession of tremendous confidence and believes that he or she can succeed and will make a shit-load of money and receive a multitude of sexual favours. Will insist on reference for *The MA* at some point. Most likely to write a story that features the tutor undergoing some humiliating ordeal or assault.

before, I knew I was entering unstoppable-force-versus-immovable-object territory, and I didn't want to get too snagged. Hopefully my course would puncture Mac's preconceptions. If his prose were just a little better by the end, or even if he merely came to a realization that's it's harder than simply wanting to do it, I would have done my job. Also, anger was beginning to rile my stomach and my ears were heating up and then the throb came at my temples.

No, no, no, no, no, Flack, no, somehow I surmise that it won't be like that.

Oh God. I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my fists until my ears popped and I realized that to the class it must look like I was battling with a particularly vicious bowel problem.

'Good stuff, Mac,' I panted. 'We'll see how you get on.'

I asked for Mantlestein; I wished for Mantlestein. Kind, keen, straightforward Pravina Mantlestein. I got no Mantlestein.

'Reg,' I said, hearing my voice level with formality. 'Your turn.'

'Yes, you seemed to miss me out earlier. Surely C comes before the D of Denbigh and the Ch of Chodd.'

'Sorry, go on.'

He propped himself up on the armrest of his chair with his elbow. A kind of boyishness or sprightly quality came over him. He checked both sides, beaming a smile that I'd only seen before on the faces of old guard novelists wheeled out in lecture theatres or festival amphitheatres, a smile of relief on the face of someone happy that he's still remembered somewhere, what with his novels out of print and his appearance on the shortlist of one of the initial late-sixties Booker Prizes long forgotten, his reputation dependent on PhD students eager to find something obscure to cut their teeth on.

'As I said earlier, I'm Reginald Carnaby, and I'm a retired headmaster, and I've always wanted to be a writer, and since I retired from active life I've dedicated myself to writing something that I think will be of great use to future generations ...'

A sudden feeling of déjà vu weighed me down – I'd heard this a million times before; it was in the preface of the 58<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Grammar-Stammerers Handbook* – and I have to admit I glazed over. I found myself thinking about Sylvester 'Sly' Ramos-Pintos striding through a gallery in a

stately home, stripped to the waist, dressed in only leather trousers, his pack of muscle sidwinding between his shoulder blades, deshabillées debutantes and under-dressed underwear models strewn around the room spread out and waiting for him. Then Pashmina's legs distracted me – beneath the pashmina of crimson and flame, she wore a short black dress more suitable to the cocktail hour or a networking soiree, and there was a strip of adorable leg on show between the hem and her knee – and I was speculating on something unprofessional when Reg's voice interjected again, a sound like that of a distant buzzsaw, the sound of men doing DIY in a yard over the back, behind your house, when you're a kid and it's Sunday and you've been out with the other boys in the street, but you were bored and disconnected and came back to read an HG Wells or John Wyndham book or *I am Legend* by Richard Matheson or something. The buzzsaw voice grew louder and I blinked at her knees and let my gaze travel up to her face and her titian, wavy hair. She was staring back at me. The buzzsaw voice clamoured and I felt all the liquid in my body – blood, lymph, water, stomach acid, brain fluid – start to evaporate and my extremities wizen and I could imagine the expression on my face and my ashen, pallid skin tone, and it must have been the same expression that I saw on Pashmina's, and as I scanned the line, on Sensie's, and Frank's and Mac's and even Erika's.

'My novel,' Reg said, 'is about a rather crusading headmaster and how he deals with the various challenges put to him by the social changes of the nineteen-sixties and how he fights a rather valiant rearguard. And it's a love story too, which I'm basing on my Darling Dear and myself.'

'That sounds very interesting, Reg,' I said, my autopilot kicking in. 'I look forward to reading it. Swiftly moving on.' I gestured to the end of the line. 'And which one of you two is Doctor Jane Vest?'

Pashmina placed her hand to her chest. 'That's me,' she said, and she blushed and stalled and gave me a pleading look.

'Are you a medical doctor?' I said, trying to help her out.

'No, PhD in physiology. But what I'd really like to do is be a writer and write full time. That's my dream. So, I kind of feel that this course is really important to me. I really do. I'd really like to give up work next year and just write. That's all I want. I can just see myself doing it all day in a cottage with just a cat for company.'

My spirits dropped. I'd hoped that Doctor Jane wouldn't fall into any Major Arcana category, but the cottage-and-cat statement marked her out as

a Romantic Typist<sup>21</sup>. The pashmina was a dead give-away, in any case. Pashminas, long diaphanous scarves and crushed velvet coats are a uniform of sorts for Rom-Ts and all other dreamers and delicates. Then again, I could work with a Rom-T. I just needed to knock the romance out of them. Come round to mine and I'll show you the romance. Come round to mine at six am on a winter's morning, when breath hangs visible in the room like ectoplasm and I can't feel my feet and the heater's a joke and the pipes are groaning and shaking the draining board so hard that the crockery is smashing into the sink, and the rising damp on the stairs has frozen and leaving the flat is like *Touching the Void* or *The Birthday Boys*, and I kippered the cat long ago with my thirty a day habit, and am desperate for the post and for something good to happen to me, and I'm trying to winnow out 250 words because otherwise the day will seem pointless, and then Squinty Hugo phones, his voice now an elemental part of the weather, and starts droning on about marketing and profiles and the tightening of the book trade and what *they* want, and he does this once a month for two years until that time he tells you that your scripts for *Gentleman's Relish* are not the 'posh porn' *they* wanted, and then sends you an e-mail saying that there's nothing he can do for you, chin up, best of luck, and you go out and smoke a fag on a park bench and watch the fronds of snow melt and fall from the branches.

The best thing I could do for Doctor Jane was disillusion her, gently, gently, of course. The thing I hate most about teaching is that ninety-nine percent of the time I come as a hatchet man to the students, a stealer of comforts, the unceasing complicator, the raiser of the bar. More. More. More. Closer. Closer. Closer. *Show*. Can't see this. Can't feel this. Don't get

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<sup>21</sup> **Romantic Typist (Rom-T)**: category of CW student, frequently female, though the 18-25 year old male is also susceptible (minus the underwear issues: see below). The Romantic Typist is less abrasive than a Literature-Denier, a Grammar-Stammerer and some Wrong Roomers, though requires a similar kid gloves approach as a Sensitive Plant. A Romantic Typist entertains grand illusions. Writing is not so much the telling of stories, but the attainment of status and the escape from perceived disappointments or routine drudgery. The Romantic Typist feels that she will not be taken seriously unless she is recognized as a writer and will tell all and sundry about her works in progress, frustrations and expectations. The Romantic Typist will try very hard and is certainly earnest, but confuses the process with something to do with being taken out to lunch, the wearing of La Perla underwear, and the standing on balconies in a chiffon dress, whilst sipping white wine and looking wistful. The Romantic Typist shares with the Sensitive Plant a tendency to insist that the tutor would only understand if he or she dropped all critical parameters and just accepted the work as the writer intends. We all have an inner Rom-T. Most of us outgrow it, as we do not standing up for ourselves, reading door-stopper science fantasy novels, listening to Pink Floyd and masturbating all day and all of the night.

this. Go back and do it again. Start again. Replan. Replot. Refashion. Rewrite. Rewriting is writing. Writing is a way of life and a state of mind, not a job option or career path. It is not a way to stop commuting. You will not regain your self-respect. This helps a Rom-T and most Minor Arcana Folder-Holders. For the other Majors, I wasn't so sure I could help them at all.

'Have you written much already, Jane?' I said.

'I have. I really want to get into the women's market. I just like things with a bit of spice and a damned good sense of humour. I do hate the phrase, but I'd like to get into chicklit.' She sat back and hunched up. 'You're looking at me funnily.'

'No, I'm not. Sorry. Go on.'

'Then I also write, well, I don't like the word either, but I write erotica.' She held her hair in a bunch at her ear that if she pulled on any harder she'd rip out.

'That's er . . . quite diverse,' I said. 'Thank you very much, Jane. Nice to have you here.' I started my pacing again. 'Maybe before we go on, I ought to say that all these ideas that you might carry about what a writer is like or what writing is going to bring you, lose them. They will only distract you. Writing is mainly work, OK, it's hard work, it's a slog and a grind and a worry. It's not about cottages and cats. It's not about future generations. It's not about publishing. It's too mysterious for that, OK?'

'I'll try,' she said. She let go of her hair and it bounced back into shape. Her hand fell to her lap and she started to scribble quickly in her exercise book.

'I've already got a cottage,' said Mac, 'and a cat. It's called Four. After *Led Zep Four*.'

'Do you spell that F-O-U-R,' I said, 'or One-V?'

'Dunno, just Four.'

'OK, OK, OK, who's last on the list?' Must be Oatmeal-Sensie. I checked for the name. I double-took. I bit my lip. I swallowed my breath and for the life of me tried to keep my voice even and unruffled. 'You must be . . . er . . . Cynthia Wadge?'

She crossed her legs. The oatmeal colour of her sweatpants looked extra bland in the striplights and one of her feet twitched feverishly.

‘Well, after what you’ve just said, I don’t think I want to tell you anything about myself at all.’

‘Oh, c’mon, Cynthia. You’re among friends here.’

‘No, I’m just Cynthia. That’s all I want to say.’ She hunched up again, her foot stilling as she lost her hands in her brown cardigan. Worry balls were lodged in the pockets.

Well, there wasn’t much I could do about a Sensie. If I’d said something else, the something else would have been her reason for shutting down. I clapped my hands in a way that I hated, then said thank you to the class. Sitting on the edge of the table, I briefly summed up the course outline, saying that the first hour of each session would be given up to discussing the previous week’s homework and the second would involve an exercise and a mini-lecture from me. I ran through the assessment criteria and the details of the residential. So there they all were, my new flock, folders out, grinning and eager. They and I had survived thus far and only two of them, Reg and Erika, looked like they wanted to kill me. Only 30%. Not bad in the circumstances. Totally manageable. Now we could get on with it. How to begin? Cut to the chase. Appeal to their vitals. I told them where the coffee machine lived and gave them a full fifteen minutes to recharge and slag me off.

As I sat in my chair behind the desk and waited for voices, a familiar feeling came over me, a down-dragging sense of loneliness and ennui that I’d forgotten about during the summer vacation. There’s a melancholy, the sort of melancholy you might romanticize in a short story or novel coda that seems far more unsettling in lived life, when there’s no context or structure, no sparkle of hope in the rainfall, none of the consolations of fiction. Teaching creative writing is a melancholy occupation. Continuously, at the back of your mind, you know that you should be writing. Your time would be better spent writing. The rain that glimmered and splashed on the black windows now should have done so on my window at home. I should have been pushing on with my new novel about the girl on the Millennium Bridge and waiting for news. With my luck, news would come when I wasn’t in, and Fred Malone would leave no message and neglect to ring back. My big break would be no more than a dead blip on the ansamachine.

Only an hour to go. Then I could return home. There might be messages. And the class would be easier from now on. What a gang, though, what a crew. I was going to have to earn my alms here. Then I experienced a

tremor of fear when I reminded myself that in December I would have to spend a whole weekend trapped with these people in the gloomy, gothic confines of Kollocks Grange in the northerly outer reaches of The Shire<sup>22</sup>.

Don't be such a sourpussy, I told myself. They're all right. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just run-of-the-mill Folder-Holders and Leisure-Learners. Writing here is just a form of socializing and entertainment. It's not serious. I reminded myself that my job was to impart a sense of first principles and offer some editing tips, just like Sebastian had done for me. That's all I could do. That's all any CW tutor can do. Can't give anyone a voice. Can't give anyone ideas. Can't give anyone the luck or the breaks or the networks.

But, I told myself, it was a small group, nice and compact, and maybe Chodd and Mantlestein would turn up next week, and there are always Sensies and Rom-Ts, and frequently Grammar-Stammerers and Wrong-Roomers, and I had coping strategies and ways of teaching them all. At least I didn't have any of the really dodgy Majors I'd come across during my time<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> **The Shire:** Flack-speak for Norwich and Norfolk. When trying to sell a contemporary English novel, the setting is important. According to Squinty Hugo, unless a novel is set in one of a few elite places it will be 'tricky to market'; hence the trade's preference for novels set in the past or abroad. London, Manchester, Liverpool and for some reason, Brighton, these are places that have a marketable charge. Stories don't happen in Leicester, Mansfield or Stoke. They don't happen in Hastings, Glossop or even Penge. It wasn't the writing in *The Truncheons of Humber Vice* that led to its rejection by every major publishing house in The Arctic (no one would have read as far as the lines I quoted earlier). It was the river that runs through it. I always find this odd, as most of us live in places like Leicester, Mansfield and even Penge. But I couldn't possibly think about setting my story in Norwich. Although there is a long history of stories set in 'East Anglia' – East Anglia evokes a winning combination of bleak watery glamour and grotesque peasants– Norwich or Ipswich seem provincial and uninteresting. I could have got around this by using a municipal pseudonym, like Cowrich or Fenchester, or by pretending that all this actually happened to me in St Petersburg in 1912 or in some microcelebrity's penthouse overlooking Battersea (there is, of course, an alternative version set in the penthouse but so this more marketable idea sidetracks no one, I'll give away the end. I murdered Zizi but only so I didn't have to ghostwrite her autobiography, *Dangerously in Love*). By borrowing a place-name from Tolkien, though, I not only manage to avoid the 'N' word, I might fool the unwary into thinking that this story is a soft fantasy in the epic mode that features magic objects, hooded figures and an apocalyptic medieval fantasy battle that decides all at the climax

<sup>23</sup> I was relieved not to have in our midst here: a **Ponce**; a **Trustafarian**; a **Child of the Raves**; a **Retired Married Couple Who Used to Run a Concentration Camp**; an **MC Text-Speak**; a **Poverty Pornographer**; a **Shout-in-yer-Face Ian Paisley Voice**; a **Chestwig of the North**; a **Can't Spell, Won't Spell**; a **Fan-fiction Geekface**; a **Script Slipper**; a **Pratchett Hat**; a **Princess on a Hill**; a **Theory Wanker**; an **Author Stalker**; a **Masonic Ex-Copper with Streets to Clean**; a **Financial Journalist of Our Times**; a **Fringe Cringer**, a **Third Monkey**, a **Penguin with Weasel's Fur**; a **Hank Fantasy** or

Famous last words, said James O'Mailer, uttered by the not very famous.

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anyone who'd asked whether I could guarantee them a three-book publishing deal at the end of our eight weeks or where they could buy my novels.

## Nothing is Lost

I had my head pressed to the tabletop, unable to pop my ears, reduced to hoping that I had an ear infection, some imbalance or inflammation of the fluid in my ears that was causing distortions I interpreted as language when the door opened. I lifted my chin and opened my eyes, fully expecting the normal crocodile of nervy, chatting double-ups carrying plastic cups of weapon's grade coffee, but some sort of kerfuffle occurred. Reg, Jane and Cynthia scrambled into the room and scuttled to their chairs as if they were fleeing from something occult that had manifested itself out there in the corridors. They were followed by a slower, more composed Frank, who was grinning like he'd just won the biggest, hairiest coconut at the coconut shy at the grandest, bestest fair ever to hit the little village at the edge of the world. Oh my God, I thought, what has he told them about himself?

'That's a bit rough,' he said.

'What is?' I said. The other three cowered and rubbed their arms as if freezing.

'I don't know what it is, but it's a bit rough,' said Frank.

'It's disgusting,' said Reg.

'What is it?'

‘I don’t want to say in front on these lovely young women.’

‘I’ve seen some things,’ said Jane. ‘I don’t usually get rattled, but . . .’

Inside the room now, Mac was standing deep in conversation with Erika. She held one of her carriers with both hands, pulling its mouth open wide so he could look into it. He stared pensively and rubbed his beard, his back slightly arched, as if forcing himself to keep his eyes fixed on whatever it was that lurked and glimmered down there.

They both seemed to then realize that they were being watched. Erika closed the bags and fell in behind Mac as he sauntered back towards his desk.

‘That’s just given me a blinding idea,’ he said.

‘What is it?’ I said.

‘I don’t want anyone copying my ideas, Nathan.’

‘In the bag?’ I said.

‘The object found,’ said Erika. ‘It is my inspiration. It calls to me.’

‘Well, it can stop calling now, Erika.’

‘It prophesises the world of The He.’

‘Next time, leave it at home. No one comes here to be inspired. Well, not like that anyway, if you know what I mean.’

A plummeting sensation travelled through me and for a while I couldn’t stop myself staring at Erika, staring into the abyss and the abyss was staring back at me. And then, bull to my red rag, Reg’s gimlet eye joined forces with The Moon-Barker-ray, and I snapped out of it.

‘OK, I said, galvanized by a meditative pace across the front of the classroom. ‘Let’s get down to business. Where do we start?’

As they sat there attentively now, autopilot took over and I dozed off behind the levers and dials as I talked about ideas and where they come from, how they are gathered and shaped, and impressed upon the group the need to write frequently and the need to consider writing a process. When I asked them who was keeping a journal, only Erika, unsurprisingly, was already doing so; a freehand, hieroglyphic epic, I imagined, which like the satanic tomes in the HP Lovecraft novels I used to read when I was

fourteen, could drive the reader insane<sup>24</sup>. Besides, none of the others were doing practice, so I hammered into them the need to get into the habit of writing three pages of free notes a day<sup>25</sup> and then write maybe two hundred and fifty to five hundred words a day of composition. This caused some consternation.

‘I don’t want to do that,’ said Mac. ‘I just want to write. And five hundred words a day is too easy.’

‘The thing is,’ said Jane, ‘that I really need certain things to write. I can only write on nice paper in a violet notepad and I can only write at dusk and I can only write if I have fresh flowers on the desk and I need chilled white wine and nibbles.’

‘And I wouldn’t want anyone to read my diary,’ said Cynthia. ‘I’d feel violated.’

When I suggested to Cynthia that a journal is for her use alone and not for publication, Frank nodded his head sideways and said, ‘What, not even after she’s dead?’ Cynthia cringed and her notepad fell to the floor with a thwack.

‘Let’s really not get ahead of ourselves,’ I said. ‘All I say is give it a go. Keep a journal and write a little every day. That sound fair?’

By the look of them, I’d just asked them to walk to the North Pole in their bare feet. I then mentioned Henry James’ idea of the ‘glimpse’ and how we are looking for images or situations that allow us to use both our imagination and our experience, quoting his line: ‘*Try to be one of the people of whom nothing is lost!*’ Then I asked them to spend twenty minutes or so compiling a list of ‘glimpse’ ideas that could eventually become stories.

For what seemed like hours, nobody did anything, then notebooks flapped open and pens started to move. Frank lowered his head to the armrest, poked his tongue out and shielded his paper with his elbow. Reg started to list, but did so without reference to the paper, his head up and eyes lofted as if studying the shapes of clouds or the transit of butterflies.

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<sup>24</sup> **Note to Self:** *The Erikomicon*. Pastiche. Write twelve horror stories that reference *The Erikomicon*. Watch as sundry Moon-Barkers, Lit-Deniers, Wrong-Roomers, goths and larpers hassle the staff of the British Library and the Bodleian trying to find the Eldritch and hallowed *Erikomicon*. Realize there are better things to be doing with your so-called talent.

<sup>25</sup> See **The Artist’s Way** by Julia Cameron (Souvenir Press, 1994), though if you take this book to heart, you’ll end up like Erika.

Jane was thinking hard, I could tell, but she gave me a concerned glance before dipping her eyes to her paper. Mac was writing incredibly swiftly, line after line, on his second page already. I couldn't see Erika. A flood of tiredness engulfed me as I sat down. I could have slept then. Something comes over you as the end of class approaches, exhaustion so heavy that you could curl up on the desk and flake out and become a living sculpture for the students to sketch. By the time you get home, though, you'll be wired again and won't be able to sleep until the early hours.

I swallowed a yawn and drifted. So much of your time teaching is spent doing nothing, daydreaming before a group of strangers reading or writing. Mac was blitzing the page. Jane and Reg scribbled notes and Cynthia was staring into the void of the blackboard behind me. There was no sound, apart from the rustle of Erika's bags. What on earth was in there? What wet creepy thing had she trawled out from the depths and the dark? I didn't want to think about it. Mac did. A worry, but not a surprise. On the back of my lesson plan, the nib of my pen started to sketch Doctor Jane's outline, trying to remove the pashmina. I just wanted to see her without the cashmere wigwam attached to her shoulders. Not without her clothes, not that. I hadn't yet been completely taken over by the spirit of Sylvester 'Sly' Ramos-Pintos, though it worried me that a year after I'd stopped working on *Gentlemen's Relish*, I thought about him at least as much as I thought about my own characters, and frequently listed plot ideas for the defunct series during my writing practice in the mornings. As I started to adjust the shape of the waist and crosshatch the bust, I realized that the face possessed a peculiar resemblance to Juicy Gash.<sup>26</sup>

A chair scraped, clattered.

'I can't believe you're making us do this!'

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<sup>26</sup> **Juicy Gash:** Flackspeak for JG Ballard. I used to have a real obsession with Juicy. I can pinpoint the exact moment when I suddenly, really, really needed to write, and to write things that are predictive and extreme and strange and unsettling, to an afternoon when I was seventeen and it was summer and I lay in a park on my back in the grass and read *Crash* by JG Ballard. I could never think of a dashboard as merely a tool ever again. And afterwards I read everything he'd published at that time. I read him a lot when I was at university. One morning, I was reading *Highb Rise* in bed and Johanna woke up and asked me what I was reading and after I'd said it starts with a GP eating a dog (an impressive, immediate opening; refer back to opening thoughts here), she said: 'what does JG stand for?' I didn't know. I'd never even thought to wonder. 'Juicy Gash,' I said. He'll always be Juicy to me. RIP.

Cynthia shoved her folder under her arm and scrambled out of the room, scattering more chairs and banging the door behind her. A hum hung over the heads of the students.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘It happens. I’ll e-mail her.’

In my experience, running after a Sensitive Plant will lead to a grim tête-à-tête beneath the sodium glare of the carpark lights, listening to a long diatribe about the shadow of a more talented brother or an accomplished sister, or the brink of divorce, or how he won’t read my writing or just how difficult this all is and can’t you be more encouraging.

The others continued. Another wave of drowsiness came over me. My eyelids heaved and I felt myself plummet, almost dropping off until the throb suddenly hit me.

You’re the one upon whom everything is lost, Flack, said James O’Mailer.

Before I knew it I’d jumped up and blundered across the blackboard to the television, where I turned to the class and froze. A sensation of deep shame crashed over me. The students’ eyes seemed froglike and yellow.

‘What’s the matter with you, boy?’ said Reg. ‘Having a mental episode?’

‘Sorry,’ I said. I shuffled back to my desk, keeping my eye on him, the way he draped his left hand over the rest and kept his right neatly in his lap.

The rain was lashing the windows now. The clock had inconvenienced itself enough to slither towards five to nine, just about time for me to call it a night. Returning to my perch on the rim of the desk, I asked the students to stop writing.

‘Anyone have any good ideas?’ I said.

No answer.

‘Well, what I’d like you do for next class is to firstly, start to get into the practise routine I mentioned earlier. Buy a pad. Write every day. Then I want you to think more about this idea of the glimpse, and then go over your list here, and cross out anything that seems too cliched or too unlikely, settle on one idea and then start to write the story. If you can bring two pages next week, we’ll see what we’ve got. And next week, we’ll move on to the vexed subject of showing and telling. OK? Nice to meet you all. Thank you and goodnight.’

As I organized my papers, Erika and Reg left the room, which gave me a certain feeling of relief, as I didn't want to get bogged down in any afters with either of them. Mac was standing now, stomach puffed out and his notebook under his arm.

'Frank, mate, fancy a pint?' he said.

'Oh no,' said Frank. 'Wife's in the van. See you all next week.'

As he stalked out of the room, a worried look shot across Jane's face that I assumed matched mine. She slid her stuff into a glossy shopping bag imprinted with a Montmartre street-scene, then hesitated to peer back at Frank and then over to me. For a second I thought she was going to approach me. I tried to look nonchalant and involved myself in quickly, desperately screwing up Eveningwear Juicy Gash. Footsteps approached. When I looked up, Mac's vast stomach was blocking my view on the room, his mahogany-brown eyes studying me. The door shut. The air-conditioning buzzed. My legs seemed to telescope and my shoulders hunch. He was holding papers covered in scrawl.

'Mac,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

'I've just written a short story.'

'What? In twenty minutes?'

'Well, it's short.'

'It must be.'

'Will you read it for me?'

'The thing is Mac, and I should have said this earlier, but I'm not paid to do work outside of class, that's why we use the first hour of the class for workshopping.'

'Oh go on, Nate. You'll like it, I promise. It's the best one yet.'

'I thought you'd never written before.'

'That's how come it's the best one.'

'Don't you want to edit it? It'll seem different in the morning and then different again the morning after that.'

'No, I don't want to change it. I want *you* to read it.'

I was desperate to leave. I wanted a cigarette and a bottle of beer from my fridge. I wanted to check my messages and spend some time with my

friend the Sofa of Shame and ponder my predicament. Should I go and see a doctor or pay to sit in a conservatory with yuccas and decaf tea? Should I go and see an ear specialist or a padded cell door-slammer? This was the question that burned like a magnesium flare.

‘Look, just this once,’ I said. ‘I’ll read it for next week. But don’t tell the others, all right?’

I took the papers and shoved them with the others in my bag.

‘Cheer’s mate. Want a lift?’

‘Er, thanks, no, I like the walk.’

‘It’s pissing down.’

I smiled and patted the collapsible umbrella lodged into the side-flap of my bag.

‘Suit yourself then.’

I sat back, let out a long sigh, then another one. Since when had I become such a soft touch? The room was white and bright and empty and the rain beat against the windows.

You’re becoming one of them, Flack, said James O’Mailer. A what do you call them? A Folder-Holder. So far out of the loop now.

## **I Have Seen Them**

Outside the Eudora Doon, I was halfway up the path, frantically searching my jacket pockets for my cigarettes, when I realized that it really was pissing down. Rain pounded the surface of the road and the glass roofs of the greenhouses opposite. My hair was already wet and if I didn't stop dithering I'd quickly be soaked to the skin. I half wished I'd taken up Mac's offer, but I'd have ended up in a St. George cross-bedecked, Euro 96-themed pub on the ringroad, listening to his lifestory and his plans to rip up the hardback charts, and I'd have to talk like I'd been talking for the last two hours for a further two. Anyway, I liked my post-class walk home. It helped burn off the melancholy. But tonight, as a gust of wind swept a sheet of rainwater off the road and splattered it across me, I decided to take the bus. As I started for the little shelter just along the road past the greenhouses, a voice crackled behind me.

'Herr Professor.'

My guts rippled. Standing under the portico of the building, silhouetted against the plate glass windows and the soft yellow light of the foyer, half in shadow, half glimmering, was Erika Gretsich. The woolly hat was pulled down over her forehead, the puffa jacket done up fast to her neck, which gave her, when added to the width of her chassis, the look of a Mongolian

bouncer or small-time rapper's bodyguard. The bags nestled against her legs like squat ducklings to their mother. Rain seeped through to the roots of my hair. Now I wished I were pulling up into the carpark of some shit-awful mock-Tudor pub on the ringroad, about to deconstruct *Jaws* over pints of real ale full of animal hair and woodchips, or sheepishly about to ask what Mac had seen in the Moon-Barker's bag.

Suddenly, she was right in my face and the bags were nipping at my shins.

'Professor Flack, I need speak with you.'

'I'm not a professor,' I said.

'I need speak with you.'

'Can't it wait? Why don't you e-mail me?'

'E-mail?'

'Seriously, I'm in a rush. I've got to meet someone.'

'Really? Who?'

'My wife.' I shivered against the wind, perhaps knowing even then that someday I'd regret this fib. 'Goodnight, Erika.'

I marched off towards the bus-shelter. As I crossed the road I realized that no one else was there hiding from the rain, no other Adult Ed types from classes running simultaneously with mine, none of the other tutors, or Frances; now I wished I had agreed to a drink. We could have sat out the rain in the bar. I could have apologized for seeming rude earlier. Then again, if I told her that O'Mailer was talking to me, she'd laugh. I imagined that, like me, when Frances was sixteen she had matured out of laughing at mad people. Something about this job had made us both shrink back down into those clothes. I couldn't call her, but I couldn't stay here and wait for the bus on my lonesome. Erika was lurching along towards the shelter, the bags slapping against her jeans. No way was I was going to suffer on that oblong of concrete, praying for the bus to come, a Moon-Barker frothing at my side.

Girding myself to the weather, I trudged away up the road. There was a larger bus stop by the porter's lodge on the main university drive. I didn't look back and powered as fast as I could. When I reached the other stop, it was packed with huddling undergraduates. I lost myself in the crowd and again considered putting on my headphones. Then I noticed Erika dragging

the Gretschbags across the road, her eyes scanning the faces in the queue. I shuffled along the line, maniacally searching for anyone that I knew. It had been two years since I'd taught undergrads but there was an off chance that ex-students might be here. I could ingratiate myself and keep my back turned as I asked how they were, if they were still writing. I'd risk being sent a story about sour campus love or what happened on my Interrailing holiday to look busy and unapproachable to The Moon-Barker. Nobody, though. Not a soul. I reached the end of the shelter. The long, black stretch of the drive was ahead of me, and I could just keep going and walk on, but the rain was torrential now. The students yelped and screeched and tried to bundle under the roof. My hair and legs were getting drenched. Through the glass of the shelter, I couldn't see Erika, just a bleary mass. Then, holy miracle of miracles, a bus pulled up.

I elbowed and barged through the pack. When I got on, the bus was already half-full and all the seats were taken. Long-tailed water droplets clung to the windows, vibrating as the bus thrummed and started to chug along the drive. I ended up standing in the middle of the aisle, clinging to a handgrip, keeping my eyes fixed to the floor and the bag between my feet. Just as I began to let myself think that in five minutes or so I'd be at home, towelling off my hair and cracking open a Pils, just about to check all the messages on the ansamachine and the e-mails, shouts and protestations erupted from further down the aisle. Shoved-aside kids collapsed onto the laps of people sitting. The thud and a rustle of bags followed each barked volley of, 'Excuse me! Excuse me!'

Her shoulders split apart the two giggling Japanese girls in front of me, the Gretschbags sliding past their hips and their matching yellow coats as she conquered the gap. In my face now, Erika's eyes were black and piggy and they slid disconcertingly leftwards as the bus veered out of the campus.

'Professor Flack, I must speak with you.' She dropped one of the bag clusters. It thunked on the floor. She raised her hand into a clenched fist. 'Today I have had one of those days when everything I have touched turned to dust!'

'Pardon?'

'I wake up. They don't come. I go out. I can't stay. I go to post office. There is nothing there. I ring up and they put the phone down. On me. They *put* the *phone* down on *me*!'

The people around us flinched and snickered. Eyes were averted. Eyes were wide. I wanted to turn and say that I didn't know this person. She had nothing to do with me.

'These people are all peasants,' she spat. 'I have seen them, in the south of France, crushing grapes with their feet!' Her voice then lowered a little. 'But Professor Flack, I have found you at last. You are The He. You can help me, you know people, you know these peasants.'

'No I don't.'

'I have piles and piles of them. I have heaps and mountains all over place and nobody will publish them.'

'Erika, I still don't know what you're talking about.'

'Poems. I have a poems and no one wants.'

'I'm not a poet, Erika.'

'You are The He! All poems are for you.'

'I don't know anything about poems.' Ah, she was Moon-Barker sub-category, **The Beat Baglady**. I might yet shunt her sideways into someone else's classroom and someone else's nightmares. If I was a cruel man, I would have given her Frances's e-mail, but I was pro-life, anti-blood sports. I could e-mail Plum and ask for this one to be transferred. Then I remembered my little altercation with Plum earlier and my ears started to burn.

Erika's voice dipped to a grovelly whine. 'The He can help me. You can.' As the bus pulled up before the roundabout, I thought for a second she was going to use the thinning of the crowd in the aisle to throw herself to her knees. But she stayed standing, a terrible grimace of loss and emotion pleading all over her face. 'The He, you must help me.'

'Erika,' I said. 'I teach prose. Why are you in my class? We have poetry classes.'

'I have done those. Facking idiot-bitches.'

'Erika . . .'

'I am writing love poems for you, just for The He.'

A big guffaw went up behind me. My ears were scorching and my wet jeans shrunk and heaved and crawled up into my groin.

'Erika, can you be quiet.'

The bus jolted sideways as it took the roundabout. Erika startled and fell into me, her giant breasts thumping into my chest, her huge face clamping to my cheek. My arm snapped rigid as the handgrip took my weight. Someone behind me pushed me and I was able to drive Erika off. As she wavered, a muscle spasm pulsed through my legs to my pelvis, up my spine to freeze my jaw. All my composure funnelled into not shouting, not bursting into tears.

‘You must help me!’ she whined. ‘You must! You are The He!’

I would have better appreciated the despair in her voice if she had been drowning in quicksand while I was sitting nonchalantly on the bank, whistling a merry tune as I practised slipknots with the rescue rope.

‘Erika, this is not the time, OK?’ I said. ‘Not here. And I don’t want any more bloody poems written about me, OK?’

She glared, made a castrating pout, then shook her hair and turned away. There was a pause. Muttering circled me. The bus engine rumbled. Rain against the window sounded like handfuls of shingle. Embarrassment makes you temporarily telepathic. The judgements and the *schadenfreude* of the people around me swirled in my head. The bus was barreling down the road and I lived on this road, so I picked up my bag and positioned the strap on my shoulder. I took a glance at the Gretschbags. They were filled with newspaper packages covered with greasy spots and thumbprints that jostled and leapt as the bus hit humps in the road. I dithered about whether I should ask what she’d shown to Mac and the others. I *did* want to know. Or at least, the dirty-minded, risk-all, curiosity-martyr in me wanted to know – Juicy Gash would want to know, wouldn’t he? – but the safety-first adult didn’t want to be responsible for the stampede that would follow when Erika waved a dead alligator or something around the bus.

‘Where do you live, Erika?’ I said, trying to make polite, non-berserker chitchat, now that the end was in sight.

‘You want pizza?’ said Erika.

‘No!’

‘I live other side of city.’

‘Good stuff. I’ll see you next week,’ I said, reaching for the bell. I made an ungainly hash of trying to force myself along the aisle while the bus was still moving. When it stopped, I fled into the rain, not looking back. The bus swooshed past me as I was struggling with the front door key. Inside, as I

made my way up the stairs to my flat, I felt the relief that the class was over and that I was shot of Erika strangely change into restlessness and wide-awake boredom. Then again, time to see if anything had come in for me while I was out.

## The Garret

Three messages bleeped on the ansamachine. I could hear them singing to me while I towelled off my hair in the bathroom. Turning on the taps sent a shuddering death rattle through the pipes. It howled downwards into the depths of the building and set my teeth on edge. The ground floor flats were still unlet; no one else could hear that sound. In the bedroom, I changed my jeans. Then the lounge, as ever, seemed grim and shambolic: the dull magnolia walls; the russet carpet that was impossible to keep clean; the mismatching sofas; the piles and piles of books and DVDs all over the place; the heaps of folders and stationery and journals; the desk strewn with fag packets and letters and post-its and the computer that by now was actually nicotine-stained. The Garret wasn't exactly Wilbur Smith's private island, or John Fowles' house on the Lyme Regis cliffs. It was never going to get me onto *TLS Cribs*.

When I'd got the money through for *Gentlemen's Relish*, I'd made a reasoned decision not to move from The Garret to somewhere with 20<sup>th</sup> century plumbing and central heating and presentable furniture, thinking that the money would last longer here and I could devote more of my time to *The Penelope Tree* and less to teaching and editing. Now, it was time for this tactical manoeuvre to pay off.

It is not unusual, I told myself, for literary agents to contact you at the end of the day should they phone. With the towel around my neck, I checked the messages on the machine.

One: Recording of gushing Northern woman proclaiming that if I ring an extortionately priced phone line I might have won a holiday on the Costa Del Bollocks.

Two: Frances: Nate, er, you there? . . . It's me. Good to see you tonight, sorry I was stropy. Hope yours were more simpatico than mine. Shudder from Hell<sup>27</sup>. Er . . . buy you a pint later in the week? Call me? Ciao-Miaow.

Three: no message, just a tone, and when I dialled 1471, the caller's number had been withheld.

I paced. That might have been him. Fred Malone. On the other hand, he was unlikely to call in the evening, and I'd not left for work until six. I booted up the computer – no messages there either. Only junkmail about mortgages, Viagra and dating agencies in Texas.

I grabbed a beer and lit a cigarette and wandered around the room, not really knowing what to do with myself. I was involved in a nerve-jangling waiting game, in stasis until the breakthrough. Since Squinty Hugo dropped me in March, I had no agent, and without an agent I couldn't sell the book and while I couldn't sell the book I was stuck here.

On my desk lay the bag of objects I used in my teaching, the bag I would get out next week for 'Show, Don't Tell'. I reached in and found the starfish. It was big and pink and studded with filaments. I gave it a stroke and a squeeze. Johanna had given it to me in Australia. I could almost hear her voice: *Touch it always and think of me*. I'd never wanted to be the sort of creative writing tutor who has a bag of objects that he pours out onto a desk and everyone takes one and someone has to touch the starfish and describe it in a paragraph of sense-based prose, and you just say, *well done Simonetta, bravo*, and everyone claps whatever. Never wanted to be that. Pretty pointless. Hate exercises. Never did exercises myself. Think it best to start with narrative ideas and work techniques into storylines. But I had a syllabus

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<sup>27</sup> **Shudder:** The collective noun for a Sensitive Plant is a **shudder**. For example, "Frances told Nathan that fifteen minutes before class, she was sitting in the cafeteria speed-reading 48 students' poems about September 11<sup>th</sup> (and/or 'geese') when she was approached by a shudder of Sensies. All clutched folders to their hearts and were on the brink of tears".

to follow and included the starfish as a private joke. Recently though, I'd started to find a new respect for the starfish. I began to see more in it. The star was high in the sky. The fish was flat to the seabed. The starfish would eventually be washed up and passed around and prodded and fingered, marvelled at and despised, just like a novel.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I spread out on the Sofa of Shame with the starfish on my chest and tried not to think about agents or voices or Frances or whatever was in Erika Gretsches bag. Switching through the channels on TV, I'd either seen everything – documentaries I'd already taped and films I knew so well I could have acted in them – or the shows were just time-wasting drivel. I was zapping the remote control, muttering *shit, shit, shit*, over and over again until I gave up and turned it off. I lay around for a bit, sipping my beer and smoking cigarettes, unable to clear Mac and Reg's voices from my mind and intermittently cringing at the memory of Erika ranting on the bus. And O'Mailer. How could I have spent an evening with James O'Mailer speaking to me? I lay there and looked for faces in The Garret's lovely Artex walls<sup>28</sup>. I should go to bed but resisted this, I realized, because I was still waiting for the phone to ring. I often sat up until the early hours waiting for the phone to ring. When I was going out with Lisa, my post-Frances girlfriend, she lived – she still does live – in The Arctic, and most evenings she would ring me late, around midnight, and we would talk for an hour or so. It played havoc with my writing routine. I couldn't get up in the mornings. Somehow, I was still waiting for her call, even though it was over a year since we'd split and I didn't have anything to say to her anyway and vice versa. If the phone rang now, it would only be: *I'm pleased to announce you have won one of our top-prizes, if you are a mug or a spanner, ring this number . . .*

I took a stroll to the kitchenette. I'd make a camomile tea to help me sleep, then turn in with a book, forget about tonight. It would all go away; or at least I'd wake up with a skull-busting ear infection but in the morning

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<sup>28</sup> **Note to Self:** Potential new creative writing exercise. First, touch the Artex. How does it feel? What texture? What does it look like? What does it remind you of? Remember your first encounter with Artex? How does it smell? If Artex is an historical or cultural figure, who would it be? Shaka Zulu? Mrs Beaton? Cliff Richard? If Artex is an emotion, what would it be? Is Artex reckless or conservative? What part of Artex is changing and what part is static? What sort of voice would Artex use? Does it orate like Il Duce, or does it promise huskily, a late night telephone voice (a glass of whisky; the first cigarette from the day's second packet; the long distance relationship) Now, write for fifteen minutes from the point of view of Artex.

there would be post. I hoped there would be post. Hope of the mornings: post. Hope of the afternoons: phone calls and e-mails. As the kettle boiled, I lit a cigarette and standing by the window blew smoke against the glass. The rain flickered in the orange glare of the streetlamps. Shimmer flowed down the side-road opposite The Garret and swept into the gutter. Cars swished past. I felt kind of content then, out of the weather with the smoke, the kettle's burble, the quiet. Then the wind whooshed in the copper beech tree outside my window and as the branches sprang back, I saw something on the pavement outside the house. Unsure, I nipped back to turn off the kitchen light. The outside became more distinct as my eyes adjusted to the darkness in the kitchen. I waited for the wind to take the branches again and give me an angle. I was right. Not seeing things. Down there, in front of the tree, apparently staring up at the house, was a figure in a black, hooded sou'wester.

Someone was standing there, looking up at my window. What did they want? Why couldn't they have it? Why were they doing that? Steam mottled across the glass. The figure became no more than a blur, then nothing. Stop writing, I told myself. Just a late night dog-walker or boozier having a piss on the way back from the pub. The kettle clicked and I made my tea. When I checked again, the figure had gone. I stirred the tea bag around the mug and pressed it to the sides to squeeze out the flavour. If anyone, I thought, and I laughed as it occurred to me. It was James O'Mailer out there, checking up, making sure that I wasn't writing furiously by candlelight, making sure I was still the one upon whom everything is lost.

It's not me. I'm in here, and I know all that already.

My temples throbbed. I dropped the mug. It smashed on the lino and the tea jumped and stung my shins. I was hopping around, slashing at my legs with a towel. The kitchen was empty. Just me in the dark and a sickish smell of herbs.

It's started, he said. They know.

'What?'

At this juncture I cannot say for fear, dear Flack that we overplay our hand. They are powerful.

'Go away!'

That I cannot do, Dame Parlet the Hen, dear Kiddo, I have a little job for you to do.

‘What job?’

Let us not refer to it as a mere job but a quest. Now there’s a word to gird the soul.

‘Who are you?’

My ears popped. He didn’t answer. I turned on the light. A thin brown puddle spread its borders over islands of shattered earthenware. My legs were still steaming when I reached the window. No hooded figure lurked out there in the rain.



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