

Corpus Britney

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1.I

On the eve of 29th February, Malainey Milksour descended a flight of stairs to a swaying, pulsating basement on Sauchiehall Street, where she danced in the bowels of the night until she had to throw up into an empty beer glass. She emerged on the other side, her skin steaming in the cold air, her brain rubbed raw from the lack of sleep, the pounding beats, the strobe lights and the sirens on her way home. The soles of her feet throbbed as they always did; begging for oxygen and ice. This deep, burning pain was familiar to Malainey from all the previous nights she'd gone clubbing in four-inch New Look heels. Over the years, she had even grown attached to it, convincing herself that it was a pleasant pain, an impressive pain, a pain that meant she was truly alive – an inevitable mark left by the highs and lows of nightlife, euphoria and ugly tears.

She'd seen it coming from a long way off, this extra night: ever since the last leap year. It had spent four years lurking in every night; through the cracks in their dark surface she could see its glow, as if it were emitting light from within. But now the night has spat her out at her own kitchen table, in the dim lamplight just before dawn. Sitting opposite her is a man she has never seen before. She'd found him standing on her doorstep in his expensive trainers, wiping rain and condensation from glasses that immediately misted up again. Fine droplets had glistened on the felted cloth of his coat under the streetlighting. Thin wrists protruded from sleeves too short. A luggage tag from LAX, California, dangled from his Adidas holdall.

The crumbs on the table are soaking up the rainwater that drips from her hair. Malainey scrolls through the photos on his phone, which he'd thrust into her hands. She recognises in his bearing the torment that characterises all her clients. 'The Haunting', she calls it. She no longer takes on clients who don't bear its marks. On the few occasions she made an exception and offered her services to a person in robust emotional and spiritual health, they invariably vanished into thin air without paying her. It was as if even a sincere longing for something more, something beyond the tangible, wasn't enough; her work could only take root in a deeply tormented soul, a soul in which fear, loss and pain had suffocated everything else.

Classic signs of The Haunting include bloodshot eyes, chewed lips, sunken cheeks, and unkempt stubble which, she has noticed, starts to grow in strange patterns: stiff spirals, keratinous vortexes leading down to the miserable depths of the human psyche. Faces often take on a pale greyish-green hue, bordering in the spectrum on mould-on-white-toast. Dazed and with eyelids twitching, the Haunted would look around, shell-shocked by what they have seen behind the day's mask.

Malainey knew how they felt. She, too, had struggled through dark waters before reaching the bank on the other side.

He'd followed her up the stairs to her flat. At the top he'd introduced himself as Alexander.

'You can crash in the armchair for a couple of hours first if you want?'

But he'd remained standing in her kitchen, and she had too, until she'd shrugged, taken off her shoes and turned on the kettle.

Outside, the night is beginning to fade, as if its darkness were draining into the circles beneath Alexander's eyes. All over Glasgow, misted-up windows glow in the sandstone Victorian tenements, their light yellowish and hazy in this dark blue hour. Girls tumble out of their warm nests of featherdown and night-breath, tug tights over their clammy feet, stretching the black fabric until the pale skin of their thighs shines through it. Malainey scrolls through Alexander's photos. Some are snapshots of his life in California; a dry, hilly landscape beneath a clear blue sky, soaring birds of prey, the glittering city down in the valley. Friends in a bar, drinking bottles of IPA with trendy labels. Snippets of code on a computer screen. But most of them are of a girl, the same girl, hundreds of times.

When she sees the first photo, Malainey thinks she's the young Britney Spears, exactly as she looked around the turn of the millennium: with a broad grin, holding nothing back, giving everything of herself to the masses, beamed into the world defenseless. Malainey opens her mouth, but Alexander knows what she wants to ask; he probably knew even before the question arose in her mind.

'She only *looks* like her.'

With every photo, Malainey's mind glitches for a fraction of a second. In most of the photos, the girl is alone. In the selfies, taken over the course of many years, Malainey recognises a transformation she herself has undergone. The oldest images are grainy, taken in front of a dirty mirror and flooded by the flash of an early digital camera, one of those little silver ones. A little later, in the MySpace era, the girl dyed her hair dark – or perhaps the blonde had been fake and the black had always been lurking underneath; Malainey can't tell from these low-res, pixelated images, snapped with a flip phone held backwards, always from above to emphasise the asymmetrical black fringe, the black-rimmed eyes filled with soul-shaking fear and anxiety, the whole thing bleached by the flash, converted to black and white and the contrast cranked up until everything non-essential fades from the face, only the eyes remain, eyes which have to say it all. Later, the focus shifts to the mouth. The duck face years – Malainey remembers them well. Cheeks sucked in and lips pursed, ironically of course, always ironically, all to obscure the stark fact that you were shamelessly pointing a camera at yourself.

Then the girl is blonde again and has taken countless variations of the same photo with her webcam, which like Malainey, she may have uploaded to Facebook by the dozen. Back then, Malainey used a cheap webcam she'd taped to an old monitor connected to a Toshiba laptop with a cracked screen. This girl, this Californian girl, had something Malainey could only dream of back then: a MacBook. Malainey recognises the Photo Booth backgrounds and effects, which were iconic and de rigeur back then: a rollercoaster, an aquarium, tropical island at sunset, thermal camera, pencil sketch, mirrored and distorted faces. Even with bulging eyes, fat cheeks or a gigantic forehead the girl managed to look glamorous; the grain and the oversaturated colours of the built-in camera didn't prevent her from looking unearthly beautiful, even when she did everything she could to give the impression of nonchalance, of only wanting to be silly and random, sticking her tongue out, pulling funny faces, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer with smudged make-up and hair still stiff from the previous night's clubbing – even then: her beauty was nonchalant, effortless, yet calculated.

The recent images are crystal clear and transparent, because no one can yet see the grain of the present. Malainey can tell some of them are from Instagram and Snapchat from the filters: the warm, almost sunburnt tones, as if everything had been taken with a disposable camera in the Italian evening sun, and the smooth, slightly glistening face with a dog's snout and ears.

It is 2016 and there are countless images of this girl who is not Britney. In each one and for a fraction of a second, she gives herself, *a* self, a tangible form. But the longer Malainey scrolls and swipes, the more she gets the feeling that every photo simultaneously exhausts that self, that it is precisely the repetition that fragments it. Faster than the self empties, it must be filled, and the shutter always lags behind... The endless series of photos exude a longing so strong that Malainey can feel it through the screen – a longing to turn herself into an object, a permanent object, that can't be affected by anything. But instead, Malainey sees a self riddled with gaps, as if there were holes not only in the compression-damaged code of the images, but in this girl herself. Something else now bears what was once her face: the dark void beneath the devices, the platforms, where every self ends up evaporating.

In some photos, she poses with a group of friends or stands next to Alexander (one arm around her, the other holding out the phone), but she always looks lonely. Sometimes it looks as though she wasn't even with these people at all, but photoshopped into the picture later. The light bends differently around her, the shadows are slightly off, and her body doesn't relate to the people next to her in a way that feels natural to Malainey. Even when she appears to be looking someone in the eye, her line of sight never actually meets the other person's.

Malainey is reminded of the horror film *The Ring* in which people who have watched a cursed video tape and are doomed to die within seven days begin to look blurred in photographs, their faces bleary blobs among the smiling faces. The longer Malainey looks at the pictures of this girl, the more uneasy she feels. Walls are closing in on her, dark clouds, her ribs feeling tighter and tighter: the usual shit. Alexander is looking everywhere except at her; his gaze rests briefly on the One Direction mug on the washing-up rack – the faces of Harry, Zayn, Niall, Liam and Louis, scratched and corroded by cheap washing-up liquid – and from there glides over the dirty plates, the sponge caked with grease and crumbs, the polystyrene takeaway containers with melted and re-solidified bits of cheese.

He looks limp and soggy, like a wet macaroni at the bottom of a sink. But she mustn't be mistaken about him. A wimp with a pale scrawny body he's never felt comfortable in, not for a single second of his life, shoulders perpetually slumped: that's the kind of guy you need watch out for. The potential for violence – which she has seen before in others – crouches in his weakness. She thinks of people who were once bullied and never stopped acting like victims, who still see themselves as the weakest, who don't know what they are capable of when things change, or, if they do know, just want to get a taste of that power, take revenge for everything they've had to endure; they don't care who they hurt, becoming merciless because no one ever showed them mercy.

She puts the phone on the table. 'How long has she been missing?'

Alexander is startled. She can see the cogs turning: *did I tell her...?* No, he didn't. Bella's an actress, horror films, he says. That was her ambition. He is in love with her. But of course, there was always that part of her, the part he couldn't reach, couldn't touch, even after all these years. He doesn't really believe – though Malainey shouldn't take it personally – in what she does. But nobody can find her. She seems to have vanished into thin air.

He doesn't need to tell her the rest; she knows it simply because he's sitting here, because he boarded a plane on the other side of the world and, in the middle of the night, took a taxi from the airport to her front door. There is something bizarre about Bella's disappearance, beyond the bare fact of the disappearance itself. The pieces of the jigsaw don't fit; he arranges them and rearranges them, but there's always that gap in the middle that nothing seems able to fill. He has wondered,

more than once, whether he is slowly going mad. The dates become slippery, shift, change shape. The small constellation of hard facts surrounding her disappearance turns out to be shaky, even fragile. Sometimes it seems as if the slightest change in the atmosphere, a minuscule shift in the direction of the wind, is enough to topple the whole structure, transforming it into something unrecognisable.

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1.II

It all began four years ago, when, in the first days of 2012, Malainey joined the army of flexitime checkout girls at Tesco's and, in her very first week, strained her shoulder when she was scanning a 24-pack of Strongbow. Determined not to let her precarious employment slip through her fingers, she numbed the pain with ibuprofen and valiantly carried on scanning.

'Hey, hey, Lainey,' Abby whispered to her one morning from behind the till next to her. 'Want something a wee bit stronger?'

Malainey was rubbing her shoulder with a dramatic frown, after a fruitless struggle with a value bag of cat litter. Abby had a sweet, concerned voice and big, gentle eyes, like a cute, empathetic animal in a Disney film, but there was also something undeniably shady about her, a hint of petty criminality; it wouldn't have surprised Malainey to hear that she'd once stolen a television or set fire to a car, just for fun. The next day, in the dreary break room plastered with passive-aggressive posters about efficient scanning and efficient smiling, she slipped a handful of pills to Malainey under the table.

'Don't go overboard, awright? It's strong stuff. Some kind of experimental product, not yet on the market. My ex temped at the factory they're made at, somewhere on an industrial estate outside Kilbirnie, and nabbed a stash for my period cramps.'

'Don't you need them then?'

'Oh, I only take natural remedies and hard drugs.'

The pills were bright pink and glowed slightly in the dark. Only in an absolute emergency, Malainey told herself, would she resort to this obscure remedy. That evening, during the short walk home from the Poundland on Dumbarton Road, where she'd got off the bus, the damp January chill crept into her body. By the time she'd climbed the uncarpeted steps to the third floor, the cold had bitten deep into her bones. It was so cold in the flat she could see her breath drifting in little clouds along the corridor. She lived in one of the many sandstone tenement blocks in the city, built during the industrial revolution to accommodate workers.

It was a beautiful but shabby Victorian building, with single-glazed windows, damp walls, and rooms with high ceilings that were impossible to heat properly. There had been a hole in the kitchen window for as long as anyone could remember, which her flatmate Emma had eventually covered with a strip of cling film after a hundred fruitless phone calls to the landlord. When the wind blew, as it was doing now, the cling film billowed and fluttered gloomily; the plastic spectre of a Victorian woman driven to madness, hovering above the shared courtyard in the shadow of the sandstone walls, where strange plants stubbornly grew between the bricks and where rubbish seemed to gather of its own accord into mysterious assemblages. Malainey looked out of the window and felt the night pushing against the thin barriers, seeping in through every crack, wrapping its chilly tentacles around her shoulder and gnawing at the stiff joint with its dampness.

At the back of the fridge, she found half a bottle of Cherry Lambrini, probably left over from Emma's girls' night out with her friends from the university rowing club. The cheap, sickly-sweet pear cider tasted even more rancid now it had lost its fizz. Halfway through her second glass, the sharpest pain she'd ever experienced shot through her shoulder. She doubled over with a sob.

'Fuck it.' She pulled one of the pink pills from her trouser pocket and screamed. A second jolt of pain, almost as intense as the first. Crying, she put the pill on her tongue. The taste was familiar: chemical and bitter, with a hint of something sweet and corrupt. She'd first tried something like it when she was sixteen, at a party at someone's parents' house in Shettleston. She'd been invited by Michelle, a girl she'd met through an advert she'd placed on Gumtree looking for band members ('experimental electronic glam-indie shoegazing, poetic lyrics, psychedelic visuals and gold hotpants'). Their music career had quietly fizzled out when it turned out neither of them could sing or play an instrument, but they'd kept seeing each other on hazy Sunday afternoons drenched in cider and Breezers, during which they'd pool the contents of their wardrobes, trying on everything that was tight or see-through or glittery – or, preferably, all three at once – after which Michelle, who was learning hairdressing at Glasgow City College, would dig out her arsenal of straighteners, curling tongs, bleaching kits, volumising combs and hairspray, and they'd hold endless photo shoots for the covers of albums that would never exist.

Aside from Michelle, Malainey hadn't known anyone at the party, but for the past hour she'd lost sight of her head of messy, bright-red hair extensions. She sat by herself on the narrow strip of lawn in front of the house, drinking Amaretto from a bottle she'd swiped from the kitchen worktop. The sharp pebbles that adorned the front wall dug into her back, which, despite the Baltic temperatures, was largely exposed in her top.

'Shut yer eyes and stick out yer tongue,' was the first thing he said to her after he'd sat down beside her. He had a baby face that didn't match his stocky, muscular build, as if his head and the rest of his body had been growing at different rates. He spoke quietly, with a rough, awkward shyness that nevertheless possessed a certain compelling quality. This was the first time she tasted that bitter, artificial decay, perhaps what plastic would taste like if it could rot. Even before the crushed crystals had dissolved in her saliva, her eyes still closed, she felt his lips on hers, his hand on the bit of her bottom peeking out from under her short denim shorts. His tongue slipped into her mouth and licked away the bitterness.

At twenty, Malainey still hadn't been as smitten by any boy as she was with Callum. Whenever they arranged to meet, it was always a toss-up as to whether he'd turn up, and she could tell within a split second from the look in his eyes whether he'd lift her up, kiss her for minutes on end and breathlessly swear that she was his reason for getting out of bed in the morning, the only thing that made his existence worthwhile, or whether he'd tell her, without a hint of emotion, that he'd shagged a lass in the toilets at The Garage the night before who was much skinnier than her.

She'd been hopelessly addicted to that roulette, no matter how miserable it made her. The sickening tension before every date and after every message, when she'd wait hours or days for a response, was also somehow thrilling. Even during her worst lows, a part of her remained aware of the tragic glamour she ascribed to her situation; she wasn't just a regular insecure teenager with mascara-smudged tears, but a martyr to love, a woman whose suffering bestowed upon her a kind of grace, a dark yet richly variegated radiance. And the highs – those moments when everything fell into place, when it was just the two of them against the world again – were beyond comparison. The relief and euphoria proved more addictive than any pill or powder, precisely because Callum was so unpredictable, because the light of his attention could shine on her again at any moment; she just had to hold on a little longer, grit her teeth a little longer. There had been a moment when they'd been lying on the grass in the orange glow of a street lamp, as the winter chill, the muffled beats seeping out through the rain-soaked pebbledash wall, the retching above the geranium-filled window

boxes, melted away in their glow, a warm and shimmering light that they themselves rekindled with every touch and that washed over their entwined limbs in tingling waves. The moment had existed and it still existed, an inner sanctuary beyond the laws of linear time, one to which she constantly searched for a way back.

Abby's pills worked the same way as Callum. Sometimes Malainey's pain would disappear completely within a quarter of an hour and she'd feel stronger and more refreshed than ever, but on most days the pills did fuck all. She never knew in advance how they'd turn out, so she stubbornly carried on taking them. She couldn't make out a pattern in how they worked. She looked for correlations with the weather, the positions of the celestial bodies and her own menstrual cycle, but could find no logic to their pharmacological whims. The pills' fluctuating effectiveness, however, turned out to be the least of her worries. Over the course of February, other effects began to manifest, which were even more unsettling. Unexpected and absurd encounters had always been part and parcel of city life, but now they were becoming more frequent, their strangeness more intense. Something was infecting the fabric of the city.

Apparitions flickered in the corner of Malainey's eye, glitching on the edge of her perception. They appeared where the city's skin had cracked, where patches of wasteland were covered in the tyre tracks from diggers, commas etched into the mud between a rugged landscape and a slicker new order of glass and steel; the as-yet undefined zones where the Pret-A-Mangers and Caffè Neros would soon rise up, the concrete cubes of anonymous business parks, the private student flats and other, less legible architectural structures, gleaming towers which, as Malainey began to suspect, were not containers, not casings for activities taking place within them, but conduits for abstract flows, nodes in a network, a grid through which occult energies flowed – a Stonehenge that channelled not cosmic influences, not emanations from the celestial bodies, but undercurrents of the market, obscure economic forces and financial algorithms, the dreams of global trade; not rough megaliths but shimmering, geometric artefacts, opaque and without an interior, only the grey sky turned inside out in the reflection on their surface – the complex patterns of migratory birds, data clouds and frozen kerosene trails.

It was in those zones, scattered in fragments across the urban landscape, that Malainey saw them: flickering, semi-translucent afterimages that appeared out of nowhere and faded away just as quickly. Some wore the uniforms of fast-food chains or supermarkets; others wore overalls or bright yellow high-vis suits. She saw scars, burns, hairnets and latex cleaning gloves; she saw bodies that had been transformed, contorted by high pressure or years of routine; she saw skin raw from abrasion and broken backs; she saw people trapped in the blue glow of laptop screens, and everywhere she saw worry lines, dark circles under their eyes, bodies moulded to the rhythm of punch clocks and algorithms. More and more often, Malainey sought them out herself, these broken and churned-up landscapes, studying the caravans of semi-transparent bodies trudging past, searching for logical explanations for the unusual locations and times at which they appeared, their transparency, their sudden vanishing.

She spotted a girl with long fake eyelashes, her skin orange with fake tan, sitting in the sludge in the concrete foundations of a loft development on the South Side – or rather, she seemed to be floating above it – while speaking agitatedly into the microphone of a call centre headset. She saw a tableau vivant of labourers in high-vis gear, sprawled across the floor of the McDonald's on Crow Road in a variety of poses: lying down, sitting, leaning and standing. It was a perfect composition, a bright-orange 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe' on the cold, beige tiles. The reflective strips on their clothing gleamed in the fluorescent light; they rested their helmeted and unhelmeted heads against one another's chests. Silver-wrapped parcels were carefully unwrapped, revealing soggy squashed sandwiches. The vision flickered and faded.

During her shifts at Tesco, after endlessly repeating the same mechanical pleasantries, Malainey increasingly found herself entering a state of semantic saturation. This grey suburb of her mind turned out to be infiltrated by the same ghosts as the physical city. As the weeks went by, the apparitions became more frequent, the visions more intrusive, ever more ravenous for her attention. They appeared out of nowhere, sometimes so close that she could only take them in as fragments: bloodshot whites of the eyes, cracked lips, gnawed knuckles, red welts across their skin. At first they manifested themselves only visually, but gradually they also infiltrated her olfactory senses; she smelled their sour breath after five coffees and cigarettes for breakfast, the smell of wet clothes on steamy buses during the morning rush hour. She could never hear them, though she sometimes saw their lips moving.

The idea that, strictly speaking, the apparitions didn't belong to the material reality perceptible to everyone was one that Malainey had found hard to accept. She'd kept on searching for alternative explanations, and it was well into February before, one drizzly Tuesday, she finally faced up to the truth.



'My dad's visiting,' she said to Emma that morning. They were sitting at the kitchen table eating Sugar Puffs while the rain pattered against the cling film.

'Oh, lovely!'

Emma's bleached hair was a voluminous tangle of hairspray and matted extensions. She'd moved north from Ipswich, shrouded in self-tan, bubblegum perfume, false eyelashes and lip gloss, lured by rumours of the wild nightlife in these parts. Between late nights in the clubs on Sauchiehall Street and afternoons in coffee bars and vintage shops, she'd occasionally flit into the Victorian halls of the university, where, in theory, she was studying Art History and Italian.

Malainey slurped the last bit of sugary milk. 'Lovely is hardly the word I'd use.'

It was Pancake Day – Shrove Tuesday – when, in bygone days, people used to go to confession to purify their souls and then indulge one last time, baking pancakes with all the eggs, milk and butter that had to be used up before Ash Wednesday, the start of the forty days of abstinence that lay between them and spring. In Tesco that day, Malainey experienced neither spiritual grace nor absolution. The shop was close to the university and all morning, exuberant students, their cheeks flushed from the sudden warmth, came in to buy bottles of ready-made pancake mix, soft brown sugar and sprinkles in the shape of hearts, stars and tiny unicorns, Lyle's Golden Syrup, treacle and caramel sauce, overripe bananas and frozen raspberries, and drinks, Malainey saw a great many drinks in particular passing by the till: spiced rum and Baileys, vodka, Kahlua and cream for White Russians...

It was the kind of day when it never quite got light; darkness lingered in the air like a fine mould, spreading its black threads over everything. And that darkness took on a sweet, greasy, rich quality, with all those frying pans sizzling all over the city. 'Fat Bastard Tuesday', as Malainey's dad called it, and, like most festive things, he loathed it. But Malainey could rarely resist the sacred or anything that appeared sacred, anything that cast a glow over things so that it seemed possible for her to transform herself completely, so that the world seemed to hold more than even the most utopian visions would suggest. It didn't matter if that glow was merely kitchen light filtered through steaming fat, a mist of margarine that made the air shimmer.

The day had hardly seemed to have got going when the dark-blue twilight started gnawing away at her cocoon of yellowish, hazy light and sugary mist, while on the radio, it was as if Gotye's 'Somebody That I Used To Know', Lana Del Rey's 'Born To Die' and Emeli Sandé's 'Next To Me' were

playing on an endless loop. But before that bubble could melt away and be swallowed up by the night, it was rudely shattered by a gust of wind from the sodden darkness.

Malcolm Milksour arrived in a blast of cold air. Cursing and dripping, he was swept into the flat from his world of petroleum and icy seawater. In Malainey's mind, it was always dark and wet there; everything swayed and wavered, and that was why, despite his small stature, her father still exuded a tough, sinewy, almost elemental strength. With his stormy outbursts, he could make even the merriest gathering stiffen and freeze in a chilly fog. Malainey's father had swum his way up through the world's waters, from sewers to drilling platforms, from the stinking tunnels beneath the city to the open North Sea, as if he had followed the journey of the water itself, carried along by its current. And perhaps, in reality, it was not an upwards but a sideways movement like a crab. From his early years as a sewer inspector, following in the footsteps of his own father Magnus, to his later career as a technician on British Petroleum's Claire Ridge drilling platform in the grey waves west of Shetland, Malcolm always moved in the shadows beneath our shared world, greasing the tunnels beneath the surface, the pipes and shafts that kept it all running – and perhaps, in the end, it didn't matter whether what glowed so malevolently in the depths was oil or fat-enriched shit. Malcolm had never risen above the watery world; in the end, he couldn't break free from the hard bed through which the water flowed: the brick tunnels, the rock formations beneath the seabed where the petroleum was locked away.

What Malcolm could not do, Malainey had done. She had changed her state of aggregation – evaporated, indeed; that was how she sometimes felt: having become ethereal and fleeting, and thus drifting off to layers of air where her father was too solid, too rigid to follow her. She had been young when her parents had separated, but even as a child she'd realised, intuitively, that it had always hung in the air, that it had lain dormant at the bottom of every bitter, wordless morning. The tension coiled around the house and the bodies within it, until all the oxygen had been squeezed from the rooms and throats and the chain finally snapped. Like a magnetic ball, Malainey's mother shot back to the life she had always been destined for.

By the age of eighteen, Helen Weir had eleven piercings, dyed her hair a different colour every week and, apart from dark purple lipstick, wore nothing but leather and fishnet, but her rebellion against the middle-class family that had brought her into the world was only complete when she turned down her place at university and ran off with a lad she'd met at the punk club, who hid his mohawk under his helmet while working shifts in the sewers. Twenty years later, Helen went off to study Marine Biology after all.

In the end, her ex-husband had not changed her destiny, but merely diverted it, or interrupted it temporarily. Malcolm took a job with BP and from then on was known as The Enemy. Every dead sea creature or bleached coral reef was, directly or indirectly, his fault, and he bore a mysterious yet inescapable responsibility for oil spills on the other side of the world. For weeks on end, he left his daughter, not to work towards a better world for her, but, in his stupidity and greed, to destroy it.

Two years ago, Helen had travelled to Norway to study humpback whales, fallen head over heels in love with a whaler called Bjørn, and never returned. The distance gave Malainey's mind some space. A suspicion began to grow in her that the smear campaign was not the result of her mother's justified bitterness, nor poisoned blood from the heart that her father had broken for good; no, it was the revenge of Helen's middle-class class consciousness, which had taken root deep within her and had never left her, not entirely, not even during the lean years of low-skilled labour, of retail jobs and work in the hospitality industry. It had known itself betrayed and that was why it had turned against the love that had once been great enough to make Helen forget her origins, to cast aside the comfort that was her birthright. It clouded the waters, poisoned them, killing everything that had ever lived and flourished there. And it did this almost in spite of Helen's own will – or perhaps Malainey merely hoped that, against her better judgement...

But by the time these thoughts began to take root in Malainey's mind, she and Malcolm had long since ceased to share a common language, or even a single word. She remembered the school gates beneath the dark-grey sky, when through the bars, she'd seen him standing there and immediately looked away, wriggling her way into the heart of a cluster of teenage girls where she was invisible, sneaking out through the back exit and walking three bus stops further in the pouring rain while he was still standing there, and ten years later she still couldn't bring herself to tell him that this had been the first time she'd felt ashamed of him – truly ashamed – and that only now was she beginning to understand why.

She baked flambéed pancakes for him, with caramelised bananas and spiced rum, and swallowed one pill after another. Everything left unsaid began to congeal in the air along with the greasy vapours, to clump together, and eventually to curdle in the heat, until the atmosphere became rancid and unbearable. Her shoulder began to throb more fiercely. She swallowed a pill with a glass of strawberry milk, crushed one between a pancake with raspberries and clotted cream, washed down another with a cup of coffee laced with Baileys, and then lost count until she was crouching on the linoleum in front of the toilet, her cheek pressed to the cold porcelain. By then, the storm had already swallowed her father again. Through her bedroom window, she'd seen his Lacoste jacket with the little crocodile – which he'd been wearing for as long as she could remember – glowing orange in the light of the streetlamps.

'Will you come to Gran's with me on Sunday?' he'd asked from the doorway. Just say that it would make her happy, Malainey thought. She'd be pleased to see me after all these years. But Malcolm was too proud for that or perhaps he simply didn't have the words. Maybe he didn't see things that way.

'We'll see... Friend's birthday... Also I feel like I might be coming down with something, don't want her to catch it... let you know ... Nice of you to, and don't leave it so long...'

The fluttering net curtain in front of the bathroom window, the ceiling marbled with black mould, the IKEA shelf crammed with forgotten dregs of shampoo, and the dozens of jars of skin cream that Emma always kept open, all these things spun like nebulous phantoms, jerkily spinning in slow motion through her field of vision, as if someone were swinging a webcam across the room over a faltering Skype connection and she couldn't tear her eyes away from the screen. And just like in a video call with a poor connection, a sort of... *digital interference* seemed to be occurring in her perception. Surfaces and objects crumbled into pixels; glitches and artefacts grew from frame to frame, spreading across her field of vision and distorting it.

The smell that filled her nostrils reminded her of the swimming pool, but it was many times stronger; the chlorine took her breath away and made her eyes sting and water. Through the haze, she saw figures moving in the darkness. She blinked until the image became clearer. She found herself looking into a bare room, with high brick walls and no windows. In the half-light, men in rugged workwear were spreading an off-white powder across the floor. Later, that powder had turned snow-white, and the same team raked it through a rusty metal trapdoor into large vats below. They repeated those actions over and over again, growing paler and paler from the powder that shrouded them from head to toe. Their mouths were covered with strips of flannel, but their noses, which remained exposed, had been corroded by the chemicals and were in various stages of decay. She couldn't gauge the men's ages, but their sunken cheeks, moustaches and sideburns probably made them look older than they were. The only one with an olfactory organ still intact was the most boyish of them all, he was practically a child.

Malainey didn't know how long she'd been staring at that infernal loop when the figures began to fade. The vision ebbed away along with her dizziness, leaving no trace – at least, none that she could perceive. Later that evening, after she'd scrubbed the butter from the pans, she took the box containing Abby's pills out of the drawer of her bedside table. Over the past few weeks, she would have liked to have talked to Abby, ask her what she knew about the strange side effects, whether she

knew anything about them. But the day after she'd given Malainey the supply, Abby had called in sick, and then handed in her notice with immediate effect. Malainey hadn't seen her since.

She hesitated by the toilet. She remembered the moment she'd deleted Callum's number from her phone. Act first, think later. She dropped the pills into the water and flushed.



The effect of the pills proved to be more permanent than she'd expected. The pain in her shoulder never returned, but unfortunately the visions persisted, although they had changed in nature. After Shrove Tuesday, there were no more one-off apparitions; it was always the same figure she saw flickering – on the shop conveyor belt among the groceries gliding past, in the gaps between urban regeneration projects. It was one of the workers she had seen in – or rather, from – her bathroom. He seemed to have attached himself to the interface between her psyche and the material world, like a clingy ghost, a residue of the pills that hadn't been flushed away. The other apparitions had been silent, but over time she began to hear this one, even though the sound arrived with a delay and was often distorted by static, as if it were reaching her from a great distance.

From those broken, fragmented utterances, she learnt only his name, John Lovedrop, and a second name, Polly or Molly, which he would sometimes mutter for minutes on end, as if casting a spell. Otherwise, he was taciturn. His face was gaunt from deprivation and ravaged by toxic fumes, yet he possessed a undeniable charisma. For a long time, she'd had a soft spot for pale, thin, unhealthy men; they made her daydream about intense stormy relationships – a photogenic, toxic romance like the one between Pete Doherty and Kate Moss: not being able to live without each other, but neither *with* each other; mutual self-destruction as the ultimate expression of romance – that kind of love... But Lovedrop was no junkie, nor was he an indie guitarist cultivating his demons. He was, as far as she could tell, a labourer from the Industrial Revolution, who had long since been laid to rest in the cold earth and who, for reasons that remained a mystery, was contacting her from the afterlife.

A veal cutlet glided past on the conveyor belt. In the reflection of the fluorescent light on the cling film, 'Lovedrop' flickered to life, standing in the rain among mounds of white rock. Malainey bent over the gleaming plastic wrapped around the pale pink meat to study the scene more closely. Chimneys belched dark fumes across a plain of white dust where dozens of men were breaking up large white rocks with hammers. In the distance, coal heaps stood out against the muddy-yellow sky. The air stung Malainey's nostrils. The faces of the men on the site looked even more haggard than the ones she'd seen on Pancake Day. Most were horribly disfigured, with eroded, sunken noses or gaping holes in their cheeks through which their decayed teeth and inflamed gum tissue fused into strange formations were visible.

Lovedrop's hammer hit the ground with a thud. The fine white dust settled into his pores, the cracks in his lips. It clung to his hair, which, damp from the mist, stuck to his skull. He was now so close to her that she could touch him. She didn't dare to breathe as she reached out towards him, her palm still warm from the copper coins of the day. Lovedrop faded away before her fingertips could reach him. The rocky ground, the white clouds of dust, the black plumes of smoke and the rust-coloured sunset – everything welded into an enormous spiral, a raging vortex, spinning ever faster... A black void, suddenly surrounded by teeth, lips painted red...

'Have you completely lost your mind?' the mouth shouted. It turned out to belong to a woman with a short, asymmetrical hairstyle, who was staring at Malainey in horror. Malainey looked down and realised she was clutching the veal cutlet so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. Meat juice dripped onto the conveyor belt. With every drop, Malainey winced. She made sure her manager

wasn't lurking anywhere, gave the woman the mishandled cut of meat for free and was left alone in the fluorescent light, alone with the long queue of customers in dripping raincoats.

From that moment on, the dull rhythm of Lovedrops' hammer breaking up rock rang in her ears as she mechanically performed tasks and automatically muttered polite phrases. Outside, the raindrops glistened in the light of the streetlamps before hitting the ground and fading away. She felt adrift in a sea of cold wind, a sea of gleaming black tarmac, which pounded against the shop windows and seemed to go on forever.



That February had dragged itself wearily towards its end. Malainey staggered along the pavement in astronomically chunky heels, spilling her Buckfast – the fortified, caffeinated wine favoured by youth gangs, Jakeys and brawlers. The dark liquid ran down her legs, which were bare despite the cold. She approached the motorway. The M8 sliced through the centre of Glasgow like a pulsating wound from which endless streams of light and steel gushed, a deep tear in the fabric of the city, patched up with an unstable layer of tar. On the bloodiest part of the wound, a jagged, absurd growth had sprung up: Charing Cross. Between old Victorian buildings – the sombre sandstone castaways of history – Brutalist footbridges wound their way in such intricate curves that, upon stepping onto them, it was never entirely clear where you might end up. Malainey had heard that some bridges in this concrete jungle led absolutely nowhere, but ended, lonely and unfinished, in mid-air. Long ago, on the drizzly Saturday afternoons, which had stretched out endlessly in her grandparents' small living room in Germiston, her gran had told her about these unfinished bridges, about how they had alleviated their decades-long stony boredom by conjuring up illusions, and more specifically by simulating their never-materialised phantom halves. Walkers, misled by that illusion, didn't stop where the bridge ended, but carried on walking. But instead of plunging over the edge, they simply vanished into thin air.

'And nothing' her gran had said in a grim voice, 'was seen or heard of them again.'

Whenever Malainey got lost in the concrete mazes, or found herself in the sunless deserts under the viaduct at Anderston, surrounded by gigantic pillars that bore the weight of thousands of cars every day, she thought back to Granny Milksour's stories. In one version, the unfortunate walkers lived on among the weeds growing in the cracks in the old concrete; in another, the wayward bridges carried the swallowed-up travellers to an invisible urban dimension, an alternative timeline in which the M8 formed the path to a glorious, utopian future.

For a long time, Malainey had thought these were nothing but auld wives' tales, but since her recent experiences, the way she viewed them had changed, like a slow sunrise that changes the shapes and colours of objects from inside out. She wasn't yet able to grasp the new meaning; she merely sensed the shift, which left her bewildered. She began to recall long-forgotten, muttered asides, vague allusions to a secret knowledge that had been passed down through her family from generation to generation – things they could see that others could not, a sensitivity to phenomena and entities beyond the visible. Her grandmother had promised the young Malainey that one day she'd tell her the history of their bloodline, whose descendants had been renowned throughout the centuries, and feared by some, for their occult knowledge. Her most famous ancestor – this was the only thing Malainey knew for sure – was called Mallory Milc an t-Saoir and had been burned at the stake in Prestonpans, near Edinburgh, in the 17th century. By the time she was old enough to hear more, Malainey rarely saw her grandmother. Their bond had irrevocably cooled. No new secrets were entrusted to her, and she had long since forgotten most of the old ones. Only the bridges: she had always remembered them.

Malainey made her way through the complex geometry of Charing Cross, which separated the West End from the city centre. She took a big sip of her Buckfast, grimaced and chucked the empty bottle over the railing, into the abyss where a ceaseless stream of headlights raced in and out of a tunnel, eastbound towards Edinburgh or westbound towards the Clyde estuary, the Atlantic Ocean. Ahead of her, the electric chaos of Sauchiehall Street was brewing, the buzzing anticipation of the night to come: a dark and rapturous feeling, steeped in equal measure in joie de vivre and an appetite for destruction. In Sauchiehall Street, the walls and the people dripped with sweat and brightly coloured shots. The girls, already teetering on their high heels in the queues outside the clubs, were slathered in thick layers of self-tan and foundation, wore fake eyelashes and hair extensions, and squeezed themselves into the shortest bodycon bandage dresses they could find on the racks in Primark, New Look and Topshop. In the surrounding streets, a wide array of potential Tuesday nights unfolded: Junk Disco Tuesdays at The Garage, Delirious Tuesdays at Bamboo, Juicy Tuesdays at Kushion, Killer Kitsch Tuesdays at The Buff Club.

Malainey stumbled over the uneven cobblestones of Sauchiehall Lane, the alleyway between the backs of the houses on Sauchiehall Street and Bath Street. The ventilation systems, drainpipes and rubbish bins into which club life emptied were discreetly tucked away here. At the entrance to the club on Bath Street, she showed her ID, solemnly swore she wasn't drunk yet and fished some cash out of her bag, after which the ritual was signed and sealed with a stamp on the back of her hand. This Tuesday was, from now on, officially Juicy.

Bodies swayed rhythmically to ephemeral, interchangeable bangers, a succession of tracks by Avicii, Calvin Harris, Swedish House Mafia and David Guetta. Not a single beat or melody left a mark on Malainey's echoic memory, which was why it was so blissful to sink into this soft, formless sludge, this eternal sonic present. As the night wore on, the tunes would converge even further, until no one could tell them apart – a syrupy mess of Auto-Tune and electronic beats. Maximum entropy would be reached shortly before three o'clock in the morning. Then the music would be shut down throughout the city, and the revellers would trickle away, heading for street brawls, cheesy chips, after-parties in flats where condensation dripped from the windows, perhaps a bit of drunken fondling in a stranger's bed on the other side of town, and then, shivering in the drizzle, the walk of shame home, in an outfit that had looked sexy and glamorous under the club lights, but is revealed in the morning light to be unflattering and tacky, so cheap that you cringe every time you catch a glimpse of yourself in a car window.

But for now, they were still in the club, safe from the light and the responsibilities of daytime. Girls counted down to three in a shout, before downing bright pink shots in unison, shuffling back and forth to the beat, their heels too towering to allow for any more movement.

Malainey's workmates were standing at the bar. Ruth raised her hand and waved until the vodka and coke sloshed over the rim of her plastic glass and ran down her arm, towards a hastily shaved armpit, where the liquid mixed with blood that had barely dried.

'Aw, fufuxaaake.'

She tried to wipe her arm on her black bodycon dress but the shiny fabric wouldn't absorb a single drop of moisture.

'What're ye drinking, hen?' Georgie bellowed in Malainey's ear.

'Anything, babes, anything.'

The night drifted on, carried along on streams of sweet, brightly coloured alcohol. Shots blended into one another; red, blue, orange and green drinks flowing together, and although Malainey had once learnt that all the colours of the spectrum combined to make white, here they formed a dark, brownish-grey sludge, an indistinguishable liquid that tasted of liquorice and burned her throat. Her body swayed to the generic tunes and she sweated like a pig in the overheated crowd, becoming soft and sticky like kneaded plasticine, flowing effortlessly through and between the groups of dancing

people. Every now and then, a patch of brightly coloured light from the spotlights would glide over her skin, warming her further until nothing remained of her but a puddle slithering across the floor – always, of course, in the direction of the bar. The night turned into a sponge; reality sodden, thoughts slippery and unsteady, but the regime of shots was strict and unrelenting. The swirling mass on the dance floor became one gigantic organism, breathing in and out in unison. A constant, endless shaking.

Jennifer shoved a plastic cup of water into Malainey's hands. 'Drink it yourself.' Malainey said. 'Water's for numpties, for looserrrs.'

Malainey rummaged through her bag; she was sure there were still a few of those pills left in there that she hadn't flushed down the toilet, and although she'd resolved not to take them anymore, she now felt so ravenous – she wanted to swallow everything, absolutely everything, tonight, to get so fucked up she'd literally dissolve and drift off to the edge of the night. Instead of pills, she found her phone, which was on the floor a second later. Nobody seemed to know what time it was any more, and the numbers on the screen danced before her eyes. Once midnight had passed, she often felt, when she was out, as if she'd ended up in a bizarre time warp, where the laws of the clock no longer applied, where the rigid hours and minutes saw their regime overthrown by swarming, mischievous representatives of a more unruly perception of time. Minutes stretched out and then shrank back again. Hours passed in the blink of an eye. Time itself became, as it were, 'juicyyy,' as Georgie giggled after she'd accidentally spilled a vodka and coke all over herself. By now, the floor was so sticky that Malainey was in danger of losing her heels with every step. Bodies bumped into one another, bouncing around like bumper cars. Malainey danced in her bra to Rihanna's 'We Found Love'. Juice flowed everywhere, sliding over every tongue.

'Period juice!' Malainey and Georgie toasted loudly before downing a red shot, and 'snot juice!' with the next drink, which was bright green. 'Vaj juice!' Screaming with laughter, they spat the white stuff out onto the floor, which, just like the music, was saturated, soaked through with juice, even though nobody seemed to know exactly what 'juice' was.

'I thiiiink?' said Malainey, 'that JUICE runs beneath the days, a sort of, sort of... undercurrent... And that the days sort of float on a stream of JUICE, and so aren't really real, as in *real real*.'

'I think I'm gonnae spew,' said Ruth.

The club was soaking wet, ready to be wrung out. As the water flowed towards the dance floor and lapped at Ruth's feet as she returned from the loo, still wiping the vomit from her mouth, the four of them were dancing to 'Earthquake' by Labrinth and Tinie Tempah – back then, the highlight of any club night. It was around this time that Malainey became convinced that all the bar staff were staring at her.

'Git tae fuck!' said Jennifer. 'You're not that important.' She danced across to the other side of the room and belted out the lyrics with all her heart and soul.

The bar staff were still staring in Malainey's direction. They were busy building a pyramid of cups on the bar. The girl with the short bleach-blonde hair and sleeve tattoos, who'd been pouring their poison all evening, was standing on a bar stool, holding a bottle of Bacardi dark rum in each hand. Her workmates stood in a circle around her, chanting the traditional Scottish folk song, 'Here we, here we, here we fucking go!' She raised the bottles high into the air and looked Malainey in the eye. Then she began to pour. The top cup overflowed and the rum cascaded down from tier to tier, a sticky, dark waterfall. Whenever the bottles threatened to run dry, one of the barmen was on hand with two new ones. No one in the club paid any attention to what was happening, or even seemed to notice. The bar staff had knelt down around the gushing pyramid and were muttering words that Malainey couldn't hear over the music. Only the girl was still pouring tirelessly from her stool. Malainey crept closer. 'Guardian angel,' she caught, and 'the precarious of the earth.' The pyramid

began to wobble. The top cups fell first, and then, one by one, the layers beneath them, until all the juice had been released and was gushing over the circle of bar staff.

‘Saint Precarious,’ they chanted, their words now crystal clear, for the music had not fallen silent but had solidified, thickened, becoming slow, languid and syrupy. ‘Saint Precarious, protect us from the depths of the network, from the edges of the matrix...’ Rum flooded the bar and spilled out onto the floor, flowing towards the dance floor and lapping at the feet of the revellers, foaming and churning ever more violently. Malainey closed her eyes and screamed.

Everyone was staring at her. Just as she opened her mouth, the music stopped. It was three o’clock in the morning on the dot, and the floor was as dry as you’d expect in a nightclub just before closing time. The bleach-blond girl was walking round collecting dirty glasses. On the bar, there was no trace of pyramids or rum waterfalls. Everyone meekly gathered their things and made their way towards the exit. In the harsh light of the dance floor, amid the bare clamour devoid of a beat, the excesses of the dance floor suddenly seemed unreal, improbable.

It never ceased to amaze Malainey how quickly and obediently everyone slipped back into the routines from which the dance had briefly liberated them: queuing at the cloakroom, the shuffling walk to the exit, waiting for a taxi. Outside, they smoked a fag, sobered by the cold night air, and made their way through the apocalyptic hour when all the nightclubs were spewing their customers out at once: the broken glass, the puddles of vomit, girls sitting on the kerb with sprained ankles and bloodied feet, pale faces dramatically lit by taxi headlights, neon light shining from the doorway of a chippie, the red-and-blue flashing lights of the police – and in every face that same hint of astonishment, now that it had become clear there was no transcendental truth to be found at two o’clock in the morning in a toilet cubicle, in the back of a stranger’s throat, at the bottom of a plastic shot glass... Or perhaps just not tonight; perhaps they would have to try again – tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and every night to come.

‘Watch out – glass!’ screamed Jennifer. They’d taken off their heels, but even barefoot they had to cling to one another to keep their balance. No wonder, thought Malainey. The city wasn’t built on solid foundations; rather it floated on a swaying, bubbling layer of juice in every colour of the rainbow, and the colours blended into one another until everything was as brown as mud on fallow ground, as grey as the puddles reflecting the sky.



The next morning arrived in the form of a billion raindrops, which pelted against the sandstone walls. The wind made the single-glazed windows rattle in their wooden frames. The sparse daylight that filtered through the cloud cover was blocked by the heavy curtains, leaving the room still dark. Malainey groaned and crawled out from under the musty sheets, into the cold. Her head was throbbing and she couldn’t remember how she’d got home the night before – always a bad sign. Sitting on the toilet, she tried to make sense of the previous evening’s events, to come up with explanations, to discern some sort of pattern. It only made her headache worse. She took a paracetamol and decided to banish the fragments of last night from her mind.

In the kitchen, Emma was standing by the kettle in her fluffy pink dressing gown. According to the clock, it was daytime, but it was so dark that lights were on in several windows around the courtyard. Steam from the kettle seeped into the walls, only to be sweated out again later in the form of mysterious black stains. Emma’s eyes were watery, her make-up smudged. She had chewed her lower lip to a pulp of blood and lip gloss.

‘Fancy a cuppa too?’ she asked in a high-pitched voice. An incredible array of teas immediately emerged from her kitchen cupboard, ranging from conventional flavours such as Earl Grey, English Breakfast and chamomile to walnut-peach-saffron infusions, bubblegum tea, strawberry-parsnip tea,

pine cone tea, infusions of crystals and healing stones: amethyst tea, fluorite tea, Libyan Desert Glass tea, abalone tea, infusions of the remains of historical figures like the last dodo, Marie Antoinette or Karl Marx, and finally some truly bizarre concoctions like black tea containing 2% pure tears from coltan miners with a refreshing hint of apple (0.01% of the proceeds went to the miners), or a cutting-edge jet-black infusion that promised marvellous benefits, ranging from enhanced performance in bed and in the workplace to the treatment of anxiety disorders – produced, as the packaging informed the curious consumer, by a San Francisco start-up that had developed a revolutionary process to separate the stripes from a live tiger's coat and convert them into powder form.

'I still have a pack of Tetley lying about,' said Malainey hurriedly. As she poured copious amounts of sugar and milk into her black tea, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, that Emma was wavering between an infusion made from Jennifer Aniston's hair (from her *Friends* days, as the box explicitly stated) and a seaweed and nutmeg infusion. She chose the former, took a sip and burst into tears.

'That bad? But the Rachel's a lovely haircut, isn't it?'

'I really thought he liked me for who I am,' Emma sobbed. 'How can someone seem so keen one minute and so cold the next? Like I'm a piece of shit? Did I sleep with him too soon? Is that it? Am I too easy, Lainey? Oh, I hate being a girl sometimes!'

Malainey wrapped her arm around Emma's trembling body. The bawbag in question, she learnt between tissues, had recently enjoyed a measure of fame thanks to his appearance in the reality TV programme *Come Brine with Me*, in which eight young, conventionally attractive singles lived together for two months in a modest terraced house in Ayr and took turns cooking for one another. The only rule was that the main ingredient of every meal had to be kelp, which meant that not only the meal as a whole, but also every single element of it, had to consist of at least 90 per cent brown seaweed. The participants went to great lengths, creating seaweed soups, seaweed puddings and stir-fries in which both the noodles and the sauce were made from kelp, which they ingeniously seasoned and coloured so that it looked exactly as if rice noodles with soya sauce and pak choi were being served. Tomatoes, tarts and lasagnas, French cheeses and quiches, shepherd's pies and fish and chips were sculpted from kelp, but no matter how hard the chef on duty tried, no matter how skilfully he carved the most lifelike sculptures from seaweed, everyone at the long pine table would agree: 'It tastes a bit like,' chewing slowly, gaze turned pensively upwards, 'I dunno... seaweed?'

Jamie Tonsil, who quickly became one of the favourites with his mischievous, roguish smile, blonde tousled bed-hair and rosy cheeks, was the first to cleverly capitalise on this by preparing only dishes that were *meant* to taste of the sea. He charmed the audience with a starter of sushi rolls filled with kelp and a few strategically placed grains of rice. Then he brought out gigantic shell-shaped platters brimming with shellfish sculpted from kelp – a feast of oysters, mussels and scallops, meticulously recreated using 3D models from Thingiverse and finished with a subtle coat of mother-of-pearl spray. [...]