

writing
wrongly

AUDIOBOOK
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MIDDLE BITS

thomas carfield

WRITING WRONGLY

MIDDLE BITS

By

Thomas CorField



Panda Books Australia

Sydney – New York – Tokyo – Berlin

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Licence](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Relevant Links](#)

[The Middle Bits](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Free Dooven Muzak](#)

Licence

Written in Australian English.

An accompanying audiobook is available from all leading online retailers.

The unabridged edition of Writing Wrongly is available in print, digital and audio editions from the same locations.

Search “Writing Wrongly Thomas Corfield” or visit THOMASCORFIELD.COM

This excerpt contains adult themes.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is not only purely coincidental, but rather worrying.

References to material of faith and references to mental illness are made with no intent to ridicule belief or belittle suffering.

Reviews

Writing Wrongly makes references to the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, a series of absurdist adventures representative of a new fiction genre known as New Fable. The genre has already cultivated a niche following across all ages, with many contributing tongue-in-cheek reviews via the books' website reflecting the books' humour.

"Phonetically challenging at the very least."
- *Causton Britches, Professional Pillow Fluffer.*

"I don't understand how this actually got published."
Valery Merchant, Photo Columnist for IEB.

"I just assumed it was written in Greek intentionally."
- *The Arch Deacon of Liebe.*

"Finally, a reason to remain illiterate. Much like the author, I suspect."
- *Damian Smith-Meyers, Accountant, Billiot Financial.*

"Interestingly, they actually make more sense read backwards."
- *Samantha Horley, CEO Gabbit.com.*

"Such an unusual use of the alphabet."
- *Kingston Elliot, Manager, Corporotary Inc.*

Author's Note

The middle of things generally contain the best bits. Not a gastrointestinal tract, admittedly, or an undetonated thermonuclear device, but other things. A chocolate éclair, for example, has excellent custardy bits in its middle, inside of which, interestingly, are still more custardy bits. It is the same with the book *Writing Wrongly*: its middle bits are its best, though with less custard. This is principally because the beginning of the book tends to leave one wanting, whereas the end leaves one impaired. Its middle bits, however, have several thousand brilliantly chosen words that renders the book's eventual anti-climax to become the sort of thing that antidepressants were originally invented for.

Writing Wrongly is a Sortabiography: it's both a true story and a serious cry for help. It is the story of one man against the entire world, or, more specifically, one writer against the entire publishing industry. *Writing Wrongly* is based on events following a rejection letter from a publisher suggesting that my submitted manuscript was so utterly dreadful that I ought to stop living. When I refused to, I was subsequently persecuted, prosecuted and bankrupted. Fortunately, my congenitally non-existent self-esteem afforded a remarkable resilience, which, after a decade of therapy and an unfortunate political assassination in one of the lesser known Balkan States, has resulted in this book. So, read on until the appalling punctuation makes doing so untenable, and enjoy this delightful middle bit

from a book that's universally regarded as being distinctly saggy at both ends.

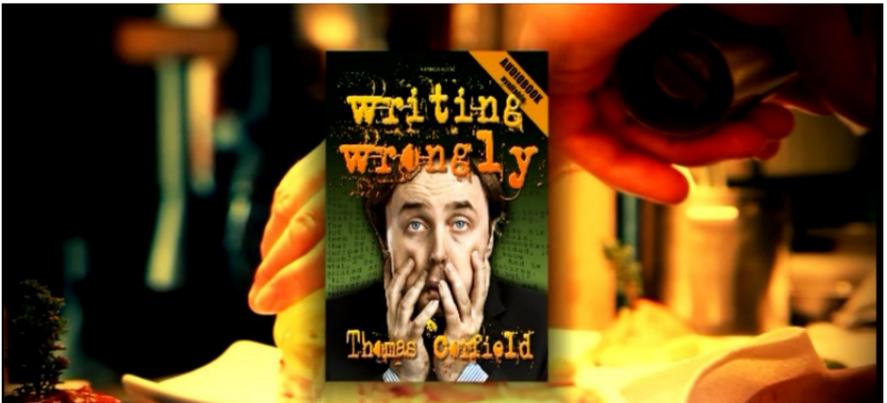
Thomas Corfield. In a café moments before being thrown from it.

Relevant Links

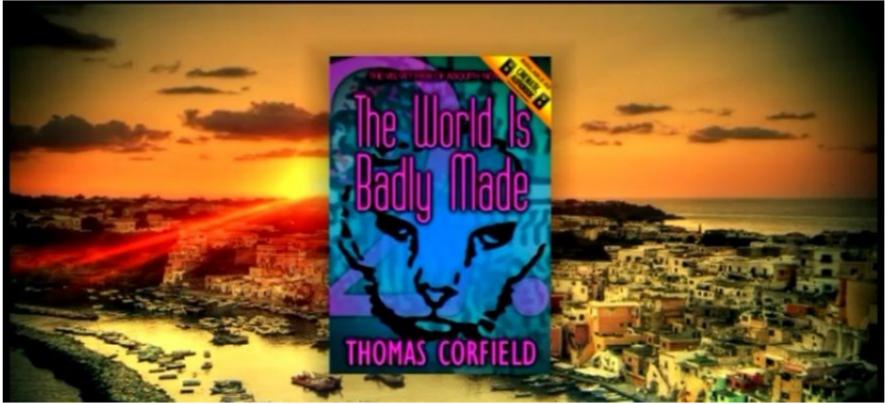
Writing Wrongly – The Middle Bits, refers to the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, an innovative series of New Fable books. Consider visiting the following links to find out more about both.

1. The Writing Wrongly Middle Bits on Youtube:

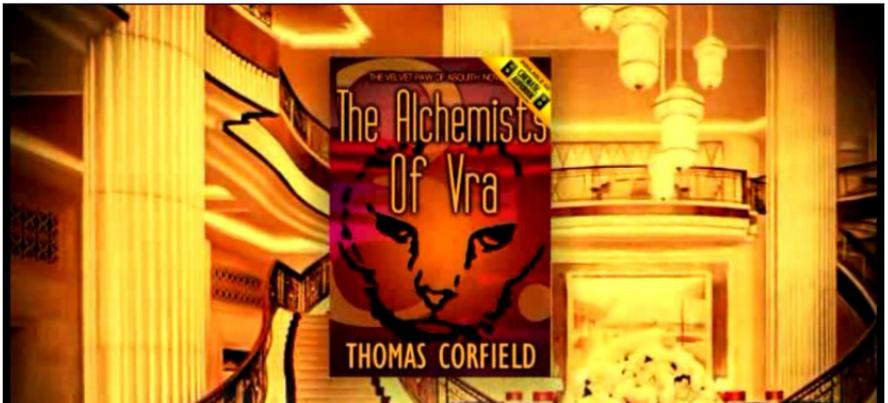
<http://bit.ly/2ggF1qB>



2. Chosen Chapters from the Velvet Paw of Asquith
Novels [Videobook](http://bit.ly/2fmCbBr) on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2fmCbBr>



3. Hotel Scenes from the Velvet Paw of Asquith
Novels on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2fNekv9>



4. The Velvet Paw of Asquith Facebook page:

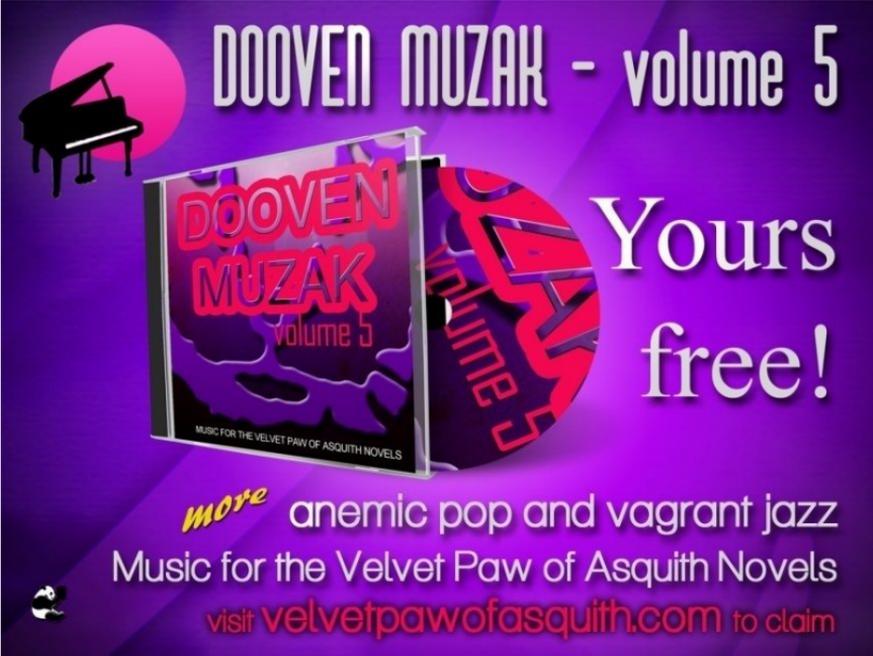
<https://www.facebook.com/doovenbooks>

5. A bit about the author:

<http://www.thomascorfield.com/>

6. Dooven Muzak is music written exclusively for the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, the books referred to in this one. Listen to some here:

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/dooven-muzak>



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Chapter Thirteen

Apartment Thirty

Janice Montbrée, a young newspaper journalist, has decided to help Thomas Corfield, an incomplete wanker, raise funds to get his books edited via a crowd-funding project. In addition, she's also convinced Malcolm Shrot-Faith, editor in chief of the Guardian newspaper (a publication at the forefront of belittling Thomas' writing) to host a project launch party. Although Thomas is reluctant to attend, Janice has convinced him that it's an opportunity to prove to everyone that he's not as dreadful as the media's making him out to be. However, having no friends, Thomas is not comfortable in social situations at the best of times. As a result, it's not long before this dinner party turns out to be the worst of them.

Now read on.

"**D**o I really have to go through with this?" Thomas asked.

He and Janice stepped out of a lift into a lavish corridor. It was lined with large ornamental plants in gilded pots and had the sort of carpet one is reluctant to step on for legal reasons.

"Yes," said Janice. "You do. This is all done for your benefit. And you should be grateful it's being thrown by someone like Malcolm."

"I hate parties."

"You won't hate this one."

"How do you know? We haven't even got to it yet."

"Exactly. Now shut up and look for number thirty."

Thomas grumbled about thirty being his unlucky number, and looked at the doors they passed, hoping whoever designed the place had thirty as their unlucky number also and omitted it from the floor plan together. Judging by the quality of the corridor, the apartments sprouting off it were also the sort one would be reluctant to enter, and have chrome refrigerators with digital screens that automatically ordered low-fat yogurt, and matching chrome microwaves that spoke French instead of pinging.

"Why French anyway?" asked Thomas.

"What?"

"Why does it have to be French. Why not a nice generic musical motif?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The microwave."

Janice stopped and looked at him.

"I don't speak French," Thomas said. "Frankly, I'd feel intimidated if a microwave started blurting it at me."

Janice stared.

"And it would be a woman," he said. "I bet you this guy's microwave is female."

"Are you trying to be peculiar?" Janice asked, folding her arms.

"Not particularly. I'm simply asking why posh microwaves have to speak French."

"Is this an attempt to be left behind, Thomas? Because it's not going to work. You can act as bizarre as you like all evening. You can alienate as many people as you desire. But do not imagine you are getting out of this. You are going to this party, you will thank Malcolm for agreeing to host it, and you will be on your best behaviour if you want

any chance of your books being read, as opposed to being used to prop up wonky tables. Is that understood?"

"Do you know what I dislike only marginally more than parties?"

Janice groaned and continued searching for thirty.

"The people attending them."

"These people are nice, Thomas. I understand that most people you come across are trying to take out injunctions against you—"

"Or pelt me with eggs."

"—or pelt you with eggs, yes. But you have to realise that doesn't reflect the whole world. Not everyone hates you."

"Oh, really? Well, I have a legally induced bankruptcy that proves otherwise."

She turned to him. "You've had a tough time, Thomas. I know. When an entire industry is throwing injunctions at you, it's hard not to take it personally. But you've got to rise above it. You have to believe things are going to get better."

"They can hardly get much worse, Janice."

"Exactly. And it starts this evening. It starts now."

"Why now specifically?"

She indicated a door with thirty on it.

Thomas looked at it and then the bottle he carried. "Can I drink most of this before we go in?"

"I thought you didn't drink."

"I don't, but I'm thinking of starting almost immediately."

She pressed a bell. "You won't need to. I promise. Just—I don't know—*try* and pull yourself together. Just for one evening. And don't drink too much."

"This *is* me pulled together," Thomas said. "I'm not crying and I'm wearing clothes."

Janice sighed. "Then just do your best to keep them on."

"What if it turns out to be that sort of party?"

"It won't. Malcolm's a great guy. He knows everybody in the journalist world – the Guardian included. So they're hardly going to start shagging each other lest others take note."

"It's not the note-taking that concerns me."

"This is an opportunity to network, Thomas. To tell your side of the story to those who can report it. It gives you a voice against the publishing industry. It gives you a chance. Who knows? The tides may turn after this evening. If you can charm them with your idiosyncracities, perhaps the papers will start portraying you as being misrepresented, rather than a talentless, useless waste of space."

Thomas stared. "My idiosyncracities? What idiosyncracities?"

"Well," she shrugged, "you know."

Thomas shook his head. "No I don't. Hence the question."

"Well, you are a bit odd."

"Odd?"

"Yes. Peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

She turned to him. "You are strange, Thomas. Not in a scary 'he's going to rip out my insides and cook them' sort of way. Just odd."

"Odd?"

"Are you going to repeat everything I say?"

"It seems prudent considering I don't understand any of it."

She frowned. "You know what I mean: you have single-handedly turned the entire literary world against you. That is particularly odd, don't you think?"

"Not when you consider my writing."

After another sigh, she said, "Don't drink the bottle, don't insult anyone, thank Malcolm and enjoy yourself."

The door was answered by a large man wearing expensive clothes and smelling of incense. He had a glass and a smile which went well together.

“Janice — *darling!*” he beamed, before leaning forward to kiss her several times, missed on each attempt and accosted the air around her ears instead.

“Hello, Malcolm. This is Thomas.”

An eyebrow arched, although the smile remained. “Is it indeed? Well, Thomas, you are most welcome. I hope you enjoy our little soiree tonight. As it is, apparently, in your honour.”

He held out a hand. Thomas took it, disappointed it wasn't the one holding the glass. Behind him, there was a large tower of hi-fi equipment with flashing lights, around which some people were jumping as though being electrocuted by both.

“You like the music?” Malcolm asked him.

“Music?”

“Yes. Playing on the hi-fi.”

“Is that music?” Thomas asked. “I thought your cat was being tasered.”

Janice cringed and Malcolm laughed.

“It's European Trash-Pop,” he explained.

“French, is it? Like your microwave.”

“What?”

“Is it French?”

“I don't think so, no. It's from a gig I did a story on recently in Berlin; a new underground movement of digital experimentation. They send me all their new stuff.”

“It should be.”

“It should be what?”

“Underground.”

“May we get a drink?” Janice tried, pulling Thomas into the apartment.

“Of course, *darling*. Please, both of you, make yourself at home.”

“That might be difficult,” said Thomas. “Because apparently I'm not supposed to take my clothes off.”

Malcolm blinked at him and Janice offered an apologetic smile, before the door rang again.

The apartment was large and high, and so open-planned it appeared to be undergoing an autopsy. It had a large bar along one end which was very popular, and toward it Janice dragged him.

"Why aren't there any rooms?" Thomas asked, staring at its design. "It's as though they couldn't be bothered with walls at all."

"What are you *doing*?" she hissed.

"Just observing the design features of modern, trendy apartments."

"No, I mean about saying those stupid *things*!"

"What stupid things?"

"To Malcolm! Just *then*!"

"I was just making conversation," Thomas said.

"That wasn't conversation, that was *insult*!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Five seconds after meeting Malcolm, you criticised his music, suggested he bury it and then mentioned taser-ing his *cat*!"

"Doesn't he have a cat?"

"That's irrelevant. You insulted him!"

"That's insult?"

"Yes, that's insult!"

Thomas blinked. "This may be the longest night of your life, Janice."

She sighed and they waited in line.

Because the bar was as popular as Janice, it wasn't long before she was accosted again, with more bouts of ear-proximity kissing. This time, however, she was far less assured. Her hand went to her hair and fiddled, and she didn't introduce Thomas to any of them.

"Excellent piece you did on the Minister for Stalin-mare," a man was saying. "His bollocks must have been blue after that! Did you get any response from their office?"

"Just the usual threats of slander," Janice said. "But nothing about his bollocks."

"Serves him right for misappropriating funds then."

She fiddled with her hair while Thomas smiled generically.

"Tell me," a woman asked her, "how have things been in features? I heard Carrie's thinking of moving on, and they're looking for a new editor?"

"She's gone to Bisque, as I understand it," the man said. "And fair play, too. Carrie's talented, certainly, and has done wonders for your lot. Though *you*, Janice, are responsible for all its charm."

Janice smiled awkwardly.

"If they're going to be looking," the woman said, "perhaps you'd let me know the moment you hear? I'd be keen to apply."

"You're not happy at the Guardian?" the man asked, surprised.

"Who's ever happy at the Guardian?"

"You don't like the Guardian?" asked Thomas, keen for involvement in normality.

Their blinks suggested they did not.

"Oh, I'm so glad! Because I think it's shit!"

"Really."

"Yes, absolutely. It's complete shit-bollocks-wank, spelt with capitals and very badly!"

They stared at him, and then at Janice.

"This is Thomas," she said. "He's a friend."

"So can we bitch about the Guardian all evening?" Thomas asked, offering his hand to both of them.

It was taken as though having been used suspiciously.

"Well, some of us work there," the man said, looking at Janice in puzzlement. "So the comment was made as a sort of in joke, rather than literally."

"But we can bitch about it? Oh, this *will* be a night to remember! Here's to Carrie and her flee from shit!"

"If I hear anything, I'll let you know," Janice said, wondering how much longer the line might remain one. She needed a drink. Several, in fact. And of increasing alcoholic strength.

Chapter Fourteen

BAR QUEUED

Thomas offered Janice the bottle. She looked at him, as did the other two, before taking it and glancing around for something to pour it into.

“How about your mouth?” Thomas said. “I won’t mind, although I’d call you a hypocrite, of course.” He glanced at the others. “You wouldn’t mind either, would you? It’s not very lady-like, and probably far too early for it to be acceptable. But you seem to know Janice quite well, and would be aware of her need for alcohol to function socially while insisting others refrain?”

They stared at him and then at Janice.

“It’s not true,” she said. “He says things like this. He’s quite incapable of saying anything to anyone that doesn’t insult or demean.”

“Now that’s hardly fair,” Thomas said. “When have I ever demeaned you? Other than that time you begged me to tie you up and bend you over?”

Janice glared at him.

“Allow me,” Thomas said, taking the bottle when worrying she might hit him with it. He examined its label. “Oho! A *Bollinger* fifty-three! Very nice. *Dutch*, I believe.”

“It’s *French*,” Janice growled.

He removed the cork and waved it beneath his nose. "Quite excellent, of course. Did you know that the French is now the official culinary language?"

The woman frowned. "Is it?"

"Presumably."

"So you're a friend of Janice's?" the man asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Thomas said.

"What manner of speaking?"

"*Dutch*, I believe."

"This is Thomas," Janice said. "He's someone I feel sorry for. He doesn't get out much and has no friends. I thought I'd bring him along. It's either that or having to put up with him afterwards sobbing for hours on end that nobody loves him."

Thomas smiled. "It's all true: I'm quite hopeless."

"Oh, I'm *sure* that's not true," the woman said.

"It is," Janice said, snatching a glass from a passing waiter, despite it being a used one. She took the bottle from Thomas and emptied the latter into the former. "And what's more, he's going to do his best to embarrass me tonight, and make me realise what a mistake it was to invite him to a party consisting almost entirely of my profession." She took an impressive swig and poured again. "It's going to be one of those nights," she decided. "A night that both me and my career will probably regret for the rest of my life. I've got a funeral to go to this week, and I was hoping this might cheer me up enough to get through it."

"A funeral?" asked Thomas.

"Oh, come now, Janice," the man said. "You jest, surely. There's certainly —"

"I'll tell you what's in jest!" she swore. "Me being stupid enough to help him in the first place! Do you know I genuinely thought there was something worthy in the rubbish he writes? I thought that if he can incite the sort of hatred that he has, then there must be some misappropriated genius buried in it! I thought I could help him re-channel the disgust he's inspired in others into something more productive! By using an editor, for example; some-

one proficient enough to claw through his turgid, self-indulgent wank and find some essence lying within! But no! It's not possible! Firstly, because he's such a self-indulgent wanker, and secondly, his writing's reviled because it's complete and utter SHIT!"

The party shattered in silence and everyone turned to her.

It was the sort of silence so long, that one could not only park a bus in it, but had ample room to build the thing first.

"Actually," said Thomas, breaking it. "Aren't all wankers self-indulgent?"

Janice groaned and took another swig – first from the glass and then from the bottle – before muttering something about no longer caring. She grabbed the woman's hand and dragged her off somewhere that hadn't a hint of him.

"Damian," said the man, offering his hand to Thomas.

"No, Thomas. Weren't you listening?"

There was a pause. "No, I mean *my* name's Damian."

"Oh. Right. Well you need to be clearer. Try putting your name into a sentence next time."

There was another pause and the line shifted closer to the bar.

"So tell me, Thomas, what do you do?"

Thomas peered through the rain in the wake of Janice storming off, but couldn't see her, despite the lack of walls.

"I'm sorry," Thomas said, turning back, "but that last bit of narration had me forgetting the question."

"I asked what it is that you do."

"Does it matter?"

"Well, no. But I'm just making conversation."

"Ah. Sadly, I don't do conversation. Well, not without offending people, apparently."

The man scoffed. "Oh, you needn't worry about that. I don't take offence easily."

"A veteran of it, are you?"

"No. Not particularly. It's just in my game one learns to develop resilience. One has to. Otherwise one would achieve little."

"Would one?"

"Yes, indeed."

"And what game is that, then?"

"I'm a columnist at the Guardian."

Thomas blinked religiously. "The Guardian, indeed? Goodness. How *very* prestigious!"

"Yes. Do you read it?"

"When I've run out of lavatory paper."

"Aha! Very good. Yes, well, I must admit to being rather pleased at the fact."

"Understandably."

"I don't like to boast, but I can certainly say I've landed on my feet there."

"It's just reassuring that you know what they are."

The man nodded. "But tell me, Thomas: what do you do?"

"Well, do you know, Damian, that I write for the Guardian as well?"

"No! Really? How marvellous!"

"Yes, indeed. Although I do so indirectly."

"Indirectly? What—as a freelancer?"

"No. I write books."

"Books?"

"Yes—well, I say write—more that I 'convolute my supposed ideas with masses of inherent redundancy through a smear a random letters which on occasion resemble a traditional alphabet'."

Damian blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

"You don't perhaps recall that line?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Ah. Pity. It was a line the Guardian attributed to my books earlier last year. And so beautifully scribed was it, that I am unable to forget it."

"Really?"

Thomas nodded. "Regardless of the therapy."

This time Damian nodded. Hesitantly. He licked his lips too, and peered past Thomas to where dinner was almost ready.

"Do you know who I am?" Thomas asked.

"Should I?"

"I think it might help."

"Help what?"

"This evening for a start."

"Why does this evening need help?"

Thomas leant forward. "So that it's unforgettable," he whispered, "*regardless* of the therapy."

"I'm sorry," Damian said. "But I don't quite follow."

"Is it that you don't follow? Or that you don't want to follow?"

"Well, both, I suspect."

Thomas stared at him. "Corfield," he said. "Thomas Corfield."

"What?"

"My name is Thomas Corfield."

Damian frowned. "What – as in the *spy*?"

Thomas blinked several times at him. "Spy?"

"Yes. Spy. You know – the one from the books."

Thomas choked on confusion.

"The one they make all the films from," Damian said.

"Films?"

"Yes – the spy with Doctor No and the quantum and loving Russian and things."

A veritable swathe of blinks from Thomas. "James Bond?"

"That's the one!"

"What the hell has my name got to do with James Bond?"

Damian shrugged. "I don't know – I got the names mixed up."

"But my name's nothing like James Bond!"

"I think it was the way you said it."

"What?"

"It was the way you leant in and said your name, like he does in the films."

"And that made you think of James Bond."

"I don't really know. Perhaps it's because your name is vaguely familiar."

"Is it, indeed?"

Awareness then dawned. "Thomas Corfield?"

"The very same."

"With all the court cases and stuff!"

"Indeed."

"Oh, Jesus!"

"Not quite," Thomas said, "though we do share the same middle name."

"I didn't realise. Goodness. But the Guardian hates you!"

"So it appears."

Damian looked around for either an exit or a weapon.

"I'm sorry, Thomas, I didn't make the connection."

"I imagine that's something you struggle with on a daily basis."

"You speak quite normally, you see. I assumed that because your writing's so ghastly, that you were going to dribble a lot and eat shoes." He smiled awkwardly. "No offence."

"Oh, none *taken*, Damian," Thomas said. "After all, how can I take offence from someone who'd struggle to spell it?"

Chapter Fifteen

DINNER CONVERSATION

They sat at a table made from glass, which left Thomas uneasy, as he was convinced tables should be both robust and visible.

“What’s the point of a transparent table?” he whispered to Janice, who sat beside him. “I mean, every time a meal’s brought out I’m going to instinctively worry about my genitals.”

Janice’s demeanour had improved proportionally to the amount of alcohol she’d consumed. Thomas had been under the impression she didn’t drink, to which she’d insisted his presence was the cure for abstinence. Although she knew most of the guests. Thomas knew none. Except for Damian, who’d gone very quiet and was drinking heavily.

Thomas found it hard to be convivial. Not just in this circumstance, but in general. This evening, however, he found it particularly difficult, incensed that at one time or another, each of these individuals had berated him via their various means of media. Janice begged him to behave by not smiling or talking, eating or drinking until they were ready to leave. Thomas had insisted he was ready to leave before they’d even arrived. But when entrées were brought out, she told him to shut up.

There was a collective 'aah' from the table, which Thomas assumed was the result of synchronised communal flatulence. Some comments were made about how delicious it appeared, and Thomas made one about flatulence.

"What?" he said in response to her glare. "Do you really expect me to sit here in silence when these wankers have spent the past year berating me?"

"They were just doing their job," Janice whispered. "Reporting on the court case. It's not their fault the prosecution has a corporate law and media machine on their side."

"But these bastards have never tried to get my side of the story!"

"That's probably because your books summed up your story rather too well. And I don't know why you're so peeved: here is opportunity for you to ingratiate yourself with them and counter-attack."

"I'm surprised they're not throwing their food at me."

"That's because they don't know who you are. I haven't mentioned your last name yet."

"What – not to any of them?"

"Well, Malcolm, obviously. But no others."

"And he didn't mind?"

"Of course not. He's a nice guy. Very understanding."

"He'd have to be, considering that music." He shifted uneasily. "I don't like this table. It's too French."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It reminds me of Malcolm's microwave. Posh things leave me uneasy."

"It's just a table, Thomas! Stop making a fuss." She smacked his hand when it kept pushing its edge. "And stop drawing attention to yourself – and stop *scowling!*"

"I'm not scowling. I'm just worried about my genitals."

"What?"

"This transparency leaves me decidedly uneasy, Janice."

"It's just a freaking table, Thomas!"

"But it's not, though, is it? It's potentially a guillotine. It's going to be hard to convince my nether regions not to worry about a scalding first course placed directly on top of them when imagining shards of glass raining down if this bloody thing breaks."

"It's not going to break, Thomas!"

"It's *glass*, Janice!"

"It's *tempered* glass."

"Try telling my genitals that!"

"I am *not* talking to your genitals."

"Well, I'm going to have to spend this whole evening offering them words of appeasement."

"Please don't spend the evening conversing with your genitals, Thomas."

"Why not? It would be far better than conversing with this lot." He looked up at their amiable chatting. "I should tell them who I am right now. I should stand up and make a statement, and then whatever follows is legally less likely to be my responsibility."

"Not yet. Don't tell them. Just wait."

He looked at her. "Until when?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you don't have to tell them at all."

"Then why am I *here*, Janice?"

"I don't *know*!" she hissed, the back of her hand against her mouth. "You were right: this is a *mistake*!"

"Oh, *really*? Are you quite certain?" He stopped, worried she might be on the verge of tears. "I'll leave them a note," he decided.

"What?"

"My genitals: I'll leave them a note, telling them not to worry."

"You could use your napkin."

"To write on?"

"No. To cover them."

He blinked at it. "Oh. I've always wondered what napkins were for." Unwrapping it, he draped it across his

nether regions. "There. Safe and sound. They'll never know what hit them."

After he tried a smile, they sat in silence while banter skittled across the table.

"I told Damian," Thomas said.

"About your genitals?"

"No. About my last name."

They both glanced at him. The banter missed Damian altogether, who was drinking so heavily that Thomas worried about the table again.

"What was his reaction?"

"Quite subdued, I think—but only because of the number of witnesses present. I think he was scared. I should probably tell the others. If they're all scared, then that could work in my favour, as being threatened is something I'm far more familiar with."

"You can't. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because this is supposed to be a dinner party," she hissed. "And we need people to enjoy themselves. It would be very awkward if they knew who you were."

"So you're not going to tell them at all?"

She prodded an entrée that landed. "It's not up to me."

"What do you mean?" said Thomas, clasping his genitals when one was placed before him as well. "This whole idea was yours."

She looked at him until he let go. "Yes, but now it's up to you, Thomas. You charm them. You tell them your side of this rigmarole."

"*Charm* them?" he hissed. "Janice, these people are clinically allergic to me!"

She leant toward him. "I know you have charm, Thomas, even if it's a weird, serrated version that causes civilities to rupture. Once they've gotten to know you, then you tell them who you are. And they'll realise you're quite a nice guy."

"But I'm not a nice guy. I'm a self-indulgent wanker, remember?"

"True. But even wankers come in a variety of degrees. It's up to you to show them which one you are."

"Well, if that's the case then I'm one addicted to it. I can't charm these people! I can't charm anyone! I have an increasingly massive legal bill which is testament to the fact!"

"If you want your books to be taken seriously, Thomas, then you have to."

"But they think I'm a complete wanker – which isn't even true. Nobody likes a wanker!"

"Then pretend you a nice wanker."

"Pretend?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Jesus, Thomas. You're the writer! Use your imagination!"

"Are you sure that's wise? After all, imagination's what got me into this mess in the first place."

"Then – I don't know – pretend you're James Bond, or something."

Thomas stared at her. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"James Bond. You want me to pretend to be James Bond."

"I don't know, Thomas! Whatever works. Whatever you need to do! I can only arrange opportunities. I can't exploit them for you. Now eat your entrée before it escapes."

Thomas prodded it. "What the hell is it? It looks more burst than cooked. And anyway, I think it's going to take more than my being James Bond to have these people speak to me."

"Why?"

"Because Damian's clearly not thrilled."

"Were you affable toward him?"

He blinked at her. "Was I *what*?"

"Affable."

"Who even uses that word nowadays?"

"People enquiring about affability."

He sighed. "Yes, I was affable. I was very affable."

"Thomas, I suspect you being affable is skewed somewhat toward the extremes of its definition."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you were rude."

"I was *not* rude, all right?"

"Then why is he drinking heavily and looking at you with confusion?"

Thomas shrugged. "No idea. But it makes a nice change from loathing."

"What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything. He just took offence to my presence."

"What did you *say*, Thomas?"

"Nothing. I simply told him who I was."

She stared.

"I said my name. That's all. I told you: they all hate me! Christ, I feel like Jesus crashing a Roman banquet."

Janice glanced at Damian. "But Damian's lovely. He's got a great rapport with the Guardian. I was hoping he'd be the easiest to convince."

"Well, if he's the easiest, I might as well bash myself over the head with this crockery now, and save them all the bother." He prodded his dinner again. "What the hell is this, anyway? It looks like uterus."

"You're not very positive, Thomas."

"Janice, I cannot identify my dinner. That is a concern. Especially considering I've had some nasty experiences with soup, recently."

"So you simply said, 'Hello, I'm Thomas Corfield'."

"Literally, that is all I said."

"How did you say it?"

"What?"

"How did you say 'Hello, I'm Thomas Corfield'?"

"I don't know: like it's my name." He stopped prodding. "No, actually, I said it like James Bond, apparently."

"What?"

"I said my name like James Bond."

After a stare, she said, "But your name's nothing *like* James Bond."

"I know! That's what I told him. But it was the intonation."

She sighed and looked away. "I don't understand any of this."

Thomas took a mouthful of food, chewed once and stopped.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Janice, I'm not entirely certain how to say this, but I think I'm eating a pregnancy."

Chapter Sixteen

Shut UP

Oh, *Malcolm!*" A woman said. "This is just *gorgeous!*"
"Isn't it?" another agreed. "Isn't it just *di-*
vine?"

There were probably fifteen at the table, and Thomas watched most of them warily. The food was very good, but hammering a uterus for long enough would eventually render it edible. Nevertheless, it didn't require their chorus of ingratiating pomposity. If it went on much longer, Thomas suspected he'd vomit, and he didn't know how he'd convey himself as a secret agent with regurgitated uterus down his front.

"Oh, but it *is* good!" another remarked. "I mean utterly *splendid!* It's the sort of food one might consider *dying* for!"

Malcolm raised his glass and eyebrows, taking in the compliments as though he were absorbent.

"Did you make this, Malcolm?" another asked, bordering on ecstatic.

"Would you believe me if I said yes?"

"Of course!"

"Then no."

Some laughter.

"Does that mean you did?"

"Perhaps."

More laughter.

"So did you make this or not?"

"I did as it happens. Two years ago I was on assignment in Japan, in Kyoto, where I learnt the art of *Hoksi-Tamua*, the tradition of braising three-month yearling over an unbelievably hot pan."

"I wouldn't have thought there was room," Thomas said.

Everyone looked at him.

"In a pan. For a cow. Even a dead one."

"It's cut up first."

"Oh, how wonderful."

"Are you a vegetarian, Thomas?"

"No, but I'm certain the cow was."

There was some laughter.

"So how was this made?" the woman asked. "Is it sautéed, perhaps?"

"In a manner of speaking," Malcolm said. "I have an excellent butcher who's trained in the art. I only found him recently. He's from Koto. It's quite an art."

"I see. Did he frame the bits left over?" asked Thomas.

Some more laughter.

"Nothing's left over. That's the beauty of *Hoksi-Tamua*."

"The entrée being an example?"

The laughter was less this time, and struggled with its own identity.

"The entrée was Firgioni mushroom and its sauce made out of the contents of spleen, as I understand it."

"Ah. Then that explains a great deal."

"What does it explain, exactly, Thomas?"

"Well, the taste for a start."

There was no laughter this time, which Thomas was grateful for, as it offered a clue to something he was generally clueless about. "It had a nutty flavour," he said, in an attempt at reprieve. "Quite wonderful. Very exotic. And a particularly nice texture. You are fortunate to have such

expertise on hand, Malcolm. Fortunate indeed to understand such culinary delights."

There were some murmurs of agreement which he was encouraged by.

"Do you have much in the way of culinary experience?" Malcolm asked.

"Not at all. I've heated some beans in a tin once. But that's the extent of it."

"You've heated some beans in a tin, have you? Well, I hope this evening has wetted your appetite for things a little more adventurous."

Some laughter made a comeback.

"I've only done it once, mind you."

"I'm sorry?"

"Heated beans in a tin. I've only done it once."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I'm not very good in the kitchen, you see, and I've never quite got the hang of a tin-opener."

"Yes. Well. They are devastatingly complex pieces of engineering."

"So I boiled it."

"I'm sorry?"

"I boiled it."

"The tin-opener?"

"No, the beans."

"I see. What — while they were still in the tin?"

"Yes."

While Malcolm stared, the guests seemed riveted. Or confused. Or scared.

"So what happened?"

Thomas shrugged. "Not a lot. They got very hot. I think I left them for something interesting on television."

"The beans were outside the tin?" a woman asked, attempting to follow, while wondering how long she might have to try.

"No. They were still in the tin."

"Oh. So how did you eat them?"

"I didn't."

Some more stares, before Malcolm asked, "So—Thomas—what has this got to do with anything?"

"It just my contribution to our foray into the culinary wilderness."

"I see."

"I like your apartment," said Thomas.

"Do you?"

"Yes. It's very nice. I like its absence of walls in particular."

"Right."

"Yes. I'm left wondering what keeps the ceiling up, actually."

"Are you, indeed?"

"Yes." Thomas took a sip of something expensive. "Although I must say, it's not the best design if someone's wanting to kill you."

The silence that followed was so uncomfortable, it needed two aspirin and bandage.

Malcolm took his glass and swirled its contents thoughtfully. "And why would anyone want to kill me, Thomas?"

"Oh, not you specifically," Thomas said. "No. I was referring to me."

A sip was taken. "And why would anyone want to kill you, Thomas? Besides the reasons you're so aptly demonstrating."

"I can't tell you that."

"Well, that's most fortunate." Malcolm put the glass down, and said to his guests, "Now, where were we?"

"You were saying something about butchers?" a man said.

"Ah. Indeed. One of the best in London. I can give you his name—but I'd have to kill him almost immediately afterwards."

The laughter might be best described as explosive.

"Is that before or after he kills the cow?" Thomas asked.

The laughter, not paying attention, got hit by a bus.

"Do you have a problem with any part of this evening in particular, Thomas?" Malcolm asked, "or is it an all encompassing criticism?"

"It's just his sense of humour," said Janice. "He's keen on cows, that's all."

"Keen on cows?"

Janice looked at Thomas, trying to find a reasonable explanation. "His best friend was a cow," she said, when unable to.

Everyone looked at him.

"Is that true?" a woman asked.

"It depends what you mean by best friend," Thomas said.

"What do you think it means?" she asked, intrigued.

Thomas shrugged. "We went hiking together in the Balkans, one summer. That's all."

"With a cow."

"A trained cow."

"Trained? Really? In what way?"

"In hiking."

The silence that followed could have been a second entrée.

"A cow trained in hiking?"

"Yes," said Thomas. "He was quite good."

"I thought cows were female," Malcolm said.

"It wasn't that sort of relationship."

"I didn't say it was. I just find it odd you refer to your best friend in the masculine, if she was, in fact, the opposite."

"It was a term of endearment."

"To contradict her sexuality?"

"He has a great sense of humour," Janice said.

"Who – him or the cow?"

"I'm not used to these sort of situations," Thomas said. "I find them very awkward."

"What situations?"

"Social ones. Sitting down. Eating. Talking. That sort of thing. Especially with people I don't know."

"Yes, well, clearly. But why make everyone else suffer too?"

"I'm a spy and I've killed before," Thomas said.

They stared at him.

"He's referring to the cow," Janice said.

"The cow?"

"Yes. He had to kill the cow — after it broke its leg — hiking."

"I thought it was your friend," a woman said.

A man threw his napkin on the table. "Oh, this is ridiculous." He turned to Malcolm. "Do we have to put up with this idiot?"

"Don't call Janice an idiot!" Thomas said.

"I was referring to *you*, you pillock! What the hell are you babbling on about, anyway? If you were a spy, you certainly wouldn't be admitting it at a dinner party!"

"I said I *was* a spy — I didn't say I was a good one."

"I knew he was a spy," Damian said.

They all looked at him. Being the first coherent sentence he'd uttered after a brief one regarding his inability to sit down in a coordinated manner, they indulged him. His eyes were all over the place — and not necessarily together. His tongue tried to follow, but made some gurgling noises when his throat got indignant.

"I told you that, didn't I?" Damian slurred at Thomas. "I told you that you were from those spy films — James something-or-rather. The one with the diamonds and the stupid umbrellas and all those women with legs."

"What are you talking about?" Malcolm said.

"He's the spy," he said, waving a full glass at Thomas, that subsequently became empty. "You know — the spy. That one with the clever girls and the sexy gadgets — the one who blows things up and says something witty as though he'd just blown his nose."

"James Bond?"

Damian tried to click his fingers and missed. "That's the one! You have to be careful: he's a spy." He tried to

sing the theme tune, but stopped when coughing up some uterus.

They all stared at Thomas.

"That's right," Thomas said. "I'm a spy. And I've got a gun and everything."

"A spy," Malcolm said.

Thomas nodded, before eyeing a pot-plant lest it tried to assassinate him.

"Right. I see, and who do you work for, Thomas?"

Some blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"Who do you work for?"

"Well – I'm actually – freelance – at the moment."

"Oh, I see – a freelance spy! How fascinating! Please, do tell us more."

"I can't because I'm a spy."

"Of course: it's all top-secret, is it?"

"Some of it, yes. All the secret bits, certainly."

"And this cow," Malcolm asked, "the one you had to kill in the Balkans. I suppose that was on assignment?"

Thomas nodded, waiting for his imagination to get its act together.

"Tell me, Thomas: was it a *spy* cow?"

There were some sniggers around the table, the absurdity dissolving their communal discomfort.

Thomas nodded, his imagination clearly at another party altogether.

"He doesn't like to talk about it," Janice tried. "He gets flashbacks."

Malcolm looked amazed. "*Flashbacks*, indeed? Well, we can't have that, now, can we?"

"Why don't we change the subject?" Janice asked. "Surely there's something far more interesting to talk about?"

Malcolm laughed. "You mean there's something *more* interesting than the assassination of a transgender Balkan *spy* cow?"

Chapter Seventeen

Complete Wanker

No!" the man said. "It's not good enough! I want to know how you killed the cow!"

"I have flashbacks," said Thomas, "so I can't remember."

"How can you *not* remember if you have flashbacks? I would have thought the one redeeming feature of flashbacks is being able to recall exactly what it is you're having trouble recalling!"

"Why does this have to be such a big deal, anyway? I'm a spy, all right? You're all journalists! I don't question you. Let's just leave it there."

"But you're not a spy, are you?" Malcolm said, an eyebrow raised. "You and I both know what you are."

"I think we *all* know what he is!" the man said.

"Tell them what you are, Thomas," Malcolm said. "Tell us all who you are and what you do."

Thomas glared at him. "I'm a spy," he said. "And I kill fascist cows."

"Fascist cows?" Malcolm laughed. "Is that right?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard of fascist cows!"

Thomas leant forward. "That's because I've killed them all."

"Is that during or after you've taken them hiking?" the man sneered.

"The hiking's just a means of distraction."

"Of course it is. Much like this bullshit."

"He tasers them," said Janice.

A hand went to a woman's mouth. Not as a fist, because that would be dreadful. More as a means to stifle astonishment.

"Tasers?"

"Yes," said Janice. "He tasers them."

"How the hell do you taser a *cow*?" Malcolm cried.

"It's a lot easier than cutting them up and braising them over a hot pan," Thomas said.

"But you can't taser a *cow*!" another said. "Not unless you're a portable *abattoir*! You'd need a whopping current to take down a cow. How the hell are you going to manage that whilst hiking through the Balkans?"

Damian sloshed his drink around the place. "He's got a watch – with a special *thing* in it."

"A *special thing*?" the man said. "Oh, well, that explains everything!"

"You don't have to believe me," Thomas said.

"Well, that's fucking fortunate, because I fucking don't! A watch with a *thing* in it – sorry, a *special thing* in it! You'd have to be fucking careful you don't blow your nuts off whenever you tell the time!"

"There's no need to swear," said Thomas, frowning. "Swearing is no more than punctuation for the illiterate."

"I'll punctuate *you* in a minute!"

"Why are you being so aggressive? All I said was that I was a spy –"

"Who tasers cattle!"

" – and as I don't doubt your profession, you shouldn't doubt mine. Although I probably should doubt yours, considering some of the rubbish you lot write."

The silence returned, this time with a sleeping bag and a small camping stove which it proceeded to light before settling down for the evening.

"What did you say?" the man whispered.

"I said that I don't question you lot."

"No, the bit *after* that. The bit about our writing."

"I said it was less than ideal."

"You said it was rubbish."

"No I didn't."

"You did."

There were murmurs from roughly fifteen witnesses concurring, all of which glared.

"Oh, *brilliant*," Thomas said. "I see. So it's fine for you to criticise me, but it's clearly not acceptable for me to criticise you."

"I think, Thomas," Malcolm said, eyeing him as though he was only partially visible, "that it's about time you revealed your true identity."

Thomas glanced at Janice, who looked bereft.

"Who is he, Janice?" the man asked. "You obviously know him, which I find extraordinary considering he's clearly a complete wanker."

"See?" Thomas said to her.

"He's not really as bad as he appears," Janice assured them. "He's just a bit – well – misunderstood."

"Oh, really?" the man said, nodding. "Interesting. I believe they say the same thing about Hitler."

"Yes – misunderstood *and* a complete wanker," another said.

Thomas stood. "Look. I'm a spy. Not a very good one, admittedly, which is why I am here and not deep inside Siberia."

"Presumably that's the name of your cow?"

"I'm a *spy*, all right? If you don't like it, then you can go and do something unconventional with a *Firgioni* mushroom."

"None of us believe you," Malcolm said. "Least of all, me."

"You know what? I don't care anymore. I didn't even want to come here this evening."

“Well, I care. You’re in my house at my table with my friends insisting you’re a spy. You and I both know what you are, Thomas. We both know what you *do*. And let me tell you something else: the only reason Janice insisted I host a party for you is because she feels clinically *sorry* for you. Nothing more. And I can see why: you’re a sad, pathetic *excuse* of a man—”

“I prefer wanker.”

“—who will never amount to anything.” Malcolm leant forward then. “I agreed to this for Janice, because she is very probably the most caring and beautiful woman God put together before giving up on us collectively. And for *her* sake—let alone the rest of us—I insist you tell us who you are. Because if *you* don’t, then I will. And I won’t be *remotely* flattering about it.”

Thomas glared at him and then the rest of them. Except for Damian, who was drawing figure-eights in his gravy. When he glared at Janice, however, she had her head hung lower than a sixty year-old Balkan cow’s udder.

“Well?” the man said, leaning back, his arms folded in triumph.

Thomas left the table and looked at a place that should have been wall. When he turned back to them, their contempt was more palatable than the entrée. “You’ve got it all wrong,” he said. “Or rather, very, *very* right.”

Glares became frowns, and stares became glances at one another.

“Who here, would like the greatest scoop of the century?” he said. “Which of you is most deserving?” He wandered around the table, feeling like Hercule Poirot prior to revealing the killer.

Except that there wasn’t one.

And he didn’t have a moustache.

Nor was he Belgian, for that matter.

He had their attention, though, and his imagination arrived with a letter of apology, some chocolates and a large bunch of flowers.

“My name,” said Thomas, “is Thomas Corfield.”

There were gasps from around the table, and Damian sloshed another drink.

"And I am, I think it is fair to say, possibly the worst writer in history."

Their gasps became vehement nods.

"And each of you, in your own way, have found my novels more traumatic than a budgerigar trying to nest in a rotating ceiling fan. But the fact is that Thomas Corfield — the writer — is a *farce*."

There was no response.

"It's a ruse."

Even less.

"A fake identity."

"Thomas —" said Malcolm.

"It was a cover. An *alias*. An alternative identity to hide the fact that I'm actually a *spy*."

"All right, Thomas —"

"That's how good I am! I'm such an appalling writer *because* I'm such a brilliant spy."

"Right. Look. Thomas —"

He pointed at them. "And you *all* fell for it! *All* of you. Especially you lot from the Guardian — which is hardly surprising considering you're such a bunch of inbred wankers."

The man unfolded his arms and stood.

"What's more, the whole time you were saying how terrible my books are, I was *laughing* at you —"

The man strode around the table.

"And every time you agreed with those bastard publishers, I added you to Mossad's hit list."

The man came closer.

"And for your information, I personally *shat* in every one of those sandwiches."

The man said, "Why don't you shut the *fuck* up?" Before pushing him in a manner Thomas was certain only his mother was allowed to.

"Who do you think you are?" Thomas said, "My *mother*?" He pushed him back.

A brawl followed.

Ironically, although Thomas fought like a wanker, proving just how dreadful a spy he was, his punctuation was admirable.

Albeit as an illiterate.

Chapter Eighteen

Deflated Testes

Well, this is pleasant," Malcolm said, at a silence so awkward it felt vilified. "I must say, if I knew things were going to turn out this way, I would have hired a hearse."

Guests stared uncomfortably at everything except Thomas.

Through a large expanse of glass, the city shone in gold and silver lights, and seemed to be having a great time. In Malcolm's apartment, however, dinner had turned into quite the opposite.

"I did warn her," Thomas said, clasping a wet flannel over an eye. "I told Janice I'm no good at dinner parties. So I'm surprised any of this comes as a shock to her."

He pressed harder at the flannel and held a piece of ice above his other one. There was only a bit of blood, mainly from the cut the man had inadvertently re-opened. The man didn't fare much better, having been forced to reabsorb a testicle when Thomas' knee insisted upon it, and sat whimpering on his chair, rocking and turning a strange shade of green.

Janice had slunk as low as she could in her chair without falling from it. A woman beside her rested a hand in commiserations upon her shoulder. When Thomas had

tried to do the same to her other one, Janice hit him. Which wasn't surprising considering he was responsible for her needing commiserations in the first place.

"Oh, come on!" Thomas said. "Is any of this particularly surprising? Who'd want to have a dinner party with the one person you all revile? If it makes you feel any better, I feel like Jesus at a Roman bath without a towel."

"So you're comparing yourself to *Jesus*, now?" Malcolm said.

"Circumstantially, yes. Do you know we share the same middle name?"

"What?"

"Jesus and I share the same middle name."

"Middle name? What middle name. Jesus didn't have a middle name."

"He certainly did, and it's Harold."

"Harold?"

"Yes."

"*Harold* is Jesus' middle name?"

Thomas nodded. "Ironic, don't you think? Considering Herrod was such a bastard."

"Why don't you just leave?"

"I'll tell you what would be even more ironic: If Herrod's middle name had been Jesus."

"I think we'd be much better off without you."

"You *see*?" Thomas said to the wilting form of Janice. "I told you, didn't I? I told you they wanted nothing to do with me?" He said to them all, "I mean, why would you? Why would the people who have strapped my name to a long turd, dragged both through mud and shoved it through their printing presses be surprised to discover that I'm anything other than ghastly?"

"You could have at least tried," a woman hissed.

"I can assure you, dear lady, that this is me trying. It was either this, or sitting in a corner rocking backward and forwards naked while squeezing bananas between my toes."

"Bananas?"

"Yes."

"Why bananas?"

"Because apples give me blisters. Look, I didn't even want to come. I begged Janice for the past month not to make me. And I did the same in the corridor outside. I warned her that this evening would end with the sort of disaster that makes Chernobyl look like a good way to cook eggs. Honestly. She's worse than my *mother*."

"You really are a *wanker*, aren't you?" the woman sneered.

"Actually, I'm not —"

"Look what you've done to her," Malcolm said. "Look at Janice. She's humiliated. Fortunately, we know her well enough to realise what a gorgeous, kind and talented woman she is. So your behaviour tonight, Thomas, reflects entirely on you: at what an unadulterated *git* you are. Similarly, it speaks volumes about her compassion to ever consider helping a prat like you."

"It always amazes me the number of people mistaking git and prat for the same thing."

"They *are* the same thing, you pillock!"

"No they're not," said Thomas. "They're spelt differently for a start. They do not, as the masses assume, mean idiot. Git refers to the joint on a type of sixteenth century ploughing harness which is prone to breaking once the leather wears, whereas prat has its origins in a mindless squabble of words that has each involved none the wiser."

"Is this some pathetic attempt at proving your knowledge of words?" Malcolm fumed.

"No more than your column in the Guardian is."

"At least I'm published!"

"Oh, indeed, Malcolm! How your prose endures! Tell me, for how long does your literary genius stimulate the minds of those able to read it? A century? A generation? No, Malcolm. A week. A week and then it's forgotten about as quickly as the chips it wraps grow cold."

Malcolm stood. "I think you'd better leave."

"Nothing would please me more. Other than having not arriving in the first place, of course."

"But first," said Malcolm, "you're going to apologise."

"I'm going to what?"

"Apologise. To Janice, for a start. And then to Gavin."

"Gavin?"

"Yes." He pointed at the green man.

"It's not my fault he ingested a testicle," said Thomas. "He should have kept both of them out of it."

"You kneed him in the groin. What sort of man knees another man in the groin?"

"A man who's not comfortable having another man's testicles that close to his own. And anyway, he shouldn't have tried removing mine first."

"I can assure you that it was a class action!"

Thomas glared. "Well, it's a pity you didn't have a go first, Malcolm, as it's clear you haven't got any testicles."

Malcolm, shuddering with rage, launched himself at Thomas with a growl suggesting he had two very large ones that had won prizes.

A collective cry went up from the table.

Malcolm made two fists – each about the size of his testicles – and tried belting Thomas with one of them. But having had far less to drink, Thomas dodged it and grabbed the other with his flannel, which he twisted to spin Malcolm in a manner suggesting they'd been dancing partners for years and were considering turning professional.

Up until Thomas kneed him in the testicles.

Malcolm collapsed with a groan, went red and then blue, before hissing as though one of them had popped. Two women fell to his side, while those remaining at the table winced and clutched themselves. Janice's saggy udder impression worsened to drag along the ground and begin furrowing soil. Flooded with triumph and shame, Thomas held his pose, glaring at them all in case others wanted a go. But they returned his glare with the sort of loathing generally requiring a license. One woman patted

Malcolm's hand, while the other had an ear against his chest, either to check his breathing or the state of his testicles.

Either way, she wasn't impressed.

"That's the most pathetic thing I've ever seen!" she growled at Thomas.

"His testicles?"

She stood and swore at him.

Thomas swallowed and took a step backwards. Women generally didn't have testicles, which left him uneasy.

"You can't just go around kneeling people in the groin!" she cried. "Particularly men!"

"But he was trying to punch me! They both were!"

"Only because you're such an incredulous wanker!"

Thomas admired his knuckles to imply they were as deadly as his knee. "I'm sorry lady, but I am not going to let myself be assaulted. It was self-defence. I learnt that in training as a spy –"

"You should defend yourself like a man!" she cried. "Not a seven year old girl!"

"I was defending myself like a man! I thought those moves were rather impressive! Did you see my flannel?"

"You kneed him in the groin, you wanker! What is impressive about that?"

"Wanker? Listen lady, *they're* the ones rolling around, moaning and clutching their testicles!"

"You know what?" she said, stepping over the body. "It's true; you're not even a wanker, because even wankers know when to stop. You have no idea, do you? I've never met anyone so self-obsessed. Not only are you delusional, but you're pathologically incapable of respecting others' feelings." She pointed at Janice, who was doing an impressive impression of the Titanic the morning after. "Apparently, she wanted to help you. She cared. *She* thought there was something worthwhile in the swathes of *shit* that you write. But you know what? The one redeeming feature of *shit* is that it can be flushed. Something your books can't be – and believe me, I've tried."

"I find it's best to tear them up first—"

"Let me tell you something, Thomas; look up the definitions of paragraph and sentence, because it seems to me you have one confused with the other."

"Sorry, I'm confused—"

"Well, let me put it another way," she said, folding her arms, "you convolute your supposed ideas with masses of inherent redundancy through a smear a random letters which on occasion resemble a traditional alphabet."

Thomas stared at her. "You were responsible for that?"

"No, Thomas. *You* were! That's the problem; you don't even see that you've got one. But thankfully, this evening has proved to everyone just how massive it is. And if Janice still believes you don't, that as both her friends and colleagues we will ensure that after this evening, she certainly does!"

Thomas looked at Janice. She was trembling. He wanted to say things to her. But being the worst writer in the world, he struggled to find words. Except her name. Which probably wouldn't suffice under the circumstances.

The woman took a step closer. "Leave," she said.

"Oh, I intend to." He glanced around the table, but a collective loathing had its occupants looking elsewhere. His bottle of wine remained. "This is mine," he said, taking it. "I brought it with me. Well, one like it, anyway."

"Leave."

He glanced at Janice a final time, before leaving the table.

"Oh," he said, turning back to them, "when Malcolm recovers, tell him to get some walls in this place. It's dangerous."

"It's not dangerous, you stupid wanker. It's designed to be open plan."

"Well, what a fortunate coincidence," said Thomas, eyeing its still moaning owner, "considering the same could now be said of his testicles."

Chapter Nineteen

Cleaved Groins

The following day began about as well as the previous one had ended; with several bruised bollocks and a very uncomfortable silence. Although he'd made it home, Thomas hadn't made it to his bedroom and instead crashed on the sofa in the sitting room of his flat. When his bladder assaulted him at six-thirty, he flailed through what he assumed was his bedroom, until ramming his groin into the corner of a coffee table. Groin-ramming is agonising at any time of the day, but at six-thirty in the morning, after a night of alcohol and sporting a bladder three times its conventional size, the pain becomes biblical in both proportion and as something to swear upon.

He spent some time afterwards rolling around the floor, wondering who the fuck had put a sharpened coffee table in his bedroom. When realising he wasn't in his bedroom—and that he was largely responsible—he left it at that, having already chastised himself enough with the coffee table. He stood, found his bedroom and collapsed onto the large, unmade mess in the middle of it. Face down on a pillow, he urinated and then slept for another five hours until the phone rang.

With effort, he turned over and winced in pain, suspecting his bollocks were in three distinct pieces. Pulling himself across the bed, he collapsed onto the floor.

"All right!" he yelled. "For fuck's sake, just shut the fuck up!"

But the phone wouldn't, and continued ringing from a hallway that seemed a great deal further away than he recalled.

Climbing up the wall, he felt for a light switch, but found nothing of the sort. He staggered to the windows and felt for the blinds. They clattered as he fumbled, and when pulling at them, daylight was as painful as a coffee table in the bollocks. He reeled and clawed at his face. From his bedroom, he returned to the sitting room, kneeed the coffee table and stumbled into the hallway.

With hands flailing, he lifted the handset to his face and growled. "Hggh."

"Mister Corfield?"

"Hggh."

"It's Sarah, Mister Corfield; Merchison Barrington-Barrington's secretary."

Thomas blinked in a bid to find focus, couldn't, and repeated the guttural sounds he'd begun with.

"You had an appointment with Mister Barrington this morning at ten-thirty."

He mumbled something resembling deep-seated annoyance with the world at large, before rubbing his face on the wall. "Really?"

"Yes, Mister Corfield."

"What's the time now?"

"Nearly midday, Mister Corfield."

Thomas sank to the floor, while life — and all that was wrong with it — got on with amusing itself at his expense. "That's quite a bit later than ten-thirty, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mister Corfield. The thing is, it was a very important meeting, and you missed it."

"Right."

"Yes. And it involved other people. Other very important people."

Thomas rubbed his face vigorously. "No, I'm sorry," he said, "you'll either have to start again, or speak slower using simpler words. I have a suspicions that my brain's fallen out somewhere on my way home last night, because I'm having trouble grasping any of this—unlike my bollocks which are huge."

There was a pause on the other end, before she said, "*Mister Corfield, Mister Barrington would like a word. I'll just put you through.*"

Thomas moaned and sank to the floor. And considering he'd sunk to it only moments earlier, this says a great deal about the extent of his frustration.

"*Thomas? What the hell's going on? You should have been here hours ago!*"

"Yes. Sorry. Something came up."

"*What, something more important than the defence of your lawsuit?*"

"Yes. My bollocks, actually. They're quite swollen."

"*I couldn't care less about your bollocks! You were to see me at ten-thirty this morning!*"

"Right. Look, I think I've been through this once already this morning—not long ago, in fact. With a woman—"

"*I've had Jamison here since ten –*"

"Have you made him some tea?"

"*This is no laughing matter, Thomas. This is deadly serious. You know how important this meeting was to your defence. You've been reminded about it countless times over recent months!*"

"Yes, but the problem with going over things countless times, Merchison, is my tendency to lose count of them, and then they just contribute to this seemingly unending quagmire of amorphous procedural stuff my life seems to have become embroiled in."

"*Well, if you don't get to grips with said amorphous quagmire, Thomas, you won't have a life worth embroiling.*"

Thomas sighed. "I rather feel that I'm at that stage already."

There was a pause on the other end. *"Look, Thomas, I know this whole thing is becoming increasingly difficult to deal with, but it will eventually end. Not necessarily in your favour, but it will end, nonetheless. But in order for it to do so, you have to help me help you. I cannot do my part without ensuring you're properly advised – even if you don't want to be. Things have to follow procedure."*

"Am I being charged for this call?"

"You need to help yourself by helping me. As good as I am, I cannot do my job unless you do your part, and that involves turning up to appointments I make, especially when I've organised important people to be at them."

"I'm being charged, aren't I."

"Apart from anything else, it looks unprofessional on my part. You, obviously, don't have to worry about your reputation, but I have an enormous one –"

"It just seems unfair charging me for something I've apparently been reminded of countless times already."

"I've had some disappointed people in my chambers this morning. Some very important, disappointed people. And the one thing one doesn't do with important people, Thomas, is disappoint them."

"Yes, All right. You've made your point – and charged me for it. It's just that I had a very bad night, last night."

"In what way?"

"In that I went out."

"Out?"

"Yes."

"What – as in socially?"

"Yes."

"Not with friends, obviously."

"Obviously. But the thing is, I don't think it went very well."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I can't remember any of it."

"Ha! In my experience, that sounds like an ideal evening. I wish all mine were like that."

"No. This was a very bad night. I drank."

"Well, congratulations!"

"No. That I drank is not a good thing."

"Thomas, one day you'll realise that 'rose-coloured glasses' was written by someone too pissed to spell Roselle."

"I didn't want to drink, Merchison."

"None of us want to drink, Thomas. It's this bitch of a thing called life that makes us."

Thomas sighed. "Look, I'm really sorry about the meeting."

"Well, in a way I'm relieved to hear from you; I was worried you'd given up on everything. And this case is so remarkable that you mustn't. The fact that you're suffering a hangover says you're learning to adopt new and exciting coping mechanisms. That in itself is progress."

"I'm not doing it again, Merchison. I'm not drinking. I can't. My bollocks won't take it for a start."

"Ha! Listen: Jamison is not flying out until eight-thirty this evening. The others have gone, but he's the pivotal character in this strategy. Be at Stella d'Amores at five this afternoon, do you understand? We'll have the meeting then. I've been raving to him about the place for ages, and he's keen to see what all the fuss is about."

"Do I have to? Can't you just do everything you need to, and then get me to sign a form afterwards? I'm good at signing forms; it's the one thing I write that people encourage me to."

"At five, understood?"

"I'll do my best."

"Good. Now go and put some ice on your bollocks."

At five that evening, Thomas waited outside a very pert restaurant in a very twee part of the city. He stood outside its door for another ten minutes waiting for some courage to arrive and help him into the place. In the end, it didn't, but Merchison did. Having watched Thomas stand for ten minutes like a sort of human redundancy on the pavement, he'd excused himself from Jamison in order to fetch his client.

"What are you waiting for?" Merchison asked, stepping onto the pavement with a click of very expensive shoes.

Thomas remained as he had been, facing the restaurant, arms listless, waiting. He shrugged. But even this took more effort than he'd expected. "I'm here as you requested," he said. "But I'm not emotionally capable of doing much more than sign a form."

Merchison frowned. "How are your bollocks?"

"Bloody sore and larger than I remember. I think I may have cleaved one in two."

"Right. Well, although I'm a barrister and not a doctor, I do know a very good cure for cleaved bollocks, and it's about fifty pounds a glass."

"I'm not drinking again, Merchison."

"Spoken like a true denier! Come on, the food here's excellent."

"I don't have any money."

"I know. You've systematically transferred it all to me. Come on." He held open the door.

With reluctant steps, Thomas entered the restaurant. It smelt wonderful, and because of the stale stink of baked beans his flat was perused with, he felt encouragement tug from the depth of despair. Merchison ushered him to a table already occupied.

"This is Smitherington-Blastenberry Jamison," he said, indicating its occupier, "an old acquaintance of mine, a very talented man, and someone who is likely to be of an asset to us."

The man smiled. "You can call me Jamison." He held out a hand.

Thomas raised his in an attempt to shake it, but didn't manage. "Jamison — yes — I think that's still going to be too many syllables. Are you called anything shorter?"

"Well, it has been said that even God calls me God. As do women who have had the pleasure of my pleasure."

Merchison laughed and sat at the table. "Ha! This is the man I wanted you to meet this morning!"

"Are you talking to me or him," Thomas asked, "because I'm warning you Merchison, I haven't felt this dreadful since flailing through my afterbirth."

“You, actually.”

“Yes. Well. Sorry I’m late,” said Thomas, sitting in surrender. “But I’m having a shit life.”

“That’s quite all right,” said Jamison. “As it happens, I specialise in them.”

Chapter Twenty

Stella d Amores

Merchison ordered some drinks, despite Thomas' insistence he wanted nothing more to do them—particularly at fifty pounds a glass. So Merchison ordered several bottles of the stuff and told him to shut up.

"I must say, Thomas," said Jamison, "This lawsuit is quite remarkable. I've never seen a case like it. It really is unprecedented."

"Jamison likes unprecedented things," Merchison said. "It allows him to pave the way."

"Pave the way for what?" Thomas asked.

"The future," said Jamison. "The past, and the small, unimportant bit joining the two."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to."

"Then why am I here? I currently have neither the physical or physiological resilience to deal with any of this."

Jamison peered at him. "How's the pyschoenteritis?"

Thomas swore. "I do *not* have pyschoenteritis, all right? It is a made up condition to discredit my writing."

"I thought your writing did that well enough by itself?"

"Yes, but not to the extend they would like."

Jamison looked at his colleague. "You're right; he doesn't stand a chance."

Merchison nodded and looked at a bread roll.

"What do you mean I don't stand a chance?"

Jamison leant forward. "Thomas, how many times have you appeared in court so far?"

"Because of my books, or on unrelated charges?"

"Your books."

He shrugged. "Eight?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen?"

"And how do you feel about the final hearing?"

Another shrug. "At this moment, my life's so dreadful that I don't care. I had a dreadful night, I did something dreadful, I woke up feeling dreadful, did something dreadful to my bollocks, and then urinated on my bed. So I'm expecting the final hearing to be along similar lines."

Jamison turned to his colleague again. "He's past caring. I can't work with this."

But Merchison shook his head in reassurance. "Thomas went out last night, that's all."

"What – as in socially?"

"Yes."

"But not with friends, obviously."

"Obviously. And I don't think it went very well."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he can't remember it."

Jamison grunted. "In my experience, that sounds like an ideal evening."

"That's what I said."

Thomas glared at them. "I am still here, you know."

"Yes, but you clearly no longer care," Merchison said.

Thomas shrugged. "Well, that should hardly be a surprise. I told you that earlier, which is why I'm wondering what I'm doing here."

"You're here to talk strategy."

"But I've told you; I'm in no fit emotional state to do so right now."

"All right," said Merchison, breaking the roll. "What about coming up with another reason; you're here because you're hungry, and because you want to remember what you did last night."

Thomas blinked at him. "What?"

"You're hungry," said Merchison, buttering it, "and you'd like to remember what you did last night."

"I am hungry, yes. But I do not want to remember anything about last night, thank you."

"You most certainly do."

"I do not." And then to Jamison, "I do not."

"Why are you so adamant?" said Merchison.

Thomas sighed. "Because I'm certain it was dreadful."

"Which is the very reason you want to remember."

"I thought you were a barrister?"

"I am."

"So what's with all the psychological bollocks?"

Merchison smiled. "Thomas, being a barrister is not just about siphoning off inheritances."

"No?"

"No. It's about ensuring people are grateful when you do so."

Some food arrived. It steamed expensively and was accompanied by several more bottles labelled in French.

Which rang a vague bell.

A large plate was placed before Thomas. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Tradition dictates that you eat it," said Merchison.

"Are you sure this is supposed to be eaten? It looks expensive."

"It is expensive. And it's delicious. Don't worry; it's insured."

"Insured?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean it's insured?"

"I mean that this place has such expensive food that's it's insured before it leaves the kitchen."

"You're joking!"

"Of course I'm joking. Now eat it before it depreciates."

Thomas ferried great forkfuls into his mouth which he chewed with the sort of fervour that can only be described as disrespectful. He stopped then, mid-chew, and stared across the table.

Merchison and Jamison looked at him.

"You've remembered something?" Merchison asked.

Thomas recommenced chewing thoughtfully. "Yes. I think last night had something to do with Janice."

"Janice?"

"A woman who's been helping me."

"What – a real one?"

"Yes."

"Helping you? In what way?"

"Encouraging me."

Merchison frowned. "Is she the one who spat at you?"

"What? No! Of course not!" He thought again. "I think I did something dreadful to her."

Merchison sank his head into his hands. "Thomas," he sighed, "you weren't inappropriate again, were you?"

Thomas glared at him. "No, I was not, thank you very much! I haven't been cautioned for weeks."

"Because you're consistently growing record of lewd behaviour is not helping –"

"It is not lewd behaviour. I am socially challenged, remember? There's a big difference – not least of which is the number of syllables. You should know; you're the one who insisted I keep seeing Margery."

"Margery?" Jamison asked, puzzled.

"Doctor Margery," Merchison said, "is a clinical psychiatrist who's treating –"

"Seeing," said Thomas.

" – seeing Thomas on a regular basis after an incident with a young woman in a café last year. Look, it's a long story – suffice to say he's making progress."

"An incident?"

"I don't talk about it with anyone except Margery," said Thomas. "Merchison had me sign a form."

"Look, what you need is this," said Merchison, filling a glass to replace one he'd filled earlier that Thomas refused to touch.

"I told you, Merchison; I'm not drinking."

"I know, and that's the problem."

"No, the problem was drinking in the first place."

"No, I suspect you drank after the problem arose in order to forget how dreadful it was—and it must have been particularly dreadful if you cannot recall it now you're sober."

Thomas blinked at him. "I drank after the problem arose?"

"In my experience, that's how it begins. The adage 'drink to forget' arose for a reason, and presumably a dreadful one."

Thomas pondered this.

"And therefore," Merchison continued, "as much as I would prefer not to, I insist that you drink this to remember. Because if you don't, then you're going to be ravaged by a self-pity that under the circumstances, may consume you. Which, from our point of view, would be most inconvenient, considering this case hinges on you remaining functional for its duration, at least."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Thomas, that the only way you're going to recall what happened last night, is to let alcohol help you."

"But I don't like alcohol!"

"None of us do, Thomas. None of us do."

Thomas took the bottle and frowned at the label. "I think it had something to do with France. Perhaps I insulted her in French? Or hit her with a croissant?" He stared at them. "Or a microwave?"

"No, you didn't, or I'd have been contacted. But we're going to get nowhere this evening until you remember. You don't need to get drunk; just mellow enough to allow

your memory to be careless with what happened. And then we can get on with business."

"And you expect me to think straight after drinking this?"

"Thomas, we've got a meeting to get through, and we need you to be able to concentrate on it without pining over last night."

Thomas leant forward. "But I don't want to know."

"Well, I do. So drink. Come on, Thomas: Jamison has to be on a plane at eight-thirty."

"This isn't going to end well," Thomas said, taking the glass.

"Maybe not, but I can guarantee it will end better than last night."

"How can you guarantee that?"

"Because you'll remain conscious, for a start."

Chapter Twenty-One

Gaping Triangles

"Oh, bollocks!" Thomas mumbled, his face collapsing onto the table as alcohol had last night flooding back. "What have I done?" His glass tipped and thirty pounds of French merlot spilled across the tablecloth.

Before Merchison could point this out, Thomas let out the sort of wail that their dinner probably uttered when slaughtered.

"Oh, for the love of bitumen, what have I done?"

"You realise I'll have to charge you for this," said Merchison, wringing out a sodden napkin in an effort to reclaim some of it.

Thomas looked up. "I think I might have made the biggest mistake of my life!"

"What – more than writing your books?"

"She was trying to help me – and God knows why; even I wouldn't bother! But Janice did. She cared. Janice made the sort of effort that most people charge for!"

"Well, I'm pleased we've sorted that out. Now –"

"You don't understand, Merchison: she really tried to help me – and I kneed her friends in the bollocks!"

Merchison and Jamison stared at him.

"You what?"

"I kneed them in the bollocks. I think one went green."

"Who the hell did you knee in the bollocks, Thomas?"

He thought again. "I think it was the host – and some bastard who liked cows."

"You kneed two men in the bollocks?"

Thomas nodded, while biting his lip in punishment. He would have put a fork through it, but after three glasses of French merlot, wasn't confident of his aim.

"What are you; a seven year old girl?"

Thomas shrugged that he may as well be.

"So let me get this straight," said Jamison. "You went to a party with someone who's helping you, and then assaulted the host and one of his *guests*?"

"Yes. I think so. It's hard to remember. I do recall a distinct lack of walls."

"Thomas," Merchison said, "I think it would be a good idea for you to see Doctor Margery again, don't you?" He got out his phone and began scrolling.

"You're not making an appointment for me now, are you?"

"No, I'm not. I'm looking to see if I've missed any calls from the authorities last night. And I'll tell you one thing; if I have to deal with one more restraining order against you, I'm going to take one out on you myself."

"I didn't knee them in the bollocks on purpose – it was instinctive."

"How can kneeling someone in the bollocks be instinctive when you're a thirty-five year old man?" swore Jamison.

"They were trying to punch me. It was self-defence."

"No it wasn't. Self-defence is when you punch them back. Not knee them in the bollocks. That's shameful!"

"No," said Thomas. "What's shameful is the way they've been tearing me apart in the media. The host deserved it: he writes for the Guardian!"

"They were *journalists*?" Merchison gasped.

Thomas nodded.

"Are you mad? What the hell were you doing with journalists?"

"Don't have a go at me! I didn't even want to go! I wanted to stay home and explore new religions!"

"So why the hell didn't you?"

"Because Janice insisted I go! She thought it would help!"

Merchison glanced at Jamison in a manner that had the latter gather cutlery. "But surely even you could see that was like putting your head up the lion's arse?"

"Of course I did!" said Thomas. "And I tried to tell her! But she wouldn't listen!"

"What do you mean she wouldn't listen: who the hell is this woman? Your mother?"

"No! My mother's never thrown a party for me in my life. She's thrown things *at* me, but not for me —"

"Save it for Doctor Margery, Thomas."

"Listen; Janice has been helping me, all right? She's been trying to crowd-fund the editing of my books —"

"She's been what? Is she mad? Doesn't she realise that's soon to be a criminal offence?"

Thomas stared at him, shattered. "What do you mean? I thought you were confident we could win this?"

The three stared at each other, open-mouthed. Like a sort of gaping triangle.

"Listen," said Jamison, dividing another bottle between their glasses. "There's a simple solution to this —"

"Oh, I agree!" said Merchison. "Unfortunately, it's illegal, messy and requires a shovel."

"No — I mean about last night." He looked at Thomas. "I take it from your demeanour that you regret kneeling these men in the bollocks?"

"Oh, God," said Thomas, his forehead plunging to the table. "You're not going to go all Jesus and gospel on me, are you?"

"No, but I —"

"Because I won't accept anything into my heart, Jamison. Just so you know. I'm not remotely religious."

When I mentioned exploring religions, I meant ones condemning parties."

"No, Thomas, I mean you could apologise."

He lifted his head. "What?"

"You could apologise."

"Apologise?"

"Yes," said Jamison, who frowned. "You seem surprised. Have you not heard of apology? It's an age-old method of reconciliation."

"Oh, I've heard of it, Jamison, I just don't think it's a very good idea."

"It's a damn sight better than kneeling men in the bollocks," said Merchison.

"How could it not be a good idea?" asked Jamison. "It's simple, for a start. And doesn't require a shovel."

"Have you seen how they treat me in the papers? They'd crucify me if I went anywhere near them again! Let alone anywhere near their bollocks!"

Jamison stared at him. "Not to them. I don't mean apologise to them. I mean apologise to Janice."

"To Janice?"

"Yes."

Thomas looked away "Apologise?"

Jamison leant back in his chair. "I'm having difficulty understanding which part of the concept you're struggling with. Do you find the notion threatening, perhaps?"

"Of course not! I can apologise easily. I have to—I'm forced to do on a daily basis. I've been apologising my entire life, Jamison."

"Good. Well, that's settled." He picked up his glass. "Tomorrow, go and apologise to the woman. But now, let's talk business before a taxi ferries me from this mad-house to the sanity of somewhere else entirely."

"I have a headache," Thomas said, slouching again. "I really don't want to talk about anything. Can't I just sign a form or something?"

“We’ll keep things simple, Thomas,” said Merchison. “But you need to be informed of our advice. It’s why we’ve been given this final adjournment.”

“I don’t mind signing a form. Really. I look forward to them. It’s the only bit of writing I get to do nowadays. Often, I pretend I’m signing autographs.”

“Jamison is remarkably talented when it comes to unprecedented lawsuits,” Merchison said. “We’re fortunate to have permission to use him so late in proceedings—though the court could hardly refuse, considering the size of the prosecution.”

“I find the unprecedented offers remarkable scope for innovation,” Jamison agreed. “Commonly, procedure and argument depends on cases that have been heard before. It gives example to quote from, and offers structure, counsel and guidance—and, to some degree, comfort for those arguing their case. The unprecedented, however, doesn’t.”

“Is this going to take long?” Thomas said. “Because I suspect this sort of talk encourages alcohol consumption in almost biblical quantities.”

“Unprecedented lawsuits offer something far more powerful,” Jamison continued, ignoring him. “There is no structure or example to draw upon. Instead, it must be created. But most importantly, in the unprecedented, there is no comfort.”

“Ah—well—you see, I’m rather keen on comfort, because I’ve had very little of it in my life. Although I do have a growing conviction that I’ll find it in alcohol.”

He lifted his drained glass so it might be filled again. But Merchison didn’t move to do so.

Jamison leant forward to explain. “Thomas, the prosecution’s argument is that your books are so utterly ghastly, that their *very existence* lowers the standard of literature itself. That your books’ existence threatens not only the publishing industry as a whole, but the well-being of individuals who try and read the things. It’s a very simple and very powerful argument.”

Thomas made a sad gurgling noise from the table top.

“In fact, your books are considered so dreadful,” Jamison continued, “that the industry’s concerns go beyond the books simply being badly written. They’re arguing that although no reader can get through their convoluted mass of self-indulgent nonsense, the threat remains in the books’ existence full-stop. As a consequence, it’s not enough to destroy all copies. It’s not enough to remove them from shelves. It’s the fact that they were written in the first place that is so dire.”

“I know all this,” Thomas murmured. “I’ve heard it every week for the past six months—”

“This adjournment, Thomas, is to ensure you understand the situation. Now, the prosecution is suggesting your books are more damaging, more dangerous and more of a threat to the well-being of the population of this planet than the bubonic plague in tablet form. In as much, in order to protect the publishing industry and the reading public at large, it is not a question of destroying your books—nor is it a question of ensuring they are never published again—it is a question of ensuring you are not to be permitted to write anything at all, ever again.”

“*I know this,*” said Thomas. “And it’s really unfair. I’m a writer. Writing is what I do. Even if I’m writing wrongly. I can’t do anything else; it’s my air, despite it stinking like warm garbage on a cold day.”

“Exactly. And this is the crux of our defence; by forcing you to stop writing, they are denying your need to create. And that denies your right to express yourself as a human being.”

Thomas looked up from the table and tried to focus on one version of Jamison. “Yes, but the problem is that they’re portraying me as being *less* than a human being. That I’m mad—this psychoenteritis thing—and that I’m socially dangerous—”

“Last night you kneed two men in the bollocks, Thomas,” said Merchison.

“Yes, but only because I was told to get some friends.”

"You've also had four restraining orders in the last six months."

"That's hardly fair! You know perfectly well that two of those were downgraded harassment charges."

"What it comes down to, Thomas," Jamison continued, "is that to counter their argument, we need to crucify you."

Thomas stared at him. "I thought you said this wasn't a Jesus-thing."

"It isn't. I mean we have to flay you alive in court."

"Right, I don't think —"

"We need to take you apart and show them how little a threat you really are. We need to show you as the socially inept, emotional cripple and complete wanker that you are. Because if you are a barely functional human being, then your writing cannot be anything other than mindless drivel —"

"Yes, look —"

"It follows, therefore, that we can argue that their interpretations of your work to the *contrary*, is more a reflection on those *making* such claims."

"What?"

"We can argue that the literary establishment's allegations that your work threatens the literary establishment, discredits the establishment *itself*."

Thomas blinked at him.

"The more the industry rants and raves about how dangerous and dreadful you are — bugging you in papers, and shafting you on television — the more they'll be discredited."

There was silence when another triangle formed.

Other diners got on with their meals and their lives, whereas the triangle's table suspended both momentarily.

"What did I tell you, Thomas?" said Merchison. "Aren't you now pleased to have come?"

"That's such encouraging news," said Thomas, with tears welling, "that I fear I may well have."

Chapter Twenty-TWO

Sharpened Cricket Bats

If I do any more laps, mate, I'm going to charge you for orbits."

In the back of a taxi, Thomas shushed the driver and told him to continue around the block again. It was night, and dark. Not an unusual combination, but trying to recall where Janice had alighted last time they were in one was proving difficult because of it.

"Look," the driver said, "although I'm being paid for this, I've got a wife and child at home, and I'd like to see them before both become pensioners."

"It was here somewhere," said Thomas, peering into the night as though having lost something in it. Which he had. "I just can't remember where."

"Why don't you just ring her?"

"Because I don't have her number."

"Well, you're an idiot, mate. If you're this crazy about her, you should have carved it into your arm with your teeth."

"That wouldn't work."

"What the do you mean by that?"

"Firstly because my arm's already covered in scars, and secondly because I don't have a phone."

The taxi lurched in surprise. "What do you mean you don't have a phone? Everyone's got a phone!"

"Well, I don't."

"Why the hell not?"

Thomas shrugged. "I've got no one to call, for a start. Except my barrister. Who'd charge me for answering."

"No one to — what about this woman we've spent the past hour *lapping!*"

"She doesn't count."

There was a rattling silence as both taxi and driver did their best to fathom this comment.

"Is there any particularly reason she doesn't count after we've driven around this block for the umpteenth time under the reasonable assumption that she does count to an almost astonishing degree?"

"Because she hates me."

The taxi lurched to a stop.

"All right, I've had enough of this," the driver said, turning to him. "Get out, now."

"Why?"

"Because I'm beginning feel the same way, and I do not want to be responsible for making her life any more miserable than you're currently making mine."

"I don't think that's very nice," Thomas said, reaching for his wallet.

When he retrieved it, a phone fell out.

The driver looked at it, and then him. "I think I can see what she sees in you."

Thomas picked it up. "It's not a working phone."

"Of course it isn't."

"No, seriously — look." He pressed at the buttons that did nothing. "It doesn't work. It's a prop. I use it to appear popular."

"Mate, I'm no longer interested."

"No, but look —" He pulled the back off to show it was devoid of any life-giving parts.

The driver stared at him. "Why the fuck do you have a dysfunctional phone upon your person – unless it's because you've got masses in common?"

Thomas shrugged and counted out a large amount of money he couldn't begin to afford. "I use it when I'm uncomfortable."

"What?"

"I use the phone when I feel uncomfortable."

The driver turned back to the wheel and shook his head. "I don't even want to know –"

"I'm not *weird* or anything," said Thomas. "It's just I have it sometimes so that I can pretend."

"Pretend?"

"Yes."

"Pretend what, that you've got some friends?"

"Yes, actually."

The driver turned to him again. "What – are you *serious*?"

Another shrug. "I take it out and talk into it if I feel people are looking at me."

"Why the hell would people be – actually, forget I even asked."

"It's great and it costs nothing," Thomas said. "Sometimes I use it on the bus to seem popular. Particularly if a woman sits next to me." He paused. "Is it normal to feel flattered if a woman sits next to me?"

"Please pay and go away."

"At other times, I pretend that I'm on my way to see my agent who's begging me to hurry up because he's being swamped by fans."

The driver turned to him again. "An agent? What are you, a celebrity or something?"

"No."

"But you have an agent?"

"No."

The driver turned away and muttered something about his rapidly deteriorating quality of life.

"Sometimes, I'll just chat into it if there's a group of people I'm supposed to socialise with," Thomas continued. "It's a great way of avoiding eye contact while creating the illusion that I've got too many friends to bother making any new ones."

"Why are you even telling me this?"

"I don't know. Probably because I've had a bit to drink this evening. Very expensive it was, too. French, I believe. Not that it matters. Did you know that French is now the official language of microwave ovens?"

"Listen son, if you don't get out in the next thirty seconds, I'm going to be lapping *you* in a minute."

"How much is it exactly?" Thomas asked, peering at the meter.

"Not nearly enough."

"Will this do?" He held up three crumpled notes of indeterminable denomination, two coins and the lid of a ballpoint pen.

The driver took them. "I don't care, provided you leave immediately."

Thomas did, and the taxi drove away with the sort of enthusiasm he'd have been grateful for when lapping the block earlier.

It was late. Or early. Thomas wasn't certain which. But it didn't matter as much as seeing Janice and apologising before one of them died. He couldn't stand the thought of her being buried without knowing how much he regretted kicking her friends' bollocks.

The night was wet and smelt of cold diesel fumes, and the moon hung in the sky as though wanting to get the whole thing over with. There was a hint of urine in the air, and he checked his trousers in case it was his.

"Janice!" he yelled.

Although an answer was unlikely, he hoped waking her neighbours might have them point him in the right direction to shut him up.

"Janice!"

The buildings were tall and monolithic, with that character of lean that foundation subsidence affords. Recognising one of them, he hurried to it. There was an intercom lit by the sort of bulb that had been going since the seventies.

He pressed its buttons.

When there was no answer, he pressed all of them repeatedly until curses crackled at him.

"Hello," said Thomas, "I'm looking for Janice. Do you know her? Something very bad happened last night, and I have a feeling she might be dying. Certainly there's funeral involved."

"What the fuck? Who the fuck are you?"

"Do you know anything about a funeral?"

"Other than your pending one, no I don't. Now fuck off!"

"Not mine, Janice's."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, the fuck it does – it's two in the morning!"

"That's great. She's probably home then."

"Fuck off!"

"Can you let me in? I need to see Janice."

"I couldn't give a fuck! Fuck off!"

"No, Janice. With a J."

"Fuck off. With an F!"

There was silence for a moment, until Thomas pressed buttons again.

"Who the fuck is this?" another voice said.

"Is he still there?" said the first. *"Fuck!"*

"Who the fuck is it?"

"I don't fucking know! But in about thirty fucking seconds the only thing he'll be pressing are fucking daisies fucking upwards!"

"Does he know what time it is?"

"Fuck knows!"

"I do," said Thomas. "It's just gone two. I'm surprised you don't remember telling me. Do you know Janice? I want to see Janice."

"None of us give a fuck, you fuck! Now fuck off before I come down there and fuck you up!"

"How about you let me in and we skip the fucking altogether?"

"Right—"

There was the sound of angry door being slammed somewhere in the building, and of a cricket bat being sharpened. When a large, tattooed man stormed down the stairs with it and launched himself at the door, Thomas waved. He continued waving up until he was hit with it, after which he flailed more than waved and bled intermittently.

When he regained consciousness, it was with a sort of relieved surprise. Firstly, because there were no more cricket bats hitting him, and secondly, because he was in bed. There was a third reason, too. But because Thomas was not used to having bosoms in his immediate vicinity, even as a child, it took some time to include them in any official capacity.

When the nurse had finished adjusting whatever it was she needed to adjust, she smiled at him.

"Well, hello," she said.

She was young and slim and dressed in white, and reminded Thomas of a tube of toothpaste which he had an urge to squeeze with the top off. He tried a smile, but it was awkward because his face was tight.

"Try not to smile," she said. "You've just had your face sutured."

To this, he frowned, which was equally awkward.

"Don't frown either," she said, scribbling on a clipboard.

"Can I speak?"

"It's best not to."

"Because I've had my face sutured?"

"Yes."

He put a hand to his face tentatively and felt bandages. He pressed his jaw, relieved it didn't feel like pieces of a puzzle in a bag. "What happened?" he asked.

The nurse put the clipboard down and took his wrist which she then timed. "You've had a nasty knock," she said. "The doctor will be in shortly, and then the police."

"The police?"

"Yes. They brought you in last night."

"Last night? What time is it now?"

"Just gone seven."

"In the morning?"

"Yes." Satisfied, she dropped his wrist and jotted things on the clipboard again.

It was lovely to be in a bed free of urine, and even nicer to be fussed over by an attractive tube of toothpaste.

"You remind me of a tube of toothpaste," he said.

"Really?" She didn't look up from the clipboard.

"Yes. I think it's the way you're quite narrow in the middle. As though you've been squeezed. It's very nice."

The clipboard was replaced again. "Now, would you like some breakfast?"

"What?"

"Would you like some breakfast?"

Thomas stared at her. "You mean like breakfast in bed?"

"Yes."

"Goodness. I've never had breakfast in bed. Well, not intentionally. I mean, I've found food in bed with me, but I'd imagine that doesn't really count."

"No, a pre-requisite is some sort of intentional plate involvement."

"Does the breakfast you refer to involve a plate intentionally?"

"It does, yes."

"Then I'd like that, please."

When she left, Thomas noticed other beds had patients stuffing themselves with breakfast. The man in the next bed slurped his to such a degree, it suggested reasons as to why he'd been admitted in the first place. She returned with a plate covered with another one. There was a

cup, too, which steamed invitingly. Both were placed on a tray that she swivelled across him.

“Goodness,” said Thomas, lifting the plate. “I’ve never seen a breakfast like this before. It seems quite wrong to eat it.”

The man in the bed next to him agreed, apparently, when regurgitating his.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FLuffed Pillows

"Do you feel up to talking to the police?" the nurse asked.

"Will you hold my hand while I do?"

"No."

"Then no, not really," said Thomas.

"Are you always like this?" she asked, reaching for his clipboard again.

"What, suffering injuries from cricket bats? Not as a general rule, no. Although the way my life is going, I should probably try and get used to it."

She put her hand on his forehead. "It's very hard to tell how much of your oddity is concussion, and how much is personality."

"Oh, almost entirely concussion, I would have thought," said Thomas, "considering I don't have a personality."

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

"Really? Even though I left out the expletives?"

She retrieved her hand and stared at him. "I wonder if I should ask the doctor to look at you again—before the police talk to you."

"I don't want the police to talk to me."

"But you've been injured."

"Yes, but I've got a feeling they'll see it as deserved."

"That's a dreadful thing to say!"

"Not really. You see, I know the police quite well. On a first name basis, in fact. Though not in a good way."

"Why? Are you a criminal?"

"Not in the traditional sense of the word, no."

"In what sense of the word then?"

"In the sense that I've had several injunctions taken out against me."

"Oh."

"But not in a *bad* way!"

"There's a good way?"

"Actually, no. What I mean is, they arose out of misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings?"

"Yes."

"But the police are very good at dealing with misunderstandings," she said, leaning across him to fluff something again. "That's what they do. But if you're not up to it, I can tell them that you're not feeling very well and need to rest."

"Yes," said Thomas. "That would be great. I'm in a hospital, after all. So they'd probably believe you."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No, not at all. I'm very grateful to you, in fact. You've been awfully nice. And the breakfast was excellent. What's more, your hands are warm."

"So, do you want me to tell them to leave you for the moment?"

Thomas sighed. "No. There's no point. They'll be back again soon enough. But are you sure you can't stay with me? You don't have to hold my hand, just rest it on my forehead like you did a moment ago. That made me feel much better. I'm certain I can help them with their enquiries if your hand is on my forehead."

She smiled. "I'm afraid I have others to look after besides you."

The man in the bed next to them vomited again to illustrate her point – which she lunged at it with a bedpan before it slopped onto the floor.

“Is that my bedpan?” asked Thomas.

“Yes,” she said, watching it fill with sick. “Do you need it at this very moment?”

“Not as much as he does.”

Once it was full, she readied to leave.

“Thank you for being so nice,” said Thomas. “It’s really very kind of you. I know you’re probably just doing your job, but it means a great deal to me.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Such kindness encourages my opinion about the human race in almost all aspects imaginable. Which is really saying something, considering I’m currently overwhelmed by its less than admirable bits.”

“Less than admirable bits?”

“Yes. I’m going through a pretty rough time of it at the moment.”

“I can see that.”

“Frankly, I’m dealing with the sort of adversity that traditionally befalls small nations.”

She pondered him for some time. “I’ll get you another bedpan.”

When she left, two police officers arrived. Thomas knew sergeant Toby well, an officer who’d taken charge of the plethora of misunderstandings Thomas had inadvertently embroiled himself in over the past twelve months, and none of which he’d been impressed with. Thomas hadn’t met the other officer, however, so he smiled at her in an attempt to counter his reputation.

“Well, good morning Mister Corfield,” sergeant Toby said.

“It’s doctor, actually, and forgive me if I don’t return the same greetings, but as you can see, last night was dreadful.”

“Yes,” Toby said, peering at the bandaged parts of Thomas’ face. “I can see that. Still, it could be worse.”

“Could be—how could it be worse? I’ve just been hit in the face with a cricket bat!”

“Is that right?” He moved around the bed. “Well, I suppose it could have been attached to the front of a speeding car.”

“Is this going to take long?” Thomas said, “because I have some very serious mending to do.”

Toby indicated the woman. “This is constable Rosenthorn, and we’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“That’s a nasty knock,” she said, after having a peer as well. “Did you see who did it?”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “Ironically, it was some guy with a cricket bat.”

“A cricket bat,” repeated Toby, jotting this detail down. “I see, and can you think of any particular reason he might have wanted to hit you with it? I mean, other than the obvious ones.”

“What obvious ones?”

“Well, your books, for a start. And the women you’ve harassed—”

“I have not harassed women!”

“You’ve had four restraining orders taken out against you in the last six months, Thomas.”

“You know perfectly well that two of them were downgraded harassment charges.”

“That still leaves two.”

“Look,” said Thomas, his brain pounding as though finding his skull claustrophobic, “they were misunderstandings, all right? I’m not used to café etiquette—I don’t understand how these things work, and that woman took things the wrong way—”

“There *is* no café etiquette, Thomas,” Toby said. “There’s just being a normal, respectful, law-abiding citizen.”

Thomas nodded with exasperation. “Yes, we’ve been through all this in court. I’ve had the counselling sessions, I’ve seen the psychiatrist—”

“Doesn’t seem to be doing a lot of good, does it?”

Thomas stared at them both. "Why am I the one being hassled here? I've just been assaulted by a *cricket* bat! Surely we can ignore the veritable swathe of misunderstandings that have accosted me in recent times and concentrate on that?"

"Of course we can," Rosenthorn said. "I'm sorry, Mister Corfield. You're quite right, we're here about your injury and not about any prior misdemeanours—"

"They are misunderstandings, not misdemeanours! Blimey, I'm not some sort of weirdo who intentionally upsets women, you know! I'm just rather awkward socially—"

"Mister Corfield, perhaps we could just focus on what happened last night? Can you remember anything?"

Thomas stared at her. "Yes, actually. I remember getting hit in the face with a cricket bat."

"Do you have any evidence to support that?"

"Besides the current state of my face?"

While she jotted something down, Toby glared at him.

"Tell me, Thomas," he asked, "do you recall why you were hit with it?"

"I'm not certain, but I suspect it had something to do with annoying someone who had one."

"And what, in particular, were you doing to annoy them?"

"I was buzzing their intercom."

"Is that a euphemism?" Toby asked.

"Why were you buzzing their intercom?" asked Rosenthorn.

"Because I needed to see someone."

"See someone? Who?"

"A friend."

Toby scoffed and turned to watch the man being sick next door.

"Yes. My friend. Her name's Janice."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'd been out."

"Out?"

"Yes."

"By yourself, or with Janice?"

"With my barrister, actually."

"Is Janice your barrister?"

"No."

"Right." She jotted this down and underlined it. "And did you manage to see Janice?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I was hit in the face with a cricket bat."

"I see. Would you like us to contact Janice?"

Thomas stared in astonishment. "Would you?"

"Certainly," Rosenthorn said. "If you'd like us to. If it would help."

"Help? But that is so *nice*! You are so nice! Not like this guy." He pointed at Toby. "He's always thinking the worst about me. And there's really no need, because I don't intentionally make woman uncomfortable, it just comes naturally. A bit like flatulence."

While Rosenthorn stared at him, Toby shook his head and removed himself from the smell of sick.

"What's her number?" Rosenthorn asked.

Thomas' face fell. "I don't know."

"Then where does she live?"

"I don't know that either?"

"What's her last name, then?"

Thomas shrugged.

"Are you *sure* she's your friend?" Rosenthorn asked.

"If we're not careful," Toby said, leaning in to his colleague, "we'll end up with five injunctions, and I'm running out of filing cabinet."

"Look," said Thomas, "I know it sounds odd, but she is my friend. Well, she was up until a night ago."

"What happened a night ago?" asked Rosenthorn.

"She went to a party."

"And something went wrong?"

"Yes."

"What, exactly?"

"Me going with her. Look, is this about the party or about me being hit with a cricket bat? I mean, I feel as though I should be asking for my barrister. Which is unfair considering I'm the one who's been hit. You should reserve this sort of questioning for the guy who did this to me."

"We know who did this to you," Toby said.

"You do?"

"Yes. And the thing is, that you weren't hit with a cricket bat."

Thomas stared at him. "What?"

"You weren't hit with a cricket bat, Thomas."

"Well, what the *hell* do you call this great big stonking wound to my face?"

"It was a door."

"A *what*?"

"A door. You know, one of those things that allows people to get through walls."

"I know what a door is, thank you very much! But I can assure you I wasn't hit with one!"

"No, that's quite right. You walked into it."

"I did *what*?"

"You walked into a door."

"Now you're just making stuff up! You're saying that because you think I *deserved* to get hit in the face with a cricket bat!"

"We're not saying that at all, Thomas," Rosenthorn said. "But believe it or not, it's true."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because the man with the cricket bat told us."

"Told you?"

"Yes. He was the one who called us."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blocked Fallopian Tubes

I don't understand," said Thomas. "He came at me with a cricket bat—"

"Yes, but he didn't assault you with it," Toby said. "That's the point. We have it on CCTV: he opened the door, which you then walked into."

"I don't believe you!"

"Well, it's true. We can show you the footage later, when your eyes have stopped bleeding. More importantly, the reason you needed such extensive suturing is because you appear to have suffered exactly the same injury within the past week. Is that right?"

"The past week?"

"Yes. According to the doctor, you appear to have smashed your face in exactly the same place twice in a row. Have you walked into a door recently, Thomas?"

"No—I—well, there was a door I walked into, yes, but—"

Both officers jotted this down, before underlining and circling their respective versions.

"So—what—you're saying this is all my fault?"

"According to the man with the bat, you'd been ringing his bell for about twenty minutes at two-thirty in the morning—"

"Rubbish!"

" – which thirteen other residents can confirm."

Thomas fell silent.

"So the thing is," Rosenthorn said, "that you ought to think yourself lucky –"

Thomas tried a laugh, but nothing happened.

" – because you could be done for being a public nuisance."

To this he did laugh. "A public nuisance? Ha! That's rich! I have an entire industry taking me to court for the very same reason!"

Rosenthorn glanced at her colleague. "Yes," she said. "I'm aware of that. Which is why I've persuaded the residents to accept that your facial injury is perhaps punishment enough."

Thomas stared at her. "Are you seriously saying that after all this, I'm the one who's in the wrong?"

"Thomas, we have CCTV footage of you harassing the residents of an apartment building for nearly half an hour. You could be done for drunk and disorderly, too."

"I wasn't drunk!"

"You'd clearly been drinking."

"I had one small, very expensive and very French glass of wine earlier –"

"Look, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that repeatedly walking into doors has made things more complicated –"

"Oh, brilliant! And tell me, constable Rosenthorn: just how much worse can it get? Am I in danger of being assassinated by the Publishing's Commercial Collective, perhaps? Am I in danger of alienating the one woman who's taken it upon herself to help me out of this quagmire of filth that my life has become? Or has my vocation to be a writer suddenly been made illegal while I was busy having my face sutured?"

"It's probably best if we let the doctor tell you."

"Tell me? Tell me what? That I have a brain tumour, or something? Because I'll tell you one thing, I wouldn't

mind that. In fact, I'd be thrilled if it's fatal, because this entire mess might be sorted out before my final court-hearing!"

The nurse returned with another woman, and although the nurse smiled at him, the other woman didn't. Instead, she glared with a sort of clinical disgust. She carried a newspaper, and when she spoke, her tone was about as sterile as her fallopian tubes.

"Mister Corfield, I'm Doctor Penelope."

"Look, it's Doctor, actually, and I—"

"What exactly are you a Doctor of?" asked Toby.

"I'm a stainologist," said Thomas.

"A what?"

"A stainologist."

"What's that, then?"

"Oh, for *fu*—it doesn't matter. Have I got a brain tumour?"

Penelope frowned. "A what?"

"A brain tumour," said Thomas. "Have I got one. And if not, can I get one while I'm here? I wouldn't mind two, if that's possible, in case one gets better."

"A brain tumour?"

"Yes. How long have I got? I don't mind if it's quick. I'd be grateful, really. The sooner I can get this mess of life over with, the sooner I don't have to think about it anymore."

"Who said you had a brain tumour?"

"No one. I'm just hoping."

"You don't have a brain tumour."

"Oh. That's disappointing."

"But you do have something else."

"This isn't about my scrotal rash, is it? Because I've had that for ages. And, frankly, I don't want to get rid of it. It keeps me company. It's a bit like having a cat but without the expense."

There was an awkward silence.

"Actually, I wasn't aware of your rash," Penelope said.

"Oh."

"But thanks for informing us." She picked up the clipboard and jotted this down.

"Yes, well, if it's not about the rash, then what is it?"

"It appears you have a tendency to walk into doors."

"Only on occasion."

"And fall down stairs."

"Once."

"You've also been known to throw coffee on floors —"

"Again, once."

"And throw sandwiches around."

"Just being friendly."

Penelope handed him a newspaper. "You probably haven't seen this morning's Guardian. But I think you ought to, as it rather succinctly illustrates my point."

"You have a point?" Thomas asked, taking it.

The headline was large, unmistakable and surprisingly unsurprising: *CRAP WRITER KNEES EDITOR IN BOLLOCKS*.

"Oh, shit," he whispered.

"Yes," agreed Toby. "Again, count yourself lucky, because they're not pressing charges either."

"They're not?"

"No. They're concerned that if they do, it might interfere with your pending court case and detract from your —" He flicked back through his notepad and read, "— 'whopping public humiliation.'"

Thomas stared at him.

"It's not complicated," Toby said, putting it away. "It seems they're hoping you'll suffer far more with that, than if they press charges for this."

"Oh, charming."

"Yes. They're going to film it in court, apparently. Your humiliation. And then release it to small, independent cinemas. Why the hell would you knee the editors of the Guardian in the bollocks, anyway? Are you trying to get crucified?"

"It wasn't like that —"

“And what grown man knees another man in the bollocks anyway?”

“That’s answered in the article,” said Penelope. “But we’re getting off track. My point is that your behaviour is very odd, Mister Corfield. So odd, in fact, that the National Board of Health is forced to take these accusations of psychoenteristis seriously.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I am. Hence my use of the word. We don’t know much about psychoenteristis, other than it being a brand new disease—”

“You make it sound like a christmas present.”

“—which, according to statistics, affects about one person in seven billion. But more worrying, of course, is the suggestion that it’s contagious.”

Thomas took a deep breath. “It is not contagious,” he said calmly, “because it doesn’t exist.”

“If it doesn’t exist, then how do you explain your bizarre behaviour?”

“Probably because my life’s going about as well as the rush hour in your fallopian tubes.”

Penelope glared at him, before jotting something down on the clipboard also, which she then underlined, drew a circle around and highlighted with little stars.

“Psychoenteristis is something we need to take very seriously,” she said. “You will see one of our consultant psychiatrists shortly, who will prepare a detailed report. After which, a decision will be made.”

“A decision?”

“Yes.”

“What sort of decision?”

“An important one.”

“About what?”

“About certificates, primarily.”

“Certificates?”

“Yes.”

A pause, and then, “You’re going to *certify* me?”

“Only if certain tests come back positive.”

"What sort of tests?"

"Ones for psychoenteristis."

"I thought you didn't know anything about psychoenteristis?"

"We don't."

"So how the hell can you test for it?"

"By having a psychiatrist look at you and come up with one."

"But I already *see* a psychiatrist! Her name's Doctor Margery! I was going to make an appointment to see her next week! She doesn't think I'm mad, she's already diagnosed me as some sort of a wanker!"

When the doctor ignored him and turned to leave, the officers did the same.

"Tell her, Toby," Thomas pleaded. "Tell her that I already see Doctor Margery. You lot organised it in the first place!"

"It wasn't us, Thomas, it was the judicial system."

"Then get the *judicial* system to tell her!"

"You know what?" Toby said, rounding on him, "I've had enough of this, I've done my bit. As far as I can see, all you do is make things worse for yourself. Everytime I have anything to do with you it's because you've pissed someone off. If I were you, I'd be grateful: psychoenteristis might give you an excuse for being such an utter wanker, which is more than most of us have." He put on his hat. "The best thing you can do is to stop blaming others for your own shit."

"But I don't blame others!" cried Thomas. "I know this mess is all my fault — it always has been. It's my books! I'm just trying to survive in this quagmire of my own making!"

But Toby wasn't interested and turned to leave. Rosenthorn smiled an apology and followed. Aghast, Thomas stared after them. The nurse remained, however, holding a bedpan.

"I don't believe this," Thomas said, staring at his bedclothes. "All I wanted to do was apologise to someone, and

I end up being accused of being certifiable!" He punched his bedclothes. "And contagious? How is that a problem, anyway? No one ever comes near me!"

"It probably sounds worse than it is," the nurse said. He looked up. "Do you think so?"

"Actually, no. It sounds pretty dreadful."

Thomas stared at his bedclothes again. "I don't want to speak to another psychiatrist. I like Doctor Margery. She understands me."

"Really? Are you certain?"

"Yes. She keeps going on about how much of a wanker I am. I've signed a form and everything."

"Thomas, I can assure you that the consultants here are excellent. And if you're not ill, then you have nothing to worry about."

"And if I am?"

She shrugged. "Well, then it's just as well that you're in hospital."

He looked at her with plead. "You couldn't help me get out of here, could you?"

"What?"

"You know; help me escape before they come for me. If you took your clothes off, I could disguise myself as a nurse and leave by the back door. There's a back door, isn't there? Or a kitchen I could flee through? You could draw me a map on the back of that bedpan."

"I can't do that, Thomas, no. You really ought to take the doctor's advice. I'm sure it's for your own good."

"No. I want to get out of here. I want to go home."

The nurse sat on the side of his bed. She put her hand upon his forehead and smiled kindly. "And then what will you do once you're home?" she asked.

Thomas stared at her, transfixed. "Probably open a tube of toothpaste," he said.

"What?"

"Sorry – I meant a window."

"And then what?"

"Hold my breath until the place has aired."

"And then?"

He wanted to shrug, but worried her hand might move. "I don't know, probably turn the mattress over."

"Will you having something to eat?"

"Yes."

"And what will you eat?"

"Presumably whatever fell out of the mattress."

"Well," she said, "there you are then. Compare that scenario with your morning here; you've had a nice breakfast, you're in a nice, clean bed —"

"I've watched someone be sick."

"—you've watched someone be sick, yes, and your mattress is fine —"

"I've got my own bedpan."

"You've got your own bedpan, exactly. So you see? Being here is far nicer than going home. At least for the moment. And what's more, if you stay here, I can look after you. Would you like that?"

Thomas nodded. "Yes, I would. And actually, you're quite right; if I had a bedpan at home I'd probably have used it and wouldn't need to air the place."

She looked at him for a time. "And for what it's worth, I don't think you're a wanker."

"Well, I am. Look."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Warren and his Chairs

The room was sparse, except for a pot plant and desk: the former sat upon the latter which only drew attention to the room's lack of things. There were two chairs, also. But because both were occupied, neither were relevant. Thomas sat in one, and a man named Warren sat in the other, who studied Thomas with a sort of intimacy that left him wishing he'd been asked out to dinner first. Although Warren was apparently one of the country's leading psychiatrists, he appeared young enough to have trouble spelling the word. Which did little to fill Thomas with encouragement.

"Do you feel uncomfortable, Thomas?"

"Considering that I've just been smashed in the face by a cricket bat, your need to ask that question doesn't fill me with encouragement."

"Would you like to be filled with encouragement, Thomas?"

"Another question that does you little credit."

There was a pause. "I suggest you are being hostile because you are uncomfortable—"

"Blimey. No wonder you're a psychiatrist."

"—and you're uncomfortable because you suspect things about yourself that you think I already know."

"That's convenient. I can probably go home then."

"No you can't. Because although I might know certain things about you, I want to know whether *you* do."

Thomas stared at him. "Are you quite convinced we're having the same conversation?"

"Do you want to have the same conversation, Thomas?"

"I want something to make sense. And this doesn't. In fact, I think I've forgotten my name. Which is odd, considering your habit of adding it to the end of every sentence."

"Does my using your name make you feel uncomfortable, Thomas?"

"No, but you're beginning to piss me off more than a well-placed catheter."

"I want to know why you're feeling uncomfortable, Thomas."

"I've just told you."

"No you haven't, you're using sarcasm to avoid the issue."

"What issue?"

"You tell me."

"I just want to go home."

Warren jotted something down on a pad. "Is that because you know that you're ill?" he asked, looking up.

"Once again, that I'm sitting here with a sutured face rather renders an answer superfluous, don't you think?"

"Are you certain an answer's superfluous, Thomas? Or do you perhaps feel that you are?"

Thomas put his face in his hands, and then swore when it hurt. "I shouldn't even be here. I should be home."

"Is that because home is safe?"

"No. It's because you're not there."

"Your hostility is not helping you, Thomas."

"No, but a cricket bat would."

"Is aggression an issue for you?"

"No. But I'm surprised it hasn't become one for you."

"I see. You are exhibiting avoidance, Thomas, and I—

"

"Would you stop using my name every time you speak? It's really starting to shit me sideways."

"Is that because you don't like yourself?"

"No. It's because I don't like you."

Warren leant forward and put his pad of paper on his knee. "Let me tell you something, Thomas. I am here to help, not hinder. But I cannot do so if you do not wish to engage. I cannot help you, unless you want to be helped. And this defensive, dismissive and sarcastic attitude is not helping either of us. Ultimately, it doesn't affect me, I'm paid regardless. But it does affect you, Thomas. I have treated thousands of patients in my career, but I cannot help you become one of them if you refuse to let yourself be helped."

Thomas squinted at him. "How unnecessarily complicated the world must appear to you."

Warren leant back and readied his pen. "And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you have to look for problems, don't you? And if there aren't any, you're forced to poke around until you find something resembling one."

"You don't think you have problems, Thomas?"

"Having problems is normal. Jotting them down in bullet points on pads isn't."

"Do you mean that it's normal to have problems, Thomas? Or it's normal to have yours?"

"I mean that people in your position cannot abide letting people just *be*, can you? You have to look for problems, which we all have, and then squeeze them like pimples until they ruin the mirror."

"I am perfectly content to allow others to *be*, Thomas, if they're not a danger to themselves or others."

"And you think I'm a danger to others?"

"There's an entire industry accusing you of being very dangerous indeed."

"Oh, I see! *That's* what all this is about."

"And what's that, exactly?"

"You're part of it, aren't you?"

"Part of what, Thomas?"

"Part of their plan to have me certified. Part of their plan to have me rendered a danger to the public. Part of their plan to banish me from writing."

"I can assure you that's not the case."

"You couldn't assure me of anything! Do you know how long I've been fighting this thing?"

"Thing?"

"Yes, this case against me. Nearly twelve months! That's twelve months of my life that's been squeezed, crushed, bankrupted and humiliated. They *want* me to crumble! They *want* me to break! They *want* me to surrender and crawl under a rock and die! But I *won't*! I'm a writer, and I'll always be a writer! There's nothing they can do to stop me writing!"

"Well, there is: they can make it illegal and put you in prison."

Thomas sank back into the chair, having not realised he'd risen from it.

Warren put down his pen and sighed. "Thomas, I am not in any conspiracy against you. I am a clinical professional who's highly regarded in my field. My purpose is to evaluate you on that basis only."

Thomas looked at him. "Have you read my books?"

"No."

"Don't you think it might be useful to?"

"I think it would be more useful if you told me about them."

"Are you scared of them?"

"Scared?"

"Yes. Of my books."

"My job is to evaluate people. Not read their books."

Thomas scoffed. "I would have thought that reading their books would give you far greater insight than trying to prise bits out of resistant façades. You could take notes, too, and jot them down on that thing."

"I can't read your books, Thomas, for the simple reason that they're unreadable."

“Ah, so you *have* read them.”

“No, I haven’t. But I do read the newspapers. And I’m under the impression that were I to, I’d be left in the sort of mental state that would be better managed by us swapping chairs.”

Thomas scoffed. “Oh, brilliant. So you’d rather take the word of massively biased media rather than formulate an opinion of your own. Well, how delightfully impartial your evaluation’s going to be, *Warren*.”

“Thomas, if I read your books, there’s a good chance that I wouldn’t be capable of formulating an opinion of any sort.”

“I can’t believe someone in your position wouldn’t be more open-minded.”

Warren put his pen down again. “Thomas, you seem to be forgetting two important points. Firstly, the media’s opinion of your books is not the opinion of only one or two individuals, but the unanimous judgment of journalists as a whole—”

“Only because the publishing industry *owns* the media.”

“—and secondly, that you, yourself, also admit to the books are dreadful—”

“Yes, but at least I’ve *read* the things.”

“—so the bottom line is that not only does an entire industry think your writing is dreadful, but that you agree with them. And we’re not just talking about *a* newspaper, but all of them. And not just *a* television programme, but all of them. Not just *a* magazine, but all of them. Even your *mother*, for goodness’ sakes, thinks your books are ghastly. So I think it’s safe to say, on the balance of opinion, that your writing is so bad that there’s simply no argument to be made on the matter, because there’s nothing to counter said argument with. Now, let’s move on.”

“I don’t feel well.”

“Then it’s fortunate you’re in a hospital, Thomas.”

“How do you think it feels to be told that the one thing you’re compelled to do is rubbish?”

Warren readied his pen again. "Why don't you tell me."

Thomas sighed and looked at the pot plant on the table, suspecting the world would be far easier to understand if convention insisted tables sat on pot plants. "Sometimes I wish I could just start again," he said, "and not bugger things up as much as I have. I'd still have written the books, of course, but I might have gotten an opinion on them before self-publishing the things."

"You would still have written them?"

"Of course."

"Despite having been bankrupted and humiliated by them?"

"Writing is what I do."

Warren wrote some things down. "When did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?" he asked.

Thomas thought for a time. "I think it was when I lost my cat."

"Your cat?"

"Yes. When he died. I missed him, you see, and so began making up stories about him to pretend he hadn't."

"And they became your books?"

"Yes," said Thomas, finding it difficult to remember specifics because of various childhood traumas. "It might seem odd not to be able to recall, but they were written so badly that once I'd finished them I couldn't determine what I'd been on about. They were about cats, I think. And dogs. And the bizarre antics that carried on in a world populated by them. That's why I thought people might like them: if the characters are human, the books' absurdity wouldn't be believable. Clearly I was wrong."

"Absurdity?"

Thomas shrugged. "Well, stupidity, then. I don't know; the silly things that can happen in a world unrestrained by conventional society."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, they get gastric worms, for example, and have manicured claws and fight over food. That sort of thing."

"And what do they do, these animals?"

"I just told you."

"No, I mean specifically. Plot-wise."

"Plot?"

"Yes."

"Plot," Thomas repeated thoughtfully, "I've heard of that. Isn't that something to do with words?"

"Yes — no — I mean what happens in your books."

"Generally?"

"Generally."

"Well, the main character's a spy. Well, he's like a spy. But he's not very good at it. He succeeds because of the characters he meets."

"Succeeds?"

"Yes. You know, in his assignments. He goes gallivanting around the world trying to stop it from being taken over by baddies. Sometimes there are dinner parties."

"That sounds quite amusing, Thomas," Warren said, jotting this down.

"Yes," Thomas sighed, "they would be, if I wasn't so shit at writing them."

"Maybe you could learn how to not be so shit?"

"I think you'll find, Warren, that there are three sorts of dreadful writers in this world; those who are shit and do something about it, those who are shit and don't believe themselves to be, and me."

"And in what way are you different from the others, Thomas?"

"Because I'm shit and will always be shit. I'm like a shit that's been shat."

"So why don't you learn not to be shit?"

"Because I'm scared I'll lose my originality."

"I see." Some more jotting. "But can't you see not-being-shit as a means to express yourself better?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm more scared that there isn't anything better."

Warren jotted this down too. "But losing your originality might be a good thing, Thomas, considering it's landed you in court and hospital, and bankrupted you both emotionally and financially."

"Yes, but at least I still have my integrity."

"Are you quite certain of that, Thomas?"

To this, he said nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Defence of Obscenities

I think you might be even nicer than Doctor Margery," said Thomas.

"Why is that?" asked Warren.

"Because you haven't once referred to me as a complete wanker."

"Perhaps I've written it down?"

"Have you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think you are a complete wanker."

"What about an incomplete one?"

"No. I don't think you're that, either."

"Well, I am," said Thomas. "And you haven't cried yet. Doctor Margery often cries."

"Does she, indeed?"

"Well, she's often sobbing by the end of our sessions. Does that mean she's wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"Yes. In her diagnosis of me being a wanker?"

Warren sighed. "Being a wanker is not an official clinical psychiatric diagnosis, Thomas. If it were, the majority of the population would be seriously ill."

Thomas frowned. "Then why does she refer to me as one?"

"I'm not certain it was in a diagnosis, so much as an opinion."

"I don't understand."

"Have you been seeing her for long?"

"About a year."

"I see." He wrote something down.

Thomas tried peering at it. "Is there a problem?"

"You tell me."

"No, I mean about her diagnosis?"

Warren put his pad and pen down and leant forward.

"Thomas, there is a chance that she just might not like you very much."

"I'm sorry?"

"She might cry and refer to you as a wanker because she doesn't like you very much."

"Doctor Margery?"

And Warren nodded.

"I don't think that's right," said Thomas. "I don't think that's right at all. She likes me, certainly."

"Look, Thomas, it's often difficult to accept things when we've come to believe they mean something they don't."

"You're wrong, you know. Clearly wrong. She does like me. She has to."

"Why? Do you feel everyone has to like you?"

"No, of course not! I know that I'm loathed in general. Even my mother's indifferent."

"Yes," said Warren, retrieving his paper again. "Let's talk about that."

"No, let's not. I want to talk about Doctor Margery."

"Do you feel that you're obsessing over Doctor Margery's attentions because of the lack of any maternal ones?"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I mean, Thomas, that you might be seeing Doctor Margery as a substitute for your mother; the attentions of the former compensating for their absence from the latter."

"No, I fucking don't! Where the *fuck* did you get that from?"

When Warren jotted something down, Thomas leant forward again. "What are you writing?"

"It doesn't matter —"

"Yes, it bloody does! The fact that its being written down proves that it matters very much indeed! I want to know what you wrote! Was it about Doctor Margery or my mother?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes, there fucking is!"

Warren leant back and eyed him for a time. "Do you know what one of the best indicators that we're approaching the root of a problem is?"

"No I fucking don't, and I don't fucking care!"

"Obscenities."

"What the *fuck*?"

"Obscenities are a defensive mechanism against being forced to recognise a truth."

"No they're not! They're an expression of being angry! I'm surprised that as a psychiatrist you aren't aware of this ever popular emotion!"

"Anger is a defence, Thomas."

"Bullshit!"

"It arises when our beliefs are threatened. It arises as an excuse not to face what we already suspect — what we unconsciously know to be too painful to recognise consciously."

Thomas stood. "Well, do you know what I think you're finding too painful to recognise?"

"This isn't about me, Thomas —"

"The fuck it isn't! You're finding it painful to admit being a stapler!"

"I beg your pardon?"

“Because the problem with being a stapler,” Thomas said, “is not only a tendency to see everyone as a *staple*, but the world in general as a packet *full* of the blasted things!”

“Sit down, please.”

But Thomas didn't. “I'm just a *guy*, all right? A *guy*. That's all. I'm not mad. I don't have this psychoenteritis rubbish everyone's going on about. I just wrote some shit books. There's nothing more dangerous, contagious or disturbing about me than that. I'm a shit writer, yes. But that's where any notable issues end! *You*, on the other hand, are treating me like a staple, and looking for reasons I'm in this mess that simply don't exist. And the thing that's dangerous about that, Warren, is your determination to prod and poke until coming up with some! Like this Doctor Margery bullshit, for example. No doubt you're keen to staple six types of shit out of such notion to convince both of us that it's the root of everything I'm being accused of!”

He stopped when realising Warren had been writing most of this down.

“Go on,” said Warren, pen scribbling.

Thomas sank back into his chair. “I know what you're trying to do.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“I mean what you're really trying to do.”

“And what might that be, Thomas?”

“You know that psychoenteritis doesn't exist and that it's made up to discredit me.”

“Discredit you?”

“Don't play innocent with me.”

“I can assure you, Thomas, I'm playing no games with you.”

“Staplers staple, Warren. And you're a stapler.”

“And what are you, exactly?”

Thomas thought for a moment. “Victimised,” he said.

Warren raised his eyebrows and wrote again. “Perhaps you'd like to explain what you mean?”

“So you can write it down on that stupid pad?”

"Yes."

"All right — fine. But only if I can subpoena it later."

"My notes are certainly admissible in court, so you'd be most welcome."

"All right, I'll tell you. Pyschoenteritis is fabricated by the Publishing Industry as being the reason behind my completely shit books. If I'm diagnosed with it, then they can prove I'm ill and have me imprisoned or quarantined or something, under the guise that doing so is best for the reading public. It's the ultimate insurance against me never compromising their industry again!"

"I see. So you're convinced there's some sort of conspiracy against you, is that right?"

"What do you call all the crap in the media, then?"

Warren shrugged. "Opinion?"

"Oh, you just don't *get it*, do you?"

"On the contrary, Thomas; I think you're the one who doesn't get it. It seems to me that you're in such denial about how clinically dreadful your writing is, that you've become denial itself. You're still under the delusion that the industry's response to your writing is over the top, when the simple truth is that you're writing's so fundamentally appalling that they're legitimately concerned for their readers."

"You mean their customers."

"In your eyes, it's all their fault. Not yours."

"What? That's not true! I *know* that I'm a dreadful writer! I've admitted it all over the place! Read back over those blasted notes! The only thing I'm denying is having pyschoenteritis!"

"Thomas, the first step to dealing with a problem is admitting you have one."

"Oh, for *fuck's sake* — tell me, Warren, do you ever listen to your own advice? Do you wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and shout, 'Wow! What a swollen knob-end!'"

Warren sighed and lowered his pad. "If you had pyschoenteritis, Thomas, you wouldn't necessarily realise."

It might be like having a very small penis: until someone laughs at you and points it out, you'd have no indication it's sub-standard."

"Well, thank you for sharing that personal anecdote, Warren."

"Part of my duty of care is to make an objective, clinical assessment of your mental state, to help determine whether you do have a disorder. For all we know, the main clinical sign of psychoenteritis might be pathological delusion."

"I'm *not* deluded!"

"Spoken like a true denier."

"Jesus, Warren, you're not listening. I *know* my books are rubbish! I know they're dreadful!"

"So why are you fighting this, then?"

"What?"

"Why are you fighting this?"

"This?"

"The court case. The industry. Me. Why are you so adamant that you're being so hard done by? If the publishing industry says your writing's dreadful, and that you're a threat to the public at large, why are you arguing with them if you agree?"

Thomas stared at him.

"Why fight at all?" Warren continued, "Why put yourself through any of this? Unless you enjoy being a victim. If you agreed to stop writing – if you plead guilty – you could probably go home and live happily ever after."

"You think they'd accept that? They won't be happy until I'm crucified!"

"How do you know? Have you asked them?"

"What?"

"Have you asked whether this whole thing would be dropped if you promise never to write again?"

"Well, no."

"Why not?"

Thomas tried to find an argument, but there wasn't one available. In the end he said, "But I can't!"

"Can't what? Ask them? Or stop writing?"
"Both."
"Why not? Don't you want a normal life again?"
"Yes, of course, but —"
"So why are you arguing with them if you fundamentally agree?"
Thomas stared at him. "Because —"
"Because why, Thomas?"
"Because Merchison says —"
"Merchison?"
"My barrister."
Warren laughed as he jotted this down. "Aha! A reason indeed! But this isn't about your barrister, Thomas. Or indeed about anyone other than you."
"Well, because of the principle then."
"What principle? The only principle here is that you're a dreadful writer. But it seems to me, that being the worst writer in the world is a title you're almost proud of."
"I'm not proud of it!"
"Then why don't you try and improve?"
"I've already told you!"
"No you haven't. You've offered excuses as to why you can't."
Thomas struggled then. "But I *can't* stop writing!"
"Why not?"
"Because it's what I do!"
"Even if it hurts others?"
"That's not fair!"
"Why not?"
"Warren, I'm not doing this anymore. You're making my head hurt. It feels all *squishy*!"
Warren jotted something down.
"Oh, come on!" cried Thomas. "How can that be relevant? Please don't tell me you're considering squishy head to be another symptom?"
"I'm not considering anything, Thomas. I'm just making notes."

"Bollocks! You're writing 'paranoid, delusional neurotic' down, aren't you?"

"What I'm writing isn't important, Thomas. It's what you say that's important."

"Which you then write down! So of course it's important! And then you write down your nasty, judgemental opinion."

"I don't have an opinion of you, Thomas. Nasty or otherwise."

"Bollocks! What's a diagnosis if it's not an opinion?"

"We've only been chatting for twenty minutes."

"That makes no difference. You had an opinion about me before we even met. Penelope was writing a veritable essay on that blasted clipboard."

"Clipboard?"

"Yes. It had stars and everything. I bet most of it was underlined. Was most of it underlined?"

"Would you like it to be underlined?"

Thomas groaned, put his face in his hands and swore in pain.

"Did you feel threatened by Doctor Penelope, perhaps?"

"Threatened?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with women?"

"Of course not!"

"What about your mother?"

In response, Thomas punched himself in the face. Which Warren jotted down.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

WRITER NOT A FIGHTER

Thomas had spent nearly three years in the room with Warren. At least it seemed like three years. But because the place had no windows it could have been anything up to five. His brain felt heavy and he'd had two nosebleeds, which left him wondering if he should just agree with everything in the hope the session might end before his head deflated altogether.

Warren was waiting for an answer to a question Thomas couldn't remember being asked, so he nodded.

"So you don't want to harm others," Warren said, "either by murdering them, or with your writing?"

"That's right."

"All right, so let me ask you the question again: why do you persist in fighting this?"

"Because I'm a writer and it's what I do."

"But you have just said that you don't want to hurt anyone."

"Yes. It's quite the dilemma, isn't it?"

"And you're adamant you can't improve?"

"Shit is shit, Warren, regardless of how it might be shat."

"Again you're making excuses, so I'll ask again: why are you fighting this?"

Thomas thought and said, "All right, well, because Merchison says I must."

"Yes," Warren said, making more notes. "I imagine there's a wealth of self-interest on his part that you continue to fight."

"Self-interest? Rubbish! Merchison's helping me."

"I'm sure he is, but at the same time, you're helping him."

"I don't see how. I have no money left."

"I'd imagine the profile of your case alone offers massive exposure."

"So does flashing my genitals at Eurovision. Look, Merchison helps me, all right? He cares. I know he does. He wants me to win."

"He wants you to win, Thomas, because he doesn't want to *lose*."

Thomas glared at him. "Why do you insist on undermining the few people in my life who care?"

"I'm not. I care. And I'm trying to help you."

"No you're not. One minute your berating Doctor Margery, and the next it's Merchison. And then you wax lyrical about the media and publishing industry as though they're the ones misunderstood in all of this. Jesus. No wonder I haven't mentioned Janice."

"Janice?"

"Yes."

"Who's Janice?"

Thomas leant forward. "Warren," he said, pointedly, "There's no way, on this earth — or any other, for that matter — that I am bringing Janice into this septic, turgid excuse for therapy."

Warren put his pen upon his notepad and leant forward also. "Right. I'm going to be frank with you, Thomas. The fact is, that you're much like a murderer who's indignant at having his murderous character traits penalised."

"A murderer?"

"Yes."

"Blimey. That's a bit harsh."

"Is it? Murderers murder because they're murderers, Thomas. It's what they do. It's who they are. Murderers cause death, pain and suffering in the same way other people build, well, model railways, for example."

"What, with balsa wood and superglue?"

"What? No—look—I'm not speaking literally, Thomas, I'm speaking metaphorically."

"Which I'm presuming is another word for bollocks."

"Look—Thomas—what I'm saying is that your argument for continuing to write is no different to a murderer's argument for continuing to murder: it's what they do. You're a writer, it's what you do, regardless of the pain and suffering you cause."

"Have you treated many murderers?"

"What?"

"Have any of your patients been murderers?"

"That's irrelevant, Thomas, what I'm saying is—"

"I'd love to write a book about a murderer. But I can't because I haven't murdered anyone, so I'd be guessing most of it. A bit like punctuation. I'd certainly be guessing the messy bits. I once upset a punnet of frozen raspberries which went everywhere and reminded me of lumpy entrails, for some reason."

"Thomas—"

"I could always get real entrails from a butcher, I suppose, and then fling them around my bedroom, or stuff them into freezer bags so I could stab them with knitting needles."

"Thomas, please—"

"Not that it would help, considering my writing's so shit. Perhaps I should write a book about shit?"

"Thomas, how would you feel if someone died from reading your books?"

"That's a dreadful thing to say!"

"Good. At least that suggests you're not a murderer."

"Are you going to write that down? I think you should write that down."

"You are, however, a dreadful writer."

Thomas looked pointedly at his watch. "Well, I must say that's brilliant, Warren. After wasting three years of my life listening to all this bollocks, you're telling me what I told you at the very beginning of it."

"You're not listening."

"That's probably because my ears are bleeding."

"I'm saying that psychoenteritis is not some publishing industry invention to have you eliminated, but instead a clinical disorder which manifests as your appalling attempts at writing."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Thomas, that psychoenteritis hasn't arisen from some conspiracy against you."

"I still don't know what you mean."

Warren sighed and looked at his hands. "I mean, Thomas, there's a high chance that your writing is a reflection of you having a diseased mind. Moreover, your assertions that it arises from a conspiracy suggests a clinical neuroticism."

"And by clinical neuroticism, do you mean that my assertions are correct?"

"No."

Thomas looked sideways at him. "Are you saying that psychoenteritis is real?"

"I am, yes."

Thomas felt the words viscerally. "Really?"

"Yes."

"After everything I've said?"

"Because of everything you've said."

"And that's your professional opinion, is it?"

"It is, yes."

"And I don't suppose there's any chance your professional opinion is as shit as my writing?"

"No."

"I see." Thomas looked at the floor. "Right. Well, there it is. I'm mad."

Warren stood and went to his desk, presumably to check his pot plant. "As it's a brand new illness, it will take

some time to insert it into our diagnostic criteria. There'll be some meetings to ascertain its position in the range of psychiatric disorders. I'm suspecting it go somewhere between pathological, narcissistic delusion, and chronic, paranoid neuroticism."

Thomas stared at him. "But how can I be delusional if I agree with everyone that I'm shit?"

"More often than not, Thomas, agreeing with others is a form of unconscious pacifism: a sort of double-delusion arising from a desire to relinquish responsibility for socially inappropriate behaviours."

"*Socially* – ? I don't have socially inappropriate behaviours!"

"I beg to differ. What about the raft of restraining orders taken out against you?"

"It's not a *raft*, Warren. More a sort of, well, floating log."

"You've had four in the last six months," he said, jotting something down on another piece of paper.

"No, that's not true. Two of those were downgraded harassments."

"Nevertheless, on that alone you are considered a danger to the public. Harassing women is also a manifestation of delusion; that is, an inability to accept rejection."

"I can accept rejection!" Thomas cried. "I've had a lifetime of it!"

"Your reaction to Doctor Margery suggests otherwise."

"You're wrong about her. And what's more, I'm not delusional, all right?"

"You are: you agree that you're a dreadful writer in order to avoid having to accept any responsibility for being one."

"But I do accept responsibility –"

"No you don't," he said, returning with the paper. "You shun it by agreeing with the rest of the world that you're dreadful. In fact, you've gone even further." He sat again and flicked back through notes. "You said, and I

quote, that there are three types of dreadful writers in this world: those who are shit but do something about it, those who are shit but don't believe themselves to be, and you."

Thomas stared at him. "Yes — and then I said that's because I *know* that I'm shit!"

"Exactly: admitting you're shit relinquishes responsibility to do something about it."

"But I'm not relinquishing anything! I'm just admitting that I'm *shit* at writing! Why are you so determined to make this complicated?"

"As a psychiatrist, I am concerned not only with my patients' well-being, but the well-being of the population at large."

"But I don't understand!" cried Thomas. "If I agree with everyone, how can that imply I'm delusional? I agree because I *know* I'm shit. I *agree* that I'm shit. Full stop, I'm *shit*. Simple!"

Warren leant forward and clasped his hands as though an enormous penis was about to be unleashed from his trousers. "Very well. Then I will ask again: why are you fighting this?"

Thomas stared at him and swallowed at nothing.

"I'll tell you why," said Warren. "It's because that although you insist on agreeing that you're shit, a deep part of you does not. You say you agree — and you believe it — but at a primal level, you don't believe it at all. You believe your writing has merit. Somewhere within your writing's convoluted redundancies and appalling use of apostrophes, you're certain there's something of worth. Your agreement, therefore, is delusional."

"I'm not fucking *delusional*, Warren! You complete *bastard*!"

Which Warren jotted down. "Again, your use of obscenities indicates a proximity to the problem —"

"You utter bastard!"

"Don't fight me, Thomas. I'm only here to help." And he offered the paper.

"Oh, believe *me*," Thomas said, snatching it. "If I was fighting you, *you'd* be the one with a two freaking nose-bleeds! Jesus Harold *Christ!* Any other sane human being would realise this whole thing is madness!"

"Exactly."

Thomas looked at the paper. "What the hell is this?"

"Your certificate."

"Certificate?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For pyschoenteritis. A provisional diagnosis, at least, before I'm able to make it official. You can frame it, if you like. I know I will. You should be proud: it's not every day you're proven to be one in seven billion. Mind you, it's not every day that I discover a new illness, either."

Thomas stood, took a deep breath and kned Warren in the bollocks so hard, that were an enormous penis imminent in release, it would no longer be in any state to do so—at least, not without medical attention first. But because they were currently in a hospital, Thomas stepped over the writhing man, confident he could leave it at that.

Twenty-Eight

A Certificate of Proof

Closing the door, Thomas cringed at Warren's groans of agony from behind it. After glancing at his certificate again, he stopped and wished they were louder. Assaulting mens' bollocks was becoming something of a habit, and he wondered whether he ought to see someone about it. But because there was no receptionist for him to make an appointment with, or with whom he could leave a short note of apology, Thomas left, keen to get out of the place, find a ladder and then find Janice.

There were two other people in the lift that Thomas entered, and both wore nametags suggesting they probably knew Warren and wouldn't be happy about him being kneed in the bollocks, even if they didn't know his bollocks personally.

"Are you all right?" one of them asked.

Thomas stopped hitting his head repeatedly against the door and glanced at the man. "What?"

"Are you all right? It's just that you were repeatedly hitting your head against the door."

"Was I?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't realise," said Thomas, rubbing his forehead. "I've just had three years of dreadful therapy,

you see, so I'm quite disorientated. I can't, for example, recall what pasta looks like."

The man blinked in a nervous way and looked up at the floor numbers, calculating their rate of descent before being disappointed with the result.

Thomas turned to a woman, who'd already done her calculations and was busy considering alternatives.

"What's security like in this place?" Thomas asked her.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What's security like in the hospital. Is it good?"

"Good?"

"Yes—for example, if a psychiatrist's bollocks get assaulted, how quickly might the place be cordoned off and security called?"

She looked at her colleague, who appeared even more alarmed than she.

"I'm sorry, but I don't—"

"I should have insisted on that bedpan," Thomas said, turning back to the door.

"Bedpan?"

"Yes. I was going to have a map drawn on it."

"A map?"

"Yes. Look, you don't have a bedpan on you, by any chance? One with a map would be great."

The lift went ping, and the two extricated themselves with the sort of fervour traditionally found on wedding nights. The man was already dialling a mobile phone and the woman was rummaging around in her bag for something similar.

"In there?" Thomas said, surprised one would fit. "I don't need one to urinate in, or anything. And unless it has a map already on it, I'm not really interested." He looked around. "There was a nurse here earlier, somewhere. She had one. Very pretty. Blonde. Shaped like toothpaste. The nurse, not the bedpan. Do you know where I might find her?"

The woman brought a phone to her ear and spoke without taking her eyes off him. But having arrived on the ground floor, Thomas realised he didn't need a bedpan after all. On the foyer's far side were some doors that led to the rest of the world, which was bright and sunny and had lots of places to hide in – one of which might contain Janice. The ground floor was busy, and staff moved about it dealing with cut limbs, ruptured arteries and scalded faces. And the patients didn't fare much better. Indeed, several had been propped in a corner with a distinct lack of hue, and another was being hosed down. There was a reception desk which was busy and covered in blood, across which a man was strewn, who urgently needed both an appointment and suturing – though not necessarily in that order.

"I might just leave," Thomas decided.

The woman continued to stare, giving details of his location and appearance into the phone.

"Yes," Thomas said, suddenly concerned, "best if I leave, I think. Oh, and if you do see Warren, could you tell him that I'm incredibly sorry? If he didn't realise the degree to which he was shitting me sideways, he ought to go back over his notes. I mean, it bordered on perpendicular."

A siren sounded. And because it seemed to be for him, Thomas hurried across the floor towards the doors. They slid sideways as people came and went, and because Thomas was keen to be the latter, his confidence returned briefly – but scarpered again when two security officers barred his way.

"Excuse me, sir," one asked, "but I think you ought to come with us."

Thomas skidded to a halt and stared at them. "Is this about Warren's bollocks? Because if it is, you can tell him he's got two for a reason."

"Come with us, please, sir." They stepped aside to indicate an amenable direction.

"You mean he hasn't got two?"

"Now please."

"Well, he certainly had one, judging from his reaction."

"Sir, come—"

"Although I suspect it's in a pretty sorry state at the moment. But being in a hospital, I'm presuming you can give him a second one?"

"Come with us now, please."

"I mean, not you personally, of course, as you're security and not doctors. But I suspect that you've removed a few appendages over the years, and adding a bollock, I would imagine, is just the reverse but with more stitches."

"This way, please."

"Look," said Thomas, not believing he was being detained a third time in this place, "I cannot believe I'm being detained a third time in this place. I've been very cooperative during my stay, so why don't you lot start cooperating with me for a change?"

"Now please, sir."

"Oh, come *on!* Warren can't berate someone like that and not expect to be kneed in the bollocks! Did you hear what he said about Doctor Margery?"

"This way, please, sir."

"I *can't!* I have to meet someone: a woman I've been trying to see ever since the early hours of this morning!"

"This way, *now*, sir."

"What part of what I'm saying do you not understand?" Thomas cried, aware that several people had paused their bleeding to watch. "I'm not coming with you, all right? I've spent more than enough time in this madhouse already, and I do not intend to spend a moment longer!"

"I shall not ask you again, sir."

"Good. Well, I'm please to hear it. Now get out of my way—"

"You will come with us right now, or we shall make you."

"Oh for *shit's* sake—you know what? I've had just about enough for one day! I'm fed up with everyone tell-

ing me what to do and not listening! Well, you're going to start listening *now*, matey!"

The security guard was broad and foreign, with the sort of accent that drowned puppies. He took a step forward. It was a large, serious step that specialised in extortion. "If you do not come with us within the next ten seconds," he said, removing something large from his belt, "I'll make you come with us by force. Do you understand?"

The entire floor had stopped to stare, and there was no sound other than the wheezing of pneumonia, the muffled crumble of hip joints and the slow dribble from temporarily staunches arteries.

Thomas stared at the thing removed. "Oh, for *fu* — is that a *baton*?"

It was waved at him in a sort of nodding motif.

"I see," said Thomas, folding his arms and feeling heat rise and his stitches throb. "So you're going to hit me with it, are you?"

But because the answer was self explanatory, it became stationery.

"Right. Brilliant. Oh, just *fantastic*. So after everything that I've battled through over this past year, it comes down to being repeatedly clobbered by bats?"

"Come with us and they'll be no problem," the man said, as puppies' lungs filled.

Thomas stared at him and then those around him. Even the ones stacked in the corner seemed to have gotten some colour back through intrigue.

"You know, I've spent the past year being told what to do," Thomas said, turning back to him, "and it's ended up with me being hit in the face already today. So, you know what? You can take that baton, Mister Security-Person, and shove it up you secure backside so hard that everytime you crap you shatter toilets!"

"You are not doing yourself any favours, sir."

Thomas nodded. "Oh, don't I know it! Funnily, I'm beginning to realise that's where I went wrong right from the beginning."

The baton was waved again, suggesting he move.

But Thomas felt a tickling in his knee that made him keen to insert it so hard into the man's genitals, that he was left wondering if he had latent homosexual curiosities. He hoped so: if this madness ever ended, it doubled his chances of a relationship. "You know what," he said, "why don't you just *hit* me?" He pointed at the side of his head with less sutures. "Hit me on this side so everything balances out!"

Presenting his cheek, he screwed his eyes shut and waited.

"Go on!" he cried. "Hit me! Do me a freaking favour! I was keen for brain tumour earlier, but a caved in skull and subdural haemorrhage would be far more efficient end to all this, I'm sure!"

The guards peered at him.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" the other said.

"Oh, nothing," Thomas said, still bracing, "other than my shit life having just become shittier since being diagnosed with psychoenteritis."

The baton faltered and there were murmurs from those nearby.

A doctor approached and peered at him also. "What did you say?"

Thomas turned to him. "Go away."

"What did you say you had?"

"Do you mind?" Thomas said, before indicating the guards. "I was about to be hit in the face and you're distracting them."

But the doctor ignored him. "What did you say you'd been diagnosed with?"

"Psychoenteritis."

"Rubbish!"

"Oh, but if only it *were*. But it's not. It's true."

"I don't believe you."

“Good. Then bugger off and let these two thugs hit me.”

“You can’t just say you have it when you haven’t – you’ll worry people.”

“I do have it.”

“No you don’t!”

“What’s it to you, anyway?”

“I’m a doctor.”

“Then go and deal with the guy draped over the desk before he ruins the carpet!”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

“Prove that you’ve got psychoenteritis.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t have psychoenteritis.”

“Why not?”

“Because it only affects one in seven billion –” he licked his lips worriedly, “ – unless, of course, it really is as contagious as has been suggested.”

“Look. Why don’t you sod off and let me get my skull cracked?”

“You’re just embarrassing yourself –”

Thomas almost laughed. “Oh, I’ve been doing that for a long time!” He pulled out his certificate. “See this? Read that word there, and then that signature there.” He waved it in front of him.

The doctor snatched it and read the scrawls, before whispering, “*Jesus*.”

“Not quite,” Thomas said, “though we do share the same middle name.”

“But – isn’t that highly *contagious*?” the guard asked, snatching it and doing the same.

“Apparently,” said Thomas.

The certificate was dropped and the doctor threw both hands over his face, teetered backwards, turned and vomited.

After a few seconds of communal deliberation, the contents of the hospital’s ground floor did the same: ex-

ploding in panic and vying to flee Thomas' vicinity. Some threw themselves behind pot plants and others behind desks. The woman and man from the lift careered back toward it, scrambling over those who'd gotten there first, kicking them in the teeth and using the bleeding mess that resulted as foot-holds. Cupboards were emptied of buckets and brooms and re-stuffed with staff, while the less able-bodied took to brandishing the brooms threateningly and hiding what they could of themselves in the buckets. There were screams, wails of despair and great torrents of sobbing. One member of staff desperately sutured three patients together as a sort of human shield, while others burrowed themselves beneath the pallored stack in the corner. The security guards, belting themselves with batons in a vague attempt at immunity, fled from whence they'd come, and the man bleeding upon the desk was hollowed out and turned into a sort of shelter for three receptionists and a small child with a lung full of Lego.

Surprised, Thomas stared at them. When the chaos had dissipated into a sea of whimpers, he picked up his certificate and stared at it, before leaving the building and hailing a taxi. When it stopped, he got in and gave the address of Tony at Benetti's Deli, where he intend to get a sandwich, a ladder and Janice, in that order.

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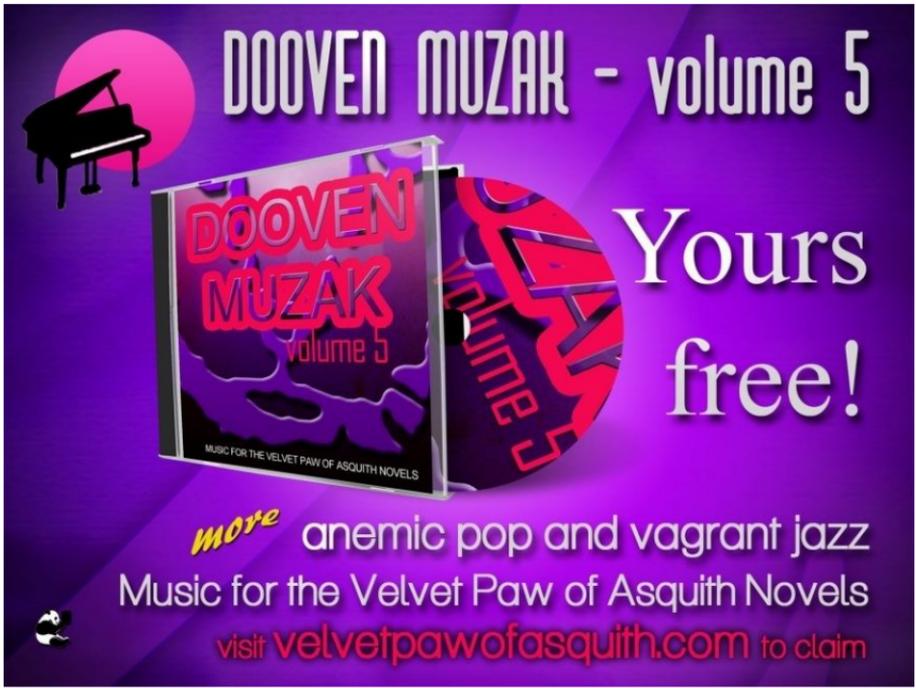
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About the Author

Thomas Corfield was born in London several years ago, definitely before last Thursday. This was a good year for all concerned, and for him in particular, because without it, later years would mean little. He owes a lot to that first year, and now lives because of it in undisclosed locations after having successfully absconded from probation. Although he finds making friends difficult, this is only because no one likes him. Including his mother, who didn't bother giving him a name until he was nine. His solicitor describes him as having an allergy to apostrophes and an aversion to punctuation that borders on pathological. This makes the popularity of his books all the more remarkable. At least it would if there was any. But there isn't. So it doesn't. He was recently interviewed in Joomag's Meals of Food magazine, which didn't help anyone.

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