

The End of the World

THE WORLD WOULD END at five to four, just after the disco.

Our final day at Merton Grange Secondary School had arrived, brilliant and bright and commencing with skirmishes at the gates; school ties worn as bandanas and tourniquets, in knots as compact as a walnut or fat as a fist, with enough lipstick and jewelry and dyed blue hair to resemble some futuristic nightclub scene. What were the teachers going to do on our last day, send us home? They sighed and waved us through. The last week of formal lessons had been spent in desultory, dispiriting classes about something called “adult life,” which would, it seemed, consist largely of filling in forms and compiling a CV (“Hobbies and Interests: Socializing, watching television”). We learnt how to balance a checkbook. We stared out of the window at the lovely day and thought, not long now. Four, three, two . . .

Back in our form room at break we began to graffiti our white school shirts with felt-tips and magic markers, kids hunched over each other’s backs like tattooists in a Russian jail, marking all available space with sentimental abuse. *Take care of yourself, you dick*, wrote Paul Fox. *This shirt stinks*, wrote Chris Lloyd. In lyrical mood, my best friend Martin Harper wrote *mates4ever* beneath a finely detailed cock and balls.

Harper and Fox and Lloyd. These were my best friends at the time, not just boys but *the* boys—the group was self-sufficient and impenetrable. Though none of us played an instrument, we’d imagined ourselves as a band. Harper, we all knew, was lead guitar and vocals. Fox was bass, a low and basic thump-thump-thump. Lloyd, because he proclaimed himself “mad,” was the drummer, which left me as . . .

“Maracas,” Lloyd had said and we’d laughed, and “maracas” was added to the long list of nicknames. Fox drew them on my school shirt now, maracas crossed beneath a skull, like military insignia. Mr. Ambrose, feet up on the desk, kept his eyes fixed on the video of *Free Willy 2* that played in the background, a special treat ignored by everyone.

In our final assembly, Mr. Pascoe made the speech that we’d all expected, encouraging us to look to the future but remember the past, to aim high but weather the lows, to believe in ourselves but think of others. The important thing was not only what we’d learnt—and he hoped we’d learnt a great deal!—but also the kind of young adults we’d become, and we listened, young adults, stuck between cynicism and sentimentality, boisterous on the surface but secretly daunted and sad. We sneered and rolled our eyes but elsewhere in the hall hands gripped other hands and snuffles were heard as we were urged to cherish the friendships we’d made, the friendships that would last a lifetime.

“A lifetime? Christ, I hope not,” said Fox, locking my head beneath his arm, fondly rubbing his knuckles there. It was prize-giving time, and we sank low in our chairs. Prizes were awarded to the kids who always got the prizes, applause fading long before they’d left the stage to stand in front of the photographer from the local press, book tokens held beneath the chin as if in an ID parade. We sank lower in our chairs until horizontal, then when it was over, we shuffled out to have our photo taken.

But I realize how absent I am from the above. I remember the day well enough even across twenty years, but when I try to describe my role, I find myself reaching for what I saw and heard, rather than anything I said or did. “What were you like?” my future wife would later ask, “before we met?” and I’d struggle to reply. As a student, my distinctive feature was a lack of distinction. “Charlie works hard to meet basic

standards and for the most part achieves them;” this was as good as it got, and even that slight reputation had been dimmed by events of the exam season. Not admired but not despised, not adored but not feared; I was not a bully, though I knew a fair few, but did not intervene or place myself between the pack and the victim, because I wasn’t brave either. I neither conformed nor rebelled, collaborated nor resisted; I stayed out of trouble without getting into anything else. Comedy was our great currency and while I was not a class clown, neither was I witless. I might occasionally get a surprised laugh from the crowd but my best jokes were either drowned out by someone with a louder voice, or came far too late, so that even now, more than twenty years later, I think of things I should have said in ’96 or ’97. I knew that I was not ugly—someone would have told me—and was vaguely aware of whispers and giggles from huddles of girls, but what use was this to someone with no idea what to say? I’d inherited height, and only height, from my father, my eyes, nose, teeth and mouth from Mum—the right way round, said Dad—but I’d also inherited his tendency to stoop and round my shoulders in order to take up less space in the world. Some lucky quirk of glands and hormones meant that I’d been spared the pulsing spots and boils that literally scarred so many adolescences, and I was neither skinny with anxiety nor plump with the chips and canned drinks that fueled us, but I wasn’t confident about my appearance. I wasn’t confident about anything at all.

Soon it would be time for my friends and I to settle into some role we might plausibly fit, but when I tried to see myself as others saw me (sometimes literally, late at night, staring profoundly into my father’s shaving mirror, hair slicked back) I saw . . . nothing special. In photos of myself from that time, I’m reminded of those early incarnations of a cartoon character, the prototypes that resemble the later version but are in some way out of proportion, not quite right.

None of which is much help. Imagine, then, another photograph, the school group shot that everybody owns, faces too small to make

out without peering closely. Whether it's five or fifty years old, there's always a vaguely familiar figure in the middle row, someone with no anecdotes or associations, scandals or triumphs to their name. You wonder: who *was* that?

That's Charlie Lewis.

Sawdust

THE END-OF-YEAR DISCO HAD a reputation for Roman levels of depravity, second only to the Biology field trip. Our arena was the sports hall, a space large enough to comfortably contain a passenger jet. To create an illusion of intimacy, ancient bunting had been strung between the wall bars and a mirror-ball dangled from a chain like a mediaeval flail, but still the space seemed exposed and barren, and for the first three songs we lined up on benches, eyeing each other across the scuffed, dusty parquet like warriors across the field of battle, passing and sipping smuggled bottles of alcohol miniatures in the chocolate box flavors that we preferred, coffee and orange, coconut and mint. Perhaps they'd give us courage. Mr. Hepburn, Geography, on the wheels of steel, veered desperately from "I Will Survive" to "Baggy Trousers" and even "Relax" until Mr. Pascoe told him to fade it out. An hour and fifteen minutes to go.

But now came Blur's "Girls & Boys" and, as if some signal had been given there was a great surge onto the dance floor, everyone dancing wildly, then staying on to bellow along to the pop-house anthems that followed. Mr. Hepburn had hired a strobe light and now he jammed his thumb down with a wild disregard for health and safety. The dancing became wilder, more aggressive, and when "Jump Around" played a new crazy started, the boys climbing on backs and crashing full speed into each other, jousting. Even above the music you could hear the slap of spines against the parquet. Seeking some escape, I climbed the monkey bars that lined one wall of the gymnasium, folding myself in between the rungs. By now a real fight had broken out. I glimpsed keys bunched in someone's hand and in the

spirit of public order Mr. Hepburn played the Spice Girls, a kind of musical water-cannon for the boys, who scattered to the edges, the girls taking their place, skipping and wagging their fingers at each other. Miss Butcher, too, replaced Mr. Hepburn on the decks. I saw him raise his hand to me and dart across the dance floor, looking left and right as if crossing a busy road.

“What d’you think, Charlie?”

“You missed your vocation, sir.”

“Clubbing’s loss was geography’s gain,” he said, folding himself into the bars beside me. “You can call me Adam now. We’re both civilians, or will be in, what, thirty minutes? In thirty minutes you can call me anything you like!”

I liked Mr. Hepburn and admired his perseverance in the face of vocal indifference. *No offence, sir, but what’s the point of this?* Of all the teachers who’d aspired to it, he’d best pulled off the trick of seeming decent without being ingratiating, dropping tantalizing hints of “big weekends” and staffroom intrigue, displaying just enough small signs of rebellion—loose tie, stubble, shaggy hair—to suggest comradeship. Occasionally he’d even swear, the bad language like sweets thrown into a crowd.

Still, there was no world in which I’d call him Adam.

“So—are you excited about college?”

I recognized the beginning of a pep talk. “Don’t think I’ll be going, sir.”

“You don’t know that. You’ve applied, haven’t you?”

I nodded. “Art, Computer Science, Graphic Design.”

“Lovely.”

“But I didn’t get the grades.”

“Well, you don’t know that yet.”

“I’m pretty sure, sir. I didn’t turn up half the time.”

He tapped me on the knee with his fist once, then thought better of it. “Well, even if you haven’t, there are things you can do. Retake,

do something less conventional. Boy like you, boy with talents . . .” I still treasured the praise he’d lavished on my volcano project: the last word, the ultimate in volcano cross-sections, as if I’d uncovered some fundamental truth that had evaded volcanologists for centuries. But this was a small hook from which to hang the word “talent.”

“Nah, I’m going to get a full-time job, sir. I’ve given myself ’til September, then—”

“I still remember those volcanoes. The cross-hatching was superb.”

“Long time since those volcanoes.” I shrugged and, unexpectedly, mortifyingly, realized that some switch had been flicked and that I might cry. I wondered, should I scamper further up the monkey bars?

“But maybe you can do something with it.”

“With volcanoes?”

“The drawing, the graphic design. If you wanted to talk to me about it, once the results are through . . .”

Or perhaps not climb the monkey bars, perhaps just push him off. It wasn’t far to fall.

“Really, I’ll be fine.”

“All right, Chaz, all right, but let me tell you a secret—” He swung in and I could smell lager on his breath. “Here it is. It doesn’t matter. Stuff that happens now, it doesn’t matter. I mean it does *matter*, but not as much as you’d think, and you’re young, sixteen, so young. You could go to college, or go back when you’re ready, but you have so. Much. Time. Oh, man . . .” He pressed his cheek winsomely against the wooden frame. “If I woke up and I was sixteen again, oh, man—”

And blessedly, just as I prepared to leap, Miss Butcher found the strobe light and jammed it down for a long, long burst and now there was a scream and a sudden surge of movement in the crowd, a panicked circle forming as, in the flickering light and to the sound of “MMMBop,” Debbie Warwick coughed and threw-up in a series of rapid snapshots like some hellish stop-motion film, until she was left hunched and alone in the center of a circle of kids who were laughing

and screaming at the same time. Only then did Miss Butcher switch off the strobe and tiptoe into the circle to rub Debbie's back with the very tips of the fingers of an outstretched arm.

"Studio 54," said Mr. Hepburn, clambering down from the bars. "Too much strobe, you see?" The music was paused as Parky, building maintenance, went to fetch the sawdust and disinfectant that were kept close at hand for parties. "Twenty minutes to go, ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Hepburn, restored to the decks. "Twenty minutes, which means it's time to slow things down a little . . ."

Slow songs provided a school-sanctioned opportunity to lie on top of each other while still standing up. The first chords of "2 Become 1" had cleared the floor, but now a series of panicked negotiations was underway at its edges as, courtesy of the lab technicians, a small amount of dry ice belched out, a cloaking device, settling at waist height. Sally Taylor and Tim Morris were the first to kick through the fog, then Sharon Findlay and Patrick Rogers, the school's sexual pioneers, hands permanently plunged deep in the other's waistband as if pulling tickets for a raffle, then Lisa "the Body" Boden and Mark Solomon, Stephen "Shanksy" Shanks and "Queen" Alison Quinn, hopping blithely over the sawdust.

But these were old married couples in our eyes. The crowd demanded novelty. From the far corner, there were whoops and cheers as Little Colin Smart took Patricia Gibson's hand, a corridor opening up as she was half pushed, half tugged into the light, her spare hand covering as much of her face as possible like the accused arriving for trial.

"I hate this bit, don't you?"

I'd been joined on the bars by Helen Beavis, an art-block girl and champion hockey player, tall and strong and sometimes known as The Brick, though never to her face. "Look," she said. "Lisa's trying to fit her entire head into Mark Solomon's mouth."

"And I bet he's still got his chewing gum in there—"

“Just knocking it back and forth. Little game of badminton going on. Pok-pok-pok.”

We’d made a few self-conscious attempts at friendship, Helen and I, though nothing had ever taken. In the art block, she was one of the cool kids who painted big abstract canvases with titles like *Division*, who always had something drying in the pottery kiln. If art was about emotion and self-expression, then I was merely a “good drawer”; detailed, heavily cross-hatched sketches of zombies and space pirates and skulls, always with one living eye still in the socket, imagery ripped off from computer games and comics, sci-fi and horror, the kind of intricately violent images that catch the attention of an educational psychologist. “I’ll say one thing for you, Lewis,” Helen had drawled, holding some intergalactic mercenary at arm’s length, “you can really draw a male torso. Capes, too. Imagine what you could do if you drew something *real*.”

I’d not replied. Helen Beavis was too smart for me, in an un-showy private way that didn’t require the validation of book tokens. She was funny, too, with all the best jokes muttered in a low voice for her own satisfaction. Her sentences contained more words than necessary, every other word given a twist of irony so that I never knew if she meant one thing or its opposite. Words were hard enough when they had one meaning, and if our friendship foundered on anything, it was my inability to keep up.

“You know what this gym needs? Ashtrays. Fitted flush at the end of the parallel bars. Hey, are we allowed to smoke yet?”

“Not for . . . twenty minutes.”

Like the best of our athletes, Helen Beavis was a dedicated smoker, lighting up more or less at the gates, her Marlboro Menthol wagging up and down like Popeye’s pipe as she laughed, and I’d once watched her place a finger over one nostril and snot a good twelve feet over a privet hedge. She had, I think, the worst haircut I’d ever seen, spiked

at the top, long and lank at the back with two pointed sideburns, like something scribbled on a photograph in biro. In the mysterious algebra of the fifth-year common room, bad hair plus artiness plus hockey plus unshaved legs equaled lesbian, a potent word for boys at that time, able to make a girl of great interest or of no interest at all. There were two—and only two—types of lesbian and Helen was not the kind found in the pages of Martin Harper’s magazines, and so the boys paid little attention to her, which I’m sure suited her fine. But I liked her and wanted to impress her, even if my attempts usually left her slowly shaking her head.

Finally the mirror-ball was deployed, revolving on its chain. “Ah. That’s magical,” said Helen, nodding at the slowly spinning dancers. “Always clockwise, have you noticed?”

“In Australia, they go the other way.”

“On the equator, they just stand there. Very self-conscious.” We turned back to the dance floor. “Trish looks happy,” and we watched as Patricia Gibson, hand still clamped over her eyes, contrived to simultaneously dance and back away. “Colin Smart’s trousers have arranged themselves in an interesting way. Weird place to keep your geometry set. Boing!” Helen twanged the air. “I had that once. Christmas Methodist Disco with someone whose name I’m not at liberty to repeat. It’s not nice. Like being jabbed in the hip with the corner of a shoebox.”

“I think boys get more out of it than the girls.”

“So go rub it against a tree or something. It’s very rude, by which I mean impolite. Leave it out of your arsenal, Charles.” Elsewhere, hands were seeking out buttocks and either lying there, limp and frightened, or kneading at the flesh like pizza dough. “It really is a most disgusting spectacle. And not just because of my much-vaunted *lesbianism*.” I shifted on the bar. We were not used to frank and open discussion. Best to ignore it, and after a moment—

“So, do you want to dance?” she said.

I frowned. “Nah. M’all right.”

“Yeah, me too,” she said. A little time passed. “If you want to go ask someone else—”

“Really. I’m all right.”

“No big crush, Charlie Lewis? Nothing to get off your chest in these dying moments?”

“I don’t really do that . . . stuff. You?”

“Me? Nah, I’m pretty much dead inside. Love’s a bourgeois construct anyway. All this—” She nodded to the dance floor. “It’s not dry ice, it’s a haze of low-lying pheromones. Smell it. Love is . . .” We sniffed the air. “Old gym kit and disinfectant.”

Feedback, and Mr. Hepburn’s voice boomed out, too close to the mike. “Last song, ladies and gentlemen, your very last song! I want to see every single one of you on the floor, every last one of you! Are you ready? I can’t hear you! Remember, dance around the sawdust, please. Here we go!”

Obediently, we clambered down. The song was “Heart of Glass” by Blondie, scarcely less remote to us in time than “In the Mood,” but clearly a great thing because now everyone was on the dance floor: the theatre kids, the moody pottery kiln kids, even Debbie Warwick, wiped down, pale and unsteady on her feet. The lab technicians poured out the last of the dry ice, Mr. Hepburn turned the volume up and, to whoops and cheers, Patrick Rogers pulled his shirt off over his head and whipped it through the air in the hope of a starting a craze—then, when this didn’t catch on, put it back on again. Now the new sensation was Lloyd clamping his hand over Fox’s mouth and pretending to snog him. Little Colin Smart, sole male member of the Drama Club, had organized a trust game where you took it in turns to fall back into each other’s arms in time with the music, and Gordon Gilbert was on Tony Stevens’ shoulders, embracing the glitter-ball

like a drowning man clinging to a buoy, and now Tony Stevens stepped away and left him dangling while Parky, building maintenance, poked at him with the handle of his mop. “Watch this! Watch this!” shouted someone else as Tim Morris began to breakdance, hurling himself onto the floor, spinning wildly into the sawdust and disinfectant, then leaping to his feet and wiping madly at his trousers. I felt hands on my hips and it was Harper, shouting something that might have been “love you, mate” then kissing me noisily, smack, smack, on each ear and suddenly someone else had jumped onto my shoulders and we were all down in a scrum, the boys, Fox and Lloyd, Harper and me and then some other kids I’d barely spoken to, laughing at a joke that no one could hear. The notion that these had been the best years of our lives suddenly seemed both plausible and tragic and I wished that school had always been like this, our arms around each other, filled with a kind of hooligan love, and that I’d talked to these people more and in a different voice. Why had we left it until now? Too late, the song was nearly over: *oohooh woahoh, oohooh woahoh*. Sweat plastered clothes to skin, stung our eyes and dripped from our noses and when I stood up from the scrum I saw for just one moment Helen Beavis dancing by herself, hunched like a boxer, eyes squeezed tight singing *oohooh woahoh* and then, behind her, movement and the sudden hauling open of the fire-exit doors. The atomic brightness poured in like the light from the spaceship at the end of *Close Encounters*. Dazzled, Gordon Gilbert tumbled from the mirror-ball. The music snapped off and it was over.

The time was three fifty-five in the afternoon.

We had missed the countdown and now we stood, silhouetted against the light, dazed and blinking as the staff shepherded us towards the doors, their arms outstretched. Voices hoarse, sweat chilling our skin, we gathered our possessions into our arms—hockey

sticks and coil pots, the rancid lunch boxes and crushed dioramas and rags of sports kit—and stumbled into the courtyard.

The freedom we'd been celebrating suddenly seemed like exile, paralyzing and incomprehensible, and we loitered and hesitated on the threshold, animals released too soon into the frightening wild, looking back towards the cage. I saw my sister, Billie, on the other side of the road. We barely spoke to each other now, but I raised my hand. She smiled back and walked away.

The four of us began our last walk home, turning the day into anecdote even before it was over. Down by the railway line, in amongst the silver birches, we could see a haze of smoke, an orange glow from the ceremonial pyre that Gordon Gilbert and Tony Stevens had built from old folders and uniforms, plastic and nylon. They whooped and hollered like wild things but we walked on to the junction where we had always parted. We hesitated. Perhaps we should mark the occasion, say a few words. Hug? But we baulked at sentimental gestures. It was a small town, and it would require far more effort to lose touch than to see each other constantly.

“See ya, then.”

“I'll call you later.”

“Friday, yeah?”

“See ya.”

“Bye.”

And I walked back to the house where I now lived alone with my father.

Infinity

I USED TO HAVE a recurring dream inspired, I think, by a too-early viewing of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, of drifting untethered through infinite space. The dream terrified me then and now, not because of the suffocation or starvation but because of that sense of powerlessness; nothing to hold on to or push against, just the void and the panic.

Summer felt like that. How could I hope to fill the infinite days, each day infinitely long? In our final term, we'd made plans: raids on London to prowl Oxford Street (and only Oxford Street) and some Tom Sawyer-ish expeditions to the New Forest or the Isle of Wight, rucksacks packed with lager. "Binge camping" we called it, but both Harper and Fox had found themselves full-time jobs, working cash in hand for Harper's dad, a builder, and the plan had faded. Without Harper around, Lloyd and I just bickered. Besides, I had my own part-time work, also cash in hand, behind the till at a local petrol station.

But this only burnt through twelve hours of the week. The rest of my time was my own to—what? The luxury of the mid-week lie-in soon wore thin, leaving just the fidgety sadness of sunlight through curtains, the long, lazy, torpid day stretching ahead, then another and another. I knew from science fiction, rather than from Science lessons, that time behaves differently depending on your location, and from a sixteen-year-old's lower bunk at the end of June in 1997, it moved more slowly than anywhere else in the cosmos.

The house we occupied was new. We'd moved out of the "big house," the family house, shortly after Christmas and I missed it very much: semi-detached, all squares and triangles like a children's drawing, with a bannister to slide down and a bedroom each, off-

road parking and swings in the garden. My father had bought the big house in a misplaced fit of optimism, and I remembered him showing us round for the first time, rapping the walls to confirm the quality of the bricks, spreading his hands flat on the radiators to experience the glory of central heating. There was a bay window in which I could sit and watch the traffic like a young lord and, most impressively of all, a small square of stained glass over the front door; a sunrise in yellow, gold and red.

But the big house was gone. Now Dad and I lived on an eighties estate, The Library, each street named after a great author in a culturally fortifying way, Woolf Road leading into Tennyson Square, Mary Shelley Avenue crossing Coleridge Lane. We were in Thackeray Crescent, and though I'd not read Thackeray, I knew his influence would be hard to spot. The houses were modern, pale-brick, flat-roofed units with the distinctive feature of curved walls inside and out so that, seen from the planes circling the airport, the rows would look like fat yellow caterpillars. "Shitty Tatooine," Lloyd had called it. When we'd first moved in—there were four of us then—Dad claimed to love the curves, a more free-form, jazzy expression of our family values than the boxy rooms in our old semi-detached. It'll be like living in a lighthouse! If The Library estate no longer felt like the future, if the table-size gardens were not as neat as they used to be, if the occasional shopping trolley drifted across the wide, silent avenues, this would still be a new chapter in our family's story, with the added peace of mind that would come from living within our means. Yes, my sister and I would be sharing a room, but bunk beds were fun and it wouldn't be forever.

Six months later, boxes still remained unpacked, jutting out against the curved walls or piled on my sister's empty bunk. My friends rarely came to visit, preferring to hang out at Harper's house, which resembled the palace of a Romanian dictator, a two-jukebox household with rowing machines and quad bikes and immense TVs, a samu-

rai sword and enough air-rifles and pistols and flick-knives to repel a zombie invasion. My house had my mad dad and a lot of rare jazz on vinyl. Even I didn't want to go there.

Or stay there. The great project of that summer would be to avoid Dad. I'd learnt to gauge his mental state by the noises he made, tracking him like a hunter. Most days, I'd hear him stir at around nine and shuffle to the bathroom, positioned on the other side of my bunk. No alarm clock was as effective as the sound of my father weeing near my head, and I'd leap up, quickly pull on the previous day's clothes and slip downstairs with ninja stealth to see if he'd left his cigarettes. As long as there were ten or more, it was safe to take one and quickly zip it into a pouch in my rucksack. I'd eat toast standing at the breakfast bar—another feature of the house that had lost its novelty, eating on stools—and leave before he made it downstairs.

But if I failed, then he'd appear, sticky-eyed and with the creases of the pillowcase still visible on his face, and we'd jostle awkwardly between kettle and toaster, slipping into our act.

“So is this breakfast or lunch?”

“I think of it as brunch.”

“Sophisticated. It's nearly ten—”

“You can talk!”

“I didn't get to sleep 'til—could you use a plate?”

“I've got a plate.”

“So why are there crumbs every—?”

“Because I've not had time to—”

“Just use a plate!”

“Here's a plate, here it is, in my hand, a plate, my plate—”

“And put the stuff away.”

“I will when I've finished.”

“Don't leave it in the sink.”

“I wasn't going to leave it in the sink.”

“Good. Don't.”

And on and on, banal, witlessly sarcastic and provoking, less a conversation, more the flicking of an ear. I hated the way we spoke to each other, yet change required voices that neither of us possessed, so we lapsed into silence and Dad turned on the TV. There might once have been a delinquent pleasure in this but truancy requires that there's somewhere else you ought to be, and neither of us had that. All I knew was that Dad didn't like to be alone, and so I'd leave.

Most days I'd ride my bike, though not in the slick, modern style. I wore jeans, not Lycra, on an old racer with drop handlebars, a clattering rusted chain and a frame as heavy and unforgiving as welded scaffolding. Low on those handlebars, I'd patrol The Library and lazily circle the cul-de-sacs, Tennyson and Mary Shelley, Forster then Kipling, up Woolf and round Hardy. I'd check the swings and slides in the recreation ground for anyone I might know. I'd cycle down pedestrian alleyways, swoop from side to side on the wide, empty roads on the way to the shops.

What was I looking for? Though I couldn't name it, I was looking for some great change; a quest, perhaps, an adventure with trials undergone and lessons learnt. But it's awkward to embark on an adventure on your own, hard to find that kind of quest on the high street. Ours was a small town in the south-east, too far away from London to be a suburb, too large to be a village, too developed to count as countryside. We lacked the train station that might have turned it into a commuter hub. Instead, the economy relied on the airport and the light-industrial business parks: photo-copiers, double-glazing, computer components, aggregates—whatever they were. The high street—called High Street—had a few buildings that might have passed as quaint: a timber-framed tea room called the Cottage Loaf, a Georgian newsagents, a Tudor chemists, a mediaeval market cross for the cider drinkers, but they were blighted by the dust and fumes of the busy road that ran alongside narrow pavements, leaving shoppers pressed flat against the leaded windows. The cinema was now a carpet

ware-house, trapped in the time-loop of an endless closing-down sale. Areas of outstanding natural beauty were a twenty-minute drive away, the Sussex coast a further thirty, the whole town contained within a ring road that encircled us like a perimeter fence.

I didn't hate our town, but it was hard to feel lyrical or sentimental about the reservoir, the precinct, the scrappy woods where porn yellowed beneath the brambles. Our recreation ground was universally known as Dog Shit Park, the pine plantation Murder Wood; for all I knew those were their names on the Ordnance Survey map, and no one was ever going to write a sonnet about that.

And so I'd walk the high street, looking in windows, hoping to see someone I knew. I'd buy chewing gum in the newsagents and read the computer magazines until the newsagent's glare drove me back onto my bike. I must have looked lonely, though I would have hated anyone to think this. Boredom was our natural state but loneliness was taboo and so I strained for the air of a loner, a maverick, unknowable and self-contained, riding with no hands. But a great effort is required not to appear lonely when you are alone, happy when you're not. It's like holding out a chair at arm's length, and when I could no longer maintain the illusion of ease, I'd cycle out of town.

To reach anything that might pass as countryside it was necessary to cross the flyover, the motorway thundering alarmingly beneath like some mighty waterfall, then cycle across great prairies of yellow wheat and rape, past the corrugated plains of poly-tunnels that sheltered the supermarket strawberry crops, then crest the hills that encircled us. I was no great nature-lover, not a bird-watcher or angler or poet, but solitude was less shaming out here, almost pleasurable, and each day I dared myself to travel further from home, expanding the circumference of places that I knew.

The first week, the second, then the third passed in this way until one Thursday morning when I found myself in the long grass of a wild meadow that overlooked our town.

The Meadow

I'D NOT BEEN HERE before. Bored of the ascent, I'd dismounted and noticed a footpath to my right, shady and blessedly flat. I'd wheeled my bike through woodland that soon opened up onto a sloping pasture, overgrown to waist height, the brown and green spattered with the red of poppies and the blue of . . . something else. Willow-herb? Cornflowers? I'd no idea, but the meadow was irresistible and I heaved my bike over the wooden stile and ploughed on through the tall grass. A grand timbered mansion came into view above me, one that I'd noticed from the ring road, a formal garden bordering the meadow at its lower edge. I had a sudden sense of trespass and dropped my bike, then walked on until I found a natural hollow in which to sunbathe, smoke and read something violent.

The great expanse of empty hours meant that, for the first time in my life, I'd resorted to reading. I'd begun with thrillers and horror novels from Dad's collection, dog-eared pages waffled from bath or beach, in which sex alternated with violence at an accelerating pace. Initially, books had felt like second best—reading about sex and violence was like listening to football on the radio—but soon I was tearing through a novel every day, forgetting them almost instantly except for *The Silence of the Lambs* and Stephen King. Before too long, I'd graduated to Dad's smaller, slightly intimidating “sci-fi” section: scuffed copies of Asimov, Ballard and Philip K. Dick. Though I couldn't say how it was achieved, I could tell that these books were written in a different register to the ones about giant rats, and the novel that I carried daily in my bag began to feel like protection against boredom, an alibi for loneliness. There was still something furtive about it—reading in

front of my mates would have been like taking up the flute or country dancing—but no one would see me here, and so on this day I took out my copy of Kurt Vonnegut's *SlaughterhouseFive*, chosen because it had "slaughter" in the title.

If I rolled a little from side to side, I could make a sort of military dugout, invisible from the house above or the town below. Straining for soulfulness, I took in the view, a model-railway kind of landscape with everything too close together: plantations rather than woodland, reservoirs not lakes, stables and catteries and dog kennels rather than dairy farms and roaming sheep. Birdsong competed with the grumble of the motorway and the tinnitus buzzing of the pylons above me but from this distance, it didn't seem such a bad place. From this distance.

I took off my top and lay back, practiced my smoking with the day's cigarette, then, using the book to shield my eyes, I began to read, pausing now and then to brush ash from my chest. High above, holiday jets from Spain and Italy, Turkey and Greece, circled in a holding pattern, impatient for a runway. I closed my eyes and watched the fibers drifting against the screen of my eyelids, trying to follow them to the edge of my vision as they darted away like fish in a stream.

When I awoke, the sun was at its height and I felt thick-headed and momentarily panicked by the sound of whoops and shouts and hunting cries from the hill above: a posse. Were they out to get me? No, I heard the swish of grass and the panicked gasps of their quarry, running down the hill in my direction. I peered through the high grass. The girl wore a yellow T-shirt and a short blue denim skirt that hindered her running, and I saw her hoist it higher with both hands, then look behind her and crouch down to catch her breath, forehead pressed to her scuffed knees. I couldn't see her expression, but had a sudden, excited notion that the house was some sinister institution, an asylum or a secret lab, and that I might help her escape. More shouts and jeers, and she glanced back, then straightened, twisted her skirt

further up her pale legs and began to run directly at me. I crouched again, but not before I saw her look back one more time and suddenly pitch forward and crash face first into the ground.

I'm ashamed to say that I laughed, clapping my hand to my mouth. A moment's silence, and then I heard her groaning and giggling at the same time. "Ow! Ow-ow-ow, you *idiot!* Owwww!" She was perhaps three or four meters away now, her panting broken by her own pained laughter, and I was suddenly aware of my skinny bare chest as pink as tinned salmon, and the syrupy sweat and cigarette ash that had pooled in my sternum. I began the contortions required to get dressed while remaining flat on the ground.

From the house on the hill, a jeering voice—"Hey! We give up! You win! Come back and join us!"—and I thought, *it's a trap, don't believe them.*

The girl groaned to herself. "Hold on!"

Another voice, female. "You did very well! Lunchtime! Come back!"

"I can't!" she said, sitting now. "Ow! Bloody hell!" I pressed myself further into the ground as she attempted to stand, testing her ankle and yelping at the pain. I would have to reveal myself, but there seemed no casual way to leap out on someone in a meadow. I licked my lips, and in a stranger's voice called, "Helloo!"

She gasped, pivoted on her good leg and fell backwards all at once, disappearing into the grass.

"Listen, don't freak out but—"

"Who said that?!"

"Just so you know I'm here—"

"Who? Where?"

"Over here. In the long grass."

"But who the fuck *are* you? *Where* are you?"

I pulled my T-shirt down quickly, stood and, in a low crouch as if under fire, crossed to where she lay. "I was trying not to scare you."

“Well, you *failed*, you *weirdo!*”

“Hey, I was here first!”

“What are you doing here anyway?”

“Nothing! Reading! Why are they after you?”

She looked at me sideways. “Who?”

“Those people, why are they chasing you?”

“You’re not in the company?”

“What company?”

“*The Company*, you’re not part of it?”

The Company sounded sinister and I wondered if I might help her after all. *Come with me if you want to live.* “No, I—”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Nothing, I was just, I went for a bike ride and—”

“Where’s your bike?”

“Over there. I was reading and I fell asleep and I wanted to let you know I was here without frightening you.”

She’d returned to examining her ankle. “Well, that worked out.”

“Actually, it is a public footpath. I’ve got as much right to be here—”

“Fine, but I have an actual *reason.*”

“So why were they chasing you?”