

HITCHING

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“I asked you what the fucking time is, for Christ’s sake!”

“Sorry man, I s’pose I just wasn’t paying attention.”

“As if you ever fucking do. Jesus, Bael, anyone would think you lived on a different planet.”

“Yeah, well I’m getting there slowly. And, if we get kicked out of here, I reckon I’m gonna have to get my arse into gear.”

Yahweh climbed out of the shabby room via the curtainless window. The Saturday afternoon shoppers threaded their way from vendor to vendor below. They were watched by the collection of contented onlookers who had expressed the preference for a very long liquid lunch. The pub was nestled into the station above which he and Bael had made their home and, as the afternoon drinkers gloried themselves in the sun, he imagined himself in their place, cool beer in hand, reclining on the warm wooden bench.

Definitely a day meant for wasting.

He looked back into the flat. From here, it looked even more dingy than ever. He shook his head with resignation. Today he was staying outside. This wasn’t going to be another sit around and smoke day. ‘Activity and appreciation’ - motto of the moment, to be observed at all costs, but not overdone. Activity needn’t be productive.

But first, before all that, the seed of energy must be sown. No frenetic afternoon was more than a mere possibility without a little divine inspiration. A quick prayer and all would be well. The sun would shine even brighter, and the buzz of summer would most certainly be all pervading.

He climbed back through the window, portal to the world of drab. Bael sat characteristically static and mentally *in absentia*, like a yogi on the rug in the centre of the room, the epitome of everything he was hoping to leave behind. Yahweh drifted through to the kitchen, pulled open the fridge door. It was virtually empty, which came as no surprise. He yanked open the battered ice compartment and retrieved the scrunched up ball of cellophane, then held it up to the light that just about penetrated the smog-stained kitchen window. The plastic ventilator-thing would have been spinning in the light breeze from outside - if it hadn’t been welded into stasis by grease and the great unknown.

He unravelled the plastic wrapping to reveal the last of the little cardboard squares. It must be quite old now - how old he wasn’t sure. He just hoped it’d do the job. Only one way to find out: a few chews to work that mysterious strychnine jaw-ache into the saliva. There: he grinned as it ran up the right side of his mouth to his temple - a sure sign of potency.

Right, where to first? No money, so the pub was out. No desire to stay inside, so no trips on the underground.

“I’m off out,” he called to the body that occasionally hosted his flatmate.

“Get some bog roll.” Automatic reply, proof that Bael had once more left the building well before him. He jogged downstairs and wrenched open the door, the effort sapping most of what was left of his energy. Still, in half an hour or so it would all come flooding back - and then some.

He walked passed the shops - café, hardware, newsagent (“Big Issue!”), minimarket, estate agent - and headed down toward the Gardens, caught in an intolerable line of ambling tourists. As he watched them pile in through the gates, he felt a touch of jealousy that he

couldn't afford the entry fee - or a '99' from the ice-cream van over the road. He licked his lips and turned right towards the bridge. Crossing the river, now that *was* adventurous!

As he neared the bridge, with the grassy green of the common on either side, he suddenly came over all rural. He needed some fields, and some rolling hills and cows and stuff. But how the fuck was he supposed to get out into the countryside with sod all cash and no means of transport?

Hitching.

Never done it before, but always felt it would be a smart idea. A free ride and the chance to meet some new people. Okay, so most of them would probably be boring but, when you live with a perpetual astral nomad and you're used to little or no intelligible conversation, you need a change far more than a rest.

So he stuck his thumb out, keeping it casual, and carried on walking, squinting against the sun. Didn't bring his shades - what a fucking genius!

He'd only just made it over the bridge when a car stopped beside him. Being a Londoner, his first instinct was to wonder what they were after, and he assumed they'd be wanting directions. But then he remembered his outstretched, digit-thrusting arm, and it all slotted sensibly together.

"Where're you headed?"

He stooped down to look into the unhappy Fiesta for a glimpse of the woman behind the voice. Not bad for a first attempt.

"I'm not really sure," he admitted. "How about you?"

"Milton Keynes..."

"Why?"

"Don't ask," she grimaced. "Do you want a lift or not?"

"Yeah, great."

"Well, hop in then."

He opened the door and sat down in the passenger seat. She didn't wait for him to get comfortable - or even close the door - before she pulled out into the traffic.

"I'm Jenny," she told him.

"Yahweh."

"Are you serious?"

"'Fraid so. Strange parents."

"Evidently so. You're not some nutter, are you?"

Under the circumstances, he felt it wise not to answer her question. "Believe me, my name is one of their more mundane stunts," he assured her.

"I'm intrigued. So, what are you doing?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Today. Where are you going?"

"Oh, just anywhere really - except Milton Keynes."

She glanced at him disapprovingly. "Just drop it, okay."

"Yeah, sorry. I just thought the weather was too good to be wasted, so I thought I'd get out for the day."

"Out of London?"

"Out of anywhere, really. Kew's not exactly the most exciting place to spend a nice sunny day - inside *or* out."

"It might not be exciting, but it's not a bad little place."

"Yeah, well I wasn't really up for sitting around in a deckchair reading the paper."

“So you’re off on a little adventure, then?”

“Would be nice. I’ve had enough of all the nothingness that seems to permeate my every waking moment.”

“Haven’t we all?”

“I know it’s a cliché, but it’s still true.”

“Of course it is: they all are.”

“So. What’s in Milton Keynes?”

“A wedding. My brother’s finally decided to tie the knot with the girl he’s been living with for the past seven years.”

“Sounds like you don’t approve,” he observed.

“The girl’s thick as pigshit. A real bimbo. Everything she says is a hemp-induced platitude.”

“So you’re not a big fan, then?”

“Hate her guts.”

“No, I meant of the weed.”

“Oh, that. Well, I’ve got nothing against the substance itself, just most of the people that use it. Not the occasional user, but the ones who sit around all day, rotting their brains and talking shite. It just pisses me off to see people wasting what little time they’ve got, slouched in a corner, waffling on about the meaning of existence when they could be out there, making the most of their own.”

“I know what you mean. This guy I live with sits on his arse and smokes constantly. He’s always talking about shit he’s done, places he’s been and his plans for the future - ‘I might do this job, I might do that; wouldn’t it be nice to live in a commune?’ - all that crap. But I can’t believe he has done, or will ever get round to doing, any of it. Everything he says he’s already done sounds like pure fiction.”

“Don’t you ever lose your rag with him?”

“Oh, I tried having a go once or twice.”

“And what happened?”

“He just told me I wouldn’t understand, that I shouldn’t hold such a linear notion of time and that I should relax and spend a couple of days getting boxed.”

“So you don’t get on too well?”

“Oh, we get on all right. He’s pretty amicable and easy going, and some of his stories are pretty entertaining - sometimes even insightful, though I’d be reluctant to say that to his face. And, if he *has* done everything he says he has, then he must have led a pretty full and mad life.”

“So, maybe he’s just taking some time to relax. An escape from all the hecticcity. Is that a word?”

“Words are made by people and new words have to start somewhere. Besides, who’s to say who’s got the authority to keep gibberish separate from English? We nick words from other languages all the time, and so many people talk nonsense that I reckon it deserves to be called a language in itself.”

“Profound,” she nodded.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to forgive me. I often talk bollocks. I’m not sure if it predates Bael, or if I’ve always been so eloquent a purveyor of stupid ideas.”

“You’ve got a spooky habit of swinging between coarseness and sounding intelligent,” she observed.

“Is spooky good or bad?”

“Oh, neither. It goes under the innocuous banner of intriguing.”

“So you’re intrigued?” he grinned. The acid was beginning to take effect now and he

suspected the grin was too much - more rictus than playful. He struggled to tone it down, but his efforts made his jaw ache.

"I was only saying that a person *might* be intrigued..."

"And this person in particular?"

"Particularly this person in particular," she acknowledged, rolling her eyes.

"Am I going to see you again?" he asked out of the blue.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because if I'm not, and I don't act now, I'm going to torture myself for months."

"Over what?"

"Over my stupidity at not making a more concerted pass at you," he said with synthetic boldness.

She turned to him, blushed, and returned her gaze to the road ahead.

In the absence of any response, the drug dragged him on. "However, if I am going to see you again and I made a pass now but fell flat on my face, I'd feel a bit if a twat next time we met. You'd probably have no respect for me whatsoever and any hope of a lifelong friendship would be lost, because you'd always see me as just another libido-driven monster whose only goal in life is to de-pant every fair maiden in his path."

"So you're just trying to get into my pants?"

"I was only saying that a person, such as our hypothetical me who suggested more than a platonic liaison, might be seen by our hypothetical you, who was appalled by the aforementioned suggestion, as some kind of insatiable sex-beast."

"In other words, you're not committing yourself," she concluded.

"To put it more simply, yes."

"And you want to know what the future holds before you take a chance."

"Well, I can make do with knowing whether or not our paths are likely to cross again."

"And if I say I think they might?"

"I suppose, then, I'll be forced into another dilemma," he admitted.

"Which would be what?"

"Whether you were keen to continue our acquaintance in order to increase the chances of me acting on impulse..."

"And making a concerted effort to get into my pants," she finished more bluntly than he would have.

"Yes," he agreed. "But bearing in mind that in this scenario, the getting-into of the pants would be a mutually desired event."

"Right," she nodded. "And the other horn of this dilemma?"

"Well, that would involve you saying we might see each other again because you're keen to build that life-long friendship I mentioned earlier."

"I see. And this dilemma would continue indefinitely. You would be constantly asking yourself what I was really after, and our lifelong friendship would be nothing more than a mask for your continuous assessment of the probability of debagging me?"

"Unless, of course," he pointed out. "I made an impulsive attempt to do so."

"In which case our friendship would die the same death as it would have if your attempt had occurred today and failed, which would render the entire friendship a waste of time and effort."

"But, on the other hand, it could turn into the same highly-charged sexual encounter it would have been had I made my bid today and succeeded," he pointed out.

"Except that the build-up, over the course of a long-running friendship, could well intensify the excitement."

"As could the randomness and spontaneity of meaningless sex with someone you'll

never see again.”

“But, of course, there is another possibility,” she reflected.

“And what’s that?”

“Well, I might be telling you I think we’ll see each other again purely to get you off my back. You spend the rest of the journey planning a mounting long-term campaign to invade my underwear, and - when I drop you off - I give you a wrong phone number and go on my way, safe in the knowledge that I’m rarely in Kew and that eventually you’ll forget what I look like and who I am.”

“Given that I don’t have or ever use a phone, whether the number was genuine wouldn’t make the slightest bit of difference. But I see what you mean. Personally, I like to think that, even if *friends* aren’t always honest about their intentions, complete strangers will be. After all, if they’re never going to see each other again, they’d have nothing to lose from telling the truth and nothing to gain by lying.”

“How about freedom from guilt?” she suggested.

“What? At hurting my feelings?”

“No, at leaving you by the side of the M1, when they decided they couldn’t handle sitting next to someone they’d admitted they never wanted to see again.”

“So, you’re about to falsely profess a desire to see me again?”

“Surely, if I professed that desire, you wouldn’t be able to decide whether it was genuine or not? You’d be no better off than before, and you’d be stuck with your original dilemma of whether or not to try and get into my pants immediately.”

“Hmmm,” he mused. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Which leaves the only productive response from me, at least as far as you’re concerned, being ‘No, I don’t think we’ll see each other again.’”

“Which is the line you’re going to take?”

“Only out of kindness to you, of course.”

“So, I’m now left with the arduous task of deciding whether to make the pass or not,” he concluded.

“Oh, it’s not really that arduous.”

“There’s still the problem of failure,” he reminded her.

“True, but you haven’t got nearly as much to lose. After all, this way there’s no lifelong friendship at risk.”

“All the same, if things were to go wrong, I’d most likely find myself waiting by the side of the M1.”

“Naturally,” she agreed. “But it’s a busy motorway.”

“Maybe so, but somehow I don’t think I’m everyone’s ideal passenger,” he said, looking at himself in the mirror on the tacky plastic flap that shielded his naked eyes from the sun. He still wasn’t used to baldness. It was less than a month since he’d sacrificed his once long hair to the blasting furnace of summer, and he did look a bit of a nutter. But it wasn’t the shaved head that did it. With or without hair, people considered him scary. There must have been something about him, something menacing in his bone structure, or his posture, or the look in his eye.

“I picked you up,” she reminded him, not noticing the way he was staring at his face in the mirror, “And besides, you don’t even know where you’re going. You can hardly complain that you’re in a hurry.”

“Well no, but spending the day on a grassy verge at the side of a busy motorway isn’t exactly my idea of entertainment. And what about that guilt you referred to?”

“I think you’ll find I was talking about the hypothetical ‘they’,” she smiled.

“Marvellous,” he sighed. “I think I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

"I don't think there's much chance of that," she sniggered.

"What do you mean?"

She turned to him and raised an eyebrow. He folded his arms and clamped his jaws tight around his indelible smile, taking his own secret vow of silence.

"I'll tell you what," he announced within sixty seconds.

"What?" she laughed.

"I'll make a compromise. I'll save my pass for the next junction."

"Very noble, but I'll tell you two things."

"What and what?"

"A compromise isn't something one person comes up with on their own..."

"It is if the other side agrees with it," he objected.

"Which brings me to my second point... A compromise is a settlement of differences between two or more opposing sides, options or scenarios. It has to be something that comes somewhere between them."

"Which it does," he frowned. What the fuck was she talking about?

"So, what are they? What does this compromise of yours lie between?"

"Between the possibility of me being thrown out here to wait for some other charitable soul to pass..."

"And?"

"And the agony of never knowing whether or not my attempt might have borne fruit."

"Your agony," she added.

"Our agony," he insisted.

"But surely I already know the answer?"

She was right. He stared at the licence plate of the car in front.

"My God, silence!"

"I suppose you've got a point," he admitted, turning his nose up. "Still, if you were going to accept my proposition, and it never came, you might be disappointed."

"If" and "might".

"Are you going out of your way to make this as difficult as possible?"

"Of course. Sunny days might make me ridiculously horny, but I'm not the sort of girl that hitches up her skirt for any old bloke who happens to be walking down the road with his thumb in the air."

"So you pick them up and interview them first, and if they don't measure up you leave them at the side of the road?"

"Actually, this is my first time, but it seems sensible, don't you think? I don't want to be bending over for any old riffraff, and I'll certainly use the same recipe next time."

"Next time?"

"Well, it's too late to start all over again now, isn't it?"

"So, you're not considering me?"

"Oh God no."

He flinched. "There's no need to be so harsh. You don't know how fragile my self-image might be. Your rejection could be the final push over the brink of despair."

"Which is another good reason for me not to reject you. After all, how could I live with myself if a healthy young man like you committed suicide simply because I wouldn't let him between my legs?"

He looked at her blankly as she kept her eyes on the road.

Sex had never been something that had come so easily to him. It had always involved so much messing about. He'd pull and they'd snog, then perhaps they'd meet up again. If he was lucky, they'd get on and maybe over the course of a few weeks, they'd share a bed a couple of times, and eventually they'd finally shag. But now, here he was, lying beside a near stranger in a field next to a motorway sliproad, naked and sweating in the summer heat.

The act itself had been strange, as well as the lead up. The acid had increased his excitement yet prolonged the event, then left him exhausted but still unsated. He wished he had the energy to do it again, although his companion seemed more than content to doze in the long grass.

"What now?" he asked her, more interested in breaking the post-coital silence and seeing if she was awake, than in any answer she might give.

"Hmm?" she murmured, lifting her head and shielding her eyes in salute.

"What happens now?"

"What do you want to happen?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Fancy coming to a wedding?"

"I thought you said we weren't going to see each other again?"

"We haven't finished seeing each other the first time, yet," she pointed out.

He nodded in defeat.

"Well? Are you coming?"

"I don't see why not."

"As long as you don't decide to adopt the title of 'boyfriend' or anything."

"Fair enough," he complied.

"Right then, let's get going."

She rose into a fetching crouch and gathered her clothes. Then she slipped on her skirt and still-buttoned blouse and dropped her underwear back in the grass. "That should cause someone amusement."

He laughed as he buttoned-up his jeans, and they walked barefoot back to the car.

"So what's his name?" he asked as they climbed back in.

"Whose?"

"Your brother. I'd feel a bit rude turning up to someone's wedding when I didn't even know their name."

"Tony."

"And hers?"

"Er, Jez."

"Took a while!"

"Yeah, well, like I said, she's not my favourite person."

"Do I get to meet them first, or are we headed straight to the church?"

"Oh, I'm supposed to go to the house beforehand."

"And what time's the wedding?"

"Half four."

"That only gives us an hour," he pointed to the clock in the dashboard.

"I like to cut things a bit fine. And besides, we're almost there - once we get back on the motorway, it's the next junction."

"Already?"

"Time flies when you're negotiating a shag with a complete stranger!"

"Certainly does."

She turned on the radio. The news. More BSE and a massacre in Tasmania.

“Sod this,” she cracked. “Grab a tape from the glove compartment.”

He found it jammed with caseless cassettes which spilled onto the floor. “Any preferences?”

“Anything. I just want some music instead of all this crap.”

He grabbed a handful and read through the labels, opted for a band and album he’d never heard of and slotted the cassette into the stereo. She turned up the volume as the intro began - a man and a woman in mid-west American accents.

I’m tired of just driving around. Let’s go some place.

All right, like where’re are we going?

Anywhere, just as long as we stay out good and late!

“Good choice,” she told him.

“Pretty fitting,” he agreed, wondering what he’d selected.

“So,” she started after quite some time, having rejoined the motorway with the minimum of cursing and confusion. “What do you do?”

“When?”

“As a job,” she elaborated. “Or instead of one.”

“I’m having some time off.”

“On the dole.”

“I prefer to think of it as a paid sabbatical.”

“And what might you be doing otherwise?”

“I’ve just finished a degree and I haven’t really decided what to do next.”

“You don’t come across as the studious type.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he replied, and did. “Actually I was never particularly attentive.”

“So you fucked it up, and now you can’t get a job despite three years on the poverty line?”

“Not at all,” he mocked offence. “I actually did pretty well, in spite of my lack of commitment. The course was as boring as hell, but what little work they made us do, when we weren’t cramming for exams, wasn’t exactly taxing.”

“So what did you do?”

“History and Philosophy.”

“Christ!”

“Exactly. Actually, the Philosophy wasn’t too bad. It was just the rest of it that failed to grab me.”

“I can see why you’ve not got a job. Didn’t you think of the prospects when you were choosing the course?”

“I took it because I was interested.”

“And then you found it boring. That’s a bit of a cock up.”

“A massive cock up!”

She looked at him with a cheeky grin, her teeth acidic white, and her eyes roved downward.

“Oh please,” he groaned.

“What’s up? Don’t like being treated like a piece of meat?”

Looking for a way in, searching for the way out. Angels ride free in your mind.

Actually it rather appealed to him. Her blatant disregard for common decency fit snugly into his own sense of escapism. Today marked the beginning of a new era, a whole new life-scheme. Wouldn’t it be cool and reckless to not bother to go back to the squat at all? Back to Bael’s lifelessness and spirally fictitious anecdotes. Back to his own gnarled

mattress and the plague infested fridge. All he'd left behind was a few personal effects - the few bits and bobs he hadn't left with his parents, nothing he'd miss if he blew the place out and started all over again. Sure he'd have the hassle of shifting his dole and maybe a few quid in the process, but he could wear that for a while. He could even try hanging out with this girl and poncing a meal or two. After all, if she could afford to run a car, then she could afford to feed him for a couple of days. If he played his cards right, he could be onto a good thing. She was obviously keen on a bit of use and abuse, and she certainly gave as good as she got - and she hadn't ditched him yet.

Drifting like a stoned dog, sister rebel outlaw, agent for a vacant world.

What the hell was this music? Was it just the acid, or had a totally random selection proven bizarrely appropriate? Did it really matter? Things were going great. The sun was out, the drugs were working, and he was in the midst of a mini-adventure. Not only that, but he'd just had some fantastic sex, *and* the whole thing came with its own soundtrack. His whole day was being carefully orchestrated around him, and the conductor deserved a standing ovation. Big hand, big hand!

But his gratitude soon turned sour. With the start of the next track, he sank in a state of intense paranoia.

Chemical cop-out! Chemical cop-out!

They were just pulling off the motorway as the song unfolded, blasted at him from all four directions, and he looked at his chauffeur suspiciously. The poignancy was seemingly lost on her - or was it all just part of the ruse? Had she been watching him all along, monitoring his highs in anticipation of this sudden descent? But hadn't he put the tape on in the first place? Was that what she'd meant when she'd said it was a good choice?

No, fuck it. It was just a tape, for Christ's sake!

His eyes were wide and staring when they pulled up outside a terraced house in Milton Keynes.

... But crimes of the heart have no place in their world. Too wild to possess, maverick Babylon Drifter...

With the ignition went the music. With the music went his rapt focus upon it, and with that his paranoia.

"Well, here we are," she announced. "Are you still alive?"

"Eh?"

"You haven't spoken for the last twenty minutes."

"Sorry. I was just listening to the music."

"You like it? Hardly anyone else does." She pressed the Eject button. "Here take it. I've got it on CD anyway. I'll tape it again later."

"Thanks."

"No worries. Think of it as a souvenir!"

That didn't bode so well. Sounded kind of final. Still, he took the tape anyway.

A middle-aged woman tapped on the driver's side window, standing back as the door opened.

"Come on, Jenny. You'll be late!" So that was her name!

"Sorry, mum. I kind of got tied up in London."

"This is an important day. We need to get you ready. Oh, hello."

"Hi," he waved.

"Aren't you going to introduce your friend?"

"Oh, sure. Mum, this is Yahweh. Yahweh, my mum."

"You must be very happy," he said inanely.

"I certainly am. It's nice to meet you... Yahweh. Now, if you'll excuse us the car will be here in half an hour and we've got to get Jenny ready."

"Mum, Yahweh's going to be coming to the wedding with us. There'll be room in the car, won't there?"

"Of course! We'll be able to squeeze him in with your brother."

"Sorry, I haven't got a suit," he apologised. "This was a little unexpected."

"Not at all. We can probably fit you into one of Jenny's dad's if you want?"

"Oh, I don't think a suit will be necessary, mum."

"It's not exactly in keeping with tradition, Jen. But that's just you, isn't it. I suppose it's up to you how you want your friends to dress. Anyway, come on now. It's just like you to keep us all waiting."

He followed them into the house, where he was introduced to Jenny's father, Jim. They necked a couple of swift scotches as they waited for the women to get ready. They exchanged a few pleasantries and he managed a quick lie about how he'd met the man's daughter - something to do with mutual friends down in London. Pressed for a job, and deciding the truth would leave both of them rather uncomfortable, he claimed a more useful degree and a subsequent job in computers. Fortunately Jim had as little interest in computers as him, which kept the conversation short and safely untechnical.

"It's just as well you had your makeup and hair done before you left London, or we might never have got you ready in time," came Jenny's mother's voice from behind him as the two women fuffed in the hallway.

"Always fashionably late," added the voice of a young man. "Ready, dad?"

"I've been ready all day," Jim grumbled, looking at his son over Yahweh's shoulder. "Tony, this is... sorry, what was your name again?"

"Yahweh."

"Yes," Jim agreed with him. "He's a friend of Jenny's - an unexpected guest for the day."

"Hi," said Yahweh, standing to shake the man's hand. "Any last minute worries?"

"About what?"

"Tying the knot. Scares the hell out of me."

"Sorry, mate. I dunno what you're on about."

"You are the groom?"

"No, I'm Jenny's brother."

"Of course he's not the groom," Jenny's mother piped up. "It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before she arrives at the church."

He turned on his stool to face her. Jenny was smiling behind her. Then she stepped into full view and pulled down the veil.

"How do I look?" she asked him cheekily.

He couldn't help but feel out of place as he stood in a corner at the reception, sipping his third glass of champagne. The acid had all but worn off and the ceremony had been sobering to say the least. The numbing effect of the alcohol helped him see the funny side, but nevertheless he found himself alone and embarrassingly underdressed surrounded by crisp suits and tails.

"All right, mate?"

He pulled himself back from gazing vacantly across the room to find Jenny's brother Tony standing beside him.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Just feeling a bit of a misfit, that’s all.”

“I know the feeling,” he agreed. “Apart from family and a few of Jenny’s friends, I don’t really know anyone here, either. I’m surprised Jenny hasn’t introduced you to a few people to make things easier for you.”

“Oh, she’s busy,” he shrugged, failing to catch her eye as she headed from one bunch of guests to another. “I’m sure she’ll get round to me later.”

“Yeah. So, what do you do?”

“Oh, this and that. Computers and stuff. How about you?”

“Promos.”

“Eh?”

“I’m in the music business,” he explained, taking two glasses of champagne from the tray as the waiter moved past them. “You know, left school at sixteen, lucky break and all that.”

“Must be fun.”

“More fun than this,” he groaned. “Listen, what would you say to a little something to spice the evening up?”

“Like?”

“Oh, you know. Some synthetics to put a pep in your step.”

“What are we talking here?”

“I just happen to have a couple of pills on me. Splendid ‘E’s, straight from California.”

“And that makes a difference, does it?”

“Of course not,” Tony grinned. “But it sounds good!”

The acid hangover was already starting to kick in, in spite of the alcohol, and he had no desire to be stuck in Milton Keynes feeling grisly with no mates and no way out. He’d always avoided ‘E’s in the past, but then he’d never hitch-hiked or been to a wedding where he’d only just shagged the bride.

“Oh, sod it. Why not?” he shrugged.

They knocked back the pills with a dash of champagne and the effects were just kicking in when Jenny wound her way over to them, her new husband on her arm. There was none of the prelude of acid, none of the frenetic nervous energy he’d felt earlier that day. This was far more mellow, a sense of swelling anticipation that blossomed into a calm wakefulness that swept away his LSD hangover.

“Sean, this is my friend Yahweh from London. Yahweh, this is my husband, Sean.”

They shook hands and he beamed the groom a smile. The overdone grin was still as insistent as ever.

“Jenny’s told me so much about you,” he lied, a string of platitudes suddenly springing to mind. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy together. The two of you looked great. It was a lovely ceremony - very, erm, personal. I’m so glad Jenny made me come.”

His eyes lingered on hers as he said it, and she buried her smile in her glass.

“I’m afraid you have the advantage of me,” Sean responded, missing the joke entirely. “Jenny never even told me she was bringing an extra guest up from London.”

“Oh, we don’t know each other all that well. I didn’t even know she was getting married. I just bumped into her on the way up and she gave me a ride. It was all pretty spur-of-the-moment, which is why I’m so underdressed.”

“Not to worry. We’ve never been much for tradition. In fact we only got married in a church to keep our families happy. So, are you a friend of Jenny’s from work?”

“Yes,” she butted in as he told him he wasn’t. Sean frowned in confusion.

“Yahweh is friends with a couple of the people at work,” she explained. “Friends of his

from University. We met at a party a couple of months back.”

He nodded to confirm the lie. “As I said, we haven’t known each other very long. It was great to have the chance to get a bit closer on the journey up, to find out a bit about each other. And now, here I am. I can’t say how much it surprises me to have come today.”

“I’m glad you were able to,” Sean smiled welcomingly.

“So am I,” he nodded again.

“I’ll catch you later, boys,” Jenny told them as she led her husband away. “Oh and Tony...”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t get my friend into any trouble, will you?”

“Would I ever?”

“Listen,” said Tony, as the guests filed out. “I know of a party we can go to. It’s a bit of a trek, but I’ve got my bike at home and I’ve only had a couple. What do you reckon?”

“Sure, why not?” he agreed. He’d been peaking for a while and was longing to make the most of it - and besides, where else would he go?

“Excellent! Let’s grab a lift back to mine, then we can shoot off.”

They joined Jenny’s mother and father in a taxi back to the house. While Yahweh jabbered about his fictional job, Tony explained that they were off to party in town. Then they wished his parents goodnight and Tony changed out of his suit. Five minutes later, they were on the back of a Kawasaki, in leather jackets and crash helmets, apparently headed back toward the M1. Tony refused to say exactly where they were going, but promised they’d drop another couple of ‘E’s as soon as they got there. They way things were going, Yahweh was definitely going to need it.

They pulled up outside an ominous looking building that would have seemed more appropriate as the offices of the local council. His mind whirled with memories of fudged claims for income support, housing benefit and jobseeker’s allowance. Still, if Regal House had had an atmosphere like this place, he’d have gone every day. He could hear the music from the street, even through the crash helmet. Blaring techno. Definitely something he could sink his teeth into.

He climbed off the bike and Tony wheeled it onto the kerb. His feet were tapping without him and he was desperate to get inside. Nevertheless, he waited patiently for Tony to lock up the bike. After all, what could be worse than having it nicked and being stranded somewhere in Nottingham?

When he was done, they headed around to the back. Two bouncers on the door stood aside for them to enter as Tony flashed what must have been a ticket or pass in their direction. They dropped their jackets and helmets in at the cloakroom and headed upstairs.

They threaded their way through people in every conceivable position - from horizontal-unconscious to vertical-Siamese-twinning - and burst into the main room. The sweat-filled air rushed through the open doors to greet them, then dragged them like a dank tentacle back into its ravenous maw. The room was a battlefield. The perimeter was littered with bodies, some expired, others enjoying a final chat, beer and smoke before they lay down to play dead. And in the centre, the berserkers fought on, frenzied pagans worshipping the gods of excess. It reminded him of the Halls of Valhalla, where heroes whiled away the afterlife proving their bravery and gorging themselves on everything they could get their UV-painted hands on. It reminded him of heaven.

Tony waved to someone in the distance, then grabbed his arm and lead him along the edge of the undulating monster that was the dancefloor. They made their way to a stall in the corner farthest from the doors and the bar. It was manned, if that's possible, by two girls, and surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. Every visible part of the girls' skin was elegantly decorated with multicoloured luminescent paint, and each of them wielded a brush for the embellishment of others. They showered Tony with kisses as soon as they saw him, and chatted excitedly in his ears.

He watched the three of them with a niggling sense of jealousy as he listened to the thump of the music. And then, with a gesture, Tony sent them over to him for similar treatment. They asked him if he'd like to be painted. He glanced at Tony, who nodded and smiled. And suddenly they were pulling his top off, and it was all he could do to keep hold of it as they picked up their paints and began. Sandwiched between them, he closed his eyes and focused on the soft, cool brushes stroking his chest and back.

He felt something small pressed into the palm of his hand and he raised it to his face for inspection. Another pill, courtesy of his host. He looked guiltily and pointlessly around him, before popping it into his mouth. Then he swallowed it, wishing he had something to wash it down with.

The front girl had finished his chest. She was speaking to him with her brush poised in front of his nose. He hadn't a hope of hearing her, so he frowned and touched his ear.

"I said, 'Would you like me to paint your face?'" she bellowed into it, kissing his earlobe and holding it briefly between her teeth.

He nodded enthusiastically, keen to keep her as close as he possibly could.

She held his chin with her left hand while she worked on his face with the right. Behind him, her friend had completed his back. She was pushing herself up against him, her arms encircling his waist and stroking his hips.

The other girl laid down her paints and grabbed her. She pulled all three of them together, and they rocked in time with the now more ambient music. His hormones were raging inside him, and the closeness and movement were more than he could stand. He placed a hand on either side of the first girl's head and lifted her face to his. Then he planted a kiss on her lips and she yielded eagerly.

The three of them ground against each other for the rest of the track. His excitement soared, and with it his imagination. As soon as the moment was right, he would lead them out through the doors, down those casualty-ridden stairs and out into the cool night air. And then the fun would really begin...

The moment came as the DJ took the music up tempo. The girls stepped away and he held onto the first one's hand, ready to lead them both to a higher plane.

"All done," she said, with an exuberant smile.

"It looks nice," the second girl told him, taking her friend's hand from him and walking her over to Tony. Tony was balanced on his haunches, talking to a dreadlocked crusty who was putting the finishing touches to a pot and Rizla 'Windmill'. The girls sat down either side of him.

"Boz, this is a friend of mine, Yahweh. Yahweh, this is Boz."

Boz's nod was one of acknowledgement, not greeting. Tony sat down and pulled in his legs. Yahweh did the same, hoping the 'E' would soon kick in, so he could overcome Boz's apathy.

"Boz runs one of the shops in town," Tony told him. "Clothes, pipes, bangles - you know the sort."

"Right," he nodded. What had he said *he* did? No idea. The truth was always a good bet, though he certainly hadn't told it earlier.

But nobody asked him what he did. Instead, Boz lifted the four-pronged monstrosity and lit it, inhaling deeply. And when he'd had his fill he passed it on.

They sat there for a while, passing the windmill without speaking a word. He sat there, watching the girls. He'd expected to fawn over Tony or Boz but was surprised to see that they hadn't. Still, they'd shown no more interest in him and he was praying for some music that would give him an excuse to dance.

Thank God! He leapt to his feet, the Ecstasy leaping with him. Then he gave the others a wave and headed out into the dancers. He wormed his way into the centre. On the fringe he was vulnerable, but at the hub he would be one with the crowd. No matter how badly the booze and drugs addled his brain, at the centre he'd be in good company.

He needed a drink, and just as badly he needed some air. He weaved his way to the bar, wiping his brow and the top of his head with the T-shirt tucked into his belt. A mystery free pint was thrust into his hand and he gulped half of it down as he pushed his way to the swing doors and out.

Still too hot. He walked down the steps, past the cloakroom and bouncers and into the cool night air.

"M' name's Arick," he was told by a clean-cut Mancunian who was leaning against the railing. Another friendly face.

"Yahweh."

"Ad enough inside?"

"Just too fucking hot. I'm sweating like a donner kebab and the crush is starting to do my head in."

"Me too. There's an all-night garage down the road. Fancy a walk?"

"Don't see why not."

"Y' better get a jacket, though, or you'll freeze your tits off."

He popped back inside, presented his soaking wet ticket and retrieved his borrowed leather jacket. He wasn't cold yet, so he'd just hold onto it.

"So, where y' from?"

"London," he replied. "I'm just up here with a friend; we're going back tomorrow."

"All this way for a bog-standard party like this?"

"It wasn't planned." Understatement. "I just ended up here."

"Mad."

"What about you?"

"Stockport. I'm studyin' 'ere."

"What?"

"Eh?"

"What are you studying?"

"Mech. Eng. Dull as shite."

"But useful." Not like his own.

"Only if you wanna go into engineerin', which I don't."

"So why'd you do the course?"

"Romantic delusions. S'pose it's like wantin' t'be a train driver as a kid. I was just a kid when I got 'ere, an' I thought it would be a great career. Instead, I'm workin' my arse off f'no apparent reason, sittin' borin' exams an' fuckin' up if I don't spend just about every night at my desk. Now, I'm near the end of my degree and I find myself looking at the Big Wide World that everyone's always warned me about. It don't look too hard, just more borin'. I'm 'ardly gonna be strapped f'cash, just as long as I can programme m'self to put up with the shite of a nine-t'-five job where I'm doin' the same borin' rubbish every single

day.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“Really, what d’you do?” Arick asked him.

“Not a lot. I’ve got a degree, but it’s about as useful as a Tetley condom. So, I sit around on my arse in a squat in South London. It’s not a bad squat as squats go, but any walls’ll get to you when you stare at them all day every day.”

“Sounds like yer in need of a little excitement.”

“Too fucking right,” he agreed. “That’s why I’ve spent the last twelve hours or so in the company of complete strangers with no idea what’s coming next.”

“But I thought y’said y’were ‘ere with a friend?”

“I exaggerated. It’s like lying but decriminalised.”

“Like dope in Amsterdam?”

“Like dope in Amsterdam.”

“I went to the ‘Dam once,” Arick told him.

“Enjoy?”

“Nah. It was a shite’ole. There was me, expectin’ birds in funny costumes skinnin’ up the biggest and best cones y’could imagine, and all I find is seedy backstreets, porn shops, and ‘ores in winduz.”

“You should try Rotterdam - crack smoking on the underground, extremely ugly whores in the street. If you think the north is bad, try the south.”

“To be honest, mate, I think I’ll give ‘Olland a miss. Manchester’s bad enough, without going on ‘oliday t’find the same old crap.”

“It’s not all bad if you stay away from the main cities. Cities are much of a muchness, if you ask me.”

“Oh, I dunno. There’s plenty of variety ‘ere in England.”

“What, you mean some of them are more seedy and violent than others? Great fucking variety.”

“S’all relative, though. I mean Manchester’s s’posed to be violent, but it’s ‘ardly Beirut, is it?”

“To be honest, I’d rather stay out of both.”

“But there’s no shit in Manchester. As long as y’don’t go t’the wrong places, you won’t get in any trouble.”

“But why should there be places you can’t go?”

“Mate, y’can go into them if y’want to, but if y’do y’need plenty of attitude and preferably some ‘Ungerford courage.”

“A gun?”

“Yeah.”

“So, as long as you’re carrying a gun, everything’s cool?”

“Yeah. Nobody fuck’s with a gun.”

“No, people just get fucked *by* them.”

“Only those as don’t use ‘em right.”

“You’re not going to tell me you’ve used one?”

“No, but ‘aven’t you ever ‘eld one in yer ‘and?”

“No. For some reason I’ve never been tempted.”

“Y’ve never been tempted by the feeling of power?”

“Power to kill people? No, I have to admit, it’s not been one of my burning ambitions.”
Fruitcake.

“It’s not one of them things y’d actively seek out. It’s just that once y’ve ‘eld a gun, it puts things into perspective. While it’s there, it’s like a drug. Y’feel strong with it, but it

takes 'old of yer. It's like, every little sound and y' thinking y' need the gun just in case."

"So you get paranoid everyone else's got one?"

"Yeah, I s'pose."

"And wouldn't it make you more vulnerable if other people thought you had a gun?"

"What, like the Police?"

"No, anyone you might use it on, to protect yourself. If they thought you had a gun and were willing to use it, they'd know they'd have to shoot first. Even if you didn't actually have one, they might think you did, in which case it'd have the same effect."

"Aw, y' can't be afraid to die all the time."

"That's the Mancunian in you talking."

"I'm from Stockport, not Manchester, and I wasn't askin' f' yer to take the piss."

"No offence."

"Good. No, it's just one of my little philosophies on life, that's all. Comes from the conservation of energy. If y' can't destroy energy and matter, but can only transform them into different combinations, then nothin' can ever really die, which means there's nothin' t' fear. An' if y' not conscious after y' die, then what's the problem with dyin'?"

"It might not be so bad if you're going to die suddenly, but what about a long, drawn out death?"

"The pain doesn't matter, either. Look at it this way: if you 'it your thumb with a hammer today, then by tomorrow the pain'll probably be gone - and the pain y' felt today won't matter anymore. It's the same with dying. Once it's over, it doesn't matter 'ow it 'appened."

"So you're quite willing to suffer any sort of pain, then?"

"Don't be daft. Yer 'ardly gonna look forward to a period of intense pain. I'm just puttin' it into perspective. I'm not saying I'm looking forward to dying, just that if I do, it won't matter. Live for the present, take the risks and the most monumentous consequences are the ones y' won't have to deal with at all."

"Are you just the tiniest bit pissed off with your degree, by any chance?"

"I've just decided that I should live for today. Grab it, shake it about, and get m' money's worth. Do all those things I've always wished I'd done, and share them with others so I don't get lonely along the way."

"Is that why you started talking to me?"

"In a way. It kind of makes things seem more real if y' do them with a kindred spirit. Partners in crime, so to speak."

"I s'pose so. I have to admit I've tended to stick to doing things with others. Except for today. Today I've just gone off on my own and let things happen as they've seen fit."

"But y've still been interactin' with other people."

"Interacting, yes. But the whole journey's been one of passing from one person to the next. They're all linked in some way to each other, but I'm not part of the chain, I'm just climbing it."

"Of course y' part of the chain. You're linked to these people just as surely as they're linked to each other. We all are."

"But the only way I'm linked is by following the chain. Chance brought me into contact with the first link, and from then on I've just been playing along with a segment of each of their lives."

"But chance brought the links together in the first place. If someone was playin' along with a segment of your life, they'd think of you in the same way as you think of them."

Manchester 1, London 0.

"Oh, we're just about there. Put your jacket on, mate."

“Why? I’m not cold.”

“Just do it, it’s part of the plan,” Arick said, pulling a pair of Hallowe’*n* masks from his own jacket. “And put one of these on. A couple of my mates are trippin’ tonight and I wanna scare the shit out of ‘em.”

He did as he was told, though reluctantly. Seeing masks like Arick’s when you were under the influence would seriously fuck with your head.

“Oh, ‘ang on,” said Arick. “I just wanna get some fags from the garage.”

Arick ran over the road and he followed. As he caught up with him at the window, Arick was shouting at the attendant.

“Just put it in a bag and pass it out, y’stupid wanker, or I’ll shoot you in the fucking guts. It’s not your money, so what the fuck do you care if I nick it? And give us twenty Bensons and a box of matches, too. And some papers - *cigarette* papers, you twat.”

Yahweh moved back and stood around the corner. What the fuck was he doing here? This bloke was obviously some sort of nutter, and he was either going to get arrested as his accomplice or shot as a potential grass. He had to do something. He could hardly run away. No matter how many stimulants he was on, he couldn’t outrun a bullet.

Sod it.

He walked out behind Arick as the attendant passed the bag through the slot in the window.

Get the gun off him.

He grabbed Arick’s wrist and yanked it away from the slot and the trembling attendant. The gun went off and he was sure his ears were bleeding. His hand slipped down to the warm metal of the gun and he threw his other arm around Arick’s neck. Then he dragged him to the ground and drove his knee into the northerner’s spine.

His grip on the gun was weak and easily broken. He glanced round the forecourt for help, but found none. Arick sensed his distraction and swung the gun towards him. Yahweh slapped it away and lurched backwards, tangled in Arick’s limbs, panicking and sure he was dead. A second gunshot echoed off the petrol pumps and shop front and Arick collapsed against him.

Fuck.

He let go. Arick slid to the ground.

Now what? He was stuck in some strange fucking city, standing on a garage forecourt over the corpse of some student/armed-robber. The attendant was staring at him over the counter and the whole thing was caught on Candid Camera. The power of drugs drained out of him, and the cumulative paranoia took its place.

There was only one thing for it... run like the proverbial shit. So he ran like shit would if it could - sloppily and with precious little co-ordination.

The party. Where else could he go? He knew no one and nowhere in Nottingham and he needed a way back to London. Tony was all he had, and could at least take him as far as Milton Keynes. Strange, the infamous concrete cows were suddenly strangely inviting.

He still had the mask on. He tugged it off as he ran. He had to get rid of it, but how, without leaving evidence for the Police? He’d have to burn it or they’d be able to tell who’d been wearing it by the bits of skin and sweat he’d left inside. ‘Every contact leaves a trace’.

The fear carried him back to the party, mask in hand. Where the fuck was he going to burn it and with what?

A car. An idea.

The petrol cap came off with the maximum of effort and he stuffed the rubber mask through and into the tank. He smiled at his ingenuity. If anyone ever found it, all the forensic evidence would be gone.

Someone was calling his name. They were heading towards him from the entrance at the back of the building. He had to explain his absence somehow. There was only one thing for it.

He ran headlong at the railings, slammed into them hard, and fell to the ground in pain. Perhaps he'd overdone it a bit. Darkness.

He came to with a group of people standing above him. Tony was kneeling beside his head and one of the bouncers was wiping his forehead.

"What happened to you?" Tony asked.

"I don't know," he lied.

"We saw him walk off with some bloke about half an hour ago," the bouncer reported. "Figured they were mates, but it looks like the other bloke's done him over."

Tony frowned. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Student type," the bouncer replied. "They all look the same to me."

"Right," Tony sighed, turning his attention back to Yahweh. "Come on, let's get you to a hospital."

"No, I'll be all right. I just want to get back home." He sat up, his head spinning and a throbbing behind his eyes.

"You should really get checked out after you've been knocked unconscious."

"There's no way I'm going to a hospital. You know what they're like. I might not make it out alive."

"Fair enough," said Tony, shaking his head. "But I'm not having you make your own way back to London all the way from Milton Keynes. I'll take you myself - as long as you're sure you're not going to fall off the bike."

"No. I'll be fine. Just give me a couple of minutes to get my head together."

"Okay. Whenever you're ready..."

Home. Legally or not, it was where his stuff was, and it was where he lived. The battered black front door with its array of padlocks had never looked so welcoming.

The head-wound had been mostly superficial. He'd had a few dizzy spells on the way down, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. Far worse was the gamminess that always came with the retreat of synthetics - the body crying out for more, when it knows that's the last thing it needs. When they'd stopped at a service station for a quick sugar fix, Tony had offered him another 'E' - just to keep him going, to keep him awake for the rest of the journey. He'd turned the offer down and immediately wished he hadn't - though he'd have been rude to say so.

But now, at last, he was home. He fished the keys from his pocket and dealt with the various locks. Bael must be out. Pushing the door shut behind him, he went upstairs. Bed. Sleep. Today was waking already, but he was happy to let it go about its business without him. No doubt, if he'd been identified at all, the cops would be round at some point. They'd probably ask him if he wanted to press charges against Arick, who - if he was lucky - they'd assume had smacked him one before heading off to do his armed robbery. Naturally he'd decline the offer so he could stay as far away from the whole thing as poss. They'd hassle him, give him the usual cop-to-victim pep-talk, but he'd stand his ground and eventually it would all blow over.

He decided to kip in the main room, in the hope of garnering sympathy - and maybe some food and drink - when Bael made his return. There was a mattress in every room so it

hardly mattered where he collapsed. He shuffled in and crumpled onto the squashy mattress, dragging the grubby duvet over his legs. And as soon as he was still, he saw a piece of paper on the floor. Determined not to disrupt his mock-comfort, he stretched out and picked it up between the two longest fingers on his left hand.

It was a note. A fucking Dear John!

Y,

wasn't sure when you were coming back so I thought I'd just leave a note. No offence but I'm off. We can only spend so much time in contemplation and this is the hour for action. See you around

B

So, he'd finally got off his arse and done something. He should have been pissed off, but for Bael to lay down his pipe long enough to make himself a sandwich had always seemed a minor miracle. And now he was gone, and Yahweh was alone in the flat. Just him and his stuff. Didn't really feel like much of a home with no one to share it with. The permanence was gone and its true, pit-stop status oozed from every squalid corner.

He lay there with his arms folded behind his head, the note still on his chest. He'd get some kip, then he'd walk round to his mum's. She wasn't that far away, just didn't have a clue where he'd been all this time. A couple of months should be bearable - assuming there was room for him, and she was willing to put up with his failure to communicate. Then he would sort his shit out, get a job and look around for somewhere half-decent to live. He'd rented some real shit-holes before, but just about anything would be better than this place. He'd probably have to spend some of his housing benefit on housing, but the council had served him well and he was happy to tow the line for a while.

Yeah. Definitely time to get things moving. If a layabout piece of squat furniture like Bael could pull it off, then so could he. After all, he'd managed to muster enough energy to drag himself through three years at university.

But this was Sunday and he felt like shit. His mum was hardly going to appreciate him turning up like this. He'd smoke a joint, get some sleep and sort the rest out later.