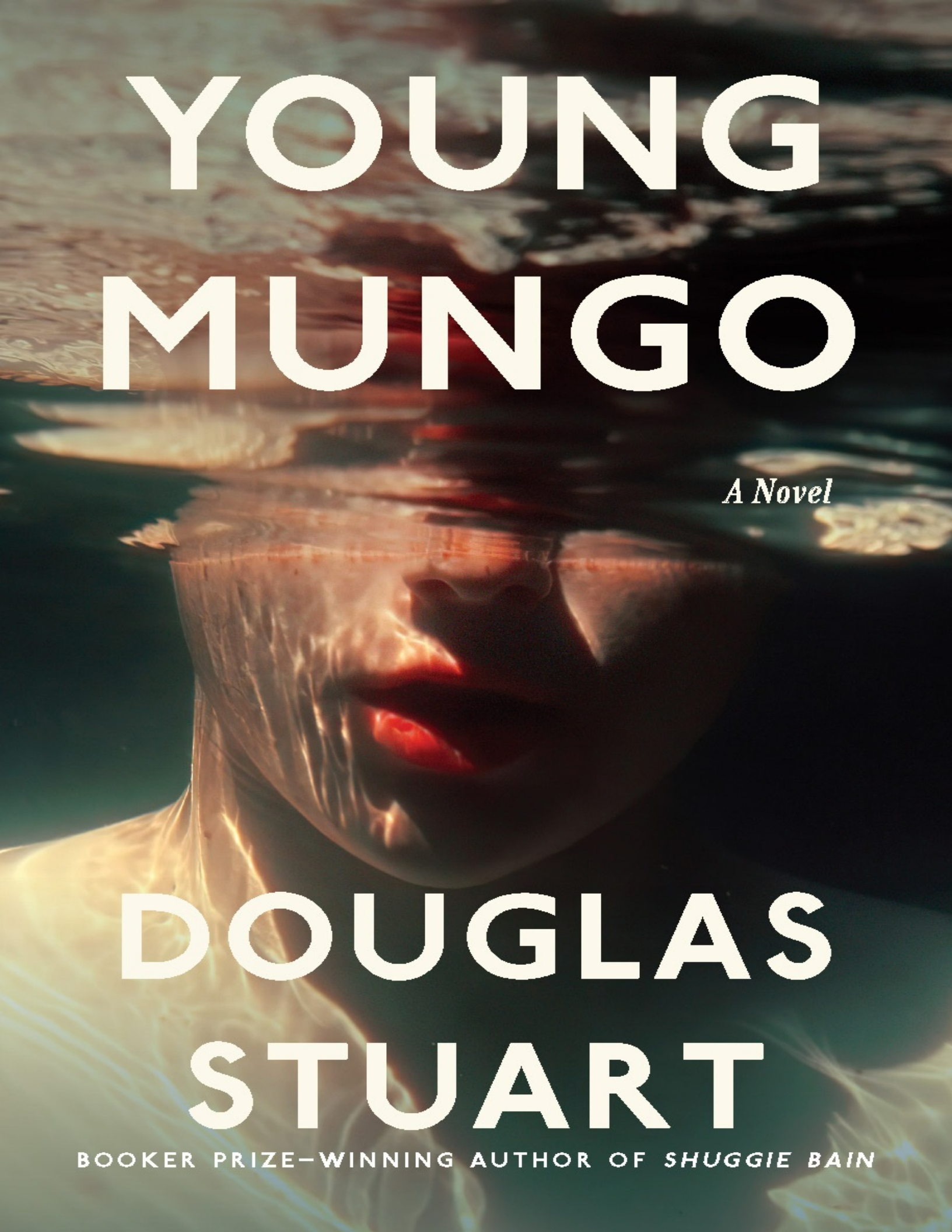

YOUNG MUNGO
A Novel
DOUGLAS STUART
BOOKER PRIZE–WINNING AUTHOR OF SHUGGIE BAIN

Also by Douglas Stuart

Shuggie Bain

YOUNG MUNGO

A Novel

DOUGLAS STUART



Grove Press
New York

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Jacket design by Christopher Moisan
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FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

This book was set in 11-pt. Janson Text LT by
Alpha Design & Composition of Pittsfield, NH.

First Grove Atlantic edition: April 2022

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available for this title.

ISBN 978-0-8021-5955-7
eISBN 978-0-8021-5956-4

Grove Press
an imprint of Grove Atlantic
154 West 14th Street
New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

groveatlantic.com

For Alexander,
and all the gentle sons of Glasgow

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THE MAY AFTER

ONE

As they neared the corner, Mungo halted and shrugged the man's hand from his shoulder. It was such an assertive gesture that it took everyone by surprise. Turning back, Mungo squinted up at the tenement flat, and his eyes began to twitch with one of their nervous spasms. As his mother watched him through the ear-of-wheat pattern of the net curtains, she tried to convince herself that his twitch was a happy wink, a lovely Morse code that telegraphed everything would be okay. F. I. N. E. Her youngest son was like that. He smiled when he didn't want to. He would do anything just to make other people feel better.

Mo-Maw swept the curtain aside and leant on the window frame like a woman looking for company. She raised her tea mug in one hand and tapped the glass with her pearlescent pink nails. It was a colour she had chosen to make her fingers appear fresher, because if her hands looked younger, then so might her face, so might her entire self. As she looked down upon him, Mungo shifted again, his feet turning towards home. She fluttered her painted fingers and shooed him away. *Go!*

Her boy was stooped slightly, the rucksack a little hump on his back. Unsure of what he should take, he had packed it with half-hearted nonsense: an oversized Fair Isle jumper, teabags, his dog-eared sketchbook, a game of Ludo, and some half-used tubes of medicated ointment. Yet he wavered on the corner as though the bag might tip him backwards into the gutter. Mo-Maw knew the bag was not heavy. She knew it was the bones of him that had become a dead weight.

This was all for his own good and yet he dared stare up at her with a doleful look. It was too hot for his nonsense. He was fraying her nerves. *Go!* she mouthed again and took a swally of the cold tea.

The two men idled at the bend. They shared a sigh and a glance and a

chuckle, before putting down their bags and lighting cigarettes. Mo-Maw could tell they were itchy to be gone – these narrow streets didn't like unknown faces – and she could see it took patience not to goad her boy on. The men were canny enough not to pressure Mungo, not so close to home, not when he could still bolt. Their slitted eyes kept flicking towards him, watching, waiting to see what the boy would do next, while their hands ferreted inside their trouser pockets as they peeled their ball sacks from their thighs. The day would be muggy and close. The younger man fiddled with himself. Mo-Maw licked the back of her bottom teeth.

Mungo raised his hand to wave up at the window but Mo-Maw glowered down at him. He must have seen her face harden, or perhaps he thought waving was childish, because he aborted the gesture and grasped a fistful of air, which made him seem like a drowning man.

In his baggy shorts and his oversized cagoule, he looked like a waif dressed in hand-me-downs. But as he pushed the cloud of curls away from his face, Mo-Maw saw his jaw tighten, and she was reminded of the determined young man that he was becoming. She tapped the glass again. *Don't you scowl at me.*

The younger of the two men stepped forward and laid his arm across Mungo's shoulders. Mungo winced at the weight. Mo-Maw saw him rub at his sides, and she was reminded of the tender purple bruises that were blooming across his ribs. She tapped the glass, *Oh fur God's sake, jist go!* At this, her son lowered his gaze and let himself be led away. The men were laughing as they clapped her boy on the back. *Guid lad. Brave lad.*

Mo-Maw was not a religious woman but she stretched her pink fingernails to the heavens and wiggled them as she cried hallelujah. She tipped her tea into the parched spider plant, and filling her mug with fortified wine, she turned up the music and kicked off her shoes.

The three travellers caught a corporation bus into Sauchiehall Street. Glasgow was in a rare swelter and they had to push upstream through rowdy gangs of shirtless men already poached pink from the sun. City benches were lined with thick-armed grannies, proper in their hats and good wool coats, and sweating heavily across their top lips. As sticky-faced weans skipped across the street the women pulled their heads into their fleshy chests and dozed in the heat. They reminded Mungo of the tenement pigeons, big lazy doos with their eyes half-

closed and their heads swallowed by neck feathers.

The city was alive with the sound of buskers competing with the battle rattle of a practising Orange band. Like chirruping songbirds, the Orangemen's piccolos made a sweet trilling sound against the heavy thump of a Lambeg drum. The tune was so affecting that an older, refined-looking gentleman was lost in reverie and weeping big dewdrop tears. Mungo tried not to stare at the sight of a man crying so openly. He couldn't be sure whether the man wept in anguish or with pride. There was the glint of an expensive watch band peeking from out of his suit sleeve, and Mungo decided, based on no other information, that it was too ostentatious, too indiscreet to belong to a Catholic.

The men lumbered in the sunshine. They were weighed down with armfuls of thin plastic bags, a satchel filled with fishing tackle, and a camping rucksack. Mungo could hear them complain of their thirst. He had known them only an hour, but they had mentioned it several times already. They seemed always to be thirsty. "Ah'm gasping for a guid drink," said the elder of the two. He was already beetroot-red and overheating in his thick tweed suit. The other man ignored him. He was walking bandy-legged, as though his tight denims were chafing his thighs.

They led the boy into the bus station and with a rattle of coins they boarded a coach that would take them out the north side of Glasgow and towards the green hills of Dumbarton.

By the time they fought their way to the plastic bench at the back of the bus the men were sweating and hard for breath. Mungo sat between them and made himself as small as possible. When one of them looked out the window he studied the side of their face. If they turned his way, he would feign interest out the opposite window and try to avoid their eyes.

Mungo braced his chin on to his chest and tried to stop the nervous itching that was spreading across his face as he watched the grey city go by. He knew he was doing that thing again, the crinkled nose, the blinking, the face that looked like he might sneeze, but never would. He could feel the older man's gaze upon him.

"Ah cannae 'member the last time ah came oot of the city." The man's voice had a raspy quality, like he had a throatful of dry toast. He would occasionally inhale in the middle of a sentence, wavering, like each word might be the last one he managed. Mungo tried to smile up at him, but there was something ferrety about the man that made it hard to look him in the eyes.

The suited stranger turned back to his window and Mungo took this opportunity to study the length of him. He was an angular man in his late fifties or early sixties, but the years had clearly been hard. Mungo had seen his kind before. The young Protestant hooligans off the scheme often hounded men like him for fun, rounding up the jangling drunks outside the working men's club, taunting them towards the chip shop and then swooping as the last of their coins fell from their burst pockets. Neglectful eating and hard drinking had withered and jaundiced him. There was too much skin over too little fat, his yellow face wrinkling like an overripe apple.

The man's tatty jacket was mismatched with a pair of dress trousers, the knees of which sagged like more stretched-out skin. Underneath his jacket he wore a T-shirt emblazoned with an advertisement for a plumber on the South Side, the neck was torn and separating from the body. Mungo wondered if perhaps these were the only clothes he owned; they smelled musty, as though he wore them through smirr and shine.

Mungo felt strangely sorry for him. The man was trembling slightly. Years spent hiding from daylight in dark pubs had given him the nervous reactions of a whippet pushed out into the snow, and he had the small darting eyes and long twitching limbs of a mistreated dog. He seemed on the verge of bolting.

As the last of the high-rises faded from view, the suited man made some small sounds, filling the empty air, inviting the others to join him in conversation. Mungo braced his chin to his chest and said nothing. The younger man was scratching his crotch. Mungo watched him from the corner of his eye.

This man seemed to be in his early twenties. He wore indigo denims and his belt was laced under the logo so as not to obscure the proud Armani badge. He was handsome – or he must have been close to it once – but there was something already spoiled about him, like good butcher's meat that had been left out. Despite the heat he had been wearing a puffy bomber jacket. When he removed it, Mungo could see his arms were roped with lean muscle that spoke to a heavy trade, or years of fighting, or both.

His hair was clipped short. His fringe had been combed forward in a gelled line, the hairs formed little saw-toothed points, as though they had been cut by pinking shears. Mungo stared at the damaged skin of his knuckles. He was honey-coloured in the way Scottish people seldom were; perhaps his family were chip-shop Italian or Spanish by way of the Black Irish.

Any trace of that romance was lost as he said in flat, glottal Glaswegian,

“Haw. Dinnae be botherin’ wi’ auld St Christopher.” He spoke without looking directly at either of them. “He’d bore the arse aff a horse.”

Mungo was left to ponder why he was on a bus with St Christopher, while the other man went back to picking his nose. As the man’s pinkie searched the inside of his nostril Mungo noted how he wore sovvie rings on all of his fingers and that his forearms were snaked with interlocking tattoos. He was a man covered in words: from the logos on his chest, to his shoes, to his jeans, to his skin. He had written on his flesh with a sewing needle, women’s names, gang names: Sandra, Jackie, RFC, The Mad Squad. Here and there, the blue biro ink had bled, it wept beneath his skin like a watercolour and tinted him a pretty violet hue. Mungo read his arms carefully. He committed as much as he could to memory.

St Christopher reached into one of the shopping bags, and with a sly wink he raised a half-dozen cans of Tennent’s Super. Keeping his small eyes on the back of the bus driver’s head, he broke two cans free of their noose and offered them to the boy and the tattooed man. Mungo shook his head but the young man took a can with a grateful groan. He burst it open and clamped his lips over the escaping foam. He drained it in three throatfuls.

St Christopher must have read the boy’s mind because he said, “They calls us St Christopher on account ah go to the alcoholic meetings on Hope Street every Sunday and Thursday. Ah’m Sunday-Thursday Christopher, so as no to be confused wi’ Castlemilk Chris or Wee Ginger-Heided Chrissy.” The man took a slug, and Mungo watched his throat struggle to take enough in. “S-T Christopher, ye see?”

Mungo had heard something like that before. Mo-Maw herself was known as Monday-Thursday Maureen. That’s who the other alcoholics asked for when the boy answered the hallway telephone. The callers wanted to be sure they hadn’t found the house of “Maureen from Millerston” or “Wee-Mo frae the Milk” by mistake. These small distinctions mattered if they were to honour the code of anonymity.

“Sometimes ah have the shakes that bad, ah should go tae a Wednesday night meeting as well. But well, ah just cannae.” St Christopher made a sad frown. “Do you see what ah mean?”

Mungo had been working hard at seeing what people really meant. Mo-Maw and his sister, Jodie, were always nagging him about that. Apparently there could be some distance between what a person was saying and what you should be seeing. Jodie said he was gullible. Mo-Maw said she wished she had raised him

to be cannier, less of anybody's fool. It was a funny thing to be a disappointment because you were honest and assumed others might be too. The games people played made his head hurt.

St Christopher was sucking down his can when Mungo said, "Maybe you should just go on Wednesdays too. Like, if you really need to?"

"Aye, but ah like ma handle." His hand reached inside his shirt and drew out a small tin medallion of the saint. He peered down his pockmarked nose at it. "*S-T Christopher.* It's the nicest thing anybody's ever said about us."

"Could you not just give them your family name?"

"Widnae be very anonymous wid it?" interrupted the tattooed man. "If ye start spilling yer guts and letting everybody know yer demons, then they'd be able to lift yer name out in the street."

Mungo knew fine well that people had demons. Mo-Maw's showed itself whenever she jangled for a drink. Her demon was a flat, eel-like snake with the jaw and beady eyes of a weasel and the matted coat of a mangy rat. It was a sleekit thing on a chain leash that shook her and dragged her towards things that she ought to be walking away from. It was greedy and it was cunning. It could lie dormant, wait for the children to leave for school, to kiss their mother goodbye, and then it would turn on Mo-Maw, throttle her as though she was some shivering mouse. At other times it coiled up inside her and sat heavy on her heart. The demon was always there just under the surface, even on good days.

On the days that she gave in to the drink, the demon could be quieted for a while. But sometimes Mo-Maw could get so far in the drink that she would become another woman entirely, another creature altogether. The first sign was how her skin grew slack, like her real face was sliding off to reveal this strange woman who lurked underneath. Mungo and his brother and sister called this slack version of her *Tattie-bogle,* like some heartless, shambling scarecrow. No matter how her children stuffed her with their love or tried to prop her up and gather her back together, she took in all their care and attention and felt as hollow as ever.

When Tattie-bogle spoke, her lower jaw would hang loose and her tongue would roll in her mouth in a dirty, lascivious way, like she wanted very badly to lick something. Tattie-bogle always suspected that she was missing some party, that something more exciting must be happening just around the corner or hidden up the next close. When she felt like this she would turn to her children

and shoo them away as though they were drab little birds. Tattie-bogle believed that better things, brighter lights, bigger laughs were always happening to women who had no children.

Tattie-bogle would become best friends with women she had just met, and over a half-bottle of Black & White whisky she would betray her own intimate secrets, and then felt wounded when these new friends didn't share the same depth of feeling. Then when they fought, she dragged them, or she was dragged by them, across the carpet and down the stairs. In the morning Mungo would find tufts of perfumed hair, like the straw from a burst scarecrow, lying in the hallway, animated by the draught that whistled under the front door. Either he or Jodie would hoover it up with the Ewbank and say nothing more about it.

It was Jodie who had split their mother in two. In the cold morning light, this trick helped Mungo forgive Mo-Maw when the drink had made her vindictive and rotten. "It wasn't Mo-Maw," soothed Jodie, as she held him in the airing cupboard, "it was only horrible old Tattie-bogle, and she's sleeping now."

Mungo knew what demons looked like. As the bus trundled north, he sat quietly and thought about his own.

"Ah wish this driver would hurry the fuck up," the tattooed man said. He reached into the bag between his legs, the canvas strap was studded with brightly coloured lures. Rummaging amongst the spools of fishing gut he produced a pouch of tobacco. He rolled a fat cigarette, his tongue darting along the paper. The man took a deep drag and blew the smoke into his empty lager can. He cupped his hand over the mouth like he had caught a spider, but the stench of tobacco was already wafting around the bus. Several of the passengers turned and glared towards the back seats. Mungo leaned over him with a meek smile and unclipped the hasp on the thin window.

"Do you smoke?" the man asked between greedy puffs. His eyes were a rich green, glinting here and there with flecks of gold.

"No."

"Guid." He took another lungful. "It's bad for ye."

St Christopher reached out a trembling hand and the tattooed man reluctantly let go of the cigarette. St Christopher inhaled and filled himself up to the very brim. His dry lips were sticky on the damp paper. The tattooed man rammed his shoulder into Mungo's. "Ma pals call us Gallowgate on account of where I'm frae." He adjusted his sovvie rings and nodded towards the oblivious bus driver. "You're a nervous wee fella, int ye? Don't worry. If he gies us any lip, ah'll

fuckin' stab him."

St Christopher sucked on the dout until it burned his fingers. "Do ye like tae fish?"

"I don't know." Mungo was glad to see the cigarette die. "I've never done it before."

"Where we're gaun ye should catch pike, eels, speckled trout," Gallowgate said. "You can fish the whole weekend and naebody will come by and ask for a permit. Ye'll be twenty, forty miles from the nearest soul."

St Christopher nodded in agreement. "Aye. It is as near tae heaven as ye can get on three buses."

"Four," corrected Gallowgate, "four buses."

The remoteness of it filled Mungo with a sinking feeling. "Do you eat the fish?"

"Depends on the size," said Gallowgate. "In breeding season you can catch that many that you'd need a deep freezer to keep them all. Does your mammy have a big freezer?"

Mungo shook his head. He thought of Mo-Maw's tiny box freezer, how it was thick with ice. He wondered if she would be happy with a fat speckled trout, but he doubted it. Nothing he did seemed to make her happy. He had been worrying her heart lately, which he knew because she had told him so. He had tried not to laugh when she had said it, but all he could picture was her heart walking around the living room in her chest and folding a white hanky in agitation. At the time Jodie had rolled her eyes and said, "Listen to yourself, Maureen. Do you even have a heart?"

Mungo picked his cheekbone as the bus passed Dumbarton and the ochre banks of Loch Lomond came into view. He remembered the heavy things Mo-Maw had said. He knew why he was here; it was his own fault.

"How auld are you anyhows?" asked Gallowgate.

"Fifteen." Mungo tried to draw himself up to his full height, but his ribs still hurt and the old bus had terrible suspension. He was average height for his age, one of the last in his class to take a growth spurt. His older brother Hamish liked to grip his chin and tilt his face to the light. He would inspect the fine line of dander growing on Mungo's top lip in the same way a gardener checks on a spindly seedling. He would blow on it just to irritate Mungo. Although Mungo wasn't especially tall, he was still taller than Hamish. Hamish hated that.

St Christopher reached out and circled the boy's wrist with his long fingers.

“Ye’re only a wee thing aren’t ye? Ah would have put ye at twelve, thirteen, tops.”

“Ach he’s nearly a man.” Gallowgate slung an inked arm over the boy’s shoulders. He exchanged a sly look with his friend. “Have yer balls dropped yet, Mungo?”

Mungo didn’t answer. They just sort of hung there all wrinkly and pointless. If they dropped, where would they drop to?

“Ye know, yer nut sack?” Gallowgate punched the boy lightly in the groin.

“I don’t know.” Mungo doubled over for protection.

The men were chuckling to themselves and Mungo tried to join in, but it was a self-conscious laugh, a half-beat too late. St Christopher broke into a hacking cough and Gallowgate turned back to the window in disdain. He said, “We’ll look after ye, Mungo. Nae worries. We’ll have some laughs, and you can bring yer mammy some fresh fish.”

Mungo massaged his sore balls. He thought again about Mo-Maw’s worried heart.

“Aye. Yer mammy is a good wummin. One of the few left.” Gallowgate started biting the dry skin from around his index finger and spitting it on the floor. Suddenly he stopped what he was doing. “Can I see?” Before Mungo could protest, he hooked his hand at the bottom of Mungo’s cagoule. He started to lift it and began undressing the boy. “Gie us a wee look then.”

Mungo raised his arms and let the man draw his top up until the nylon cagoule covered his face and bathed everything in a calm blue light. Mungo couldn’t see, but he could hear the men and the ragged patterns of their breathing. There was a sad intake of air, a pause, then a sigh. Gallowgate’s fingertip was slimy where he had been chewing it. He pressed it against the blackening bruise on Mungo’s chest, and Mungo felt it travel from his sternum, around the curve of his bottom rib, as though the man was tracing a map. Gallowgate prodded his ribs and then, as if testing their tenderness, he dug his finger into the bruise. Mungo winced and squirmed to get away. He pulled his clothes back down, certain his face was scalding. Gallowgate shook his head. “Terrible business that. Yer mammy telt us all about that mess ye got yourself into with those dirty Fenian bastards. Catholics, man. Butter widnae melt.”

Mungo had been trying not to think about it.

“Dinnae worry,” grinned Gallowgate. “We’ll get you away frae that scheme. We’ll have a proper boy’s weekend. Make a man out of you yet, eh?”

They changed bus, and then they changed bus again, and then they waited nearly three hours for the next one. They were far beyond Loch Lomond now and Mungo began to think the men had no real idea where they were. It all looked the same to him.

The two soaks lay in the gorse behind the metal bus shelter and finished the last of the Tennent's cans. Every now and then Gallowgate would throw an empty over the hedge on to the country road and ask the boy if a bus was coming. Mungo tidied up the rubbish and said no, "No bus."

Mungo shivered in the sunlight and let his face tic freely, free from the open-mouthed stares of strangers. When he was alone, he tried to tire out the urge like this, but it never worked.

It was colder out here in the countryside. The slow northern sun seemed stuck in the sky, but the heat it gave was stolen by the long wind that hurried through the glens. His nose began to drip. He might also be sunburnt in the morning.

He sank on to his haunches. There was a scab on his right kneecap, the skin was puckering and itchy. Mungo checked no one was watching. Then he put his lips to it, ran his tongue over it to soften it, and sucked it till his mouth filled with a metallic taste. Mungo knew he couldn't be trusted not to lick his scab again so he covered his bare legs with his anorak and, pulling his knees to his chest, he hid them from the warmth-less sun. It had been such a rare sort of heat on the scheme that he hadn't thought to bring more than his thin football shorts. Mo-Maw had given him no time to get his bag ready, and she hadn't stopped him as he sloped, poorly dressed, out the door.

He pulled the thick Fair Isle jumper from his bag and slipped it on under his cagoule. The dry Shetland wool tickled as it came down over his face. Mungo checked the soaks were still lying in the gorse. Cupping the jumper up and over his nose, he ran his tongue along the inside of the knit. It still smelled of fresh air, sawdust, and the sour ammonia of the pissy doocot. It reminded him of home. Using his thumb, he stuffed the fabric into his open mouth and closed his eyes. He shoved it in until he gagged.

By the time the country bus arrived the men were deep in their drink. Mungo helped them aboard with their bags and fishing rods and then he waited patiently for St Christopher to pay the fare. The drunk man swayed and produced a handful of silver and copper shrapnel. Chapped-faced women huffed impatiently,

their shopping defrosting at their feet, and Mungo felt his neck burn as he scraped the change from St Christopher's curled palm and dropped coin after coin into the tray. The boy could feel his eyes twitch, and he was relieved when the driver finally said, "Okay, okay, stop. That's plenty, son." He had been embarrassed that he couldn't add so fast. School had been scarce for him since Mo-Maw had taken sick on drink again.

The driver released the handbrake. Mungo couldn't meet the eyes of the country women but he laughed as he heard St Christopher lollop after him and wish their sour faces a "glorious and happy afternoon." Gallowgate was already sound asleep on the pile of tackle and plastic bags. Mungo sat on the seat in front and picked at the black rubber sealant around the window.

The fat bus bumped along the serpentine road. It stopped every so often, and dropped little white women outside their little white houses. The diesel engine thrummed a lullaby and the boy could feel his eyes grow heavy from the day. A copse of pine and yew trees began to encroach on the road, their leaves mottled the sunlight on his face. Mungo laid his head against the glass. He fell into a fitful sleep.

Hamish was there. His brother was lying in the single bed opposite his own. By how the daylight reflected off his thick glasses, Mungo could tell it was early evening. Hamish was scooping spoonfuls of cereal into his mouth as trails of chocolatey milk streamed down his hairless chest. Mungo lay still, quietly watching his brother. He always enjoyed moments like this, when the person didn't know they were being observed. Hamish was smiling to himself. The left side of his face puckered in a dirty grin as he flicked through the pages of a magazine. Mungo could see the pained, painted faces of naked women, spread-eagled and grimacing back up at Hamish. Yet when Mungo brought his gaze back to his brother's face, it was Hamish who was watching him. He wasn't grinning anymore. "Tell me Mungo. Is it all my fault?"

Gallowgate shook the boy from his dream. His top lip was caught on the sticky film that had formed on his teeth and for a moment Mungo didn't know if the man was smiling or snarling at him.

As they tumbled from the bus St Christopher rolled his ankle and fell into the grass verge. They were on a section of road where a thick canopy of alders made the air green and damp and slow. St Christopher writhed in the dirt, pulling his suit blazer tight across his pigeon chest. "How come youse didnae fuckin' wake us!" There was angry spume in the corners of his mouth. "We're miles out of our

bastardin' way."

"I don't know where we're going. It all looks the same to me."

Gallowgate stepped forward as if to strike the boy and Mungo instinctively flinched, his arms barricaded in front of him.

"Fuck's sake." His breath was sour with beer and sleep. "Calm down. It's no come to that awready." Gallowgate heaved some of the bags out of the dust and slung them over his shoulder. The man started walking in the direction the bus had come, sauntering down the middle of the road, daring any driver to hit him. "It's miles back, so let's get a fuckin' move on."

There were no cars travelling in either direction but Mungo and St Christopher struggled in the safety of the verge, their carrier bags snagging on bramble thorns. The boy fastened his blue anorak up to his throat and then continued up and over his mouth. He sank his head lower into the funnel and became a pair of downcast, twitching eyes.

They had been walking for forty minutes when St Christopher started to moan; the bags of supplies were cutting into his fingers, and his dress shoes were starting to rub at his papery heels. Gallowgate scowled at the pair of them like a father who could not get his children to behave. He yanked the boy's arm and forced Mungo's thumb out, and left him facing the non-existent traffic. Gallowgate slid down the embankment and the older man followed him, complaining all the way. They lay behind the drystane dyke as Mungo waited by the empty road and tried to hitch a lift. Nothing passed in either direction. Further along, the road was flooded with sheep.

Mungo didn't know what time it was, but it was cold under the canopy of alders. His bare legs were speckled blue, so he made a game of removing his cagoule and slipping his legs through the sleeves. When his ribs became colder than his legs, he unzipped the windbreaker again and put it back over his chest. An hour passed, then two. No cars came. He could hear more cans of beer hiss open behind the stone dyke. St Christopher stood up every now and then to offer words of encouragement. "Aye ye're doing a great job son. Really, truly, outstanding."

The mannish woman was visibly shaken to come across the boy in the middle of the road. Her surprise turned to fear and then disappointment, as the two alkies clambered out from the undergrowth. Mungo stood in front of her brown Lada,

blocking her escape, smiling as warmly as he could. He made an unsettling sight, beaming with relief in the dim glow of her headlights.

The woman wouldn't let any of them sit up front. But in the back seat, crushed between the strange men, he was glad of the roaring warmth of their bodies. They burned blue with the alcohol and the tang of peat on their breath reminded him of winter fires. The cold had robbed Mungo of any notion of independence and he gladly let their bodies swallow his. Gallowgate uttered as many polite niceties as he could manage; Mungo listened to him struggle to sharpen his vowels. He asked the woman to drive them to the dip in the road where the fence was broken, and a mud track led down to the lochside. Mungo could tell that even in broad daylight this would be hard to find, never mind in the violet gloam.

The woman drove slowly, afraid of the men in the back seat, terrified to miss the break in the fence and be stuck with them longer than she needed to be. Mungo watched her eyes flit to the rear-view mirror and every time they made eye contact, he smiled his best school picture smile.

"I've never seen sheep before," he said.

The woman smiled, if only to be polite. Whatever Mungo was doing seemed to make her more uncomfortable. Her skin was leathered as though she worked in the wind and the rain. She wore horn-rimmed glasses over a hand-knitted Aran jumper, and over this humble garment she had carefully arranged a pearl necklace. Mungo watched her tuck the necklace inside her jumper.

"We're not related," Mungo said quietly. "These are pals of my mother's and they're taking me away on a fishing weekend."

"Wonderful," she said without any wonder at all.

"Aye." He felt compelled to tell her more, to let someone, even this snobbish woman, know who he was, who he was with, and where they were taking him. "They are members of Alcoholics Anonymous. S'pose my maw thought it would do us all some good to get some air about us."

The lady in the Aran gansey took her eyes off the road a moment too long, and the car swerved as she connected with the verge. A thumb, or maybe a Bic lighter, jabbed a warning into the side of his bare leg. It was clear Gallowgate wanted him to stop talking. Mungo could hear St Christopher huff; he was smacking his lips in agitation like a woman who couldn't believe the price of milk nowadays.

They crept along for several miles, searching desperately for the point Gallowgate remembered from distant memory. Yet when they finally got to the broken fence it was exactly as he had described it. The lady clamped her handbag between her knees before she let them out. She sped off in first gear as they gathered up their bags of lager and fish gut.

“Snooty cunt. I thought she was going to twist her pearly earlobe right aff,” said Gallowgate with a chuckle.

St Christopher had been shaking over by the fence. His lips were still slapping together in agitation. “Mungo. You shouldnae break a person’s anonymity lit that.”

Mungo had to turn his eyes from the receding tail lights. “Sorry. I didn’t know.” Mungo had taken Mo-Maw to enough meetings on Hope Street to know fine well the Alcoholics’ rule of anonymity.

“Whit dis it matter to ye?” said Gallowgate. “The wee man wis only bletherin’.”

St Christopher was rattling like a fairground skeleton now. He took to muttering under his breath. “Ah’m jist saying you shouldnae ruin a person’s reputation like that.”

Gallowgate drew his eyes over the trembling man. There was mud on his good suit from where he had lain in the gorse and his “ten-for-a-fiver” white sport socks were ringed with dust from the road; there were scarlet blooms at the heels where his shoes cut his feet. Gallowgate shook his head. “Ah widnae have taken you to have been marked by pride.” From his jacket pocket he produced a Wagon Wheel and handed it to the boy. Gallowgate winked at him. It was an apology for the older drunk. It said that Gallowgate thought he was all right, that they’d suffer through St Christopher together.

It was getting late now. As they walked down to the loch, Mungo thought how the men made odd friends – but then he knew that drink was a great leveller, it always brought unlikely people together. He had seen that in his own home, how different folk could huddle in solidarity around a carry-out. He thought about all the aunties and uncles that crossed his door and had lain in waste with his mother. People she wouldn’t have sniffed at in the street became like kin when they cashed their unemployment giros and turned them into a quarter-bottle of amber.

There was no path to the loch, the ground was obscured with a carpet of horsetail fern. In the last of the blue daylight, Gallowgate wove in and out of the

birch trees, gliding downhill to a loch they could not yet see. St Christopher fell behind. Mungo could hear him muttering to himself, and he stopped now and then to smile back at the sulking man, but St Christopher only paused and picked at the downy bark like he was fascinated by it.

Mungo had hardly been out of the city before. He had never been any place where the greenery didn't eventually end. He had once roamed the untended fields around Garthamlock but they had been spoiled with burnt-out cars and burst settees, and you couldn't run through the long grass for fear of things that might cut into your ankles. Now, as they walked through the forest, he was dizzy with the thought that he was only one of a handful of people who might ever have been here. There were no sounds, no birds, no animals skittering across the forest floor. It was soothing to be part of something so unspoiled.

They came across the bleached skull and bones of an old sheep. Gallowgate ran his fingers over the curled horns and explained it was a ram, "a man sheep." Mungo fished around in his cagoule pocket until he found the disposable camera that Jodie had given him. The roll was half-spent already, wasted on silly snaps of Jodie experimenting with a home-cut fringe. The only sound in the understorey was the *scritch-scritch* of the film winding on. The flash stopped the leaves in their swaying. Even St Christopher stopped his lamenting.

They crossed a dim clearing in single file. Gallowgate squatted; he took the time to show Mungo what stinging nettles looked like, and when they came upon an ocean of the plants, he hoisted the bare-legged boy on to his back. Gallowgate charged through the undergrowth like a saddled mule. He whinnied as his jostling shook gurgling laughter from Mungo. The more Mungo laughed, the harder Gallowgate cantered, until Mungo's shrieks echoed off the thick canopy and Gallowgate was panting heavily.

It had felt strange at first, to wrap his bare legs around Gallowgate's waist, but he felt safe upon the man's back. As Gallowgate put him down again, he rubbed the chill from Mungo's shin bones, and Mungo wondered if he had read the man wrong. Mungo glanced up the path but he couldn't see or hear St Christopher behind them anymore. Gallowgate didn't seem concerned, he hauched into the ferns, and kept marching onwards.

The sun was dipping behind the hills by the time they reached the lochside. After the confines of the forest, the loch suddenly opened up and it was almost too expansive for Mungo to take in. He stumbled down to the shoreline.

The day was drawing in the last of her colours, and as the softest violets and

apricots bled away into the horizon, he was sad to have not arrived sooner. Mungo tilted his head back and walked in a circle. The sky above him was a darkening blue smeared with faint streaks of lemon. He hadn't known that the sky could hold so many hues – or he hadn't paid it any mind before. Did anyone in Glasgow look up?

He let out a small awe-filled sigh. All this beauty in the sky was mirrored in the loch as though Mother Nature was bragging. Gallowgate grinned with pride. "Wait till you see the sky the night. Ye've never seen a black like it."

Gallowgate offered Mungo his shoulders to sit upon, so Mungo could glimpse the other side before it vanished entirely in the dusk. From this height Mungo thought the loch must be two miles wide and a hundred miles long.

On the far side it was hemmed in by stout hills whose slopes were split like the underlying rock had torn through the very fabric of them. All the colours were patchy and mottled. It seemed to Mungo as though the hillsides had been blanketed in some giant threadbare rug. The moss green and drab brown were rubbed away in patches to reveal the grey granite as if it were the underlay of the land. There were scatterings of purple moor flower and golden gorse, and here and there were little pockets of white snow, clinging stubbornly to the deepest fissures.

The loch diminished out of view on the left. To the right it turned around a lazy corner and disappeared behind a wall of pine trees. Mungo thought how it was ten times bigger than his scheme, bigger, perhaps, than Glasgow herself.

He had seen the sea twice before. There the water was always shaking and churning. But here the tide was lazy and the surface was glassy as a puddle. Nothing moved except for the buzz of black midges that swarmed low and excited a ripple of hungry fish. The loch looked colder and deeper than he could say. It looked sad, like it had been forgotten. Quiet, like it kept its secrets.

Gallowgate lowered the boy. He rubbed his hands over Mungo's cold back and then hurried across the broken rocks that lined the shore. Tucked into a moss-covered slope was a pile of rough-hewn boulders that vaguely resembled a bothy. There were parallel walls and Mungo could still make out the crumbled doorway and a gabled far end. Outside the bothy was a firepit and a semicircle of larger boulders for sitting on. Thick biting midges thrummed in the shadows.

"Ye'll get used to them," said Gallowgate, handing the boy a large dock leaf. "Rub yer legs with this and ye'll be awright."

Mungo rubbed at his bare legs until they turned green and slick with

chlorophyll. The biting flies seemed undeterred.

St Christopher hobbled out from the treeline. He plonked himself down by the lochside and dunked his feet in the icy water. With his angular bones and his grey tweeds, he was just another rock on the shoreline.

Gallowgate marshalled the setup of camp around the stone fire ring. He took off his trendy nylon bomber and the knees of his Italian denims were soon damp as he unpacked the pile of plastic bags. From the backpack he unfurled two thin-looking tents. The two-man tent he erected inside the abandoned bothy. The smaller tent he staked across the far side of the camp, on a bed of dry shingle, almost as far away from the other as possible. Mungo helped drive the curved metal pegs into the ground with a flinty rock. “Shouldn’t the tents be closer together?”

Gallowgate looked at the boy and shook his head. It seemed he meant it to be a friendly smile, but it was without warmth, and Mungo thought he saw a flash of menace cross his thin lips. Perhaps, like Hamish, he didn’t like for his authority to be questioned.

“Naw. Better to be far frae the fire,” Gallowgate said. He went back to pulling the guy line tight. He strummed it to check its tension. “Don’t youse want to see the stars?”

THE JANUARY BEFORE

TWO

Their mother was surely dead. It had been over three weeks since her children had seen her, and Mungo could imagine nothing but the most gruesome of scenarios. Mo-Maw Hamilton had been raped and then she had been gutted with a steak knife that some long-haul lorry driver had bought using petrol station coupons. She had been trussed and the tips of her fingers hacked off before her naked body was slipped into the cold brackish water of the River Clyde. Mungo followed his sister from room to room, conjuring the worst.

"I just know she's dead."

"Maybe," soothed Jodie. "*Or* maybe she's just on another bender."

"But what if she is dead?"

Jodie sighed. "Look around. We're no that lucky."

The children had come home again from school to an empty house and an emptier fridge. Jodie was watching her brother pace back and forth in front of the bay window, imagining all the horrible things that might have befallen their mother, listing the reasons they should go to the polis. They were in their school uniforms, matching navy jumpers over a striped burgundy and gold tie, except Mungo's tie was wrapped around his head like a bandage to soothe the itchy feeling in his face.

"She's fucked off before," said Jodie. "Don't forget who you're dealing with."

Jodie crossed to where he had been ploughing furrows into the carpet. She wrapped her arms around him, tried to quiet the fluttering inside his chest. He was only a year younger than her, but he had taken a stretch; it had come late, but he was taller than her by almost a head now. Jodie laid her cheek against the nape of his neck, he was burning hot. "Any minute now she could walk through that door."

Mungo turned his brown eyes to the door, the tic under his left eye sparking out a telegraph. Jodie cupped his chin with her hand and manually turned his face away. He was like a dog, he could stare at something for hours unless you distracted him from it.

She pressed her fingers to his face. The doctors had advised her not to draw any attention to his twitch, to simply ensure that he was getting enough magnesium and that he would grow out of it eventually – but he hadn't, and she doubted that he ever would. It was happening more frequently now. His nose would begin to crinkle, and then he would blink as though someone was flicking the power switch in his brain. If he was especially anxious, or tired, it manifested as a tug or a twitch in his left cheek. He had taught her where to press to try and calm the electricity. It was nothing but a placebo. Jodie came to understand that he just liked to be touched.

He had been clawing at his cheek again, the skin was chafed and angry. Jodie tutted. "You have to stop scratching at your coupon. You're going to leave a scar. *Haaah-ha*."

"I can't help it."

There was a fresh sore on his top lip. He had taken to picking it when the sore on his cheekbone became too raw. "Oh, for goodness' sake. You're gonnae end up all pockmarked and snaggle-faced like that fella who works at the butcher's."

Her younger brother was a rare sort of handsome. His wasn't the usual blunt or rugged masculinity, and it wasn't the over-preened, over-musked, amateur-footballer style that the boys in her year aspired to. Mungo had high cheekbones and a refined brow that Jodie, with her plump cheeks and stub nose, would have killed for. There was a timidness to his gaze. His hazel eyes could bathe you in their glorious warmth, or he could dip them away from you and make you wish he would look at you again. If you could coax it from him, then there was a real reward in his cautious smile; to earn it made others feel instantly endeared towards him. His unruly mop of hair made women want to mother him.

Growing up he had always been the obedient groom that Jodie constructed play-weddings around. Jodie would nag, while Mungo, always agreeable, would do as he was told. He would stand stock-still as she and Angie Harms swanned around him, draped in mucky veils made from their mother's net curtains. He spent many afternoons kneeling, biting at the hair scrunchies they had wrapped around their puppy-fat thighs in imitation of a garter belt.

There was a gentleness to his being that put girls at ease; they wanted to make

a pet of him. But that sweetness unsettled other boys.

Mungo had always been the bonniest of the Hamiltons. His brother and sister shared his chestnut hair and light olive complexion, so different from their mousy, wan mother. Hamish, when he had wanted to get a rise out of Mo-Maw, had said at least their shared colouring proved they all came from the same father, that they'd gotten more from him than just his surname. Jodie had to admit that Mungo wore it the best. Where the freckles and the sallowness looked slightly grubby on her and Hamish, on Mungo it looked so creamy that you wanted to take a spoon to him.

Jodie had seen the inside of Glasgow Cathedral only once; she had been allowed to go on that particular school trip since she could walk there and it was all free. As the other girls took out their RE notebooks to rub at the stone carvings, Jodie found a stained-glass window of the patron saint, St Kentigern, or as he was colloquially known to Glaswegians, St Mungo. Here St Mungo was depicted as a melancholy boy, cradling a fat salmon, looking sorry that it was dead. Jodie had watched the afternoon light splinter through the saint and cross the dusty cathedral floor and thought of her brother. It was a peaceful window, somehow lonesome. Jodie had sighed before it. It was unlike Mo-Maw to get something so right.

When they were younger and Mo-Maw took them shopping on Duke Street, women would stop to suddenly admire Mungo. "Here now, what a good-looking wee boy ye've got there."

Hamish would step in front of Mungo and say, "Thank you missus, you're no bad looking yersel."

The clumsier of the women would tut and say, "Naw son, *no you.* Him! He's bonny."

Mungo always hated that. He didn't like anyone staring at him. He knew when they got home Hamish would batter him, stuff him between the bed frame and the skirting board, and then just stand on him till he was bored.

Jodie let go of her brother's face. "When you feel the need to pick at yourself you should just sit on your hands."

"C'mon. They make fun of me enough. Can you see me sitting on my hands when my face spazzes out? No fucking way." Mungo bent forward and lifted his sister off her feet. He wore her like a backpack and carried her, giggling, through to the narrow kitchenette. He dropped her in front of the electric cooker. "Feed me, woman."

Jodie extended two fingers and jabbed upwards into his ribs. “That shite doesn’t suit you. So don’t try it. *Haaah-ha.*”

Jodie Hamilton had a nervous tic of her own, although she would never admit to it. It could pass as an affectation, or perhaps girlish nerves, but after certain sentences she would pepper the air with a sputtering, snorting laughter. *Haaah-ha.* It was unexpected. It was odd. It burst forth with a wheeze and died with a chitter. She tried to chew the end off of it, as though her laughter had a tail she could catch in her teeth. When Mungo started his blinking, it elicited sympathy. When Jodie started her laughing, people told her to get a grip on herself.

Mungo knew she was powerless to it; it happened at the worst times, and he saw how it embarrassed his sister. But Mo-Maw said she did it for attention. *Haaah-ha-ha.* She could startle women in quiet post offices. She could make gangs of neds step away from her. Mungo thought it was brilliant, much better than his fidgeting, scratching face, which always made people come closer to get a better look. But Jodie’s tic was pure magic. It pushed people away.

Mungo loved to watch her deliver bad news.

One morning she had found Shingles, Mrs Campbell’s scabby tabby, dead inside the bin sheds, all stiff and covered in maggots. She had wrapped the dead cat in her school jumper and chapped on Mrs Campbell’s door. There were tears on both of their faces as they looked down at the poor, lifeless beast. Mrs Campbell was stroking the bald spot between his mushroom-coloured ears as Jodie was dripping great gobs of tearful snot on to her shirt. “I’m dead sorry, Missus Campbell,” she choked. “I could tell he wisnae right even in the dark there. I think he must have gotten into the rat poison. There was a stinking pool of sick next to his wee face. *Haaah-ha-ha.*” Jodie couldn’t help laughing, even at the worst moments.

Hamish never got himself a tic. When Mo-Maw would rub Mungo’s back to try and calm his anxiety, Mungo watched his brother scowl, and he wondered if Hamish felt a bit left out. He rarely got any special attention from Mo-Maw. Maybe he should get a really unusual tic, like that one that made you fanny around with the electric cooker knob a million times. Mungo could imagine Hamish flicking at the big light switch while the rest of them were trying to eat their dinner. If he had one, his tic would certainly be the biggest nuisance. Or maybe it could be the one that Mungo had seen on the telly. The one where the boy from the Borders screamed the dirtiest things when people least expected it. *Fuckcuntfannybaws* when he was in the church, *Getitupyeyahairypussy* in the

doctor’s office. That tic seemed gallus and violent, perfect for Hamish.

Jodie undid the school tie around Mungo’s forehead. She studied the uncertain weather crossing his face. “What’s going on in that hamster brain of yours?”

“Do you really think Mo-Maw might come home any minute?”

“I don’t know, Mungo. I asked the vet, but he wouldn’t let me put a collar on her.”

“You could be nicer to h—”

“He wouldn’t let me spay her either.” Jodie took two thick slices of white bread from the bread bin, smeared them with margarine, and dusted them with white sugar. She folded a sandwich and handed it to Mungo. “Maybe you could go see Hamish and ask if he’s heard from her. Anyhows, she needs to get her poxy arse back here soon. The council will pap us on the street if she doesn’t.”

“They will?”

“Well, technically you’ll go into a home for waifs and strays and I’ll be put out on the streets. But you get the gist.” Jodie filled two mugs with tap water. “Still think she’s the best mammy ever?”

They spent the afternoon finishing their homework. Jodie did her own quickly and then she helped Mungo with his. He was drawing a diagram of a bee and had mislabelled the thorax and the abdomen. In frustration, she tore the jotter from him and did it herself while she watched the evening news. She had taken the same class only twelve months earlier. She drew it perfectly and barely glanced down at the page.

“Mungo Hamilton,” his Modern Studies teacher often declared, “How come ye cannae be mair lit yer sister?” The little Napoleon had a mass of grey curls that he teased out on all sides in the hopes it might make him more imposing. He spoke in a gruff Glaswegian dialect. Mungo knew he faked it in order to appear authentic to the East End weans, and to subjugate them by sounding like their fathers. Many of the male teachers did this because their proper Queen’s English stank of privilege and always elicited mockery when they raised their voices and tried to control their classrooms. The man drummed his fist on Mungo’s forehead as if he was checking the hull of a leaky boat. “How can’t ye be mair lit Jodie?” Mr Gillespie would pause – he liked an uncomfortably long silence – before he would dismiss Mungo back to his desk with a wave of his stubby hand. “Ah suppose at least yer fuck all like your Hamish, and that’s better than nuthin’.”

Mungo gladly let Jodie do his homework while he sat by the radio and recorded the top forty on to a cassette. When he grew bored of this, he found a balloon in the kitchen drawer and blew it up, then he and Jodie kicked it back and forth without letting it touch the carpet. Once or twice, Jodie swung her leg too hard and her tight pencil skirt caught her other leg and swept her to the floor. While she lay there laughing, he would sit on her chest and pretend to dribble spit on to her face. They didn't wrestle, and eventually their gaze would slide back to the television. Mungo would sit on her for a while, and Jodie would let him, until he became too heavy, or she needed to get up and go pee. She would be late for her shift at Garibaldi's Café; Mungo knew she would have to run all the way down Armadale Street just so Enzo wouldn't scream at her in Italian for twenty minutes straight. Still, here she was, kicking this stupid balloon and ripping the seam of her best skirt just so he wouldn't be lonely without her. She was good like that.

"What are you going to do tonight?" she asked.

"Mibbe walk about for a while."

"You need to try and make some frien …" When she saw his eyes were twitching, she trailed off.

He was standing on the balloon and trying to burst it.

"Listen, I'm not coming home after my shift tonight. Don't worry, I'll find you at lunchtime tomorrow and we can sit together. I promise."

"Where are you going after Garibaldi's?"

"Never you mind." He followed her as she started filling her schoolbag with strange things: hair tongs, corn plasters, a velvet dress she had ironed and hung on the back of the bathroom door. "I'm staying with one of the girls from my History class."

"But who?"

She tapped the end of her nose. There was panic rising inside him and she could see it clear as a bubbling pot. "But I'm not Mo-Maw. I will be back tomorrow. Promise."

"Okay." He tried to not pick at his face but he couldn't help himself.

After Jodie was gone Mungo stood at the window and worried for Mo-Maw some more. To kill the quiet, he took out his sketchbook. Letting his hand glide over the page made him forget himself. Jodie had been the first to notice it. One

day she had grown irritated by his restlessness and had given him one of her old jotters and a half-chewed blue biro. When he couldn't concentrate or grew itchy, she opened it to a blank page, and he drew great sprawling patterns. He never drew figures, he just started in a corner with the indigo ink and let it wander where it would until he had filled the page with intricately swirling, interlocking jacquards: things that looked like peacock feathers, fish scales, or ivy vines, all looping around each other till no whiteness remained. There were wonderful patterns forming in his mind. They could look as ornate as the Bayeux Tapestry or as simple as Ayrshire lace.

But today the blank page could not hold his attention. His mind would not leave his mother alone.

It had been Mo-Maw's turn to mop out the close, which meant it became Jodie's responsibility. For the past two weeks Mungo had watched his sister skitter inside the close mouth and sneak up the stairs before any of the neighbours could open their door and shame her for the stour. It was unfair, Mungo thought: Jodie was run ragged, and all because she had a fanny.

With nothing better to do, he filled the tin bucket and poured globs of Jodie's conditioning shampoo into the water. He started on the top landing, outside Mr Donnelly's door, and washed each stone step on his way downstairs. The close soon smelled tropical with happy bursts of coconut and strawberry chewing gum, but the mop grew slick and several times he had to wash a landing again and again to calm all the bubbles.

The Hamilton family lived on the third floor of a four-storey sandstone tenement. The close wasn't fancy but it was well kept, and everybody went to the bother of leaving a clean doormat outside their door. There were two flats on every landing and each half-landing had a stained-glass window, a simple diamond pattern that let in light from the back green and cast a subdued olive and indigo down the stone stairway.

As he emptied the perfumed water into the gutter he watched gangs of young Proddy boys prowl along the road. They had their jackets zipped open despite the damp cold, and they hung off their thin shoulders in an air of gallus nonchalance. Without exception, they wore their hair parted in the middle and hanging over their eyes in heavy gelled curtains.

"Mungo!" they called at him. They balled up their faces, twisted them like wrung-out tea towels.

Annie Campbell was out on her landing by the time Mungo climbed back up

the stairs. She was rubbing at the stone floor with her foot, her husband's moccasin slipper making a tacky, sucking sound. "Oh! Mungo son, what did ye wash this wi'?"

"Just shampoo, Missus Campbell." He had always liked Mrs Campbell. When they were younger, she had baked cakes. On dreich days, if she had heard them playing in the close, she would give them each a slice of Selkirk bannock and tell them how she missed her own boys, all grown and headed somewhere south to look for work. Mungo knew Mr Campbell used to work for Yarrow Shipbuilding, although he couldn't remember Mr Campbell ever leaving the house for work, not since Thatcher had stopped funding for the Clyde. Now Mr Campbell rotted away in an armchair that faced a hot television, and the Hamilton children slunk against the wall if they ever met him on the stairs.

Mrs Campbell swept Mungo's hair off his face. "Honestly son, ye are all kindness and no common sense." She dug around in her pinny and handed him a fistful of lemon drops. They were all congealed and stuck together as one.

"Ah havnae seen your mammy in a guid while. Is she keeping awright?"

Mungo picked the lint off the blob of sweeties. He wouldn't look at her.

Mrs Campbell sucked thoughtfully at her dentures. She took her cracked hands and put them on his narrow ribs. "Would ye do me a wee favour? Ah'm that used to making big dinners. Ah can never get it right since my boys are away. Would you come inside for a minute and have a plate of mince? It wid break ma heart to put it in the bin." She pulled a face that said it would indeed break her heart if the food was wasted.

Mungo thought about Mr Campbell. It wasn't that he disliked the man. It was just the size of him scared any wean that found themselves in his shadow. Years ago, any time he hung out of the window and scolded one of his own sons, the other children would stop their playing and hang their heads in a moment of silent mourning for the poor condemned Campbell. Something about Mr Campbell made Mungo nervous because he had never grown up with a man in the house.

Although he was hungry, he shook his head. "No thank you, Missus Campbell."

The woman tutted. She grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him through her front door. She looked as wispy as sea haar, but she was made of tough Aberdonian granite. "Ah'm done asking you nice. Ah'll be personally offended if ye refuse ma cooking again."

Mrs Campbell led the boy through to her front room. It was the exact same shape as his own, only one floor lower. Mrs Campbell liked to smoke and keep the windows closed. He had heard her say: Why would she waste something she had paid good money for?

Mr Campbell didn't take his eyes off the television as they entered. They were replaying the highlights from a greyhound race out at Ayr. Mungo watched the long dogs slice through the drizzle as they chased the mechanical rabbit.

Mrs Campbell pushed Mungo into her own armchair. She unfolded a small trestle table and pinned him in while she went to heat up a plate. The wall above the fireplace was covered in photos of the Campbell boys. They showed a time-lapse of sorts, every era of them clearly documented. Smiling, good-natured boys, grinning once a year against the marbled blue of the school photographer's backdrop. They were at least ten years older than Mungo and he didn't remember them too well, but he could tell from the boys' mouths that the photos didn't miss a moment: baby teeth, missing teeth, first big teeth, gappy teeth, and metal teeth. He saw the shy smile of silver braces and then the straight and confident grins of successful young men. Mungo touched his own mouth self-consciously. Mo-Maw wasn't a big believer in dentists.

"Has your mother gone missing again?" Mr Campbell didn't look up at the boy.

"Aye."

"Wummin don't know what nonsense to be up to these days. Too much choice. No doubt she'll show up when she dries out."

"Do you think so?"

"Aye." He scowled at the racing results. "Has your Hamish found work yet?"

"Naw."

Mr Campbell considered this for a moment. "Aye, well. Glasgow's done for. No coal, no steel, no railway works, and no fuckin' shipbuilding." The man's jaw set at a funny angle but he didn't stop watching the racing. "You tell him Mr Campbell said he should join the navy. He should ask to get stationed at Faslane and then drive one of thon nuclear submarines right up Thatcher's cunt."

Mungo tittered with nerves. "Don't you mean John Major's hole?"

Mr Campbell grimaced. "There's submarines enough for the lot of them."

Margaret Thatcher had not been Prime Minister for a couple of years now, even Mungo knew that. Yet every conversation about unemployment and the future still focused its ire on her. Mr Gillespie had told his Modern Studies class

that Margaret Thatcher had been intent on closing all the heavy industry in the city. The English government had been frustrated with the growing power of the trade unions, tired of subsidizing Scotland to compete with cheaper foreign labour. He had said that it was catastrophic to put several generations of the same families out of work: men who had been bred to shape steel would be left to rust, whole communities that grew up around shipbuilding would have no paying jobs. He drew concentric circles like the ripples in a puddle and tried to have the class list the broader effects Thatcher's policies had on the city. How when the collieries closed, it had been the butchers and the greengrocer and the man who sold used cars who had suffered next. Mr Gillespie had said it was bad enough that the Conservatives had killed the city, but that it had been spearheaded by an English woman was an unspeakable insult. What had made her want to neuter the Glaswegian man? A thousand words due a week on Monday.

When Mungo asked Jodie what *neuter* meant, she had said Mr Gillespie drank too much. That if a man was in power, he would never have made the tough decisions that Thatcher had been faced with. Then she asked Mungo if he actually wanted to work down a coal mine?

"Naw."

"Then stop fucking blaming it on women." Jodie picked the chipped polish from her thumbnail. "Besides, ignore the old bastard. None of that Thatcher stuff is on the curriculum. Mr Gillespie is a flabby-arsed Marxist. Do you know how some men build model railways in their spare room? Well youse are his little green soldiers. He sees it as his wee project to stir up the proletariat in the East End, while he drives his Sierra estate to the Marks and Spencer out at Bishopbriggs and spunks his wages on baguettes and Merlot."

Mungo must have been squinting at her because Jodie sighed. "I saw him peeling a kiwi fruit in the staffroom the other week. So, up your arse with his voice-of-the-working-class nonsense."

Mungo bet Jodie would never say that to Mr Gillespie's face.

Mr Campbell was still talking. "Just like the fucking English, eh? First they let boatloads of the starving Irish bastards come over and take all the good work. Then they go and shut all the businesses and leave us jobless and drowning in dirty Fenians." He looked at Mungo now, his eyes were as clear and blue as a June sky. "Aye, very clever of the English that was. That's how ye keep the Scottish lion on its knees."

Mrs Campbell returned with a scalding plate heaped with boiled potatoes swimming in brown mince. The gravy was thick with onions, long and curved as a witch's fingernails. In the middle of the plate were two fluffy doughballs. She smiled as Mungo ate. Mungo chewed as quickly as he could, eager to be away from Mr Campbell. Only when he was finished did she take the trestle table away and free him. The woman dabbed at a gravy stain on his jumper. "That Maureen Hamilton, she was having a bloody laugh when she named you after a saint, eh? The cheek of it. Look at the state of ye." He kissed Mrs Campbell's cheek, his lips felt greasy against the parchment of her skin.

The man pointed at the ceiling but did not look at the boy. "When yer mammy shows her gallus face, ah'll nail her fuckin' feet to your carpet if ye want? That'll soon sort her."

"I'll let you know," said Mungo. He nodded quickly as he went out the door.

Afterwards, Mungo lay on his living room carpet running his hands across his happy belly. The day dimmed early and the orange street lights came to life all across the scheme. He lay there in the afternoon dark, humming to himself.

He heard Mrs Campbell climb up and down the close with her sloshing pail. Her knees cracked as she went. The mop head clipped the hard stone as she rinsed each stair clean of his shampoo. He felt bad to have given her extra work, but her voice echoed as she sang Tammy Wynette to herself and he decided that she sounded content enough.

When she reached the Hamilton landing the woman crouched at his door. The rusted spring whined in protest as she opened the letter box. Her voice was carried in on the draught. He could hear her clearly enough, as though she was in the room with him.

"Mungo Hamilton, ye're a useless wee scunner."

The letter box closed with a snap. Mungo sat up. There was a brief pause before it rasped open. "But I love ye." It snapped closed, and then sprung open again. "Ya wee arsehole."

Garibaldi's Café had been on the same corner for over twenty years. For sixty years before that, it had sat further along the road, at the base of a tenement the council had pulled down during the slum clearances, when they had sent the families to live in the new high-rise flats.

Jodie was out of breath by the time she raced through the front door. Enzo

Garibaldi raised his head as the little bell tinkled. He scowled at the ornate clock that sat amongst his family photos; six generations of stern Italian men wrapped in jolly striped aprons. Jodie knew the clock ran fast but it was hardly worth arguing about. She tucked her schoolbag under the counter and pinned up her hair.

Jodie worked at Garibaldi's most nights after school; scooping hard ice cream into oyster shells and marshmallow-filled wafers, before pouring thick syrupy raspberry sauce over the top of it with a glurp. Garibaldi's ice cream came in only one flavour: sweet full-cream vanilla. Jodie had tasted real vanilla only once, and she knew that Garibaldi's was not vanilla. It was just white sugar and heavy cream, but it made housewives' eyes roll back in their heads and children behave at the mere promise of a pokey cone. There was a reason it had stayed in business for nearly a century; it made your teeth scream with delight.

It was a damp, uneventful evening and she passed the hours by breaking apart bulk crates of ginger so Enzo could sell them individually at a higher price. When Jodie finished her shift she locked herself in the bathroom. She stuffed herself into her velvet dress and then concealed the dress underneath her winter coat before she asked Enzo for an advance on next week's wages.

Enzo liked Jodie; she had the tint of an Italian and reminded him of his own adult daughters, grown and with families of their own. At least once a week he asked if Jodie was still planning on going to university, if her life remained *on track.* It was an odd euphemism, when what he really wanted to know was if she was letting any man get at her. But Jodie was glad that somebody cared to ask, even if she had to remind Enzo that she didn't come from university money.

As she folded her apron, Enzo beamed at her proudly and handed her an advance straight from the till. Then he let her heap two golden oysters for herself, dusted in flake crumbs and smothered in raspberry sauce.

As she crossed Duke Street, the faint rain shimmered like midges in the glow of the street lights. She walked up the hill towards the high school and stood on the corner taking care to hold the dripping ice cream away from her velvet dress.

The man had been parked with his headlights off, waiting patiently for her. When he saw her in the rain, he turned over the engine and pulled alongside the kerb. Jodie got into the car and kissed him. He didn't linger on her lips. He was annoyed that she would bring dribbly ice cream into his new motor. Rolling down his window, he took the oysters from her and dumped them out on to the street. Then he put each of her fingers into his mouth and sucked the cream from

her knuckles.

Before him, Jodie had never been outside of Glasgow; she had rarely been out of the East End. She knew the West End was not for the likes of her, with its gothic spires and ancient university and outdoor cafés with vegetarian menus, and she never went to the South Side because Hamish had scared her with lies of what the Pakistani men would do to a wee white lassie like her.

As he drove her across the Kingston Bridge the city was illuminated below her and she felt alive. They flew over the lights so quickly that in moments like this she believed she could belong anywhere, not just in a council tenement looking after her little brother. Jodie curled up into the leather seat and allowed herself the daydream of a life at college, maybe not a university, but a good trade school, a technical college like the Building and Printing school or Cardonald with its plumbers and hairdressers.

The man took her hand in his and kissed the back of it. As the lights fell away she put her trust in him. She knew he wanted the same bright future for her. He had told her many times how clever she was, and that when she had her education, they could be together, even in the bright daytime, somewhere far away from Glasgow and the eyes of his wife.

Mungo pulled on his cagoule. It was a royal-blue ski jacket that he needed to wrangle over his head because the zipper only went halfway down and butted into a large kangaroo pocket. He loved this jacket. He could carry all manner of things in the pocket, which opened with a Velcro flap at the top and you had to twist your body to reach inside. Often he found things, pocketed them, and then forgot about them for weeks until they brushed against his fingers again. When Hamish hung him by the ankles, his entire world would spill out like a confession.

For a while he wandered along familiar streets, winding back and forth, looking for a glimpse of Mo-Maw, lying to himself that he was not. The streets were narrow and the tenements were tall, making each road feel sunken, deep as a sandstone gorge. The sky was small here. It was hard to see what was coming over the horizon until it was directly above you. He had spent his whole life on these streets and some days it could make him feel like a mouse in a maze. He knew there was nowhere you could walk without people looking down at you, watching the sameness of the weather, passing the slow time. It was hard to feel

alone.

The worst of the watchers was Mr Ogilvy. Ogling Ogilvy led the local Orange marching band and either he or his twin sons would stand at their window practising their fife and drums and letting the thin glazing shake in its putty. Today, the Ogilvy twins wore their regimental blues and their jaunty Tam-o'-Shanters. In their white gloves they looked as neat as porcelain ornaments, children dressed as romantic, hateful Union soldiers. The sharp song of their flutes carried out over the tenements, and behind them, echoing off the stone walls was the *thoom, thoom, thoom* of the Lambeg drum. Ogling Ogilvy hammered the heavy oak battle drum, and it thundered off the sandstone as the shrill piccolos played the melody to "The Sash My Father Wore." Two men had stopped and leaned on the rusted fence to listen, their eyes wet with whisky. Mungo hurried past the Ogilvys'. *Thoom, thoom, thoom* went his footsteps. He knew Ogling Ogilvy watched his every move. He knew he thought him a great disappointment to the Protestant cause.

Frowning, he reached the large patch of scabrous grass that separated the old tenements from the damp flats the council built in the sixties. The city planners had angled the new flats away from the greenery. They had faced them towards the motorway because they had thought that's what people would have wanted to see: progress, not skinny weans playing in the smirr. Mungo loitered a while and was happy for a moment to be unobserved. The grass was worn bald and muddy, and bands of older boys were playing football, running up and down after a half-deflated bladder. They had organized shivering girls into clusters of three or four and were using them as wide goalposts. Every now and then the ball would ricochet off the face of one of these girls, and she would fake tears until the required boy came and clamped his chapped mouth over hers.

On the other side of the waste ground, younger boys had collected discarded wood, old doors, and bits of broken furniture. They had dragged it all the way here and assembled the scraps into dens. Eight or nine of these makeshift homes clustered together like a shanty town and Mungo watched little boys go around making repairs and improvements to their castles. As he watched their industry, he was reminded of a video the substitute teacher had played in school to show the inner workings of a beehive. He knew some of the boys had hard men for fathers and they had brothers in the jail. He had heard that boys as young as eleven could make swords and charge at bands of Catholics who came on to their scheme: they split skulls, they slashed faces, they stabbed Fenians twice

their height and all for the chuckles of it. As he watched them cooperate building their dens, it was easy to forget the cheerful violence they were capable of.

Mungo kept his head low and passed by the new flats. The pebble-dash facing was so porous that even on dry days it looked like it was leaching rainwater back into the world. On the far side, behind fifteen-foot walls, was a builder's yard. The builders had ringed the top of the wall in barbed wire, but the local boys would not be deterred.

Mungo watched a cluster of young men mount their attack on the wall. They had roped together two of their mammy's wallpapering ladders and someone had stolen the duvet off their little sister's bed. They wanted to get in because inside were great beasts of heavy JCB machines that could be climbed and smashed and destroyed. Sometimes, inside the cabin of one of the diggers, a workman would forget his tools and the boys would take the bag full of hammers and spanners and make great plans to weaponize them back at the tenements.

Best of all was the time someone left the keys for the JCB digger in the ignition. The Protestant boys took the digger, and after ramming it into other machinery drove it clean through the padlocked gate and up and down the back streets. They were lifting a bucketful of young men up to a second-storey window to peep in at a chubby girl when her mother finally called the polis.

Mungo watched the young men prop their rigged ladders against the wall. Their leader selected the smallest of them to climb the length of it and test it for sturdiness. A ginger-headed youth wrapped a teddy bear blanket around himself and scaled the shaking ladders. When he was high enough to kill himself, the other young men took turns at kicking the bottom of it. It must have been a great entertainment, for they were whooping and betting money on him cracking his skull. They grouped together and pushed the ladder away from the wall. For a moment it stood on its own and the ginger youth teetered with the promise of a broken back. He let out a pathetic howl. The ringleader cut through the others and with one hand he pushed the ladder back against the wall.

"Fuckin' pack it in," threatened Hamish.

The ginger boy blanched and wilted like stewed cabbage. He flattened the barbed wire under the teddy bear blanket and stood a while checking for the security guard before he scaled the wall and dropped on to the corrugated roof beyond. Mungo crossed the waste ground and stood next to his brother as the others climbed their siege ladder.

Hamish half-nodded in greeting. He was watching his troops very closely.

Mungo knew he would give them harsh feedback later; he ran a neat, ambitious little army. It was important to expose the inadequacies of the men in front of the other men, for it kept them divided. It kept them trying their hardest.

To Mungo, his brother was simply Hamish – Hamey if he was feeling especially brave. But to his troops he was Ha-Ha, or the Big Man, despite his disappointing height. Ha-Ha watched the last of the troops scale the ladder before he addressed Mungo. “Whit’s happenin’ gobshite?”

“Nothing.” Mungo shrugged. “Have you seen Mo-Maw?”

Ha-Ha shook his head. He looked up at Mungo through his thick government lenses, his eyes tiny behind the yellowing glass. As a boy he had been embarrassed by his free tortoiseshell frames, but Mungo knew his brother had mastered this shame, and now relished the chance of anyone calling him a speccy cunt so he could surprise them with the swiftness of his violence. Hamish loved traps: he particularly enjoyed the suspended moment when someone ran off a cliff and didn’t know they were about to fall to their doom. He came to appreciate how his glasses disarmed strangers. Other men would foolishly let the wee wide-o in the pensioner’s glasses get too close, and still thought they could get the better of him, right up until he was shattering their teeth on the kerb edge.

Hamish was not tall, but he was always ready and never, ever scared to hit first. He was wearing his denim jacket and a pair of jeans that were an identical shade of blue. He had buttoned the jacket up to the throat and turned the collar up. On his feet he wore a pair of triple stripe Sambas that looked brand new. Nothing on him was given to fat, every tissue was sinew and muscle. Everything was pulled in tight like he was ready to bolt. Ha-Ha never ran.

“On ye go.” Ha-Ha pointed up at the rickety ladder.

Mungo stepped back.

“How?”

Mungo knew his face was electric. “I’m no in the mood.”

Ha-Ha wrapped a hand around the back of Mungo’s neck. He was going to say something further but instead he thrust his brother at the ladder and Mungo found himself scaling it.

The builder’s yard was not large. The industrial vehicles were packed tight, like pieces of a board game in a box. It was all very neat and orderly: mixers, spreaders, heavy steam rollers, and sitting in the middle, like a band of brontosauruses, were the long-necked excavators.

The key to success at the builder’s yard was not to raid it too often. If you

thieved from it too frequently then the foreman would install a temporary night watchman to protect the equipment. He was always a temp, because the Protestant boys would not think twice about stabbing him, so it was hard for the foreman to retain someone full-time. However, if they raided it only once or twice a year, it became a strange sort of parasitic relationship. The boys smashed and stole what they liked, and the foreman claimed the damage on insurance and still came out in the black in his account books. Hamish knew there were times the canny foreman used the raids to replace outdated models, or tools that were half-broken and would cost more to mend than to replace. Hamish had seen him once, in the Louden Tavern, and the man had nodded a faint head bob of respect. Twice a year, no more. It was still cheaper than hiring a night watchman.

The young Protestants were standing on the corrugated roof of the main building; their breath misted the air as though they were a string of Eriskay ponies. Mungo watched their eyes scour the builder's yard. None of the horses moved until Ha-Ha scaled the wall. He stood amongst them like a general, a stone-washed emperor.

"Hallo, Hallo, we are the Billy boys.
Hallo, Hallo, ye'll know us by our noise.
We're up to our knees in Fenian blood, surrender or ye'll die.
For we are the Brigton Billy boys."

Ha-ha knew what he was doing. The Orange song filled them with pride. Any fear the half-men harboured vanished on hearing it.

One by one they dropped off the guttering and hit the gravel like spears of rain. Mungo turned to his brother but Hamish had vanished, and Ha-Ha was in no mood to talk to him. He was watching his soldiers make the first sweep, seeing what could be soundlessly liberated, before the fun of the smashing started. Then Ha-Ha shoved his brother and Mungo hooked his hands on to the tin guttering and dropped the fourteen feet to the ground.

The youths were ripping things out of the cabins now, tearing up owner's manuals and carelessly tossing screws like shrapnel. Of all the things they did, this was the part that Mungo hated the most. He could understand the theft – stolen things were useful – but this was just mindless destruction. The ginger-headed boy had found a bright orange hard hat; it dwarfed him and made him look like a wean who was terminally sick. Mungo watched him hammer his head into the side window of a steamroller. He did it again and again until the glass

cracked and he could push the rest of it in with his elbow.

Ha-Ha never came down to the ground. From time to time the squad would throw things up to him, forgotten wrenches or a rusting spirit-level. Behind his thick glasses he watched everything like a tawny osprey. He pointed from his perch and the boys scurried off, searching for the shadow of his talon.

One of the squad was being too considerate in rifling through a toolbox. He was sitting in the raised bucket of a digger, as comfortable as a new settee. He was a tall youth who wore his mousy hair long on the sides and softly feathered over his eyes. Mungo knew that he occasionally spoke in the Queen's English – not *hame* but *home*, not *didnae* but *did not* – and that it slipped out of him when he was tired. He had a proud mother and a working father who still lived at home. The others teased him for it. Ha-Ha's voice boomed over the gravel. "Haw Prince Charles! Can ah bring ye a cup o' tea? Ya fuckin' poofter."

The marauders stopped what they were doing, fearful that he should be naming one of them a deviant, an aberration amongst decent men. Ha-Ha pointed his finger directly at the youth and shook his head in shame. "Stop fuckin' wasting time like ye were choosin' carrots to shove up yer arse." The mousy boy scattered the toolbox as he tried to reclaim his manhood. The others tittered and went about ransacking the place with a sense of relief. There was nothing more shameful than being a poofter; powerless, soft as a woman.

Mungo hid in the darkened cabin of a backhoe, safe from Ha-Ha's glare. He watched the mousy-haired boy flush scarlet and then spray the box of brackets everywhere with a malicious kick. The others scavenged all the weapons and tools they could and when they were done, they started their smashing. A ruddy-faced youth swung a fence post off the window of the excavator. The safety glass made a satisfying crunch.

When they grew tired of this, they moved on to the third stage, and, reverting to children again, they played. The young men climbed on to the roof of the smallest of the loaders and made a great circuit of jumping from one to the other, never touching the ground. They ran this obstacle course of follow-my-leader and climbed higher and higher. They found new ways to make it more dangerous. They took it in turns to climb the angled neck of the brontosaurus excavators, they crept upwards to the bucket and then they leapt, gliding through the air to the roof of a backhoe. If they missed, then it was a twenty-foot plummet to the ground. But they flew across the night sky like fearless angels, their tracksuits flapping behind them like flightless wings.

The machinery was wet with rain. Mungo watched as some of the boys slipped on the angled neck of the brontosaurus. One or two overshot the jump and slid across the wet backhoe only to catch themselves at the very last moment on the raised rubber seal of a window. It always made the others hold their breath and fall silent for a moment. As the lucky boy hauled himself to his feet they would whoop for their own immortality.

Ha-Ha stood on the roof smoking a short dout. He had transformed from an emperor to a bored dad who hated having to share custody. It was as though he was watching his weans work off a day of sugary treats before he could return them to their mothers. It was because Mungo was watching his brother that he saw the sky change. Ha-Ha saw it too, the rhythmic pulse of blue and white. The police cars had crept nearer without wailing their sirens. Now they were at the gates. Ha-Ha had let his weans play too long.

Mungo spilled from the tin-can cabin and started the quick climb from front wheel to back wheel to engine mount to roof. He was bounding across the yard as the polis burst through locked gates. Around him the squad leapt from the long excavator arm and raced to the guttering and on to the safety of the roof. They were squealing like six-year-olds at a fairground as they danced away from the bogeyman's grasp. Only when they reached the safety of the roof and the dauntless protection of Ha-Ha did they straighten up and become men again. They arched their backs and showered the polis with phlegm.

Six policemen arrived in two Rovers and one battered detention van. They caught one of the slower boys who jumped unwittingly into an officer's arms. He held him for a moment like they were startled lovers.

The ginger-headed youth twisted on the neck of the excavator, slunk to his nylon backside, and was about to slide down and away from the polis. Mungo was almost at the guttering when he saw the boy fall. The metal must have been wetter than he had thought, and he slipped off the high arm as gracelessly as a bag of flour falling off a shelf.

He didn't split open like a bag of flour and he didn't cry out, but by the way his arm crumpled beneath him and the odd angle of his hand, Mungo could tell he had broken his wrist, maybe even shattered his forearm.

Mungo could hear Hamish call his name as he rained rocks and shrapnel down on the polis. If Mungo stood up now, he could climb swiftly and be on the corrugated roof before they could catch him. "Jist leave him!" Hamish roared. It would be foolish not to run – the polis must have clocked all the boys – and even

if they hadn’t seen Mungo, they certainly had seen the bag of flour plummet to his doom. They would come looking for the burst boy soon enough.

Mungo heard the clatter of feet on the corrugated roof, the bravado and taunts retreating, and he knew the others were back over the wall and running for the safety of the scheme. They were leaving him.

The ginger youth was hard-hatless now, and there was a shallowness to his breathing. Mungo gripped him below his oxters and dragged him underneath the backhoe. It was dark away from the security lights, and they watched as police torches streaked the ground. The young man was whimpering. Mungo put his hand over his mouth. Any other time he would have leathered Mungo for touching him like this. Now he lay with his head cradled in Mungo’s side and they watched the police lights strafe between the vehicles. Mungo recognized him then: he was Bobby Barr, the older brother of a boy in Mungo’s class, the unlikely father of twins, and a famed destroyer of virginities. Now there was blood pooling out his jumper sleeve and from the smell Mungo could tell he had ruined himself with piss.

Other than the soft crunch of gravel it was quiet. The polis were stalking and had switched off the crackling static of their radios. Bobby was sobbing quietly to himself. Mungo’s face short-circuited in the darkness. *“Don’t leave us.”* Mungo could feel the words reverberate through the palm of his hand; the boy’s tears were pooling in the gullies of his fingers.

Torchlight streaked under the backhoe. There were hard hands on Bobby Barr’s ankles. A policeman ripped him out in one smooth move, and the boy rolled away on the chuckie stones, like a mechanic on a wheel board. Bobby’s good arm was ruined and his other was cradling it like a baby, so he could offer no resistance. Whoosh. He was gone, fast as any magic trick.

“There’s another fuckin’ basturt in there,” screamed an officer.

Mungo pushed away from the light and scrambled across the stones towards the other end. He could hear them closing in on him, two on either side, running along the long sides of the machine. He found his footing, he wasn’t as agile as the other boys who leapt like skinny cats from machine to machine, but Mungo was on the cab before the polis could round the corner. He knew he would never make the safety of the guttering; as his legs hung down, they would grab at him. So he made the half-turn to run for the open gate, but they cut him off. He was trapped.

“Ye little basturt. When ah catch ye, ah’m gonnae fuck ye!” A smug smile

spread over the officer's face. He was climbing up towards Mungo while the others blocked his escape. "Ah'm gonnae fuck ye. Ah'm gonnae fuck ye." He was chanting it over and over.

Hamish would have told him the officer only wanted to break his nerve. That he wanted to belittle and intimidate him so that Mungo would come down from the roof and offer no resistance. But Hamish wasn't here.

"Ye'll like it," said the policeman. "If ye come down the now, ah'll spit on it first, so it hurts less." They were laughing amongst themselves now. He could hear the polis both protest and congratulate the officer on how rotten he was. "Ye goat any sisters?"

Mungo scurried higher.

There was a thud in the dark. He wasn't sure what had caused it. But whatever hit the officer stopped his taunting, sweeping his cap off his head and knocking him against the side of a mixer. There was dark blood on his face, as black as treacle in the gloaming. There were bits of him sprayed over the yellow steel of the machinery.

Ha-Ha was back at the top of his ladder and launching half-bricks down on the policemen. Mungo knew the Protestants had a stash for gang fights and were now passing them phalanx-style up the ladder to their emperor. Ha-Ha had a skilled arm for smiting.

"Well? Run, ya fuckin' bellend!"

Mungo saw his chance. He flew down from the roof and was out the open gate as a hail of bricks sent the policemen scurrying under machinery. At first he ran past it, then he skidded to a stop and dashed back to the meat wagon. He threw open the back doors. He didn't wait for the captured boys, but he heard the reassuring slap of trainer soles as they raced, lungs bursting, through the wet streets.

THREE

St Christopher was hunched by the edge of the loch, mumbling to himself and swatting at the biting midges. Mungo couldn't tell if he was sulking or just sobering up. The man had his back to them and was hunkered over like he might submerge his face or spit up the rising boak. The wind mussed his thin hair; it broke the lock of sweat and pomade and separated the tawny brown from an inch of pure-white roots. His vanity struck the boy. The old man had coloured it like Mo-Maw did, from a supermarket box. He must have sat on the toilet at home with a black bin bag over his shoulders to catch the drips.

Mungo could see he had already unpacked all the remaining alcohol and nestled it between two boulders in the frigid loch. A man with a single suit, and a bag full of drink. As easy as that he was settled.

Mungo gathered sticks and Gallowgate showed him how to make a weak, coughing fire from damp wood and green limbs. They huddled upwind and let the billowing smoke drive the black flies away. Mungo added moss-covered branches until the fire danced brightly. Each time he added one, he looked at the man to see if it was okay. Gallowgate unwrapped three lasagnes that had long ago defrosted, and buried their aluminium basins in the glowing embers. Mungo pressed his hands to his empty stomach.

St Christopher held his distance. Away from the firelight it became a sleekit kind of dark. It was as though the sky wanted to be like the quiet loch: it crept in shades towards the water, until the sky and the loch became one, and St Christopher was swallowed by the inky night.

"That's a funny name. Mun-*go*," said Gallowgate. He was sucking on a bent dout. He had crushed the hand-rolled cigarettes in the back pocket of his tight denims and amber tobacco escaped from the creases in the paper.

"I suppose." Mungo watched him cover the holes with his fingers, skilled as

any flautist. “My father was a Nationalist. He wanted his boys to have traditional Scottish names.”

“Aye, but Mun-go. Ah mean, for *fuck’s sake,* that’s pure child abuse.”

“St Mungo. He was the patron saint of Glasgow. He started a fire from nothing, or … something, I don’t really know.” His understanding of the Glasgow myths was streaked with embarrassment. He couldn’t count the times he had been dragged to the front of the classroom to read the history of the city aloud, blushing at the sound of his own voice, retaining not a single word of what he read.

The first time they had called him Mungoloid, he had come home in tears. Jodie had hidden with him in the hot airing cupboard. He was soothed by the happy click and whirr of the gas immersion as she dried his face on Mo-Maw’s winter coat. She had told him about the myths of St Mungo: the bird that never flew, the tree that never grew, the bell that never rang, the fish that never swam. Of all the legends, he liked the one about the bird the best; how St Mungo had brought the little robin back to life after it had been killed by the cruel children. Jodie said that was his power, that after their father died, he gave life back to Mo-Maw when she had given up on it for herself. He loved Jodie. He forgave her when she lied to him.

Gallowgate raised his can in salute. His eyes were rheumy with drink. “It’s a marvellous thing. Here, ah thought ah was only scum but turns out ah’m a blessed man indeed. Oh, to be protected by two saints on this fine bank holiday weekend. One to carry me safely across the water. The other to light ma fires as we go.” He drummed his fist against his heart. “If only ah could find another to gies a loan of some money. Then ah’d be fuckin’ whistlin’.”

St Christopher came shivering out of the darkness. He waited on the very edge of the light, like a shy guest at a house party. Gallowgate belched, beckoned the man to find a rock to sit on. It was embarrassing to watch St Christopher pretend like he hadn’t been sulking, to watch him try and catch the conversation, jump back on to it like it was a galloping horse. His feet were meatless and bloodless. The water was so cold they shone smooth as blue porcelain.

As St Christopher thawed by the fire, there was a smell of turned milk, and underneath that, something that smelled like dried goldfish flakes. Gallowgate wrinkled his nose, shifting upwind slightly to lie against the bothy wall. Mungo watched as he lifted his shirt and ran a hand across his taut, distended belly; even there, he was inked with words, signed like the inside flap of a school jotter.

They sat drinking by the fire long enough for their eyes to begin streaming from the smoke. As each new lager splashed open, the conversation darkened and ratcheted downward. For Mungo it was like walking down a tenement close: every flight they descended, it got darker, the lights were less bright.

"… So, ah took hold of her and she was pure gaggin' for it," Gallowgate was explaining in the firelight. "She telt me that her husband knew whit she was up to and didnae mind. So, ah thought to masel, if this cunt disnae mind then ah'm no going tae worry about leaving marks, eh?"

Mungo drew his knees up to his chest again. He didn't like the way the man was licking the back of his own teeth.

"So, whit did ye dae?" St Christopher spat, un-saintly, eager for the dirty details.

"Well, ah've got haud of her." Gallowgate leaned closer to the boy. "An' she's got oan this wee blue nightie, one of them cuddly kittens printed on the front. Ah didnae bother to undress her cos she was no Easter lamb ye understand, sometimes it's better no tae chance it. So, ah just got stuck in. Started going for it." His eyes were opals in the firelight. He held out a cupped hand. "Ye know. Ah was rubbing away. Feeding the wee horse."

The question slipped out of Mungo. "Wait, the lady had a horse?"

The men blinked at him. They roared with laughter. "Naw, wee man. Her lady bits, her fanny. Next time ye put your hand over one, see if it disnae feel like a pair of horse lips."

St Christopher rattled his own lips and made a neighing sound.

Gallowgate laughed, the short dout hanging out the side of his mouth. Mungo had done it again, failed to see the difference between what someone said and what they truly meant. He could feel his eyes start their nervous blink. He tried to laugh through the tic, eager to stay on the inside and not the outside of it all.

St Christopher had no time for the boy. "Then whit?"

"So, ah put her on the couch and we start doing it, like *really* doing it, right? An ah'm up to ma nuts in her guts and she goes like, '*Ooooh let's go upstairs and do it in the bedroom.*'" He hauched into the fire, the spit sizzled a second and then disappeared. "So here's me, ah carry her up the stairs like she was an auld coat stuck on a peg."

Mungo thought about the coat hooks they had made in techy class at school. Twisted *G*-shaped metal pegs, heated and dipped in powder coating and screwed to cheap wood. He bit down on his bottom lip.

St Christopher slapped his leg. “Ye’re a dirty basturt.”

“Ah get her up the stairs and ah must’ve gone into the wrong room, cos this is a teenager’s bedroom. But she’s clawing at me, and we’re gaun for it.”

“She’s a filthy besom, right enough,” said the saint. Mungo wondered if he knew this woman.

“Well ah’ve bent her over and ah’m doin’ her on the single bed.” Gallowgate stood up and began thrusting his hips in and out of the firelight. His pale face was bloated with alcohol, it floated like a moon in the sky. “And just then ah look at her carpet and ye’re no gonnae believe it, right?”

“Whit? *Whit!*”

Gallowgate stepped closer to the firelight. He arched his back, and Mungo could see the swollen outline in his denims where his meat lay pressed against his hip bone. Mungo lowered his gaze. Gallowgate took a draw on his dout, holding the tension, savouring the impatience of his saints. “Well, as it turns out, ah’ve only bloody tacked out and laid that floral carpet in her daughter’s room the year afore.”

“Aye. *So?*”

“A guid carpet-fitter never forgets his work. It turns oot ah had shagged her wee lassie on it as well.” Gallowgate tossed his head back in a smug way. He exhaled like a proud chimney.

It took a minute, then St Christopher let out a howl like a punctured dog. “Ah, ya dirty basturt.” His broken teeth looked dangerously sharp. He slapped his knee.

“Well. Ah’ve got nae memory for cunts. But ah never forget a well-laid carpet.”

Mungo didn’t understand the joke. He was glancing from one man to the other, but he knew now not to ask.

“Fifteen she wis. A wee ride just like her maw.” Gallowgate took a bottle of whisky from the plastic carrier bag. He drank it down in gulps as though it were only ginger ale. “Ah learned early, it’s the big fancy houses that ye’ve got tae watch out for. Wummin who nag their husbands for double glazin’ probably aren’t getting whit they really want.” He grabbed at the front of his denims, stroked himself, then throttled it, like he was trying to strangle it.

St Christopher stopped his howling. “Ah didnae know ye fitted carpets.”

“Carpets. Kitchens. Teenage daughters. You name it. Ah fit it.” He chuckled to himself.

St Christopher nodded in quiet respect. “Must be grand, to be a young man with everything to play for.”

“Aye, well. Ah’ve always been good with ma hands.” Gallowgate wrapped his knuckles on the side of his head. “It’s the rest of me that’s been a fuckin’ disappointment.”

“Still, you’ve yer whole life ahead of ye.” St Christopher reached for the whisky like a child demanding a bottle, his feeble fingers grasping the air. Gallowgate handed it to him and when he stopped his gulping and gasping he wiped his mouth and said, “Ye should never have been in Barlinnie in the first place. A young man like you, in jail?”

Mungo had seen Barlinnie Prison before. He had heard Mo-Maw threaten Hamish with it when he got too close to the law, with his stolen motors and bags of contaminated speed. He had seen it strike a muted fear into his brother.

Mungo’s face must have framed a question because Gallowgate was watching him before swivelling his eyes back towards the saint. “What the fuck did ye have to go tell the boy that fur?” Gallowgate flicked his dout at the man. “Ye’ll frighten the wee fella.” But something in his grin told Mungo he wasn’t angry with St Christopher. Nor would he mind frightening Mungo.

“Tell him whit?” The man hopped to his bare feet. He did a jangly dance as he searched for the lit cigarette in the folds of his dirty suit.

“That we were in the *jail*.” Gallowgate turned a sneering smile towards Mungo. “He’ll think he’s out here with a pair of right jakeys.”

Mungo picked at the scab on his knee. He pretended to be engrossed in it. “What did you get the jail for?”

“Breaking and entering,” said Gallowgate quickly. Something about him looked like he was lying, but Mungo could not tell for sure. “It was an accident. Ah fell through a skylight right into a warehouse. By the time ah found the exit ma arms were loaded with four dozen fitba tops.”

The saint made a noise like he wanted to contradict him, but Gallowgate kicked at the pebbles and sent a shower of them flying in the man’s direction. The swiftness of it made Mungo jump. “Aye. Breaking and entering, right enough,” agreed the saint reluctantly. Something about how he said it made Gallowgate snicker.

“How about you?” asked Mungo. His scab peeled away from the skin. “Why were you in the jail?”

The saint looked at Gallowgate and then back to the boy. He did not answer.

Gallowgate spoke for the man. “Vagrancy.”

St Christopher looked offended but said nothing.

“They put you in jail for *that?*” said Mungo.

“Well, that and ugliness.” Gallowgate laughed as he pulled the charred lasagne containers from the ashes. “Who’s hungry?”

They were forced to wait a long time before the lasagne trays were cool enough to handle. The conversation ebbed as the men tried to eat around the burnt sections of meat and rubbery cheese. St Christopher put his dinner to the side like he was not interested. He took up the whisky again and filled his belly. Mungo thought the food tasted smoky and delicious. As the pasta expanded in his gut, he stared into the fire and thought about the jail and that poor woman and her horse. By the time he had swallowed the last of his dinner he was feeling heavy, tired from all the fresh air. His face must have been twitching freely because Gallowgate was staring straight at him.

“Ye must take some shite for that at school?”

“Sometimes,” said Mungo. He put his hand to his cheek and as the flesh twitched he began to pick at it with an index finger. He could feel the skin lifting away as he rubbed.

“Stop rubbing at yersel,” said Gallowgate. “How does that help?” The man came closer. “Move your hand, ah want to look at it.” Gallowgate cupped Mungo’s chin in his rough palm. He tilted his face towards the firelight. “Ah think it’s a wonder.”

“Don’t laugh at me.” Mungo tried to pull away from the rough hand.

“No, seriously. It’s like your face has a mind of its own. It’s showing what you feel on the inside without ye even asking it.” Gallowgate turned Mungo’s cheek to the fire. The small patch where the boy rubbed at his skin was dry and chafed along the high bone of his cheek. He ran his finger gently across the bone. “Does this help?”

“No.” Mungo sank into himself and slid out of Gallowgate’s grip.

Gallowgate winced as though he had heartburn. “Imagine. God gives ye a beautiful face. Then he does that to fuckin’ spoil it. What a spiteful bastard.”

“Cruel!” sang St Christopher.

“Poor wee Mungo. Ye’re wound so fuckin’ tight.” Gallowgate tilted his face towards the distant moon. Then he let out a sudden, terrible howl. It made Mungo want to run. Gallowgate lowered his smiling face to the boy, his sharp incisors snagged on his bottom lip. “Howl wi’ me.”

Mungo shook his head. Gallowgate stood up and held out a hand to the boy. He pulled him into the night. “Howl. Ye’ll feel better.”

Mungo tilted his head back. He hadn’t noticed, but the sky wasn’t absolutely black after all. There were stars in every corner you could see. Even when he thought he found an empty patch of nothingness his eyes adjusted and the sky filled with frosted stars and then what looked like the cream left by stars. He had never seen the night sky like this before. He had never seen it so cloudless, without the soft orange filter from the lights of the scheme.

He howled once. A timorous sound that hurried away at the end, his chin falling to his chest.

“No like that. Lit *this.*” Gallowgate inhaled, he swallowed the night. Then he howled like a monster. It ruptured the stillness and made Mungo long for the return of silence. He peered into the dark loch, fearful that something might reply.

Gallowgate gave up. “Awright, if you won’t howl, then jump the fire.” He took a small run and leapt over the embers. “C’mon!”

St Christopher had been enjoying their foolishness but at this he sat up. “Take that nylon jacket off first, son, or ye’ll be wearing it for life.”

Mungo cast off his blue cagoule and could feel the chill coming off the loch. Stepping into the darkness he took a running leap and flew over the flames. He cleared the dying fire easily, relieved that he didn’t embarrass himself. Something like happiness thawed out the cold inside of him. He followed Gallowgate in a looping jumping circle, the two whooping like a pair of maddies. The stars, the fire, the deep loch, it suddenly felt all right and for a moment he forgot all about Glasgow. He forgot why he had been sent away with these men.

They jumped the fire for a time, until Gallowgate started bumping into Mungo, and they were colliding in mid-air, moshing each other the way headbangers liked to do. Mungo stopped his jumping, pretending to have a stitch. Gallowgate sprawled out upon the shingle. He opened a can of Tennent’s and nudged it towards the boy. “I’ll boil ye some water in the mornin’ but drink this for the now. It’ll help ye sleep.”

Mungo realized he hadn’t drunk anything all day, no loch water, no milky tea. He sniffed the can with its familiar yeasty smell. He could feel the men watching him nurse it, but he was wary of the drink. He had seen the awful sadness it contained, just beneath the happy foam. Slowly, he raised the can to his lips, the

first sip soothed his parched throat, but the thick oaty taste made the boak in him rise. The men nodded in approval. Mungo found if he took a mouthful of the beer and held it in his mouth before letting it trickle down his throat, then it was less sickening, tasted less like mildew. If he sucked and sloshed it back and forth between the little gaps in his teeth, it lost its bloated heavy feeling and became like stale, sour dishwater.

The men passed the whisky back and forth, as Mungo stripped young branches for the flames. After a time, he turned his cold kidneys to the fire; there was nothing beyond this pool of dim firelight. His eyes were growing heavy when St Christopher spoke again. “So huv ye goat any pubes yet?”

The lager emboldened him. “Is that all you two talk about? Fannies and fitba and pubes?”

“It’s just banter between the boys.” Gallowgate snickered. “How auld are ye again?”

“I told you. Nearly sixteen.”

“So ye’ve got plenty pubes?”

“Mibbe,” Mungo sneered. “None of your business, is it?”

“No shame in becoming a man, ya big hairy beast. Happens to all of us.” Gallowgate held out his hand in the American way for the boy to slap it. “Here, put it there big man.”

Tired now, Mungo reached out for the high five. In a swift move Gallowgate grabbed the boy’s wrist and with a wrench he spun the boy on to his lap and choked his forearm around Mungo’s throat. The violence was sudden, his can of lager went rolling into the darkness. Mungo forgot about the stars and the firelight. Gallowgate took his thick fingers and stuck them in between Mungo’s ribs. He found the old hurt. “If ah ask ye a question don’t be so bloody cheeky.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

The man released him as quickly as he had grabbed him. Mungo scrambled to his feet. He stood apart from the men for a long time, his eyes bloodshot from the smoke. He dared not rub them.

“Don’t spaz out, wee man,” Gallowgate gurned. He mocked Mungo’s mutinous face. “Ah was only having a laugh.”

St Christopher sat slurping his can and grinning like a halfwit.

Mungo didn’t want to look like a baby, so he tried a casual laugh and pretended to be in on the joke. “Good one, Gallowgate.” He felt the impression of Gallowgate’s fingers still there, still on his skin, pressing into his tender side.

Mungo slid into the darkness, pretended to go piss into the loch. As his eyes adjusted, the water gleamed the same colour as the sky, but it glistened slightly in the moonlight, the sky matte above it. The wind coming off the loch smelled like rain. Mungo waited at the water's edge a long time. He watched the illuminated men like they were part of a diorama: they drank, they smoked, they peered out at nothing. He was forming sentences in his mind, how to fold himself back into the group, when Gallowgate shouted at the dark, announced it was time for bed. St Christopher nodded in agreement.

Mungo emerged from the darkness and made for the red tent by the water with the single sleeping bag inside. Gallowgate tutted and said something about the wild deer and pointed him to the two-man tent inside the bothy. The boy was too tired to sulk. The sour lager gurgled in his belly and he lingered as Gallowgate stamped on their little fire with the heel of his trainer. Gallowgate pointed again towards the tent in the bothy. He watched with all the authority of a father as the boy crawled inside.

Mungo lay there in his football shorts and his blue anorak, scratching the midge bites on his legs. The ground beneath him was cold as kitchen tile and his heart sank as he thought again how he had no warmer clothes to change into, tonight or tomorrow. Rubbing his cold knees, he slithered into a sleeping bag, balling his fists and jamming his hands between his legs for warmth. It was no use. The earth below him was greedy; as fast as his body could burn, the stones leached the heat away from him.

At first, he mourned for the other, smaller tent with only one sleeping bag in it, but now in the pitch-black he was glad not to be alone. There was something terrifying about what might lurk in the loch beyond the fire, and the night was surprisingly cold. Mungo balled up for warmth. His eyes grew heavy as he waited for one of the men to come to bed. He listened to them walk to the loch edge and talk quietly while they pissed loudly into the water. The roar of the whisky didn't seem to give them any insulation. From the sharp way they were inhaling, he could tell they were as freezing as he was.

Gallowgate parted the tent flaps. It seemed a great effort to fold his drunken frame into the small space. He closed the zipper, and they were sealed inside together. Gallowgate collapsed on top of his dank sleeping bag, the wind pushed out of him with a wheeze. The tight space filled with the smell of him, whisky, cigarettes, dirty socks, and warm armpits. It grew damp as a closed mouth. "You awright, pal?" he asked quietly. His fingers searched the air for Mungo, pressing

into the dark like a cautious typist. He searched for the boy, until his fingers found the side of Mungo's face, where the soft hair grew along his jawline. For some reason, the fingers kept moving. Gallowgate's ring finger brushed Mungo's bottom lip. His sovereign rings were cold against Mungo's cheek.

Mungo pulled away. "I'm fine. Tired."

"Ah, there you are."

Mungo could hear Gallowgate rub his palms together. He was blowing on his hands. "Fuckin' Baltic, int it?" In the dark he reached a thick arm out and pinned Mungo under it, pulling him against his chest for warmth. "It'll be warmer if we huddle the gether. I never was a Scout, but I've seen enough films to know we better stick the gether or we'll be deid by the mornin'. Summer in Scotland, eh?"

The man pulled him tight and held him against his chest. Mungo turned away from him, but Gallowgate fitted himself against Mungo's back. Gallowgate was not a big man but every part of him was sinew and muscle. Even through the two layers of nylon, Mungo could feel his stomach expand to fill the small of his back, till there was nothing between them. "Won't St Christopher freeze?" said Mungo. "Don't you want to share it with your friend?"

"Naw. Dinnae grudge him his peace and quiet. This is a rare treat for that auld basturt."

"How?"

"Auld Chrissy has had a bad run of it of late. He spends most nights in the Great Eastern. Do you know that hostel? It's no for the faint of heart."

Mungo had seen the homeless shelter at the Wellpark end of Duke Street. It was an old cotton mill with an imposing Victorian facade that made it look like a prison, and now housed up to three hundred men a night in tiny sleeping cubicles. In the mornings they tried to discourage the men from loitering on the stone steps, but they lingered like wraiths. It was one of the few buildings even Hamish crossed the street to avoid.

"Dinnae worry about auld Chrissy," said Gallowgate. "He's spent that many nights in the gutter he probably thinks he's in heaven now."

Gallowgate's arm grew heavy across Mungo's chest. The man's breath grew hotter and slower, Mungo could feel his eyelashes brush the back of his neck. "You and me, we'll just stick the gether. Just like the clans on the mountainside."

Suddenly, Mungo had a great desire to talk. He opened his mouth and the words tumbled out. He didn't even think about it, as though he had sprung a leak and out of him poured an endless story to fill the darkness. It came out in a

whisper, without the burden of pause or punctuation.

“When I was six my brother taught me how to ride a bike my dad was already gone away so Hamish said he was going to teach me and he kept saying it but when I got a bike for Christmas he didn’t teach me and finally by the time summer came he said I made him feel bad so he took me outside.”

Mungo listened to the side zipper slide open on Gallowgate’s sleeping bag. It was followed by the slow, tinny snickert of his own. Gallowgate’s denims were unexpectedly cold against his bare legs. The man’s arm moved down to the boy’s waist. Gallowgate pulled himself tighter against Mungo’s back. His fingers were splayed like a star on Mungo’s stomach.

“Hamish didn’t even let me try with the stabilizers he just took them off and said I was never to use them then he got on the bike and pedalled away from me he made me run after him all the way up to the top of the big hill and put me on the bike then he held the seat and right afore he let go he said he’d batter the fuck out of me if I fell off.” Mungo kept on talking to the dark. “The bike was wobbly but I stayed on it for ages and ages then it got faster and faster and faster till I couldn’t pedal and I had to lift my feet because the pedals were slapping my legs. I was happy for a moment.” Mungo drew a breath there. He could feel the man’s lips were slightly parted, they pressed lightly against the knuckle of his spine. “When I got to the bottom I didn’t know what to do because Hamish hadn’t shown me how to stop properly or how to turn so I just kept going and battered right into the red car it hurt my face and my arm and my knee and my bike took the hubcap off of one of the wheels I was lying on the ground crying with a nosebleed when Hamish came running and picked me up and we ran and hid behind the big green bushes.”

Gallowgate let out a shuddering breath of foul air. Then he started snoring. Mungo felt the arm grow dead around him. He stopped talking. It was a lot warmer in the shared sleeping bag. He felt stupid to have worried.

FOUR

There were rows of teeth marks on the windowsill, perfect little half-moons of anxiety. All afternoon Mungo knelt before the bay window and watched the street for her, his teeth sinking into the soft wood, the metallic taste of lead emulsion coating his tongue. The small flat was marked with his distracted grinding; the corners of towels were chewed and sodden, the hem of his school shirt was balled and stuffed into his mouth until he choked, the handle of the wooden spatula had a hammered pattern where he had clenched it between his molars.

After the trouble with the polis, Mungo spent a lot of time at the window. For days afterwards he avoided Hamish as best as he could, travelling in great wide arcs to stay far from his line of sight. It did no good.

Mungo came home from school one day and Hamish was sitting alone in the kitchenette. There were layers of clean clothes hanging from the laundry pulley above his head. Jodie had been busy keeping the house going, stripping beds, bleaching whites. Now Hamish sat beneath it smoking. He spoiled everything.

“Hallo.” Mungo surprised himself with how casually it came out. There was a disappointment in seeing his brother, but also a sick sort of relief. His schoolbag slid from his shoulder.

“You’ve been avoiding us,” said Hamish with a knowing laugh. There was fresh ink on his knuckles. Hamish liked to give himself tattoos using an old sewing needle and a burst biro. Curving across the knuckles of one fist was “Adri” and on the other “Anna,” Adrianna, the indigoed name of his little pink daughter. “Funny that. I should be the one embarrassed to run into you.”

Hamish’s tattoos had a disjointed, improvised feeling. The shapes were primitive and the designs were never plotted out, or laid against some larger, cohesive plan. When Hamish got dressed in the mornings Mungo had tried to

decipher them. The ox heads and daggers and coiled serpents appeared at random and were spread out across Hamish's pale skin from his nape to his kneecaps. He was punctured with a million pinpricks, tiny bursts of blue ink, and the symbols seemed scattered across him like constellations in a night sky.

"Have you seen Mo-Maw?" Mungo opened the kitchen cupboards, one after the other, hoping they were not empty, but knowing that they were.

"No. She's probably done a runner. Does she owe somebody money?" He flicked his cigarette into the pile of dishes in the sink. "Leave a saucer of milk out for her, a packet of ten Regals. She'll be back when she needs something."

Mungo slunk out of the kitchenette. There would be nothing to eat until Jodie finished her shift. If she didn't come back tonight, there would be nothing to eat until the morning.

"You havnae thanked me for saving you the other night." Hamish was starting his menace. He followed his brother to the living room. Mungo threw himself on the settee and wished he would get on with it. "What the fuck were ye playing at? It wisnae *Apocalypse Now.* Why the fuck did ye no leave that ginger arsehole?"

"He was hurt."

"*So?* I put a brick into the side of that polis's face for you. I could get the jail and all because you were playing Florence Nightingale."

"He nearly died. He was shittin' it. I couldn't leave him." Mungo kept his eyes on the blank television, it was better to watch Hamish in the reflection, not to meet the provocation of his gaze. "It just felt wrong."

Hamish pulled Mungo to his feet. He wrapped his tattooed hand around the back of Mungo's neck and put his forehead against his brother's. He must have seen it somewhere as a way for fathers to comfort sons, or to subjugate them. It should have felt tender, but something had twisted within him a while ago. Mungo tensed his stomach muscles and waited for the blow.

"The polis have been going door to door asking after us. They want to know who's been robbin' the builders. It's only a matter of time afore some spiteful auld cunt grasses, and all because you couldnae man up."

When the blow came it wasn't to the stomach as he had expected. Hamish reached out and wrenched his brother's nose. It was a dirty manoeuvre left over from their boyhood and Mungo, who was always prone to nosebleeds, began to gush. Bright tears filled his eyes but he wouldn't cry. He had learned not to give his brother the satisfaction. Hamish liked tears; if you showed any to him, he

went out hunting for more. Mungo pulled the hem of his jumper up and balled it over his nose. The acrylic acted more like a leach than a plug.

“Stop greetin’. It’s no broke.” Hamish knuckled his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He smiled, and in that instant, Mungo could tell he wanted to be friends again. Hamish was mercurial like that. It was what made him so dangerous. “Listen, I was watching you the other day. I wisnae impressed.”

Mungo could picture him glowering on the roof, not missing a moment through his corrective lenses. “I shouldn’t have even been there.”

“That’s the point. *You should’ve.* You’re ma wee brother and it’s an embarrassment to see ye carry on lit that.”

“Like *what?*”

“Lit you were too good for it. Floating around like a wee fuckin’ poofter.” Hamish paused to see if the blow had landed.

Mungo was glad half his face was covered by the school jumper. He could feel the electricity start in his right eye. He pinched his bleeding nose.

“What do you think Da would’ve said? If the big Ha-Ha was still around he would have leathered ye for yer nonsense. You didnae steal anything, you didnae fuck anything, you couldnae even run frae the polis on yer own.” Hamish picked a piece of tobacco from his lips. “Too busy trying tae cuddle wee Bobby Barr.”

“That’s no true.”

“I feel like I’m failing you, Mungo. Like I’ve no been showing ye how to be a man.” He looked genuinely disappointed at that. There was a soft, round defeat in his sharp shoulders that he would never have carried out on to the street. “I feel like I’ve no been raising ye right.”

Mungo knew it weighed heavily on his brother but it was foolish to think that Hamish could have raised him. They were too close in age. If you dropped a stone in a puddle, it was as though the ripple in front was expected to raise the one right behind it. Mungo was not very bright, but even he knew that would be impossible. A ripple could do nothing more than let the next ripple follow in its wake, no sense of where it was headed itself.

Mo-Maw didn’t like her children to call her Mammy, nor Mother, and never just Maw. She said she was too young for that shite. She had just turned fifteen when she came down with Hamish and was only nineteen when Mungo was born. They all came out so close together, they might have been arm-in-arm. Mungo was the only one who hadn’t burst forth singing. The other two came out raging, fists clenched and faces blue, but Mungo had just looked up at her in a

sad way, she had said, like he was already expecting her to be a great disappointment.

Mo-Maw could pass for Jodie's elder sister – she reminded her children of that daily. Mungo could remember the time the four of them shared one single Irn-Bru while waiting in line for *The Jungle Book*. Mungo had set Mo-Maw's nerves on edge by asking for a hot dog from the corner cart.

"I *do* like mustard," he had protested. He was only five.

"Ye dinnae, Mungo," Mo-Maw had threatened him, but her youngest was not a big eater. She hadn't seen him eat anything of real substance in three whole days. He was a distracted little boy, more given to worrying and wandering and fidgeting than sitting at a kitchen table.

Mungo had turned away from the sweating hot dog cart. He floated over to the illuminated posters and she knew she was losing her chance to put something solid in his stomach. Mo-Maw had knotted her mouth, paid for the expensive hot dog, and smeared it with luminous yellow mustard. Mungo had taken one bite before his face flared a deep puce. Born stubborn, he held it in and tried to chew. Jodie said she would eat it for him, but Mo-Maw was a fizzy kind of angry and she'd thrown the whole thing in the bin.

Her hackles were up by the time the ticket girl asked what they wanted. "Four children's tickets," Mo-Maw had said, trying to pass for a child herself.

Hamish had been dazzled by the bright lights. Mungo could see his eyes were headed westward and skyward, but his mouth was tilted towards Mo-Maw. "Mammy." He knew better than to call her that, and now he said it clear as a bell. "Mammy, do you think we could have popcorn when we get inside?"

The ticket seller had sniffed and smiled a wry grin. She had a satisfied look on her face that said she was looking forward to passing this story around the usherettes during their tea break. Mo-Maw had taken a hold of Hamish's upper arm before he could even swivel his eyes away from the bright posters. As she spun him around there was both wonder and terror on his face. Mo-Maw was only a few inches taller than her eldest child even then, but she'd strung him up like a butcher's chicken. She held him on tiptoes, and then she leathered the back of his legs. *One, two, three,* Jodie counted. Mo-Maw's face was scarlet as she raised her hand again, full-swing, like a professional golfer. Mungo had stepped forward and stood in front of his brother. Mo-Maw's hand came down too fast and caught him in the soft of his belly. The sausage blew out of him. If he had bothered to swallow the hot dog it would have come up in the great pile of lurid

sick.

“So, I’ve been thinking.” Hamish’s hand was already on the door handle. “I need to spend more time with you. I need to sort you out.”

“I’m fine as I am.” Mungo was still talking through the bloody school jumper. He sucked down a clot from his nose.

Hamish came uncomfortably close and stood on Mungo’s toes. He readied his fist in a high arc and swung it towards Mungo’s face. The boy flinched as Hamish stopped a half-centimetre from connecting with his tender nose. “Lesson one,” he spat. “Don’t fuckin’ talk to me like that ever again.”

Mungo had mixed feelings about the February half-term holidays. School provided a relief from worrying about Mo-Maw all day, and he looked forward to the free school dinners. With the school closed for a week, he was soggy with listlessness. Jodie had no time to distract him as she took on more shifts at the Italian café, her wages were barely able to cover feeding them both without Mo-Maw’s benefit books.

Most days, Jodie let Mungo come and sit with her at lunchtime and together they shared a deep-fried pizza in one of the booths towards the back. Enzo took a frozen pizza and, cracking it over the bone of his knee, folded it in two. He dipped it in a batter, the same creamy gloop that smothered all the fish and sausages, and then fried it quickly. It ended up as a bubbling mass of glorious stodge and melted cheese. Mungo had to burst it open and let the magma cool before they could touch it. When they were finished eating they both felt greasy and tired, yet underneath this was the sensation of being completely full and there was a comfort in that.

Mungo swung his legs underneath the table and tested Jodie on her French verb conjugation. He was rotten at French; every sentence felt as though it was spoken by a manic stutterer and the idea that something as simple as a spoon had a sex left him feeling agitated and with the desire to break something. It was like a game no one would tell him the rules to. When he pressed Jodie on the rules, she just shrugged. When he quizzed Jodie, he got the French pronunciation wrong, so Jodie would correct the question and then provide a perfect answer. She was that good. He laid his head on the table and told her how she would go to college and live in a fancy house in the West End. She flicked her apron at him and went back to work.

After this, Mungo was left with the yawning gape of the day in front of him. Sometimes he chewed the windowsill, sometimes he bothered Mrs Campbell. He would chap her door and ask if she needed anything doing. She was a busy woman, happiest when she was being useful, so she mostly always said no. But sometimes, there on her doormat, she would run her fingers through his thick hair. He liked the way her short nails raked his scalp. It took him a few visits to realize that this was what he came for.

Once or twice Jodie came home with news of a Mo-Maw sighting. One of the ice-cream lickers had seen her in Haghill, or getting on the Barras bus with thick armfuls of shopping. These women had never spoken to her, they had just seen her, but they said she looked well, hale, freshly painted. Jodie would lie and smile and say, yes, *yes*, Mo-Maw was doing great. She was ecstatic to be a granny to Ha-Ha's little Adrianna.

When she was safe at home, these comments made Jodie apoplectic. As she sprayed her work shoes with deodorant she called their mother filthy names that made Mungo blanch. She was harshest on Mo-Maw in a way that only girls were allowed to be. She said it felt like having a lost dog you couldn't admit had run away, a wayward bitch that you hoped would come home when her heat broke. At first, these sightings were a small comfort to Mungo. For a brief flash they gave him hope that she hadn't been murdered, that she wasn't floating somewhere in the cloudy Clyde. But if she was alive, why didn't she come home? And after a while he also came to hate receiving news of her looking happy, stories of her whistling round the Trongate.

Over half-term he kept a wide berth around Hamish. He avoided the council flat where Hamish stayed with his girlfriend, his new baby, and his sort-of mother-in-law. He skirted the waste ground where the boys played football and set up turf wars with the Catholics from Royston.

Since the incident with the flying brick, the polis drove up and down the tenement streets constantly. They would chap at the door of anyone who might tell them who the boys were that raided the builder's yard. Almost everyone knew it was Ha-Ha, but nobody would take the risk of grassing. The polis officer was still in the hospital. His jaw had been mangled and was hinged with four metal pins; he was left with a clamped mouth that wouldn't open wide enough for solid food.

There was a quiet, forgotten place behind the tenements, a scrabble of trees that sat between the edge of the motorway and the last row of sooty sandstone.

The city council had fenced in as much land as they intended to care for, and opposite this the roads department had fenced in the rushing motorway. Between these two fences was a sliver of unclaimed grass, a purgatory only forty feet wide. Over the half-term Mungo sat on the grass, picking at the scraggly wildflowers, feeling guilty about the policeman. Sometimes old men with leash-less dogs would dauner by, but mostly, Mungo was alone. He took out his sketchbook and drew the grids and interlocking faces of the tenements. Without lifting his pen he filled a double page with a wall of bricks and windows with tightly packed venetian blinds. But the roaming pen could not calm his mind. He closed the sketchbook, and then his eyes, laid his chin on his clasped hands, and felt the breeze of the day trippers as the traffic sped past to Edinburgh.

There was a doocot at the far edge of the forgotten grass. A two-storey shelter, six feet by six feet, and fourteen feet tall. The rectangular turret looked hastily put up from old, corrugated iron, a set of heavy front doors and glossy melamine that came from dismantled cafeteria tables. The whole structure had a tottering angle but was sturdy enough; each seam was nailed or soldered firmly shut, and the roof was sealed from the rain with thick tarpaper. A sliding skylight was fixed on to this roof, and over this skylight was a wire basket that cantilevered and acted as a snap-trap of sorts. Although it was made of scraps, the tower had a house-proud feel. Whoever built it had taken great care; they had painted it in a drab olive colour, an unassuming tone that would camouflage it against the waste ground it sat upon. There was a working door mounted on to one face, and laid across this were three heavy iron bars each with a fist-sized padlock.

Mungo had been drawing in the grass for two days and now, on the third, the doocot door was finally flung open.

There was a young man, he was hauling his belongings out into the shy sunlight, as if to air them. He went through his routine with ease as Mungo watched him over the top of his sketchbook. The boy must have had a strong back to carry the large cages out of the doocot as easily as he did. Then he scuffed his toes, and stumbled with his long arms knocking at his side. From a distance, between his gangly arms and his skillful hands, there was conflict about him. He could be either a boy or a man, depending on how he turned, or how the light caught him.

He was wearing a heathered grey tracksuit of thick cotton fleece. On his head was a knitted fisherman’s cap of deep navy-blue. His ears stuck out like two pale

cabbage leaves and he wore the cap above them, hanging loose as if he couldn't force it down over them. He had a shock of dirty-blond hair and there was a look of the outdoors about him; a rosy colour flushed high on his cheeks from days spent in wind and rain. He reminded Mungo of a farmer: purposeful, solitary looking. He went about his routine with a semblance of deep contentment to be outside.

The boy had not seen Mungo, or had seen him and didn't care. His face was turned to the sky, watching pigeons glide above the tenements. Something in the clouds caught his eye and he disappeared inside his tower. There were heavy footsteps on a ladder as the skylight slid open and he poked out of the roof like the captain of a wooden submarine. He was cradling something in his large hands. Mungo watched him caress it, whisper gently to it, and bring it to his lips for a kiss. He threw it into the sky and a pale pigeon fluttered away over the slate roofs of the housing scheme.

"Whroup, whroooup, whrooup." He was cooing after the bird.

His little bird whirled over the sandstone. It followed the other birds and they dipped for a moment out of sight. When Mungo looked back towards the doocot the boy was still hanging out of the skylight but now he was glowering down at him. The boy dropped back inside. He came out of the low door and started striding towards Mungo.

"How long are ye gonnae sit there?" he asked abruptly. Mungo could see the strength of his face now; he had muscles that ran from under his broad cheekbones down to his jaw, and while he waited for Mungo to reply, they moved and pulsed with life.

"What's it to you?" It was brave, and maybe a little stupid. His nose was still tender from Hamish and this boy was a good head taller than him.

What had looked northern and hale now puckered in uncertainty, and the boy looked his age again. His mouth was shaped like a wide bow, his teeth were large and white, but spread at intervals. "It's just if ma hen sees you sitting there," he motioned to the missing pigeon, "you might scare her off and she willnae come back."

"How can a bird be frightened of me?"

The boy worried the sky. He seemed conflicted. It would be mean-spirited to ask a stranger to leave and that didn't seem in his nature. "Listen, could you haud still? Put that book away, the flap of the pages might frighten it."

Mungo nodded and closed his book. The boy beamed down at him with relief.

He was funny looking: gappy teeth, sticky-out ears, and a bent, Roman nose. But when he smiled he was disarming. There was something uncomplicated about him. As his eyes returned to the sky the smile never left his lips, and Mungo found himself staring. It seemed like this boy could not have spent a day on the same streets that Mungo knew, never needed any of its callous posturing, the self-protective swagger, the dirty promise of hitting first. There was nothing guarded or fearful about him. Mungo couldn't help but smile back up at him. "I'm Mungo."

"I know fine well who you are," said the boy. "Your Ha-Ha used to kick the shite out of me for a laugh." The boy was still watching the sky, but he thrust a hand towards Mungo and hoisted him to his feet. He yanked so hard that for a moment Mungo was airborne. He could smell the fresh air on him as the boy clapped him on the back. "I'm James Jamieson. I live on the street ahind yours. I can see your Jodie dancing around her bedroom."

Mungo closed one eye and scratched at the back of his head. "Sorry. She had three weeks of highland dancing when she was eight. She cannae help herself."

"I don't mind," said James. "She's no very graceful. But she was always dead nice to us when I saw her in the street."

Everyone hated Hamish, but everyone loved Jodie. It spoke to her great-heartedness that people who could not stomach Hamish or Mo-Maw still held her in such high regard. Mungo didn't know where he fell in all of this. Sometimes he felt strangers looked at him like just another blemish on the life of this unstintingly good girl.

James led Mungo towards his doocot. About twenty feet away from the tower they lay down on their stomachs. James took a coil of white washing line into his hands. Mungo could see the rope snake through the grass back towards the tower. They were waiting for something to happen. James was purring lightly, mimicking the throaty, contented warble of a pigeon. *"Whroup, whroooup, whrooup."* With each coo he bobbed his head like he was catching a sneeze. His eyes were scanning the skyline for a glimpse of his blonde bird. A few times Mungo opened his mouth to speak but James put his finger over his own lips and Mungo sank back into the damp grass.

Eventually the blonde pigeon circled back over the tenement roofs. Relief flushed over James's whole body. *"Whroup, whroooup, whrooup."* He was kneeling now and bowing with each coo.

The pigeon landed on the doocot roof and still they waited. Another bird,

slightly larger and more ordinary looking, circled the blonde doo. It landed on the tarpaper roof and began eyeing James's pigeon. They locked their hard beaks together in a wrestling type of kiss.

"Ahh, they're *nebbing.* Yes!" Mungo could feel James thrum next to him. James's bird flattened herself slightly and the interloper mounted her. The boy shifted and gave the rope a sharp tug. The wire basket snapped shut over the lovers. The pigeons fluttered wildly and then they settled. "Ya bloody beauty!"

James was racing towards the doocot. He had captured someone else's pigeon using the lure of his beautiful bird. Mungo followed behind him. Inside the doocot, a wooden ladder drew you up to a rickety platform that formed the upper storey, and then a second stepladder led upwards to the skylight. Set into the wall were dozens of cages framed out of scrap wood and covered with chicken mesh. Each cage was filled with a restless-looking pigeon. The stench was overpowering.

James Jamieson returned the blonde seductress to her cage. He was carefully backing down the ladder with the new pigeon in his hand. "I've been trying to catch this bugger for about two years. Look. He's a Horseman Thief." He was turning the grey bird, inspecting its beak and its arsehole. The bird was just blinking. "It's Wee-Man Flannigan's prize pouter. He's gonnae be pure devastated. I wish I could see his face for maself."

"Are you not going to give it back?"

James stuck his tongue all the way out. "Am ah fuck! That's the whole point, that's what I've been trying to do all these years, have the best doocot in the East End."

He let Mungo stroke the soft downy feathers. The bird looked incredibly ordinary to Mungo, but it was chirruping happily and didn't look even slightly bothered to be in the stranger's grasp. "I've got to take my time and spoil him now. Ye know, bind him to me properly. Make sure that he disnae chase some other bit of fanny into somebody else's doocot."

"Don't you worry that you'll lose a bird?"

"Ach, I lose birds all the time. That's the game. When you let them go out on their own, they go as far as they want to go, you take a chance. If they want to come back, then they come back. If they don't, then you lose them."

"Sounds like a country and western song."

James shrugged. "I think it's honest in a way."

"What? To be led away for a mad shag?"

James looked at Mungo in a way that made Mungo feel childish. “If one of my birds leaves me, how can I be angry? It’s my fault for not making a good enough doocot for them. They must not have been happy enough to stay.” Two pigeons were pecking at each other through the wire of their cages. James drew a hand between them and moved them apart. “You’d fuck off if you were unhappy, right?” he asked Mungo.

“Mungo! Mungo!” Outside the doocot, someone was calling his name. That was the thing with being called Mungo, when someone called that name, they were definitely looking for him. Jodie sounded like she was excited and annoyed at the same time. Mungo stuck his head out of the shelter. She was surprised to see him emerge from the doocot. “What are you doing in there?”

Mungo just shrugged and picked up his bag. “Why aren’t you at the café?”

“Enzo let me away early.”

James and Jodie barely acknowledged each other. James was still clutching his prize pigeon and looking like nothing could ruin his day.

“I’ve got news. Missus Campbell telt me something. You need to come with me.”

Mungo slipped a strap over each shoulder. As he stepped away from the doocot James grabbed the spare fabric of his cagoule. “Haud on. Will you come back the morra?”

“Mibbe,” bluffed Mungo.

James held the blinking bird out to him again. “*Ach, go on.* You must be guid luck or something.”

They waited until the street lights came on, until good families had drawn their curtains and settled in front of their televisions. Then Jodie and Mungo left their tenement and headed along the main road. They walked westward against the brightly lit night buses that were bringing couples back from a night up at the dancing. Half-cut faces looked down on them as they walked alongside the busy road. It was late. Mungo took his sister’s hand in his and walked against the kerb, keeping the worst of the bus grit and puddle spit for himself.

It was raining lightly, and the air was still sharp with the frosts of winter. By the time they reached the massive bulk of the Royal Infirmary, the night-shift nurses were already clustered outside, smoking cigarettes under the A & E awning. When Jodie was younger, the Royal Infirmary terrified her. To her it

was a Victorian headmistress in the form of a building: strict and cruel and a warning to be on your best behaviour. It was built like a fortress and hung over the city in an imposing way. Thick turreted towers and balustrades running along the length of its roof gave the building a sense of confinement, like it was not a hospital but a prison. It was older than either of them could imagine and the western facade had collected decades of rain and car fumes until it bled pure blackness. It was not a place you ever wanted to end up. The pitted surface of the sandstone held shadows and gave a darkness to the city that filled Jodie's nightmares. It took her a long time to believe such a foreboding place could be somewhere people would come to get better.

Mungo put his arm around Jodie's shoulder. She hadn't been eating properly, neither of them had, but Jodie always let him eat most of their deep-fried pizza and Mungo couldn't remember the last time he had seen her eat a whole plate of her own food.

They waited to cross at the traffic lights that controlled the thick artery of the High Street. Directly across from the infirmary was a triangular island. The waste ground was bordered by a windowless pub and the indiscreet remains of a half-pulled-down tenement that made the island feel like a bombed-out warzone. In the midst of the rubble sat a white caravan. It spilled a sliver of light out into the wet night. Cars streamed by on all three sides.

The snack bar attracted a queue of lorry drivers waiting for their dinners and street cleaners waiting for their breakfasts. Men in short sleeves huddled under the plywood awning. They shivered as they smoked and danced from foot to foot, rain dripping down the necks of their shirts.

There she was, in the halo of yellow light, pushing hunks of meat around on a sizzling griddle. Jodie wanted to turn, to leave now, but Mungo held her fast and they waited patiently for the queue to move along. The woman looked content. She talked to the regulars with an easy familiarity that showed they already knew each other. Now and then she stopped her cooking and took one of their heads in her hands and asked how their sick wives were, or if their weans were behaving themselves. She listened intently as a bin man talked about his union dispute with the corporation. Mungo watched her ask insightful questions that showed how deeply she cared. Jodie turned to him and said quietly, "Please, whatever you do, don't let me laugh."

When they reached the front of the queue they stepped out of the darkness into the sickly fluorescent light. "Hiya," she said, as though they had met

casually at a bus stop. “What are youse two doing all the way out here?”

Mungo forgave her in that instant. He was flooded with profound relief. He turned to Jodie, but her jaw was locked tight and her eyes were nothing but knife slits. “Is that all you’re going to say? Hiya? *Hi-fuckin’-ya?*”

Jodie tried to tug her arm free from Mungo’s grasp, but he would not let go. He was staring up at Mo-Maw, gazing up at her in devotion. *Please,* he thought. *Just let me look at her a little while longer.*

“Listen, lady.” Mo-Maw was pointing down at her daughter, the greasy scraper extended like the finger of God. “It’s that exact attitude that has made me no want to visit.”

“Visit? Visit!” Jodie rarely used to get angry. When they were younger, they often joked that Hamish had stolen both of their portions of anger. But now Jodie was angry all the time. Mungo was shaken from his reverence. He watched as Jodie’s head snapped back and her wet hair flew wildly around her. “You don’t fucking *visit* your own weans. Ya mad auld bitch. You come home every night and make sure they’ve been fed and cleaned and then ye tuck them into bed. You make sure they have done their homework and have had enough to eat for their lunch and then if you are fucking lucky ye get ten minutes peace to yersel afore ye start it all a-fuckin’-gain.” She had been pointing a sharp finger back up at her mother; the griddle scraper and her finger almost connected. Her face started to twist into her nervous laugh. “*Haaah-ha.*”

Mungo watched Mo-Maw wilt. Several of the taxi drivers were standing slack-mouthed, huge gobbets of half-chewed sausage sitting on their fat tongues. They were unsettled by this screaming ingrate. Then when she laughed, they could not see the joke. There were rivulets of tears on Jodie’s face. “What you do not do – what you *absolutely* do not do – is leave your children alone while you disappear. You don’t fuck off to get your hole and let them think you’re dead.”

“We just wanted you to know that we missed you.” Mungo felt the sudden need to say it. He had been struck with a rising fear Mo-Maw would latch this trailer to a car and leave them again, standing on this traffic island surrounded by a dozen strange men. Jodie scowled at him like he was a traitor.

Mo-Maw leaned out the serving hatch. She placed a damp kiss on Mungo’s lips. “Darlin’. Ah came by the flat twice to pick up clean clothes, hairspray and that. Ah’m sorry. Ah left a wee note.”

Mungo’s jaw hung open, he spun and glared at his sister.

“What? Would it hurt less to know that your mother couldn’t even hang around for thirty minutes until you got home from school, eh?”

Mo-Maw closed the top two buttons on her blouse. She spoke over the heads of her children. “How about that, Johnny, eh? Ah gave up my figure for these ingrates. Now you see why ah drink.” She looked down at Mungo. “Away and wait over there, and ah’ll come see you when ah get a minute.”

“But—”

“I’m workin’. Go and have a seat.”

Mo-Maw couldn’t come out of the snack bar and talk right away, but she handed them two floury rolls with bacon and black pudding and a cup of tea each. Mungo watched his sister hesitate before taking hers. The picnic table was slick with rain but the van deflected the worst of the wind. Mungo wiped a spot dry for Jodie to sit on. They cradled their hot teas and tried to pull warmth through the polystyrene. There was a sliver of pink jumper peeking out from Jodie’s coat sleeve. When she wasn’t looking, Mungo pulled at it, and hooked his fingers into the loose stitches. The late-night traffic flew by. Mungo tried not to make eye contact with the mothers who rubbernecked from warm Saabs.

“Jodie?” There was a tentativeness in his voice. “Try and remember the good bits, eh? She’s not all bad.” Jodie stared at him. Mungo went on and as he did, he counted off their mother’s good qualities on his fingers. “She’s funny, she doesn’t always mean to be, but she is. She doesn’t hold grudges or dwell on bad stuff. She hardly ever nags us. She is, she …” He paused. “What’s that word that begins with *R*? You know when you get knocked down but you get back up again?”

Jodie didn’t falter. “Rotted, rancid, rarelysober, reallyfuckingselfish?”

When the night-shift breakfast rush was cleared, Mo-Maw hopped down out of the small caravan. Mo-Maw looked nothing like her off-spring. All the Hamilton children’s swarthiness must have come from the Black Irish that ran through their father. Mungo had never seen any pictures of this man. At one time, there was the promise of an undeveloped roll of film lying in a kitchen drawer somewhere, but Mo-Maw could never seem to find it. His mother was shorter than Jodie – only five foot tall in her bare feet – but she heaped her mousy curls on top of her head to give her the illusion of height. She was small-boned and fine-featured with quick green eyes. She was paler than her children, fragile looking, but her brittleness was only skin-deep.

Their mother was wearing a greasy pinny and underneath that she wore a pair

of cropped denims and a brand-new pair of white trainers, flashy Nike ones with the swoosh on the side. Mo-Maw noticed them eyeing this luxury. “Well, ma back hurts, standing at that hot griddle all day.” She had a polystyrene cup that was bright with the molten orange colour of Irn-Bru. There was an astringent tang to it that smelled like alcohol, a strong medicinal scent that was noticeable despite the rain. Jodie was already picking at a splinter in the table.

“How long have you been working here then?” Mungo thought that seemed like a safe place to start.

“Two weeks, give or take.” Mo-Maw sat close to Mungo and lit a damp cigarette that looked like it wouldn’t take. “Jocky knows a fat Scouser called Ella. Big Ella owns a whole fleet of these vans and needed somebody to work the night shift here.”

“Who’s Jocky?” asked Mungo.

Mo-Maw pushed at the hair that hung down the back of her neck; her old perm was looking tired and slack. Mungo thought that hair could grow a lot in a few weeks. “Jocky’s ma new fella,” she sniffed. “He runs the pawnshop down the Trongate. Oh! Wait till you meet him. He’s a smasher, puts you in mind of a chubby wee Nicolas Cage. Fair loves his grub.” She pushed Mungo’s hair from his eyes. She liked to look on him, he was the bonny and, as of yet, unspoiled bit of her and Big Ha-Ha. He didn’t have the sharpness of Hamish or the weariness of Jodie. “Do you want a Commodore 64? Jocky can get me one if ye want?”

Mungo shook his head. He didn’t want a computer.

Mo-Maw rested her hands on the table. She noticed Jodie looking at her fingernails. Her nails appeared nude under the street lights, but as she waggled them Mungo saw their pearlescent shimmer. “Do youse like it?” she asked Jodie. “Ah felt yon *Raspberry Beret* was making me look a bit done-in. Aw the young lassies are wearing these nude shades the day. Took me a minute to get used to it, but I think it looks cleaner, younger. Din’t it?”

Jodie stared at her mother with such intensity that Mo-Maw turned to Mungo and asked if she had something on her face.

“Are you living with him? This Jocky?” Jodie asked. “I mean, I suppose you are living with him, but why?”

“How no? Jesus Christ. Ah’m only thirty-four, Jo-Jo.” Mungo knew his sister hated this pet name, she said it made her sound like a dancing monkey. “You’ll be seventeen in a couple of months. Ah was potty-training Hamish when ah was your age. What’s the harm in it, eh? Jocky treats me right, he takes me for a

Chinese – starters and mains."

"Prawn crackers, too?" asked Mungo.

"Aye. And a banana fritter if I like." Mo-Maw turned her gaze back to Jodie. "Ah've got to try and squeeze a wee bit of happiness out of life while ah still can."

Jodie nodded across the table at Mungo. Her face was wet from the rain, it gave it a waxy pallor and her expression was alarmingly calm. "He's only fifteen. You're no done raising your weans yet, ya selfish besom." It was happening again. This pitched battle between Jodie and Mo-Maw over Mungo. He felt forever in the middle. At any moment they might both get on their knees and try to lure him towards one of them with a bit of salted ham hock, like a dog.

"Oh, gies peace. We both know ye love playing at the wee housewife." Her cheeks were hollow sucking on the cigarette. Mungo searched for Jodie's feet under the table, he wrapped his legs around her ankles, ensnaring his sister.

Mo-Maw said, "Look, ah've goat some money now. No much, but some." They listened to the squeak of the new trainers. "Ah'll come round the house and pay all the bills. We can go down Duke Street and run the messages the gether. You can have all the chocolate biscuits ye want." She took Jodie's hand in her own. Mungo thought Jodie might stab her. "You need to stay on yer own a wee bit longer. Jist till I know where me and wee Jocky are headed."

It was becoming so late it was early. There was a fresh line of black hackneys pulling up on the kerb. They bumped up out of the flow of traffic and Mungo watched them heave with relief as pot-bellied taxi drivers stepped down into the rain. "Can we come visit? Can we see where you live now?" He could feel the side of his face start in a mutiny.

Mo-Maw put her chin on his shoulder. She strained to kiss his twitching cheekbone. "Naw son. No the now."

"How?" It was not a good enough answer for Jodie.

Mo-Maw leaned forward and clasped Jodie's hands in a way that startled his sister. "Wummin to wummin, ye might not know how men are yet, but ah need to make this easy on him. It's too early for me to be messy, to be a bother."

"A bother?"

"Ye'll understand one day. Ah need to keep it breezy a wee while longer, that's aw." As she rose to serve the men, she unbuttoned the top two buttons on her blouse again. "Ah need to find the right time to tell Jocky ah've got weans."

FIVE

Mungo had been summoned. He was hunchbacked in front of the television, drawing a tight spiral that he didn't know how to end. Jodie looked at him havering over whether to go. She turned off the television and reminded him of how much worse it would be if he didn't do exactly as Hamish asked.

Most of the time Hamish stayed in one of the damp council flats that were built in the 1960s. Mrs McConnachie lived on the top floor and since Hamish had impregnated her youngest lassie, Sammy-Jo, she felt obliged to let him hang around. Mungo could see his brother tried to be on his best behaviour when he was there. He acted in a constricted way, tight-faced, grudgingly patient. It served only to squeeze all the cruel bits of him into the part of his day when he was not trapped under the McConnachie roof. But Hamish knew better than to chance his luck further: Sammy-Jo was only fifteen, and Mrs McConnachie could have him jailed for molesting a minor. As it was, her doctor called the Social and the Social called the police. Sammy-Jo lied to them all; she said she didn't know who the father was, and on the birth certificate a civil servant had written *Unknown* in his finest calligraphy. Hamish had copied the script and tattooed the word behind his right ear.

Mungo stood on the threshold to Mrs McConnachie's living room. He hadn't been invited inside yet. The settee had six of the boys from the builder's yard crammed on to it. They were packed thigh to thigh and spilled over the arms of the small sofa. In their nylon tracksuits they looked like so many plastic bags all stuffed together; a flammable, noisy jumble of colour-blocking and sponsorship logos. There was the manic throb of techno coming from the stereo; someone had a bootlegged copy of a Carl Cox set from Rezerection. It sounded like the DJ was pressing an early warning siren over a stuttering breakbeat. It was so aggressive sounding – it moved so fast – that it made Mungo feel tense.

The ginger boy was the only one to look up at Mungo. He half-nodded and then swivelled his clear blue eyes back to the daytime television. That was it, that was all the thanks Mungo would get for saving him. His arm looked mangled; navy-blue fingers blossomed from the end of a sickly pink stookie. The plaster was already covered in hand-drawn cocks, each throbbing vein painstakingly rendered in fat bingo marker, and signed with pride. The boy's eyes were a faraway blue, and there was a rash around his thin mouth from huffing a fresh bag of glue. His arm must have hurt awful bad.

One of the MacPherson brothers was sat on the settee. It was rumoured that there were four brothers in total, but at any given time there were only ever two MacPhersons on the streets of the scheme at once. They alternated in and out of Polmont Young Offenders so frequently it seemed like Mrs MacPherson was checking them in and out of a pawnshop based on how much she could handle at any given moment. Mal MacPherson sat on the broken arm of the settee, tapping his white drumsticks soundlessly on his legs: the left holding a rigid beat, the right adding the swirling thrill. He stopped and held the drumsticks aloft with a sense of ceremony. The sticks made a rigid line, the tips connected under his septum. He held it for a beat – Mungo could almost hear the pause in the marching tune – and then he proceeded to drum soundlessly again. The boy was dedicated. He was always practising for the Orange band competitions that took place in the Auld Resolute working men's club; a barricaded, windowless hall that sat defiantly in the Catholic end of the Calton.

On the soundless television, an English woman was dipping a vase into liquid and showing the audience how to crackle glaze the surface of it. Each one of the young men was staring slack-jawed at the screen. On the low table in front of them sat a bundle of folded nappies amongst a pile of stolen car radios, half-drunk bottles of MD 20/20, and one very large tomahawk.

The tomahawk was homemade. Someone had taken the handle from a ball-peen hammer and screwed it to a slice of sharpened metal. Mungo knew that one of the boy's uncles still worked in shipbuilding and would bring him offcuts of steel when he could. The axe looked like a medieval weapon that could cleave the arm off a man. The boy had polished it lovingly and then, using electrical tape, had wrapped the handle in blue, white, and red stripes. He had sharpened the blade to a shining point, it made a screeching noise just to look at it. Mungo couldn't stop staring.

Sammy-Jo McConnachie was sitting on the armchair. She was drowned by

one of Hamish's jumpers. She had their pink baby stuffed up underneath it, and was trying to get her to latch on. Mungo glimpsed the side of her breast. The swelling looked painful; there were angry veins bruising the underside of each tit, and it looked like two giant gooseberries had been stitched to a child's ribcage. The girl looked tired and seemed on the verge of tears. The baby was fussing and colicky sounding. Its five measly hairs were gathered together and bound with a jolly bow.

The woman stopped glazing her vase and held it out for the cameras to see the intricate swirls. The young men looked from one to another in amazement; white pearls of acne flushed across their foreheads. "That's pure beautiful," said the ginger-headed boy. They all nodded in agreement.

Sammy-Jo started buzzing around the room, trying to wipe the table before her mother came in from work. Mungo could remember her from school. She had been the year below him, boyish and slender in a way that hadn't hardened into a look of mannish starvation yet. She always smelled of fresh apple shampoo and was considered to be the prettiest girl in the whole scheme. Mungo had watched the boys from all the surrounding years try to get next to her, but of course it had been Hamish who had turned her head. Hamish was a challenge for girls; he could be so embittered, so antagonistic, that when they coaxed some small sweetness from him, they felt chuffed with their own allure. Hamish had told Sammy-Jo that he felt like a bigger man when she was around, that she, and she alone, made him want to get his life together. Mungo saw how she carried herself differently after that, she swanned around like a saviour in a B-cup. How could she resist him?

"Ha-Ha!" she shrieked. Hamish's handle always sounded strange to Mungo, like a bad actor forcing out a fake laugh. "Ha-Ha! Tell them to take their feet off ma mammy's good table."

Mungo could tell Hamish didn't want to leave the house. He didn't want to take the battalion of boys out to wander the smirred streets. It was too early for mayhem.

She was trying to tidy the pile of car radios, but the wires were roughly cut and they kept unspooling in a messy pile. The baby was huffing underneath her thick jumper. Sammy-Jo had been clever, Mungo remembered, she was one of those children who was so fluent in mathematical hieroglyphics that it seemed as if it were her native tongue. She began shaking the bottles of formula to see which still held the most. "Have ye goat any money?"

“I was gonnae ask you the same thing.” His eyes were glued to the telly.

Sammy-Jo looked on the verge of hot tears. One of the boys had stopped watching the television and was openly staring at the underside of her swollen breast. “Ha-Ha!”

Hamish tore his eyes away from the television. He was angry about missing the crackle glazing. “Whit? Did yer granny no give ye something for the baby?”

“That’s to get her ears pierced.”

“Listen, I just need a couple of poun’ for bus fare. I need to sign on up at Jamaica Street.” He nodded towards the table. “I could even take they radios down Paddy’s market and sell them afore teatime. Then we would have my dole money and whatever I got for these.”

“Naw.”

“Ye would have enough money to pierce her ears four times over.”

It was unpleasant to watch Hamish have to barter and reason with someone. Mungo was used to him just taking what he wanted and he had seen him menace Mo-Maw and Jodie if they offered some resistance. Mungo wondered how long it would be until he hit Sammy-Jo.

A singer started screaming, *“You make me feel so real,”* over the techno beat. Mungo had been waiting in the doorway. It had been clear that he hadn’t been given permission to talk yet. “I could give you money, Hamish,” he said. “If you want?”

The boys all swivelled to look at him. No one ever called the big man “Hamish.”

“Okay. I’ll gie ye it back.” Hamish scowled at Sammy-Jo. He never said please or thanks.

Mungo rooted around in his cagoule pocket. Jodie had given him money for school supplies and he hadn’t spent all of it. Hamish jostled him out into the hallway, and they went through into the narrow kitchenette, where Hamish clouted him around the back of his head. “Don’t ever call me that in front of them again. It’s *Ha-Ha*. Four fuckin’ letters, even you are no daft enough to get that wrong.”

The kitchenette was narrow, smaller than even Mo-Maw’s. Mungo knew Hamish had tried to put their names on a council list for a flat of their own. The female council officer had been horrified by him: fifteen-year-old girls should not be living with eighteen-year-old men.

Mungo poured the coins into his hand. “I have things you could sell, you

know. If it would help the baby."

"Lit what?"

"Like a remote-controlled car and one of those Space Invaders games."

"Naw. I've selt them already." Hamish quickly changed the subject. "Listen, I have something for ye." He reached into the back pocket of his denims. He thrust something small at his brother, and with a snip, a three-inch blade shot out. Mungo fell backwards over the bin. He was holding on to the melamine counter and staring down at the short blade. Hamish was jabbing it towards his stomach and smiling with a demented pleasure. "After that fuckin' palaver in the builder's yard ye need a blade to protect yersel."

It wasn't much of a blade, small and silver with a fake onyx handle. It looked like it would keenly slice an apple or cut through a length of old washing rope. As if Hamish had read Mungo's thoughts, he stabbed the blade into a bag of white sugar. Once, twice, three times. The sugar poured out of the bag and glistened on the counter.

Mungo put his hands in his pockets. He locked his elbows to his side. "No way. I don't fuckin' want it."

"It's no a question." Hamish thrust the knife towards his brother.

"But what if the polis stop me? What if the polis find me with a blade on us?"

Hamish snorted. "Fuck sake, Mungo, look at ye. What would the polis stop *you* for? Ye're that soft I'm surprised you have enough bones to stand upright."

"I don't want a knife."

Hamish sheathed the blade back in its handle. He loosened the Velcro fastening on Mungo's cagoule pocket and dropped the knife into the kangaroo pouch. "Listen baw-jaws, the more involved I get with the Billies, the more the Fenians are gonnae want to hurt a Hamilton. Even if ye don't want it for yersel, haud on to it for our Jodie. You never know when ye might need to chib a cunt." He carefully sealed the Velcro. He was done discussing it. Hamish licked his finger and was dabbing the white sugar, it made a crunching sound between his front teeth. "One more thing, I'm gonnae need yer help on Friday."

"Me?" He motioned through to the living room, where he could hear the squeak and repetition of children's television. "Why can't one of the Billies help you?"

Hamish was going through the kitchen cupboards. He was looking for something sugary to eat, and for something electrical to pawn. "It's a guid opportunity for me and you to spend time the gether. I telt ye, I'm gonnae show

ye how to be a proper man. I'll no have ye embarrassing me."

"But I was going to help Missus Campbell on Friday."

"Jesus Christ." Hamish was shaking his head. "Friday!" It had an underlined finality to it. His top lip curled back in distaste. "An if I have to come searchin' fur ye, ye'll be fuckin' sorry."

Jodie was having a difficult time concentrating over the cackling of the seagulls. She had spread her homework over the folding table, and knew she had only thirty minutes before her man would return with the fish supper, and she would have to hide all the childish reminders of herself. Only thirty minutes before the folding table would retract into a hard, uncomfortable bed and he would pull a fitted sheet over it.

Who cared about "the fatal mistakes made by the Italians while governing their colonies in Africa" anyway? Half the pupils in her class couldn't find Edinburgh on a map.

There was the crunch of tyres on gravel and she swept her school-work back into her bag. Like usual, they sat together, shoulder to shoulder on the top step of the caravan, and looked out over the Irish Sea. West Kilbride was the furthest Jodie had ever been from home. It was only forty-five minutes from Glasgow but it felt like a world away. The caravan park sat in a farmer's field and looked out over the slate-grey horizon. House-proud Glaswegians rented the caravans for the season. They covered the windows with net curtains and filled old car tyres with potting soil and forget-me-nots. They came with hopeful deckchairs and cars loaded with drink, happy to leave the drabness behind for a few hours of streaked sunshine.

It was cold here, much windier than the city, but Jodie loved how fresh and untouched everything smelled. Every breath felt crystalline, scrubbed clean with sea salt. They ate their fish suppers outside in silence, and while she watched the sea, he studied the side of her face, struck with a sense of luck that this bonny, tenacious girl could be his. When their lips were greasy with fat Jodie took the last of the charred batter and threw it high for the swooping birds. For a while, he held her cold hands in his, then he took her back inside, and folded the table into a bed.

When they were finished, he slept. He turned his pale back to her and she watched the curly black hairs on his shoulder blades dance in the breeze. It had

already lost the excitement of the unexpected, was becoming too much of a routine. He would collect her in his car. They would come to this caravan. He would go alone to buy some food, and then he would sweat on top of her for four minutes and fall fast asleep. Jodie already knew that he would wake soon and get dressed quickly. He would tickle her bare feet and tell her he loved her. But already he would be looking at his watch, thinking about his own children and the roast chicken he needed to collect for their dinner.

At first he had promised he would leave his wife. But the more Jodie let him do his sweaty things to her, the less he seemed to promise that. She was surprised to feel so relieved.

Jodie lay there and carefully counted the blemishes on his back. Then she broke them into categories, separating the brown age spots from the blood-red skin tabs. She didn't want to come here anymore, but she felt compelled. He had bought her fourteen fish suppers, and being a bright girl, she knew the exact cost of it all. She lay behind him and spoke it quietly: "If a man buys a girl fourteen fish suppers at two pounds twenty-five a time, how long till the girl gives up? Show your working." It was a trick question, because she didn't know how much the girl also owed in petrol money.

She was smarter than that, after all. He had been the first to tell her of her potential. "Jodie Hamilton, if you apply yourself you could go all the way. How on earth have you been hiding in Hamish's shadow? It's like finding a diamond under a turd." He was smiling at her over the heads of the other fourth-years.

Boys her age didn't seem to notice her. Most of them knew the legend of her brother and would not dare. Other's didn't like the way she would question the answers they gave in class. It was easier for these boys to latch on to one of the hubba-bubba girls and finger her around the back of the swimming baths than it would be to handle bossy wee Jodie of the famed Hamilton scum.

She rolled on to her back and looked at the panelled ceiling. She wondered if she was looking for a father. No, it was more than that: she wanted respite from pretending to be Mungo's mother. She felt tired all the time now. It was a transaction – she knew fine well – but for the three short hours that this man would take care of her, she could set aside all the burdens that were not hers. Three hours of peace in exchange for four sweaty, dirty minutes.

He didn't care anymore if she enjoyed it or not. At the beginning he would have asked if she was okay, worried that her tightness caused discomfort, but now he was delighted when it did. He would lie on top of her and look into her

eyes with lust, and a kind of fear. He looked afraid that she would pull her knees together and ask him to get off. *Please let me finish*, his grey eyes seemed to say, and she could tell this was one of the best things that ever happened to him by the way he repeated “thank you, thank you, thank you” as he slipped in and out of her. She had liked that at first. Now he didn’t ask her if he was hurting her, even as he thanked her over and over. He just did as he pleased and then kissed her, once, on the forehead. The greasy mark of it felt a bit like a red tick at the bottom of a test.

The man was awake again. He sat up. Mr Gillespie was tickling the bottom of her foot. He was missing all the teeth on the upper left side of his mouth and she wished he wouldn’t smile at her over the crook of his shoulder like that.

When Mr Gillespie was first manoeuvring her into position, he took her to the Ayr fairground. With a crisp fifty-pound note he paid for her to go on all the rides: screaming, rickety rollercoasters, the heavy, pendulous pirate ship, and her favourite, the whizzing, spinning waltzers. The lights, the sugary candy floss and sweet peanuty smell of popcorn had made for a dizzying night far from home. Jodie could picture him now, paying for all the rides, and standing nervously in the shadows, like a divorced father, while she had her seventy-five seconds of fun.

There was another time he had brought her to West Kilbride. It was a damp evening in September and marked the first time she had kept her knees together from shame and from spite. Her bad mood had begun in his steamy Sierra. Mr Gillespie hadn’t realized he had been talking too much about his own daughter, who went to Hutchesons’ Grammar and was a shoo-in for Edinburgh University. She was jealous to see him boastful and proud of Gillian. It stung to think that no one felt that way about her.

“Do you think Gillian does something like this with her Modern Studies teacher?” she’d asked as his hand worried the loose thread at the bottom of her school skirt.

The look of disgust on his face had pushed her deeper into the leather seat. Gillian Gillespie would never sink so low. Jodie had bitten her bottom lip, but she laughed anyway. *“Haaah-ha.”*

“The sooner you grow out of that stupid laughter, the better,” he’d muttered.

The firth had come into view. The low sun reflected on the sea and it shimmered like silver fish scales. Jodie had decided then that she would let him do whatever he wanted and just stop caring. She’d rolled down the window and

laid her head on the door frame. The sea air cooled the burning in her cheeks.

Mungo pressed the grey pigeon flat against the board. He held it firmly like James had shown him, and the pouter bobbed but it did not struggle. James mixed the packet of hair dye that he'd bought from the chemist and smoothed it over the bird. There was a toothy American pin-up on the side of the box, and now the boys were matching her hair colour to the wings of a pigeon.

"Don't get it in her eye, I cannae fly a blind bird," said James.

In long, gentle strokes, he brushed the sludge all over the bird. He plastered it over the wings until Mungo could remove his hands because the bird was pasted to the piece of salvaged plywood. It had the look of an animal tarred and feathered. Then they waited for the pigment to leach from it. "It's science, int it?" James grinned, shaking his own tawny locks. "Everybody prefers a blonde."

The doocot was sour with the tang of bleach. The acrid stench made Mungo's eyes sting, but his face was not twitching. He liked it here. James reached out a few times and tried to lick the thin dye brush against Mungo's temple. He had to keep dancing away, always careful to never let go of the platinum bird.

He had come to the doocot every day for the past week. James had been generous with him, happy to have someone other than his doos to talk to. He let Mungo hold the birds and let him feed them their diet of pellets and water. On the second day they sat on the damp grass and James shared his ham sandwich with Mungo. By the third day, James had made him one of his own, thick with butter, chewy at the crusts. Next to Hamish, James was straightforward and uncomplicated. When he handed him something, Mungo didn't need to flinch. He was sitting in the cold grass eating a salty ham sandwich when he realized with surprise that he would be sad to go back to school on Monday.

The pigeon didn't become the sun-kissed Los Angeles blonde that the box promised. It turned a pale soupy colour, like an old lady's tights, but James seemed pleased anyway. He took care to wash the hen carefully and rinse the last of the strong chemicals from her wings. When he put her back amongst the others they bobbed and eyed her lasciviously.

"I think they fancy her already," said Mungo, "but I reckon she fancies herself more."

James was busy putting pairs of cocks and hens together, letting them start a stunted round of courtship before separating them at the weekend and sending

them out over the city, a hard-done-to feather ball of lustful confusion. If they were beautiful and horny enough they might attract another man's bird back to James's doocot and have the quick fuck he was trying to deprive them of now.

A bluish bird was strutting up and down behind his chicken wire. It was puffed up and bloated looking. It was keen to attract any hen that met its beady gaze. "He looks full of himself, din't he? The big gallus smasher."

"What's his name?" asked Mungo.

"I dunno, I thought I would call him Archie but it doesnae feel quite right."

Mungo peered through the hexagonal wire. "Go on, call him Mungo."

James laughed, then he let out a sore rattling cough. Mungo noticed he did that a lot. It was an old man's cough, wet and phlegmy and deep set in his lungs. James picked up a smaller greige-coloured doo. It was a nervous-looking bird that was small enough to be female. "Naw, if anybody is to be Mungo, this is the bugger."

"He disnae look like he could attract a stuffed chicken."

"That's what ah'm saying." James lifted the brown pigeon and stroked its ruffled collar. "But watch yer language, Little Mungo can hear ye and he's a sensitive little prick."

Mungo peered at the small pigeon, he stroked its collar with his pinkie, and it flinched. He would have to admit the name suited the bird. "I've never met another Mungo before. I'm gonnae look after it and make him tougher than Dolph Lundgren over there."

James had lined the doocot in smashed glass shards to discourage rats from eating his defenceless birds. There was a crunch of broken bottles underfoot as he did an excited dance. "That's it! His name is Dolph, it's no Archie." He turned to his bluish bird. "I hereby christen you: Dolph the Mad Shagger."

"Dolph Pidgegren."

"Naw, I'll get hammered up the meeting with a name like that. It has to be mair poetic like. Something that strikes fear into the heart of other doomen, *Champion of the Sorrowful Skies*, some pish like that."

"How about Conan the Sectarian?"

"No way!" But Mungo could tell that James liked it.

They stepped outside and gave the new couples some privacy. They lay on their bellies in the raggedy grass and listened to the faint roar of evening traffic. The last of the daylight had sunk below the fleecy clouds, for a few brief moments everything was bathed in a soft peach glow. Mungo closed his eyes and

tried to feel its warmth. “How did you start the pouting anyhows?”

He imagined James shrugging beside him. “It was just something my da introduced me to.”

Mungo felt everyone knew everything there was to know about the Hamilton family, but James hadn’t told him anything about his family. “Is he a dooman as well?”

“Not really.” James coughed again. “He was looking for something for us to do the gether. I think he felt guilty.”

Mungo wondered what it would be like to have a father. “Do you look like him?”

“Aye.”

“Do you act like him?”

“Aye. That’s what my maw used to say anyhows.”

“Does she no think so anymore?”

James looked at him, it was a fleeting glance like he was trying to find something in Mungo’s eyes, some cruelty perhaps, or the narrowing that mean-hearted women get when they sniff a good story. “Sorry, I thought ye knew.” He was ripping grass out by the roots. “There were hunners of big black cars, I thought everybody on the scheme knew.” He slipped a blade of grass between his lips. “That’s why he feels guilty, see. After my maw died he needed to go back to work. He works away a lot. He’s a pipe-fitter on an oil rig. It’s good money.”

“In Scotland?”

“Aye, but right at the very top, it’s nearly in Norway. He works two weeks on and gets two weeks off. But it often feels shorter. He says the paraffin budgie can’t take off in the fog.”

“The paraffin whut?”

“The helicopter. He’s hunners of miles offshore, and they can’t fly in bad weather. The sun lifts a fog off of the sea. He says some days you cannae even see Aberdeen for the haar. You’d think it’d be the winter, but it’s not. It’s the summer that’s the worst.” He met Mungo’s eyes now. “Did ye really not see all the black mourning cars?”

“No,” said Mungo, and he meant it. He had not known Mrs Jamieson was dead. “I’m sorry about your mammy. It must be quiet in your house.”

“Sometimes.”

“It’s quiet in my house too.” Mungo slipped a blade of grass between his

fingers and tried to blow on it and make it whistle. The blade of grass made a thrumming sound and then let out a shrill song. “You know, you can come round anytime you like.”

“Cheers. But it doesn’t matter, I’m no gonnae be here much longer. Soon as I’m sixteen then I’m gonnae leave school and get out of this shitehole.”

“Aye, but where would you go?”

“I don’t know. Mibbe somewhere up north. Somewhere I could get a job working outside. I like being outside and anywhere is better than here. Here I just feel like I’m playing at happy housewives for an auld man that’s never home.”

Mungo could barely imagine life away from Hamish and the constant fear of something bad happening to Mo-Maw. He tried to laugh. “Tell you what, if you hold on, ah’ll come with you when I turn sixteen. I mean, I’ve never even been out of the East End. You could take me to Shettleston and tell me I was in Spain.”

James didn’t say anything to this. It made Mungo feel odd. He felt the seconds stretch awkwardly. He should have kept his mouth shut, but the words inside him wanted to fill the void. “You know, I thought my maw was dead too. But she wasn’t. She was cooking black pudding outside the hospital.” It was a stupid thing to say to a boy who had lost his mother. He lowered his face into the grass.

As the lights came on in the scheme Mungo helped James sweep out the last of the cages and lock up for the night. As they walked back to the tenements James handed him a long brown feather, one of Little Mungo’s moultings. “Ye should have this.”

Mungo turned the feather in his hand, it was soft and fluffy along the outer edge. Little Mungo was still a squab, he had yet to mature. He was going to mention this to James, but James spoke first. “I’m gonnae see some lassies up by the old fountain. Do ye want to come?”

“Nah. I’d better not.” He didn’t like Jodie to come home to an empty house. He wanted to have the lights on before she returned from the café.

James started hacking again. He took a blue inhaler from his tracksuit pocket and drank in two large lungfuls. His woollen hat was sitting above his ears as it always did and the cold had chapped the tips of his ears. “Maybe you should go home, and just warm up a bit? Watch telly?”

“Naw. I’m no ready to go back to an empty hoose. Are ye sure ye willnae

come wi' me? I know a lassie that will let ye finger her if ye buy her a Walnut Whip."

Mungo felt along the soft ridge of Little Mungo's feather again. He wondered if he would ever reach an age where that sounded like a nice thing to do. "Naw. No thanks."

"C'mon, man up," said James with a half-smile. But he'd already turned and was lurching towards the park.

By the time Mungo reached home all the lights were already blazing and she was sitting at the drop-leaf table in the kitchenette. She had kept her thick anorak on and was drinking whisky from a long-stemmed wine glass and using another as a lazy-man's ashtray. The line of her violet mascara was ruined and it gave an odd blue tint to her face. He knew she had been crying. She must have seen him gawping at her.

"Don't just stand there catching flies," sniffed Mo-Maw, "come and gie us a hug."

Mungo went to his mother. She pulled him on to her lap and she cradled him like the *Pietà.* He was almost sixteen now, much too tall to be babied, but he let her mollycoddle him anyway. He wrapped himself around her and sank his face into her hair. It smelled like sausage grease and loamy peat, cigarettes and Juicy Fruit, all the familiar smells he had missed. Yet as he snuffled into her crown, underneath it all was the scent of another person's soap, and there at the base of it, the smell of Jocky's house, the musk of a stranger's bath towel. Mungo tried to ignore it. "I really thought you might be dead."

"Ah-HA!" She shrieked and threw her arms wide like an Egyptian mummy. "Nae luck pal. *It's alive!*"

Mungo couldn't laugh yet. "There's been stories on the evening news. Some teenage lassies went missing and it turned out they were murdered. I was worried about you."

"Och. That's a lovely thing to say." She tilted her face towards him. There were creases on her face that were not there the last time he saw her. Old make-up was ground into her fine wrinkles, it made them seem like veins. "If ye were a mad murderer yerself, do ye still think I could pass for a teenager?"

Mungo scratched his face. "Oh aye." He knew she would like this lie.

Mo-Maw stamped her small feet in glee. "Och. Ah forgot how much better ah

always feel when ah'm around you." She kissed his cheek. It was a strange open-mouthed kiss. He could feel the wet tip of her tongue. She was already drunk. "If only ah could find a man as good as you. Ah don't know how ah never managed to make a mess of ye. Not like ah did with those there two."

"Jodie's awright," said Mungo. "She's gonnae be a doctor, or an astronaut. I think you should be proudest of her."

Mo-Maw made a disgruntled sound, then she grinned conspiratorially. "Disnae matter. Who likes a wummin that's no fun?" She poured a galloping stream of whisky into the wine glass. Mungo wondered if Tattie-bogle would come tonight, the dull-eyed monstrous side of her. He watched her closely, she looked like she was enjoying herself. Maybe it would all be okay. "Don't ye hate being cooped up all day here with *her?* She's no fun at all. Ah swear that scunner came out of me with a to-do list."

"We always have a laugh when we're the gether."

"That's another thing ah've never liked about that one. As soon as she was big enough to hold ye, she was running all over this scheme like ye were her wee baby."

"Mungo, you can't be burning all the lights …" They hadn't heard the key in the lock. Jodie was standing before them with a soggy pizza box in her hand. "What in God's name are *you* doing here?"

"What a way to greet yer own mother."

Jodie put the pizza box on the table. She took Mungo roughly by his arm and pulled him off Mo-Maw's lap. She dropped him into a seat of his own and pointed at the cold box. "Here, eat that." Mungo did as he was told. Jodie used her index finger and dipped it into Mo-Maw's elegant glass. She winced when she sucked it.

Mo-Maw's eyes were glassy, the whites were steeped in redness as though she had been too long in the local pool. Her jaw was set at a funny angle and she was scowling at Jodie as she hovered over Mungo. The boy ripped a hunk of battered pizza and handed it to his mother. She reached out to take it, but Jodie drew back Mungo's wrist. "When you are full and *if* there is some left over, then she can eat – not before."

Jodie started gathering the dirty dishes. "So, to what do we owe this great honour? *Haaah-ha.*"

"Ah just thought ah would come and see ma weans." Mo-Maw was sitting upright in the kitchen chair, trying to gather some dignity in her own house.

“What’s the harm in th—”

“Spare me your nonsense, Maureen.” It was cold, but without meanness. Mungo looked up at her – Jodie looked worn through. “What’s happened with Jocky?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s happened with Jocky. It’s aw candy floss and winching in the moonlight. Ah just wanted to come see ma boy. My only true love.” She reached across the table and interlaced her fingers amongst Mungo’s. They mooned at each other like they were sweethearts.

“Great. So, this is just a flying visit then? I’m glad you could fit us into your diary.” Jodie’s hair was scraped away from her face; her ponytail hung down her back, thick as a hawser rope. The tautness made her stony-faced. Rummaging through the kitchen drawers, she produced a stack of papers and dropped them in front of Mo-Maw. There was angry red ink everywhere like the letters were shouting at them. “They’re threatening to cut off the electric, the gas, *and* the phone. The housing association has written to us three times about the fact there doesn’t seem to be an adult in the house. If you don’t show yourself, they will call the Social and your precious boy here will be put into care.”

Mo-Maw roared. “Ah wonder what grassin’ basturt telt them that.” She cast the red letters to the floor. “These fuckin’ tenements! Ye cannae walk the length of the street without every clipe knowing yer business.”

“You need to go in first thing on Monday morning and talk to the council.”

“Aye, I’ll get to it.”

“No, you will go in first thing on Monday morning.”

Mo-Maw put her hand up to cover her lips, she leaned across the table to Mungo as though Jodie was not even there. *“See, ah telt ye she was no fuckin’ fun.”*

Jodie closed her eyes. Mungo watched her hands go limp at her side. Mo-Maw tipped the cigarette ash out of her spare wine glass. She filled it with whisky and poured sloshes of Irn-Bru in after it. She pushed it towards Jodie. “Here hen, maybe this will help ye loosen up a wee bit.”

Jodie’s eyes flew open. Mungo had never noticed it before, but now he could see the violence of Hamish in her face. Her eyes could fade to the same black and grey of Ayrshire flint, and her jaw locked in the way Hamish’s did when he was going to punch something, hard. She extended her hand and swept the glass off the table and sent it flying into the wall opposite. Molten orange sprayed the white countertop.

“Ya insolent streak of piss.” Mo-Maw did not like to see good drink wasted. “Ye’re not too old to go over my knee, lady.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Why did you come back, why did you come back.” Mo-Maw was parroting her, turning it into a sour whine. “Well if you must know, it was your fault. Everything was going grand between me and Jocky until youse two showed up at the snack bar.”

“Our fault?”

“Aye.” Mo-Maw tipped her nose upwards and turned her body away from them as though she had been dealt a mortal insult. “Ah felt bad after ah saw yeese. Guilty like. So ah telt Jocky ah had weans, and he papped us. He said it was too much trouble. He said he didn’t want a family.”

Jodie rested all her weight on one hip. She squinted like she could smell something rancid. There was a long awful silence before she said, “See, I asked around and it turns out Jocky Dunbar has four weans of his own. Three girls and a wee boy, all of them still in school. *Haaah-ha.*”

“Well, ah didnae say he *didnae.*”

“You’ve been living with a strange man and playing house with his weans. Have you been cooking for them?”

“It wisnae like that. Ah wisnae there for them.”

“Were you ironing their school uniforms? Making them sandwiches for their packed lunch?”

“No all the time.”

“Wait, what?” Mungo looked from one woman to the other. “Maw—” she hated when he called her that – “Did you iron clothes for another boy?”

“Naw, Mungo.” Mo-Maw reached out to him across the table but he pulled his hand away. Jodie laid her hand across the back of his neck, it was burning hot.

“I know you are not here because of us,” said Jodie. “I know you’ve been playing pretend with some widower and his shiny weans. I would bet Mungo’s life on the fact that you are here now because he’s chucked you for drinking too much. I bet he got sick of the state of you bouncing around the Trongate and disgracing his name.”

“Ye’ve never loved me.”

“I did once.” Jodie nodded sincerely. She took Mungo by the arm and led him out of the kitchenette. “You can stay until after you’ve spoken to the council and

then you need to leave. Ah'll come to the snack bar every Friday and collect money for the bills. You only need to pay until Mungo has his sixteenth birthday. Then you're free to destroy yourself however you like. Try and take the fast road."

Jodie wished her brother would cry. It was a luxury she never had. It had been different for her, she had no one to cry to – neither Mo-Maw nor Hamish could have offered any comfort. But Mungo had her. As they crouched behind the communal bin shed she wished that he would cry. She only had to think of Hamish and she could see the rage that built when you never let the hurt out. She knew too many knotted-up men. "You know she's a liar, don't you?"

Any other time Mungo would have defended their mother. That was his role in the family tragedy, to find the last scraps of good in Mo-Maw and forever be reminding his siblings of it. He knew his line, but he didn't have the energy to recite it.

"You know she will leave the minute Jocky phones for her."

Mungo looked thunderstruck, his mouth was hanging open. He didn't have the energy to argue anymore. "Did she really look after Jocky's weans?"

"Yes," said Jodie. "I noticed you've been at your mad chewing again. I couldn't bring myself to tell you."

They idled in the shadow of the midden as long as they could bear. It stank something terrible, but the longer they waited the more likely that Mo-Maw would have collapsed into a fitful sleep. They huddled together out of the wind until they startled Mrs Campbell as she brought plates of fish down for the tenement strays. Mungo had been telling Jodie about the pigeon boy when Mrs Campbell chased them out of the darkness and upstairs to their beds. All the way up the close she berated them. But Mungo saw the pity that sat in the corner of her mouth. "Ye're a right pair of buggers to frighten an aul' wummin like that." She slipped a chunk of bright orange cheese into each of their hands. She had produced it from her pinny pocket, as though it was a very ordinary place to keep your cheese. It was cracked dry at the edges but she made them eat it before she let them go. "Pair of ye look like ye might come down wi' the rickets any minute."

"Thank you, Missus Campbell," said Jodie.

Mrs Campbell took Jodie's hand. She smoothed the loose hairs away from

Jodie's face. "Listen, hen, if for any reason at all ye cannae sleep up there the night, ye just come back doon the stairs to me, awright? Ah can make up a wee bed for the both of ye, nae questions asked." Mrs Campbell paused, but she wouldn't let go of her hand. "Ah cannae be seen to be interfering in another wummin's business, ye understand that, eh? But youse just say the word, awright?"

Mungo stepped forward and gave the woman a hug. She spun him into a waltz. "Da-dee-da-dah. Aw, yer a pure sook, Mungo Hamilton. Last o' the great romantics." She shooed the children away. "Awa' wi' ye. Awa' afore ye make auld Graham jealous."

The Hamilton flat was quiet. Mo-Maw was in her bedroom, breathing heavily. They closed the door silently behind them. Jodie put her fingers to her lips but Mungo knew what to do. They had been playing this game for a long time: don't make a sound, don't wake Tattie-bogle.

Mungo had only been seven and Jodie had been eight and a half when they first met Tattie-bogle. Jodie could see her brother struggle with this other person, the angry, destructive drunk that came when Mo-Maw was lowest. They had been watching *Willo the Wisp*, it was only dinner time, but Mo-Maw had been drinking for long before they had come home from school. Hamish had asked for something to eat and she had laughed and told him how the electric cooker worked. In a fit of rage, Hamish had taken the bottle of whisky from her and poured it down the sink like it was cold tea.

When she was finished leathering him, a panic rose inside her: where would she get more drink? She telephoned a man who lived in the close next door. He came over and they spent some time in her bedroom with a bottle of fortified. Hamish had to lie on his stomach, the back of his legs scarlet with handprints. They sat close to the television and ate bowls of salted porridge that Jodie had made. When the man finally left, Mo-Maw was fully drunk and only half-dressed. She had gone past the point where she had been having any fun and now she was angry and lousy with a deep sense of having been swindled.

"Do ye know what ah just had to do?" she accused Hamish. They knew, although they didn't have the words for it yet. They'd had to sit cross-eyed before the television in order to not hear the man and his grunting. The children had been so close they could smell the static from the screen. "Well, that was all *your* fault, so it was." She pointed an accusatory finger at her eldest boy. The children sat clumped together, alert as three startled ferrets. That was the day

Jodie invented Tattie-bogle.

When Mo-Maw finally passed out, Jodie rubbed some calamine lotion into the back of Hamish's red legs, while Mungo flicked through the channels on the soundless television. They were playing a werewolf movie: some comedy about an American teenager trying to cope with his terrifying alter ego. The three children sat open-mouthed, their heads lolling on soft necks, when Jodie quietly said, "Ah. That's like Mo-Maw. She's not the same person all the time. See."

Mungo and Jodie choked down the last of Mrs Campbell's dry cheese. They stood in their dark hallway and tried to decipher the message in Mo-Maw's uneven breathing. She was falling asleep. *Good.* Jodie hugged her brother goodnight. They parted to go to their separate bedrooms. They did not make even the faintest noise, but still somehow Mo-Maw stirred. Her voice was damp and claggy sounding in the darkness. "Mungo? Mungo darlin', is that you?"

Mungo looked to his sister; she was beseeching him to be quiet, all the colour had drained from her face. Mo-Maw stirred from her bed. There was the thump of a meaty foot hitting the carpet, and Mungo knew what he had to do to keep her safe, to hold her still. "Yes, Mo-Maw. It's me. What is it?"

It took her much longer to think when she was rolling this deep. The children stood in the dark, waiting for her reply. "C'mon," said the pitiful voice. "Come in here and sleep with Mo-Maw the night."

You're too old for that, mouthed Jodie.

"I know." But he couldn't admit to Jodie how much he wanted to do it, how he wanted to be with his mother, and to feel safe again.

"Mungo, you can't sleep in with her," Jodie whispered.

"Munn-go, Mungo. C'mon-go, Mungo sleep in here the night," Mo-Maw whined.

Mo-Maw was slurring heavily. He could wait, he could do nothing, and she would probably fall asleep. But how could he tell Jodie this was for him as much as it was for her? "I should go. I can keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't go wandering in the night."

Jodie didn't say anything else. She turned away from him in disgust and slammed her bedroom door. He listened to the tiny snib catch. Hamish had kicked her door in once – right around the time Jodie had started her bleedings – and in revenge, she had taken all his trousers and cut the pocket bags out of them. For a long time after that Hamish had needed to carry everything he owned in his two hands like a beggar of Bethlehem.

Mungo poured Mo-Maw a tall glass of metallic tap water. He slid into the warm bedroom. “Lift your bum,” he commanded, and she did a crablike pose on the bed, shaking, like she might topple at any moment. Mungo dug the tight elastic of her leggings out from her belly flesh and drew them off. Sighing with relief, she lay back on the bed and patted the sheets next to her. Mungo took off his own clothes, naked but for his boxer shorts, and climbed in beside her. Drawing the duvet over them, she pushed herself close to him and he wrapped himself around her small back. She was like a child in his arms, a drunk, sour-breathed, nicotine-coated child. Mungo pressed the warm tops of his thighs against the underside of her cold legs. He held her tiny feet between his and rubbed them gently until they felt less like ice.

“Ah’m no sleepy,” she slurred.

“Do you want a story? I can tell you the one about the woman who wins the football pools and never needs to work another day in her life. You like that one.”

Mo-Maw shook her head like a child. “No. Sing me something good.”

“Like what?”

“You know hunners of good songs. Sing me something you’ve taped off the charts. Something about love.”

Mungo lay behind her. He needed to keep her here with him. In a quiet voice he started to sing his love songs, unsure of the words, but certain of how they made him feel.

SIX

The orange Capri was parked under a broken street light. Some industrious youth had climbed the lamp post and disconnected the light so that he could kiss his girlfriend in privacy. The car sat in the shadows, near the breeze-block wall that separated the drying area from some muddy grass. It was a magnificent machine. Even in the half-dark it was a shade of pumpkin orange so confident that it defied the usual embarrassment of gaudy motors. It was a powerful-looking beast, the kind that Mungo only ever saw in toy boxes imported from America.

Hamish put his hand on the door handle and with a quick slice of a flathead file he released the lock and let himself in. Mungo slunk backwards into the shadows. By the time Hamish had coaxed the roaring engine to life he had pressed his entire back against the breeze block. “Get in, ya shitebag” was all Hamish would say. Mungo didn’t think he could outrun the growling engine.

With its mirrored baubles and furred headrests, the inside of the car felt more like a seedy gentleman’s club than a car interior. Hamish drove slowly through the back streets as Mungo sank down into the plush velour seat and tried not to let anyone see him in the stolen motor. When they reached the traffic lights of the Parade, Hamish slid the car out of gear and pumped the accelerator. It made a ferocious roar that echoed off the tenements and made people jump at the bus shelter. He did it again.

“I don’t like that.” Mungo’s face was ticcing.

Hamish gunned the engine again. Oncoming headlights glinted off his thick lenses. “I won’t stop doing this until ye sit up and stop acting like a fud.”

“But you’ve knocked it.”

The engine squealed again and the car lurched into gear. “So? Anybody that wants tae stop us has to fuckin’ catch us first.”

The lights of the Parade were beautiful at high speed. Bright chip shops and cosy pubs all reflected on to the damp streets. Tenements streaked by, and Mungo watched the lights change in synchronization in every one of the front rooms; happy families, tucked in from the cold, all watching the same channel. Soon, the tenements fell away and the low houses of Royston rose on the hill to the right: the land of Catholics, no place for a Hamilton.

Beyond these sat the broken promises of Sighthill. The high-rise towers were only twenty years old and were already in a state of disrepair. They were the tallest buildings Mungo had ever seen. The tops of them disappeared into the dense clouds, like a stairway to somewhere above the endless rain, or like a strut trying to keep the ceiling of dark cumulus from collapsing and suffocating the entire city.

The Capri knew how to fly. Every time Hamish paused at a red light and took off again, Mungo was pressed back into the seat, as forcefully as the times when Hamish would sit on his chest. Only this pressure felt like freedom. Hamish gunned the engine and snapped the steering wheel, and the car slid around the traffic island. While they paused at the lights Mungo pointed towards the illuminated snack bar. It was quiet and Mo-Maw was hanging out the serving hatch with the fluorescent tube light glinting off her pallid chest. Her boys watched as their mother flirted with one of the bin men. Hamish cranked down his window and pumped the engine again. He screamed over the roar, *“Getitupyeyaauldrunk, giesagobble!”*

Mungo slid down in his seat. He turned to apologize to Mo-Maw but they were already screeching towards the Trongate. Hamish was roaring with laughter, and despite himself, Mungo realized he was having fun. “Don’t wet yersel, she’ll no know it was us,” said Hamish. “She’d never wear her glasses in front of men.”

The orange beast roared down High Street and, turning right, it passed the newspaper works and went into George Square. Hamish drove like he owned the whole city, one hand high on the wheel, the other waving at scornful lassies out the window. Mungo laid his forehead against the cool glass and watched a thousand stories go by: young, underdressed women going for drinks after work, lines of animated art students talking with their hands, and the lawyers with their arms full of Manila folders, walking with a sense of their own importance. So many lives were happening only two miles away from his and they all seemed brighter than his own.

Hamish pulled the car along the wide artery of Argyle Street. The people seemed a lower sort here, people like them. They were closer to the River Clyde now and the shops were cheaper; the buildings not yet sandblasted back to their glorious golden colour. Glaswegians cut through the smirr without even looking where they were going. They didn't look up at the grand buildings, heavy with Corinthian columns, that the Tobacco Lords had built for themselves. Mungo felt envious. If he could walk these streets every day, he would never take the beauty of the city for granted.

"You awright?" asked Hamish. "Ye're no gonnae be sick, are ye?"

"I never get to see this. Don't drive so fast."

They cruised on for a while, winding up and down West Nile and Renfrew Street and then back along Hope Street. The car stopped at the lights by Central Station and they watched young women huddle together and make their way to the pubs and clubs. The tops of their soft arms were pink with gooseflesh and mottled with stubborn baby fat. Hamish pulled alongside them and brought the engine to a seductive susurration. The girls laughed at them.

Hamish flicked the fuel gauge. "Seems a shame to waste this beauty. How do ye fancy an adventure afore we get tae work?" He drew out a can of Special Brew from his tracksuit pocket and handed it to Mungo. He took out another and slammed it off his brother's in salute. Mungo was sad to see gobbets of white foamy lager spill on the upholstery but Hamish didn't seem to mind. "Here's to us brave Hamilton men."

There was a stack of someone else's cassettes in the cigarette drawer. Hamish played the Pretenders and he mugged at Mungo to "stop his sobbing," bopping in time to the jangling chorus. Hamish looked happy, driving fast, with one hand gliding through the spitting rain, and the can of lager clamped between his knees. Mungo wanted to watch him in his rare contentment, but the city was already flying by underneath them. They took a bridge over the Clyde. They flew over neighbourhoods Mungo couldn't name.

By the time they reached the sea it was hard to see where the land ended and the water began. Hamish parked on the tallest hill and they sat on the bonnet. Below them were constellations of evening lights, lonely farms, and tiny clusters of villages sitting snug against the frigid Irish Sea. Hamish put his arm around Mungo. He almost apologized. "Mibbe next time we'll do this in the daylight,

eh?”

Mungo didn’t mind. It was the quietest place he had ever been. “Can we turn the headlights off? Just for a wee minute.”

His brother did as he asked. Hamish finished his lager, and then he finished Mungo’s for him, as they sat together in the gloaming. After a while, he said, “Ah dinnae mean to be so hard on ye all the time.”

“I know.”

“I just feel a mental amount of pressure sometimes. You know, wi’ the Billies, wi’ baby Adrianna, and looking after you on top of it.”

“I don’t ask you to do that.”

“S’pose you’re the least of ma problems.” Hamish was pulling gently on Mungo’s earlobe. Mungo rarely heard his brother talk like this. At home, you couldn’t admit anything tender. It was foolish to say something sweet that the scheme could use against you later. “We’re in this the gether, Mungo. I’m just hard on you because ah cannae have ye turning out soft or nothing.” He tugged Mungo’s ear, then twisted it.

Mungo was sad that his real brother had crept back so soon. “I think something is wrong with Jodie. She’s no eating properly.”

“Aye?” Hamish sounded bored. “I bet none of the boys at school want to shag her.”

“Wait, I thought we were in this the gether? Three Musketeers?”

“That’s a laugh! It’s mair like the Godfather and his two useless wallopers.” Hamish crumpled his lager can, it sailed through the air. “C’mon. Want to see some braw magic?”

Hamish drove along a series of twisting roads. He drove fast and Mungo was reminded that his brother had been here before without him and the thought made him blue. The car banked around high hedges and farmers’ fences until it came to a stop facing up a small hill. In the last of the violet light Mungo could see about forty feet ahead of them.

“Right,” said Hamish. “What do you think happens if ye take the handbrake off on a hill?”

“That’s stupid,” said Mungo. “You would roll backwards.”

“Right enough.”

Hamish released the handbrake and Mungo braced himself, waited for the car to roll downhill backwards, away from the glow of its own headlights. Nothing happened for a while, then, very slowly, very surely, the car rolled uphill. Mungo

could feel the heat of Hamish's broad grin. "How crazy is that?"

It was strange indeed. The car was accelerating uphill of its own accord.

"It's cursed or something. Anything ye put on this hill rolls upwards instead of downwards. It's an electric current. Freaky right?" Hamish put the car into gear and continued up the hill, but Mungo wanted to do it again and again.

They stopped at a small harbour by the sullen sea. Hamish bought them a poke of chips to share. He didn't complain when Mungo drowned it all in malt vinegar, he just said, "Don't eat them now. I know where we should go."

The soggy chips were still warm by the time they came to a long drystane dyke. Hamish pulled the car off the road and they scrambled over the high wall. It was pitch-black. Every so often, long ferns licked at their legs, and it made them dance with fear and delight. In the distance, about a mile away, was the faint glow of man-made light.

When they finally reached the glowing castle, Mungo had to ask what they were looking at because he had never seen anything like it. There was the Central Station Hotel, and the sooty sandstone of Glasgow Cathedral, but those places were built for the public or for day trippers. This house was all for one person. It was built for majesty and looked somewhere between a fortified castle and a grand, stately home. The main structure sat with its back to the breaking sea and the landscaping and crenelated walls wrapped around him as far as he could make out. The faint light from inside rippled against the mottled glass. The windows were generous, the rooms over-furnished, and Mungo could tell there was a world of beauty to look in and out upon.

"Smashin' int it? Culzean Castle." Hamish stood under the canopy of an ancient tree, his hands on his hips, proud as any laird. "Sammy-Jo wants to get married there." He whistled. "Do ye know how many stolen motors it would take to pay for that?"

Hamish pointed towards a bridge that arched over a sunken garden. The bridge had guard turrets on either side, long since put out of use. "In there is a good place for pumping lassies," he said, matter-of-fact. "Bring them up here wi' a bottle of Buckie and show them this castle. They'll let ye get both hauns up them after that." He was smiling. His mouth was full of yellow chips.

Mungo was watching Hamish dangle from a thick bough and thinking how much he enjoyed this playful side of his brother. Hamish was far from Glasgow and the glare of the Protestant boys who expected so much from him, and the rest of the scheme who expected so little. Here, Mungo could remember the boy

Hamish had once been, mischievous and brave, full of impetuous ideas and never afraid of falling, so long as he could fly first. In this moment it was as if he had not yet soured. To see him carry on like a wean again was almost too much for Mungo to bear.

"Hamey?" Mungo knew he was pushing his luck.

"Whut?"

"I love you."

Mungo was watching his brother swing back and forth when he felt the hands on his collar. Why did they always grab you by the collar? The night watchman had slunk across the wet lawn, the dull churn of the sea had muffled all his footsteps. He slipped a tight arm under Mungo's chin and tilted his head backwards.

"Got you, ya wee fucker!"

Hamish had barely let go of the bough before Mungo did it. The violence sprang out of a lifetime of compacted instinct, hard-learned lessons from a sadistic brother. In one quick move Mungo pulled his head forward and then snapped it backwards. He felt the hard bone of the man's nose give way to softness and he knew that he had shattered it. He curled his body into a ball and shoved with all of his might, pushing the man off balance. The night watchman fell to the sodden ground. Mungo broke free of his grip and sprang to his feet.

The man was rolling on the ground and clutching at his smashed face as Mungo darted past Hamish, heading for the safety of the darkness. As he passed, Mungo grabbed hold of Hamish's slippery tracksuit and dragged him away from the man and back through the ferns. It had been easy to overpower the night watchman; maybe he was unaccustomed to Glaswegian schemies ransacking his castle. Yet as they scaled the drystane boundary there was a look of admiration on Hamish's face. Mungo could see his teeth flash in the moonlight. Hamish lived for the thrill of mischief. As he manipulated the exposed wires and started the car humming, he said, "Sakes, Mungo. You act all shy, but I don't think you know what ye're capable of."

They sang all the way back to the city. Hamish had been talking down the boasts of the Catholic fighters and beaming with pride at the tiny spark of violence inside his brother. "That was mental how ye decked that auld cunt." He grinned. "Next month, ye need tae gie us hauners against the Royston Bhoys. The

bastards willnae know what hit them. I cannae wait to see you bury a tomahawk into one of those Fenian wallopers."

Behind Sighthill there was a sludge canal that ran from the North Side to the Clyde, and at night, all the low industrial buildings that framed it were dark and locked tight. Hamish abandoned the Capri in the middle of the empty road. There was just enough petrol left in the tank to set it alight. Mungo had tried to reason with him. They had had their fun, could they not just return the beautiful motor undamaged and just this once not spoil everything good that came to them.

"How stupit are you? I'm getting paid eighty poun' to steal this motor and torch it. Joe Morrison will get mair frae the insurance than he would get for a trade-in."

Hamish lit the rag that he had stuffed into the petrol cap. He danced away from the Capri. There was a terrific explosion and the car was a growling ball of flames. It knocked the wind out of Mungo, and it shook all thoughts from his head. It was dazzling, how something marvellous could be destroyed so quickly and so completely. The brothers jogged away from the flames, sat on the wall of Sighthill Cemetery, and watched the tall plume of rubber smoke merge into the uplit clouds. Mungo felt sad that their night was over. Soon they would be back on the scheme. He wished they could get Jodie and go eat vinegary chips by the sea together.

They were watching knots of Sighthill weans move closer to the bonfire, finding things to throw on the roaring flames before the fire brigade arrived and doused the fun. Down the hill, the industrial buildings were illuminated by the strobing blue of the fire engines. The boys watched the lights wind their way through the maze of streets towards the canal. Hamish spoke first. "I was proud of ye, up at the castle."

Mungo didn't feel proud. He was repulsed by the way his hair was hardening from the man's sticky blood. "That's a sad thing to be proud of me for."

Hamish was holding a short dout between his second and third knuckles. The city was half-rotted below them. It wasn't only that Mungo was too young to understand, it was also that in fifteen years he had seen nothing but the half-dozen tenemented streets they lived on. Hamish clenched his left fist and tried to dampen his temper. It wasn't Mungo's fault that he didn't know more. "There's nae jobs here. Ye'll need to fuckin' toughen up. Like, what's even the point of you stickin' in at school?"

“Yeah, but you didn’t even try.” It was too quick. Mungo braced himself.

Hamish flicked the dout and the cigarette cartwheeled into the night. He folded in on himself like a half-shut blade and set off on the long walk home.

Mungo trotted behind him, a kicked dog at his master’s heels.

Hamish scoffed. “Learn a trade, that’s what the school telt me. I telt them I wanted to go tae university, learn all about the engineerin’, and they said, ‘You know, that’s not for boys like *you*.’” Hamish feigned his best West End accent and Mungo knew by the way he sung it upwards that he was mimicking Mrs Newman, the overworked headmistress at the high school. “The sad thing wis, I knew what that sour cunt meant, but I goes, ‘*How no?*’ And she sucked in her massive wobbling chins and goes, ‘You’re not cut from university cloth.’”

Mungo had heard Hamish say the exact same thing to Jodie; now he knew where the hurt began. “And you believed her?”

“No at first. Newman telt us if I liked buildin’ things that much, to go down Govan, and apply for a shipbuilding apprenticeship. She sent me down the watter one afternoon, paid my bus fare and everything. I came swannin’ down the dockside in my best school uniform while a tide of men were pushing the other way. They had just been telt they were getting the sack. Their lunch pails were still full.” Hamish stopped his long strides and looked out over the low city. “Grown men wi’ greetin’ faces, and here’s muggins, in a school tie, asking for an apprenticeship. Three hunner and fifty men on the broo and I’m asking for a bus-fare allowance. It was a pure embarrassment.”

“I’m sorry.”

Hamish turned on his heels and rammed his finger into his brother’s chest. They had crossed some kind of Glasgow boundary and it was like the angry man he had left behind had been waiting there for him to return. “I don’t need you feelin’ sorry for us.”

The side of Mungo’s face started twitching again. It had been calm all night, even as he broke the nose of the night watchman.

Hamish studied its familiar twisting and sighed. “Do you hate us, Mungo?”

“No!” It came out in a rushing torrent and it was true. Mungo bit the inside of his lip and added, “But I don’t want to be like you.”

He expected Hamish to clout him. But Hamish only turned away from him and laughed. Mungo took a half-step backwards to avoid any surprise right hook. “It’s funny. Ah thought the same thing about Mo-Maw and look at me. I was an old man at fifteen and a dad at eighteen.”

“Is that why you hate her?”

“I don’t hate her.” Hamish laughed, but it was sour. “Aye, mibbe I do. But don’t we all blame her for somethin’?”

“I don’t blame her. I just try to love her.”

“You’re still young, baw-jaws. Gie it time.”

At that, Hamish turned back around and started to run as fast as he could. Mungo knew to keep up with him. Royston was not a place for a Hamilton to walk leisurely, Hamish had ruined even that. On the side of the low council houses someone had spray-painted a large green shamrock. The brothers didn’t stop to consider it. They flew along the glistening streets, interlopers in the land of the Catholics.

SEVEN

Mo-Maw spent the morning trying to get into Jodie's good books again. She alternated between ironing the same four tea towels and staring mournfully at the telephone, but whenever Jodie came near, she rearranged her smile and covered the shame she felt at having been spurned. As if to prove her reformation, she then spent the afternoon slipping cubed steak and sausage meat into a pot of stovies. The kitchenette was damp with steam. The air was salted with beef stock and sweating onions.

Mungo lay down on the hallway carpet and propped his legs on the wall. He relished the happy clip of their one good knife, and the splooking sound made by the stirring ladle. Every now and again Jodie would step over him on the way to the toilet. Her rolling eyes implored him to grow up. "Traitor!" she crowed. "Have some self-respect." Eventually she gave up on scowling at him and started cuffing his flank with her toes – "Sorry. So sorry." – pretending it was an accident every time she passed. But Mungo was a loyal dog. He would not be moved.

He got up eventually and followed her around the house. Jodie had been drying her long hair and he floated into her bedroom silently, inching ever closer, till he was sat near her, then beside her, and until finally his left hand was upturned and she was dropping her hair clips into it. He quietly implored her to come to dinner, and it was clear that he would give her no peace until she agreed.

His sister joined them at the drop-leaf table. She sat side-saddle to the chair, like she might up and leave at any moment. It made Mungo itchy. Mo-Maw ladled out bowls of potatoes that were as big and white as snowballs and floated in gristly sausage meat: both the long kind and the chewy square kind. Then she drowned everything within a lochan of fragrant gravy.

His mother had washed her face since her last shift but Mungo could still see

pockets of the ultraviolet mascara when she smiled. As they dragged their bread through the gravy, she made small talk, telling them about the characters that frequented the snack bar; the nocturnal feeders who spent their lives roaming around in the dark. They fluttered to her like moths, she said, and with no shame they told her all kinds of personal things they should never utter in the daylight.

"So, that's when Big Ella telt me that the last lassie she employed was selling mair than sausages and fried egg. The dirty besom had written out a secret price list and everything, and if ye bought ten, you got the eleventh wank for free." Mo-Maw was cackling at the story and for a moment she seemed happy enough for a heartbroken woman. "For the first three weeks ah had all these long-distance lorry drivers asking us what the *special* was. Ah kept telling them it was curry sauce and chips, and they kept looking at me like ah was stupit. 'Naw,' they'd say, 'the *special*-special.'"

Jodie folded her arms across her chest. "Mibbe you should give it a go."

"What? Ah'm no touching any man's boaby for a couple of bob."

Jodie's eyes darted to Mungo. They both knew the truth of it, that Mo-Maw had done worse and for less. His feet were searching for hers under the table, trying to kick her before she soured the meal. The edges of her lips were already curled in snideness. "Mibbe if you sold yourself by the ounce, you'd get a better price."

Mo-Maw dropped her fork. She pressed self-consciously on her small rolls of fat.

The women were both glaring, but not at each other. Mungo fretted to fill the empty space. Jodie had only eaten a few mouthfuls of the stovies and then stopped. "Are you not hungry?" he asked, mopping his own plate.

She looked a little green. "I don't seem to have an appetite."

He turned her plate slightly, as though this might help. "Just eat a few bites."

Mo-Maw lifted her fork again and ate without savouring the food. "Don't fuss, Mungo, if she doesnae want it, then she doesnae want it." She turned to Jodie. "Anyhow, now that you're a wummin, it'll no do ye any harm to skip a meal or two. You cannae eat like ye were a twelve-year-old boy. You know what they say about genetics?"

"Spell it," said Jodie quickly.

"Spell whut?"

"Genetics."

Mo-Maw snatched Jodie's plate from the table. She took the wasted stovies

and poured them back into the pot.

The telephone began to chirp. Mo-Maw gathered up her limp curls and caught them into a long banana clip. She never stood when she talked on the telephone. She treated every phone call as an opportunity to sit down, smoke her cigarettes, and converse at length. Wrong numbers were her favourite.

Mungo waited for their mother to leave the room. He laid his open hands on the table. “Sake! Why do you always have to start something?”

Jodie didn’t answer him. She laid her head on top of Mungo’s hand. The caramel silk of her hair was shiny and sweet-smelling. He could feel the beat of her pulse murmuring at her temple. She was burning up. They listened to Mo-Maw answer the telephone. She always recited the number back to the caller, an affectation that irritated Jodie. “Hello-o, Hamilton residence. *Five-five-four, six-one—*” The posh accent slid off of her lips. “Ah, for fuck sake! Oh, it’s *you,* is it? What do ye want?”

The children listened as Mo-Maw fought with Jocky. It didn’t take long. Her resolve had shallow roots. What started out as a frosty, stubborn blockade soon melted, and she was purring down the phone at him like a teenager. Jodie sat up straight and sighed once. Mungo helped scrape the old nail polish from her fingernails, and one by one, she repainted them in Mo-Maw’s good polish. It was a powdery pink, the colour of a baby’s earlobes.

Mo-Maw’s face was flushed as she came back into the kitchenette. “It’s not even been a whole weekend.” She squeezed Jodie’s hand, which surprised everybody. “Do ye think he loves me?”

Mungo knew his sister was going to ruin it for her, long before she actually did. Jodie allowed her mother a brief moment of reverie before she pulled her hand from her grip. “Surely you are not going to leave again?”

“How no? Am ah no meant to be happy?”

Jodie inclined her head towards Mungo. She said nothing more.

There was a brief moment where it seemed Mo-Maw didn’t know where she was. Then she collected herself and cradled Mungo’s head against her bosom. Mungo inhaled deeply, unsure of when he would be so near to her again. He felt her sink her weight on to her right hip as though she was grounding herself, then something shifted in her tone. All the earlier excitement was gone, her voice was flat, like someone had let all the air from a balloon. “No, no. You’re right, Jodie. I should stay here.”

Jodie’s eyes grew wide as china saucers. Mungo knew he should say

something to move Mo-Maw back towards Jocky but he did not. He put his arms around his mother and said nothing.

Mo-Maw was talking back to a game show. She was counting the last of her loose change as Mungo pulled his cagoule over his head. He hovered around her, sleekitly checked that what she was drinking was only tap water. Then he told her he would be back in a few hours.

With the sudden reappearance of his mother it had been several days since he had last seen James. Mungo still felt terrible that he had mentioned Mo-Maw's return from Hades, with James's own mammy dead – real, non-refundable death.

James wasn't at his doocot, but a fresh spray of pigeon shit and sawdust said he had been there a little earlier. Mungo plodded back through the scheme. It was a dreich Sunday night, a perfect night for weekly baths and ironing work uniforms, and a lethargic malaise had fallen over the tenements. He knew the back of James's flat faced his own, but he didn't know the exact number. He tried to look casual as he dawdled along the empty street and checked each buzzer panelling for Jamieson. Mungo was about to give up when at the last close he found the name written in green ink on the top buzzer.

"Who is eht?" It wasn't James's voice.

"Hallo, is James there? Can he come out to play?" Mungo cringed. He was bad at this.

But the buzzer razzed and he was grateful to step into the dry close mouth. The close was lined to shoulder height in gold and brown diamond patterned tiles. Each landing had a floral stained-glass window that filled the stone stairwell with fractals of beautiful light. It was the same housing scheme as Mungo's, but he could tell the council agent who managed this close took more pride in its upkeep. The families who lived here were – by the slightest fraction – better off.

The Jamieson door was a broad set of double doors on the very top landing. James was leaning over the banister, barefooted, in a thick Aran gansey over a pair of nylon football shorts. He looked flat, tired, and stood with his arms crossed like a bored bouncer. He softened when he saw Mungo climb the stairs. Without a word in greeting, Mungo followed him inside and sat down at the opposite end of the settee.

Horse racing highlights were on the television. James's father was packing a

ripstop holdall and arguing with the list of winners. He didn't acknowledge Mungo as he came in. His horse had lost, and he was packing his bag without thought, like he had packed it too many times before. Mr Jamieson was tall like James, and broad too, useful-looking. His hair was the same flaxen hue but the sides shone with silver. He looked like a man who might enjoy a long swim in January; his face had a high, florid flush. Without taking his gaze from the television he pulled on his navy toque, and Mungo realized then that the hat that James usually wore was a tatty version of his father's.

When the man finally cast his eyes over his son, they were as grey as the North Sea. Then Mr Jamieson looked over Mungo. It was such a look of disdain that Mungo hid the scuff of his left trainer behind his right, although each was as worn as the other. He wondered what Mr Jamieson had heard about the Hamilton family.

James's father went out into the hallway. He ripped a wire from the wall and as he came back into the living room he was binding their cream telephone with its own cord. He shoved it into his sports bag without looking at his son. "You know the rules. If you need tae call me, use Mrs Daly's phone." James nodded slowly. Mr Jamieson ran his eyes the entire length of Mungo again, and the boy felt an odd compulsion to open his hands and turn out his palms.

"Right." He zipped the sports bag closed. Reaching into a tight bundle of notes he peeled a stack of them away. He slapped the money on the table. "Three weeks, then. See if ye can no burn through it aw this time, okay? Try …" He started to say something, and then he cast his eyes over Mungo again and thought better of it. "Jist try your best to behave. Stick in at the school. Awright?"

He didn't hug James goodbye. He just nodded, as though they had passed each other on the street.

Mungo didn't speak until he heard the man go whistling down the close. "Wow. He's a laugh." But James was struck with a type of rictus. Mungo could barely recognize him without his usual carefree look. "You didn't tell me your da was home."

"He wasn't. He only came for the weekend."

"But I thought he got two weeks off?"

"Aye, he does. But he telt me he's met a woman from Peterhead. He wanted to head north early and spend some time with her before going back to the rigs."

Mungo didn't know where Peterhead was. He said nothing.

“Apparently Caroline is a stewardess on the Auk rig.” James paused. “Her and her daughter breed Yorkshire terriers. They have eleven of them. Big fuckin’ whoop.”

It seemed like James didn’t want to talk anymore. He hammered the remote control, flicking between the same four channels so rapidly that Mungo had to hold his cheekbone and look away. He settled on some English comedy rerun. They sat in a heavy silence and watched as pensioners let a piano roll down a Yorkshire hillside.

The front room was the same shape as Mungo’s although everything in it was plusher and of a much finer quality. There was a fitted carpet and a large wool rug. Someone had taken care to match the settee to the carpet and the carpet to the curtains. It had the luxurious feeling of having been purchased all at once, not laid away and added to, stick by stick. There were framed photos on the mantel: one of a family of four posing in a studio, and another of two children, James and a handsome older girl.

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

He followed the line of Mungo’s gaze. “Geraldine. She married a whisky distributor.”

“Cool.”

James snorted. “He’s called Gerald. His name is *Gerry Berry.* Can you believe it? Pair of them are pure jokes, man. She thinks she’s the dug’s baws because she lives in a fancy house wi’ satellite telly. But I know she’s all fur coat and nae knickers. Mrs Gerry Berry likes to come on Tuesdays and Thursdays after work and bring me frozen dinners.”

“Mibbe she wants to make sure you are eating right?”

“Really? I expect she feels guilty.”

Mungo was thinking about Jodie. His next question seemed only natural. “Why don’t you just go live with her?”

James turned and looked at him square in the eye. “Why doesn’t she ask me to?” Then he turned his face back to the television. This was a different person, not the industrious, hearty, fresh-air-filled boy he knew from the doocot.

“C’mon, don’t be like that.” Mungo rammed his shoulder into his.

When he did this to Jodie, she would shove him back, and soon they would be tormenting each other until whatever had first ailed them would have dissolved for a while. Mungo rammed him again. James didn’t move. Mungo felt foolish, pressed against his side. He was going to straighten himself when James shifted

slightly. James raised his arm out from under the weight and draped it across Mungo's shoulders. It made Mungo flinch in anticipation of a blow, a flick, a chokehold. But as he waited for retaliation, it slowly dawned on him that no hurt was coming. Instead of rejecting him James had made more space for him.

Mungo slid into him and filled the cavity in James's side. There was a tide in James's chest, and Mungo bobbed on the swell of it. He was carried along by the slow rise and fall of his ribcage and comforted by the sigh at the edge of his breath. James's arm was heavy but Mungo liked the weight of it, he felt safe underneath it. The lanolin from James's Aran jumper tickled the back of his neck and he could smell the musk of his armpit, the sticky remains of soapy deodorant, the salt of rain-scrubbed skin. James's fingers danced in the air, they kept time with his distracted mind. Mungo closed his eyes and the fingers drummed a gentle beat on his chest.

Occasionally James would laugh at the clumsy pensioners on the telly and the whole bulk of him shuddered. Mungo was muted. He couldn't focus on the programme, so he followed the patterns of James's laughter, always a half-beat behind. They sat like that for a long time. It all felt somehow wrong. Mungo worried that it would end.

"It's a lot of money, int it?" Mungo hadn't heard him at first, so James said it again. "That money, it's a fair whack."

Mr Jamieson had left what looked like two hundred pounds on the table. Mungo had been trying not to stare.

"He gets paid a fortune, that's the only reason he leaves. They pay overtime and danger money. He's got nowhere to spend it out in the middle of the sea."

"Is it to feed yourself with?"

"He never asks what I spend it on."

James lifted his arm and stood up. It was as though a thick blanket had been pulled away on a February morning.

In the veneered cabinet there were some crystal ornaments and several shelves of leather-bound books. They had a refined air to them, posh as any scholar's office. James took one down and opened it in front of Mungo. It wasn't a book at all, but a burgundy case for a videocassette. None of them were actual books.

Inside this fake book was a pile of crisp notes. "Two thousand and forty-nine pounds, give or take. I don't spend everything he gives me. I try to save most of it so I'll have enough to leave when I'm ready." He folded the new notes inside

and tossed the book across the table as carelessly as an empty cigarette packet. He sat on the other side of Mungo now, further away, and curled his flat feet up underneath himself. He went back to staring at the television.

“How’s Conan the Sectarian?”

James laughed, Mungo felt buoyed to see the happy-gappy teeth again. “Turns out his name was Caledonian Sun. He was famous. He wouldn’t settle so I took him to a guy in Garthamlock. He gave us forty poun’ for him, said Wee-Man Flannigan was gonnae stab me if ever he caught me.”

“But you didn’t steal the bird. Isn’t that the whole point?”

“Aye, but some eejits take it awfy hard. You were there, I caught him fair and square. Flannigan can go fuck himself. *Whrooup, whroooooup.*”

“I’m sad you sold him.”

James extended his foot and shunted Mungo. “You need to sell them. If ye don’t the bird might try to make its way home and take your prize doo wi’ it.” He pulled his foot away. “You need to move them on. Confuse ’em. It’s all part of the game.”

Mungo’s side felt hollow where he had been pressed against James. He had thought perhaps James had needed the contact, that perhaps he was lonely here all by himself, but perhaps it had been Mungo who had wanted the comfort.

“Are ye hungry?” asked James.

He wasn’t – the stovies coiled in his belly as heavy as lead – but he followed James through to the kitchenette anyway. The cupboards were filled with colourful boxes. It was an Aladdin’s cave of sugar, with every manner of prepackaged starch you could buy. Mo-Maw never went into those aisles at the shop, she stayed with the meats and vegetables and made it as far as the tinned soups. James looked at the hoard with a sigh of boredom.

On the wall above the small dining table was a collection of crucifixes. A collage of different palm leaves twisted into small crosses. The children’s names were written on them in the same writing but different coloured pens. His mother must have collected them every Palm Sunday throughout the years.

“Fuck!”

“Whut?” James was eating two chocolate biscuits that he had sandwiched together.

“Nothin’.”

The reason he could not quite place James was because they attended different schools; his was not just another unknown face, lost in the scrum of an

overrun state school. James was a Catholic, and the Catholic was grinning as he poured two heaped bowls of sugar puffs and crumbled a chocolatey flake over the top. Mungo took his treat and tried not to look at the crucifixes. As milk dribbled down his chin, he resolved not to tell Hamish about the Fenian.

They spent the evening in the glow of the electric fire watching a Royal Command Performance on television. They lay on the blue rug and crammed an endless procession of buttery shortbread into their mouths. English comedians were notoriously unfunny. English comedians performing in front of the Queen were unfunny and slick with a strange kind of slithery smarminess. On top of this, the man now performing had gone all limp in the wrist and something about him made the boys uncomfortable. It was a loathsome sight, people were roaring at him, and the louder they laughed the more he swished and lisped.

"When you leave," asked Mungo, "where would you go?"

James turned away from the comedian. He lowered his cheek to the floor. "I told ye already. Anywhere but here. I want to live somewhere where people aren't always leaving. I don't mind being alone. It's the fact they keep fucking off, again and again." James looked at him. "Would you be awright if I left?"

He shrugged. "Do what you like."

James lay between Mungo and the television. He was searching Mungo's face in the flickering glow. "You are a bad liar, Mungo Hamilton." He tried to lay a thick finger on Mungo's cheekbone, right where the twitch had started.

Mungo slapped him away. "Why does every fucker want to touch my face?"

James propped himself up on one elbow.

Mungo was squinting, peering like he had an eye test. He started to laugh.

James looked behind himself at the bright television. He turned and looked at Mungo. "Who are you laughin' at?"

"I can see different colours through your big ears. They're pure glowing."

James flattened them against his head.

Mungo toed his hands away and the large ears sprung back to life. "You're like Dumbo."

James lunged and caught Mungo's ankle sharply, twisting it. It cracked his knee and Mungo contorted to release the painful pressure of it. "Call me that again," he growled. "I fuckin' dare you."

"Dumb—"

But before he could finish James was on top of him. His knee was in Mungo's side and his left hand held his face against the floor. The thick carpet skinned his

raw cheekbone. James twisted his arm behind his back. “I cannae hear ye? Speak up.”

Most days, Hamish easily bested Mungo. Mungo learned quickly to offer no resistance because that would only prolong the beating. Roll into a ball. Tuck your elbows to your knees and cradle your face between your forearms. It stole the heat from Hamish. It was no fun to whale on a sack of lifeless meat.

“Submit,” James commanded.

“Ah-yah! No way.”

James wrenched his arm again. “Sub-mit.”

“Awright.”

He released him and Mungo scuttled away. He sat with his back to him, cradling his sore wrist. James had gone too far, he was no better than Hamish. The victor’s smile slid from his lips. He reached out a hand to apologize. But as Mungo turned, he glowered at James from under his fringe and a grin broke over his face. “Dumbo. Dumbo. Dumh-boh. Ya big-eared basturt. Can you fly with them flappers?”

He could endure more than James could ever dole out. James would learn.

They roughhoused until the street lights flickered on. Mungo had stayed away as long as he could. He lifted his T-shirt and rubbed at his swollen belly, feeling sick on sugary shortbread. “I need to get back. Mo-Maw will be worried.” It was the kind of thing Americans said on television. He liked the sound of it, though he knew she wouldn’t be.

A tightness spread across James’s face. He opened his mouth to say something but Mungo watched the words catch on his teeth as though he thought better of it. *“Whroup, whrooup, whroooooup.”* He bobbed and cooed in reply.

“I’ll come to the doocot after school the morra.” Mungo tried to sound as casual as he could. He pretended he was looking in his cagoule pocket. “You go to the Catholic school, don’t you?”

“Aye,” said James. “I told you your Ha-Ha used to try and murder me.”

Mungo looked up. He had misunderstood. “I thought you meant that in a general way. You know, like a touch of casual murdering.”

James sat up and pulled his knees to his chest. “Naw. Every day at four o’clock I had to bolt from him and the other Billies. For a speccy wee dwarf, your Ha-Ha can really fuckin’ run.”

“Aye, he’s a man of wasted talents.”

James was picking at his big toe. It seemed like he wanted to say something

more, but several times he lowered his head and his hair fell over his eyes. When eventually he spoke, it was directed towards a tasselled table lamp. “Can I ask you a favour, Mungo? I don’t mean anything funny by it. But would you stay, just a wee while longer? Maybe, if you like, stay here the night?” Mungo could see he was struggling. “I have a Christmas selection box, ye can have first pick.”

“I can’t. My maw.” Mungo thumbed over his shoulder.

“Go on. Please.”

Mungo exhaled. He knew what it was to feel this heavy.

The boys went one flight down and asked to use Mrs Daly’s telephone. The woman seemed to have been expecting them and left them alone in her tidy hallway. The phone rang twice before Jodie answered. She sounded the same deflated way she often did after a long shift at the café. Mungo told her where he was, told her where he would stay, and said he would collect his uniform in the morning.

“Wait, do you *actually* have a pal?” She sounded both surprised and relieved.

“Is that awright?”

“Fine.”

“Can I stay here then?”

“Aye. If I need you, I’ll wave across the back middens. Look out for the smoke signals.”

“Will you tell Mo-Maw for me?”

“I will,” she said, then she rattled her lips together in an exasperated breath. “When I see her.”

“What do you mean?”

Jodie was running a flat brush through her hair. He could hear the static crackle down the telephone line. “Mungo, did you actually think she was going to stick around this time?”

“Oh.” Mrs Daly had so many cats that Mungo couldn’t keep count.

“Never mind. She wrote a lovely note.”

James’s bedroom was a mess. The walls were thick with posters pinned layer upon layer. Clothes, clean and dirty, lay in heaps on the floor. In the corner of the room was a pile of old canary cages, modified to transport pigeons. Above these was a twitcher’s map of Scotland, lochs and hillsides in glorious detail, each glen filled in with the type of bird an enthusiast could expect to find there. James had

circled some far-flung places to disappear to.

The boys lay together, with James facing upwards and Mungo with his head at James's feet, head to toe in the single bed. They took great pains to not touch. If one moved his leg too close, the other shifted and hung off the side of the narrow mattress.

"What's your maw like?" asked James in the darkness.

It was hard to describe such a thing. You only got one mother, it didn't bear a comparison and she didn't come with a list of features like a new oven. "I dunno. She's just my maw." Mungo had never considered it before.

He could hear James picking an old sticker from his headboard. "Does she like to dance?"

"Aye."

"Does she like to sing?"

"More so when she's drunk." Mungo's eyes were open in the darkness. The room looked strange and somehow familiar. He would have thought a Catholic's bedroom would have been bare, or perhaps with crucifixes everywhere, but there were none. He kept expecting to roll over and see Hamish eating cereal in his bed. "My sister says she's not a mother at all. She says we were just a mistake that happened to a stupid young lassie and that she has regretted it ever since. After my dad died Mo-Maw decided she was going to put herself first."

"That's not what mammies are supposed to do."

"That's another thing Jodie says." He didn't want to talk about them anymore. "What was yours like?"

"Oh, she was the business," James said very quickly. "Even when she was really sick, she pretended like she wasn't. Every day I came home from school she wouldn't let me out of her hug until I told her everything that had happened. If Geraldine got home after me she had to wait in line for her hug. It could take pure ages. My mammy called it the *juicin'*. She said if she didn't hold us tight, we would ignore her. She squeezed us as hard as she could to get all of the good stuff out of us. She wouldnae let go until ye telt her absolutely everything."

"That sounds nice."

"Aye. It was." James coughed like there was a clog in his throat. Mungo could tell he was breathing deeply to keep himself from crying.

Mungo didn't know what to do. He reached out a hand and felt the sharpness of James's shin bone. He made a fist and tapped along the bone, up and down, up and down, the way a doctor would probe a fracture. He waited for James to

pull away. But he didn't, and Mungo folded first. He drew back his hand, laid it in the centre of his chest. "What was the best dinner she made?"

"She was a shitey cook." He sniffed. "But I miss that – not the food – but the feeling that she was here in the flat, looking after us. The flat never felt empty when she was in the kitchen. Ma da was on the rig when she died. She had told him she was fine, but she wasn't. They chartered a special helicopter for him and everything, but it still took him eight hours to get home after she was dead."

Eight hours. Mungo couldn't imagine a distance that far.

"I was sat here with her body. Just waiting on him." James was swallowing harder now.

Mungo couldn't cross the distance between them. The best he could do was to lay his hand next to James's so that their little fingers were almost touching. They were close enough that it was as if they *were* touching. The heat from James's hand jumped the distance between them and flooded Mungo's entire body. He lay there, upside down and a world away, and listened to James choke up. He wanted to offer more comfort. The courage wouldn't come.

It was James that changed it. The pinkie that had lain next to his own crossed over and locked over his. The electrical current that had burned at the border jumped on to his skin and he was scorched.

Without questioning it, Mungo sat up in the bed and oriented himself to lie beside James. He pulled the boy on to his chest and felt the crumpled wetness of his face. He held him, just like Jodie would hold him, and let him remember his mother. It was good to put your weight on someone else, even if it was just for a short while.

EIGHT

Mungo stepped out of his school uniform and left it in piles across the living room floor. It was warm in the airing cupboard, it was peaceful, and he felt calmest here. He pushed his hand between a stack of towels and enjoyed the sensation that the cotton nubs left on his skin. He sank in all the way up to his armpit and it felt something like a hug. He'd been anxious all day, thinking about how James had been too embarrassed to talk to him after he had started crying about his mother.

Mungo had only wanted to help, but in the morning light, James couldn't look him in the eye. As the sun came up, James had gone to the doocot and left Mungo to have his Weetabix alone, feeling like he had done something dirty, something wrong.

Mungo came out of the airing cupboard and stood at the bay window. He dug his thumbnails into the soft wood and deepened the gouges he had been making over the past few months. He watched as a familiar man came along the street. Although the man kept his eyes downcast his spine was rigid and his crown was pulled proudly upwards to God. The man walked with nipped footsteps; he tucked his arms neatly by his side, careful to take up no more room than was his to enjoy. He never swung his legs in the way of most men broadcasting how they needed to make room for their cocks. There was a stiffness in his arms but there, at the tips of his fingers, was a slight feathering. You could barely see it. Everybody could see it.

Rarely did you see the man without bags of messages. Every day he went to the Co-op and bought just enough to last him to the next day. He stocked a bachelor's pantry: two sausages from the butcher's, small packets of teabags, and bags of frozen vegetables that could be kept fresher for longer if he resealed them with old elastic bands.

Some idling Protestant boys clocked the man. Tucked safely under the awning of the Pakistani shop they nudged one another and aped him as he walked along the street. If Charles "Chick" Calhoun knew they were mimicking him, he didn't acknowledge it. A rash-faced grease slick of a boy held his hand out in a vulgar way as though it had snapped at the wrist. He minced up and down in front of the neon star stickers that were advertising a great deal on yesterday's bread. The other boys sucked on their fags and cackled to themselves. "Cooieee!" he called out with a flutter of his fingers.

There were several housewives idling at their windows, drinking tea and waiting for their children to come home from school. Anyone who was watching poor Mr Calhoun sucked on their teeth in pity.

"Cooo-*fuckin'*-eeee, ah said." The ned was getting louder. "Yer no gonnae be rude and ignore us, ur ye?"

Mr Calhoun, as he was known to his face, and Poor-Wee-Chickie, as he was known behind his back, didn't break his stride. He didn't lift his eyes to his tormentors.

"Are ye looking at ma arse?" The ned tried an old tactic in order to provoke him. He turned to his friends. "Haw, did youse see that aul' feller look at ma arse?" They all agreed that they had. Like shell-suited apes they started pacing and gesticulating wildly at the solitary man. It was all they wanted, to bait him into responding, to insult him so profoundly he would let his guard drop. Then they could feign injury, batter him, and remind him of his low place, sub-human, sub-them. This one old man made them feel better. When everyone looked at them like they were nothing, like they had nothing, he still had less.

The man maintained his neat stride, the narrowest of smiles on his lips. Mungo had no way of knowing that Poor-Wee-Chickie was not in there; he was not present in his own body, having learned, long ago, the art of floating away above the tenements. It was his trick. As his body fought along the Parade, his spirit was flying over Duke Street, swooping and spiralling to the La Scala picture house where it sat in the dark, watching Anne Baxter, incandescent, in *All About Eve.*

Poor-Wee-Chickie lived on the ground floor left. It was a door the children all rushed past. A plain brown door like Mungo's own, that had a sad, degraded look from all the times it had been scrubbed clean of foul graffiti. Someone – a Proddy pal of Ha-Ha's – had found a half-dead can of spray paint in one of the middens. The wit had spray-painted *Child Mahlestur* in tall letters on Poor-Wee-

Chickie's door. Jodie had tried her best to wash it away before Mr Calhoun saw it. She must have been scrubbing the paintwork raw because it was the sanding noise that finally brought him to the door. He found her there, her school uniform lousy with bleach and paint flakes.

"Ah, the poor beasts. They cannae spell for toffee. Personally, I prefer *kiddie fiddler* myself. It sounds somehow more genteel, more musical. Don't ye think?"

Jodie liked Poor-Wee-Chickie. She had endless patience for the lonely. But Mungo was wary of him; even though he knew better, he still believed the untrue things they said about the bachelor.

Mungo got dressed. He pulled on his cagoule. Perhaps the best idea would be to see James, and simply pretend none of the nonsense, none of the crying, had ever happened. As he went down the stairs, Poor-Wee-Chickie opened his door at the sound of his footsteps. "Ah, Mungo son. Thank God it's you. Can ye help me?" He was clutching Natalie in his arms, the fawn-coloured whippet he spent most of his disability allowance on. "I've had a wee spot of bother." He nodded out to the daylight and said no more. "Do you think you could let Natalie out for me? She must be bursting."

Mungo took the dog outside and walked her beside a line of parked cars. He tried to avoid the attention of the Proddy boys, now looking for their next target, but he could hear them moan, quietly enough that they could disavow it if he challenged them – he would never challenge them. "*Mongo, Mungo.*"

The small whippet did not care for the smirr. She grimaced, did her business quickly, and dragged him back inside.

"Did she diddle?" asked Poor-Wee-Chickie.

"Aye, she diddled."

"Diddled and *doddled?*"

"Aye. Diddled and doddled."

He swept the dog up in his arms. "Guid girl. It's hard for a lady to doddle in front of a strange man."

"Really? You should see our Jodie. Sometimes she doesnae bother to shut the toilet door."

"Och, ye're a terror!" Poor-Wee-Chickie fluttered his hand like it was a fine hanky. "Can I bother ye for five more minutes? I jist need somebody to hold her still while I clip her wee claws. Every time I get near her wi' yon clippers, she bolts for the other side of the flat. Ma sister usually helps me, but she's taken up wi' a Pakistani widower, and she's never oot the hoose noo." He looked wistful

for a moment. “Mind you. She does have lovely curtains.”

Mungo must have nodded, because Poor-Wee-Chickie stepped to the side and let the boy into his flat. As he crossed the threshold Mungo tried not to stare at the ghostly words that still tainted the door.

The flat was smaller than the ones upstairs, much of it was carved away for the stairwell and entrance foyer, so it felt like an old-fashioned room and kitchen instead of a proper family flat. Poor-Wee-Chickie was wearing a camel-coloured Lyle & Scott jumper. He had a strange habit of wearing all his clothes tucked inside his trousers, regardless of how thick the fabric was. Over the volume of his pleated trousers it gave him the old-fashioned look of having a well-defined waist. He always wore freshly polished shoes, inside or out, and a thin belt with a shiny metal buckle. Poor-Wee-Chickie handed the forlorn whippet to Mungo. She folded into his arms easily, nothing but bones and ligaments, and he held her like she was a pile of jumbled kindling. She was the least cuddly dog Mungo had ever touched.

Mungo had never seen the man walk the whippet in daylight. Just last week, Mo-Maw had mentioned that she saw the pair of them wandering the scheme, alone on empty streets, both before and after her night shift. Mo-Maw didn’t trust that about him, and said that he was “sneaking around like a grave robber.” But Poor-Wee-Chickie preferred to go unnoticed. It was safer somehow, dipping in and out of shadows.

“This is a great help, son. I cannae be chasing her all around the place, no at my age.” He took one of Natalie’s paws in his hand and with a pair of loppers he clipped each nail in turn. “She’s a daft bitch. Once a month for eight years we’ve been at this, and ye think she’d be used to it by now. Just goes to show ye …” He chuckled. “Even beasts never lose hope for a different outcome. I’m gonnae get her one of these days, and instead of cutting her nails, I’m gonnae paint them hoor’s red. That’ll show her.” He kissed between her ears. “What would ye say to that, eh? Ya silly besom.”

Mungo surveyed the room over the top of Poor-Wee-Chickie’s head. The house was immaculate, everything economical and painfully arranged, not a speck of dust. Mo-Maw had said Mr Calhoun was a housewife, but a housewife only to himself.

“He’s a bachelor,” she’d said, as her children lined up at the kitchenette window and watched him peg out his sheets and socks on the washing line.

Jodie sniffed. “What harm is he doing?”

“Bet he wanks that much he needs to wash they sheets every day,” offered Hamish with a sneer. “Rotten auld bachelor.”

The only thing they had all agreed on was that Mungo should not linger outside the bachelor’s door. If he had to play inside the close, he should play upstairs, between the Campbell and the Hamilton landings.

The nail clipping was swift. Mungo lowered Natalie to the floor. She ducked her head under her carriage and sniffed her own vagina. Poor-Wee-Chickie laughed. “It’s a funny habit. She’s checking ye’ve no stole it.” Satisfied it was still there, the dog moped off to the settee and curled up in the corner. “Tek a wee glass of ginger, son. Just to say thanks.”

Mungo started to refuse, but Poor-Wee-Chickie was already in the narrow scullery. The boy followed him through. There was a VHS player and a large colour telly next to the bread bin. He couldn’t help himself. “Wow! Do you have two televisions?”

“Aye. I like to watch old episodes of *Sportscene* when I cook.” He poured a tall glass of fizzy ginger. “Do you like the football?”

Mungo shook his head and looked at his trainers. It was a source of shame for him not to be good with a ball. He wanted to change the subject then, to pick at a different scab, one that was not his own. “So does Missus Calhoun do all the cooking?”

The man barely drew breath; he had a quicksilver mind. “Now, son, do ye mean my sister or my mother? Because I know ye don’t mean my wife.”

There was something about the way the smile slipped from his lips that told Mungo he had taken a step too far. Maybe he had wanted to see more clearly what they all squinted at from behind the net curtains. “Sorry, Mister Calhoun.” Then he added, “It’s jist I’ve lived above ye my whole life and I suppose I don’t know ye.”

“Don’t ye?” He handed him the glass with a chuckle. “Well. At least yer the first to admit that. Usually people think they know everything about me.”

There was a pigeon on the windowsill, a plain, unremarkable doo. Poor-Wee-Chickie went to the window to drop torn pieces of white bread through the slit for it. Mungo noticed then the smoothness of his face and the thickness of his fair hair. He wasn’t as old as he pretended, older maybe than Mo-Maw but much, much younger than Mrs Campbell. It was an affectation, this old, shut-in pensioner. The man could still be out at his work, could still be of use. Somebody could love him.

“You awright, son?” He caught Mungo mid-thought.

“Aye. I was just thinking about pigeons.” Then he doubled down on the lie. “I have a pal who has a doocot. He’s interested in doo fleein’. I’ve been learning all about them.”

“Is that right?” He dropped the last of the bread through the crack. “Ma father used to trap them right off the window ledge. Ma mammy used to make a gorgeous pigeon pie.”

“That’s minging. Don’t tell my pal about that.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie was laughing. “He’ll no want my recipe, then? What’s his name?”

Mungo wondered if it mattered. If the boy in the doocot was even his friend anymore or if he had done something wrong while trying to do something right. “James, James Jamieson.”

“James, James Jamieson.” The man repeated it under his breath and rapped his knuckle on the windowsill. “James. Old-fashioned and not very imaginative, but it’s a good solid name. Jameses are very constant people. He sounds like a person you can trust.”

“Do you think?”

“Aye. I like him already.” Poor-Wee-Chickie pointed up to the top-floor tenement across the back middens. “He lives there, doesn’t he? I used to ride the mornin’ bus to work wi’ his father. He was a miserable big bastard. Didnae have the time of day for anybody. Wouldnae smile at ye if you bought him a new set of teeth.”

“He looked at me like I trekked dirt across his carpet. Did you used to work wi’ him?”

“No. I was a slater for the council. He carried a union bag. Must’ve been some sorta shipbuilder. Mibbe a stager, or a caulker-burner.” Poor-Wee-Chickie tapped his neat fingernails against the glass. The doo blinked. “I’ve seen that boy staring out his windae. He’s there late at night. Sometimes he’s there in the morning.”

“I think he’s looking for pouters.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie nodded, but the jutting of his bottom lip said he thought differently.

“He’s all right. He just keeps himself to himself.” Mungo shook his head like he wanted to change the subject. “I dunno. He can be a laugh to hang out with up at the doocot. He never makes me feel bad.” Poor-Wee-Chickie made a face that

looked like he didn't quite grasp what Mungo meant. "See. You know how when somebody has something they love and they won't let you near it? Like, Hamish has an old Pink Floyd album he won't let me hold. It opens out into a great big picture and I only want to look at the drawings but he won't let me touch it. Or – *or* how Mrs Campbell doesnae like it when I touch the ornaments on her hall table. Well, James isn't like that. He loves his doos and spends all his time with them but as soon as I met him, he let me hold one. I think that was guid of him."

Poor-Wee-Chickie rapped his hand on the wooden sill again. "James-Guid-and-True." He thought for a moment. "What kind of roof is on that doocot?"

Mungo shrugged. "I dunno. Tarpaper?"

He ran a finger over his moustache. "No, no, no. That won't do. He'll be replacing that mair often than he should. What angle is it at?"

Mungo wasn't great with angles. He held his hands up in a triangular apex and shrugged. Poor-Wee-Chickie took his hands in his own and spent a great deal of time checking the exact pitch of the roof against Mungo's memory. He manipulated the boy's hands wider and lower until Mungo agreed about the fifteen-degree mark.

"No, no, no. That's no guid in the long run. Much too flat. A few hard frosts and the tarpaper will soak up as much as it repels." He was thoughtful for a moment and still holding the boy's hands in his own. The side of Mungo's face started stuttering and Poor-Wee-Chickie remembered himself suddenly. He let the boy go. "Sorry son. Old habits die hard. Roofs! I cannae help myself sometimes."

"It's okay," said Mungo, lowering his hands. "Thanks for the ginger, Mister Calhoun."

Poor-Wee-Chickie reached out like he wanted the boy to stay but then he thought better of it. "Will ye stop in again? I'll show ye a trick that Natalie can do for a bit of streaky bacon."

Mungo knew he would not, but he lied to be polite. "Aye."

"And tell James-Guid-and-True to nail some slate over that tarpaper. Everything that's built wrong gets ruined around here." He led Mungo out to the short hallway. The front door had five security locks and took an age to open.

NINE

Mungo had fallen asleep. When he woke upon the cold earth, the tent was alive with dappled light. Gallowgate was breathing unevenly; his breath was hot and yeasty. His arm was a dead weight pressing into the softness below Mungo's ribs. Their shirts had ridden up and Mungo could feel the sweat of Gallowgate's belly pooling in the cup of his lower back. The drink had paralysed the young man, but there were signs of a resurrection. Mungo could feel the swollen lump pressing against his buttocks and every so often it twitched and pulsed as Gallowgate filled with blood and strained against his Italian denim.

Mungo had been clenching his fists. They were bloodless, white, and as he unfurled them they tingled with relief. He counted. One Saturday sleep. One Sunday sleep. Then home.

In the hush of the morning, while the shingles were still slick with mist, Gallowgate led Mungo down to the loch. He taught the boy how to prepare his line, threading the fish gut with weights and a buffer bead. He showed Mungo how to secure the barbed hook with a blunt knot and how to cast out into the darkest pools of water. For bait he produced some fetid lamprey chunks which had been sealed in a freezer bag. Gallowgate kept gulping to swallow the threat of his own bile.

Mungo took off his trainers and waded thigh-deep into the frigid loch. The cold made a castrato out of him; it made him want to sing. Except for the gentle lapping and the occasional swarm of midges, the loch was tranquil. Under the clear sky, the surface was shiny as a looking glass. Mungo wriggled his toes and could see them clearly beneath the water. Before him lay more emptiness than he had ever known.

The far side of the loch was walled in by the carpeted hillsides. Beyond these were jagged Munros, the denuded mountains stretching as far as Mungo could

see. The sun illuminated the eastern face of the crags and left the other faces in deep shadow. These shadows held pockets of speckled snow that looked like flaking paint, like old coats of white emulsion that were peeling away from the moss-covered hills, as if it were the handiwork of a careless God. Each mountain appeared as though it had been chipped away from a larger piece of flint. Some of the ridges were so sharp they reminded Mungo of Hamish's homemade tomahawk.

A sharp wind blew across the loch and snapped the fabric of his cagoule in its hurry. The air was clearer than he had ever tasted, and when Gallowgate wasn't watching, he tilted his head back and put his tongue out into the breeze. It tasted green like spring grass, but there was a prehistoric brownness to it, as though it had searched an entire age through damp peaty glens and ancient forests, looking for its way to wherever it was going.

If he had known the words to describe it, he would have said he could smell the tang of the pine forests, the bright snap of bog myrtle, vetch, and gorse, and then underneath it all, the damp musk of dark fertile soil, the cleansing rain that never ceased. But to Mungo, it was green and it was brown and it was damp and it was clean. He had no words for it. It just smelled like magic.

Gallowgate was not moved by this magical wind. He spoiled it by hauching great gobs of phlegm into the water. They floated by Mungo like swirling nebulae. All morning the man had said very little, like he could not speak over the din of his hangover. He held his rod between his knees and lit his fifth cigarette. Mungo slid further out into the freezing loch. He wanted to keep the unsullied wonders for himself.

St Christopher was not moved by the majesty either. He spent the bright morning lying in the one-man tent, nursing his shakes. As the morning wore on, more drink left Gallowgate's blood and put him in a worsening state. The two men hadn't spoken since the previous night and by the way Gallowgate kept glancing at St Christopher's tent the boy could tell that he was in a foul mood and looking for a place to pollute with it.

Gallowgate lurched off into the long grass to take his morning shite. He took a meandering route past St Christopher's tent and kicked the guy ropes. The tent sank on to the sleeping man like a shroud. Mungo watched the thin nylon heave up and down, keeping time with the man's snoring.

The slow sun had shifted from the eastern side of the crags by the time St Christopher finally rose from the dead. In his wool suiting, he bent over at the

loch's edge and lapped at the icy water like a beast. Sitting back on his haunches he blinked to himself for a long while. Gallowgate ignored him and busied himself with the campfire. He dropped two tins of beans into the flames and the three of them sat together and ate a measly breakfast. They had been an age trying to open the stubborn, scalding tins without a can opener, and when Gallowgate finally burst them on the edge of a rock, some of the beans had sprayed across the shingles. St Christopher used his yellow fingers to save the beans and scoop them into his mouth. Every so often he would eat a small stone by accident, and the grinding of the broken teeth would stop, and he would cough and spit the tiny pebble across the campsite.

Mungo sat apart as some thick clouds rolled in. The clouds had been locked out by the tall Munros, but now that they found their opening, they rushed into the peaceful glen. They gathered and thickened and pressed downwards, like smoke filling a room.

It was a strange thing to see; the wonder of the changing light and how it gave colour to the land. The morning sunshine had burned the hills with brackens and lichens and coppers. Now, the fleecy clouds fell like heavy curtains, and they dampened it all to a lifeless grey and brown. It was as if the earth had no hues of its own.

As all the greens faded to grey he thought of James, and the way the light left his eyes without warning. He wanted to see those greens and golds. Then he pushed the thought away – he would never see them again.

The men were scratching through empty bags and rattling the crushed beer cans looking for a mouthful to kill their shakes. For the first time Mungo could study Gallowgate in the crisp daylight. He wasn't much older than Hamish. His flashy denims hung off his frame; his only remaining fat sat in paunchy bags beneath his eye sockets. He was hunched over, inspecting the last of their supplies, and laying them out on the rocks. There was a fair share of drink left: a noose of cans, a bottle of whisky, and a quarter of something clear. For food there were two chocolate bars; the kind with the painted frog on the side, the too-milky ones you gave teething toddlers. Mungo wondered if that had been his share. If that is what they'd brought to make this boy they didn't know fond of them.

Soothed by the fresh beer in his gut, St Christopher came down to the water. His shakes were softer now. He had brought some sprats from the city, a handful of half-rotted fish that he had wrapped in toilet paper for transport and carried in

his breast pocket. It helped explain the unpleasant smell that emanated from him. Mungo tried not to inhale as the man showed him how to sink the hook into the fish's gullet. St Christopher cast out into the peaceful loch and put the remaining fish back into his suit pocket.

"Absolutely nuthin' better, is there? Just us boys and some good fishing, eh?" At least he was in better fettle than the sullen Gallowgate. "Cannae believe ye've never been at the fishin' afore. Shame that. Nobody tells wee boys how to fend for themselves anymair. Ah met a fella the other week who didn't even know how to fix a puncture on his bike. He just took the thing, flung it in the canal."

"Why?"

St Christopher shook his waddle. "Ah dunno. But ah waited till he was gone, waded in, and got twenty-five poun' for it at the pawnshop."

"I can fix a bike. I'm not great at school, but I can fix things. And I know about pigeons."

"Don't worry about school. Any man that can use his hands will never want for work. Glasgow is the home of the working man."

Mungo thought about what Hamish had told him about the shipbuilders; the hundreds of men being put out of work every month. St Christopher was lost in another time. Mungo skimmed a stone across the water's surface. "What is this loch called, anyway?" He tried to sound casual, but he still didn't know where he was.

"Ah'm no tellin' ye," said St Christopher. "If I tell ye, all the schemie wee bams wid be up here, ruining paradise with their souped-up Escorts and BMX bikes. Aye, yer maw telt us aboot yer brother." He chewed on a thought for a moment. "How come yer brother couldnae teach ye how tae fish?"

"It's too quiet for him."

"And ye've no got a faither who could teach ye?"

"He's dead."

"Ach, ah'm sorry. A young gent like you. Ye must miss him."

Mungo couldn't say just how much he missed him. It was too big a feeling to put into words. "I was only wee."

St Christopher gave a pitying sigh. "Funny. Yer mother had the look of a divorcée to me. Angry wee wummin. She looks like she's been cheated out of something."

Mungo didn't know what to say to that. He was glad when St Christopher kept talking to fill in the silence. "Ah think ma own mammy was overjoyed

when ma faither died. He wisnae a bad soul, he jist liked the ponies too much. At first ah thought ma mammy wid marry again. She was young enough, never much of a looker though." He turned to the boy. "Is that an awfy bad thing to admit about yer mammy?"

Mungo shrugged.

"No? Well it's true. She wisnae anybody's idea of a thrill, but she was companionable enough. A very well-read wummin." St Christopher turned back to the loch, he reeled the slack from his line. "Did your mammy ever marry again?"

Mungo shook his head. "She's been trying. How about yours?"

"Och, naw. This was years ago now. Right after ma faither died aul' Jeanette sold the family hoose and bought a one-bedroom flat in Govan. She gave us all a wee bit of cash, said she wanted to see us enjoy it aw while she could. In other words, 'here take this and get the fuck away frae me.'" He laughed. "She never remarried, ah don't think she let a fella inside her ever again. But in the end she got what she always wanted."

"And what was that?"

St Christopher chuckled like it was obvious. "Peace from men."

Mungo skimmed the last of his stones out over the loch.

St Christopher drew his fishing line from the water. The sprat was gone; all that was left was a milky sac of tiny organs, faint lines of the red liver and heart that marbled the cloudy mucus. The hook must have been painfully deep to rip the insides from the twice-destroyed fish. "Basturt! He's away wi' ma lure. You were meant to be watchin' that. Ah bet it was a fuckin' pike. How did I no feel it pullin' on the line?" He posed the question more to the loch gods than to Mungo.

Mungo wondered if there was much the man could feel anymore. The blunted and cauterized veins on his face, across his hands, and down his forearms all looked like they were pushing to the surface in hopes of feeling something, anything. Even his jaundiced eyeballs were encroached with tiny blood vessels that put Mungo in mind of Garibaldi's vanilla ice cream; creamy yellow boules shot through with raspberry-red sauce.

St Christopher scraped the fishy organs off the hook and flung them into the water. He spat over his shoulder to Mungo, "It's aw yer fault. Gettin' me gassin' on about ma mammy lit that. Away wi' ye. Ye're bad luck." Then he added, mostly to himself, "I'm better at it than this."

Mungo didn't reply. It was hard to know if St Christopher was a ruin of a

man, or if there had never been much to ruin in the first place. Teaching the boy the ancient skill of fishing had been the only contribution he had made to the trip so far. This water was hoaching with fish, all of Scotland was. But now the ripped-out guts of a supermarket sprat confirmed him to be a failure even at this.

St Christopher was rolling the sleeves of his blazer up. His forearms were so thin that he could turn the woollen fabric several times over, till it almost reached his elbow. Skewering another sprat on the line he cast it into the water. Instantly the float bobbed once, and the sprat was gone. “Cunnin’ fishy basturts!”

The man was soaked to the knees. He took off his suit trousers and waded waist-deep into the loch. His underpants hung loose, like a loincloth made from an old sheet. With arms outstretched he stood as still as a dead tree and when a fish came near, he made a pantomime of trying to scoop it out with his bare hands. He fell in, sinking under the surface. He flailed up again, sputtering and cursing, clutching his loose drawers to stop them sliding down his legs. Mungo laid down his rod and excused himself to the bathroom. He had to keep his back to the saint to hide his laughter.

St Christopher paid no mind as the boy wandered along the shore of the long loch. There was a copse of stunted trees that came down to the water’s edge. Mungo weaved in and out of them, feeling the bog suck at his shoes and the mud migrate upwards on to his bare legs. He went deeper into the forest. It was quiet at the loch, but it was even quieter here without the gentle lapping of the water. He idled over mossy boulders and climbed carefully along fallen tree trunks, enjoying how the sun dappled the ground through the thin canopy. He hid himself but nothing stirred. Mungo wondered about the last person to see all this forgotten dell. It struck him then that he was totally alone.

He came to a gurgling river, a freshwater tributary that fed into the vast loch. The water frothed at the edges for the richness of the minerals in it. It swirled around boulders, and here and there it was thick with schools of brown fish, darting and happy and unbothered. Mungo waded through the waist-deep current; it was colder than the loch, coming fresh off the thawing peaks. He lost his footing on the mossy riverbed and the icy water knocked the breath from him. He jumped and squealed, suddenly very alert, clambering on to the next boulder. He crossed the river and the fat brown fish watched him go.

The trees thinned and he was back at the exposed lochside, far from the men. Mungo walked the shoreline, only stopping to fill his pocket with flat stones for skimming. As he turned a bend the ruins of an old castle stood before him. It rose from the same grey and dun-coloured stones of the hills around it, pushing up from the granite like a great rift in the earth. It must have once been a proud place, sprawling over several small hills down to a peninsula on the lochside. There still stood the three tall walls of a great hall, and another surviving wall had the vague shape of a tower, four or five stories tall, with the narrow slits of arrow embrasures.

Mungo clambered over one of the collapsed walls and stood in the gutted hall. Part of the tall tower lay in the heart of the castle, where it had come crashing through its own roof. What remained felt thick as a fortress. Besides trespassing at Culzean with Hamish, he had never seen a castle before, much less been inside one. Mo-Maw had always kept him from school on the days the class would go to Stirling or Edinburgh. “Ah don’t work aw the hours God sends so ye can be fingerin’ some tapestries.” There was always something more urgent to spend the four pound fifty on.

Fifteen years he had lived and breathed in Scotland, and he had never seen a glen, a loch, a forest, or a ruined castle. Actually, he had seen them, but only ever on biscuit tins or the side of tourist buses. Mungo lay down on one of the large hearthstones and let his head spin. It was hard not to feel a little drunk. “Halloooo.” His voice echoed off the roofless chamber. *“Whroup, whrooup, whroooooup,”* he called to the sky.

He wondered how it would feel to go home, now that he had seen more of the world in a single day than in fifteen years – how could he stay on the scheme and not try to go beyond it? James had been right. Mungo wished that James was here with him, or Jodie, but mostly James. It would be grand to have someone to share all this newness with, someone who knew that he wasn’t making it all up. Mungo picked at the ochre lichen and felt frustrated that he wouldn’t have the words to paint it all again for Jodie or Hamish or Mo-Maw. Even if he could describe it, he knew that they wouldn’t care anyway; they would make him get up off the clothes that still needed ironing or ask him to hold the box of car radios they had stolen. They would look at him with a bored chew and wonder when his stories of this golden-green place would be over.

But maybe James wouldn’t. James would have listened to him tell his stories, and when Mungo showed him the photo of the ram’s skeleton, James would ask

if there had been a rancid smell (there had not), he would ask if there'd been any wool sticking to the underside of the carcass (there had been, it was cream-coloured and curly). He wished James was here. James would have cared.

Mungo tapped the back of his head against the hearthstone.

He shot to his feet. It started as a nervous canter. He needed to move, needed to shake the guilty thoughts of the Fenian out of his head. Standing by the rotted mantel he clapped the heels of his shoes together. He bowed to the empty hall and with a heel-toe-heel-toe, he galloped the first round of Strip the Willow. The school had taught the dance during a particularly nasty winter. They had grudgingly cancelled any periods of outdoor sports and the council estate boys – who had natural finesse when they were cracking hockey sticks across one another's skulls – were made to dance around the cold gymnasium in reluctant pairs. Mungo twirled with the memory of it. He had always liked the ceilidh lessons; he was just never allowed to admit it. He cantered around the ruined hall, spinning an imaginary Jodie at the end of his outstretched arms.

"You are guid at that," said a disembodied voice.

Mungo stopped his spinning. Gallowgate scrambled over the fallen wall, a cigarette clenched between his teeth, too sure of himself to take his hands out of his pockets. "Ah forgot this shitehole was here." His jaw was looser than it had been that morning. He produced a fresh can of lager and drank it in four gulping mouthfuls. "If ye dinnae want to starve to death we need to go find a shop." He crumpled the can in his fist and tossed it into the shadows of the crumbled hall. "*Or,* we could roast that auld idiot afore he frightens aw' the fish away."

Mungo had been hoping that they would never catch any fish. He hoped that the men would go to bed early, hungry and bloated on whisky.

Gallowgate clambered out of the castle. Mungo stalled, pretending to tie his shoelace, then he darted into the shadows and found the discarded Tennent's can. He hid it inside his cagoule and climbed up and out. Gallowgate was already swaggering back in the direction they had come. Mungo stood a moment and considered his castle. He wound on his disposable camera and took the time to frame a photo that no one would care to see.

He didn't have a watch, but it felt as though they had been walking for hours. They had tramped along the lochside, past the camp, and then kept on going. They walked far apart from each other and neither of them spoke. Mungo was

dawdling at the back. He was picking the heads off wildflowers and filling his chest pocket for Jodie. As he plucked the flowers he made up their names: cowsbreath, ladies' bumholes, blue-granda-willies.

The village was no longer a village. It was a spattering of fieldstone houses, leftovers from another time. The three or four other houses they passed seemed like they had stood empty for a long time. Mungo peered in all the windows.

The house closest to the road was a single-room shop that doubled as a part-time post office but was chiefly the private home of an unfriendly-looking woman. Everything in the shop was coated with a fine layer of dust. Under the glassy eye of the well-weathered shopkeeper, Gallowgate bought some tobacco, her entire stock of pot noodles, and as many cans of lager as he could afford. The woman never once smiled at them. She spoke with a sing-song lilt the likes of which Mungo had never heard before. It was a beautiful voice and Mungo would have liked to hear her talk more, but she had taken an immediate dislike to Gallowgate and was in a great hurry to get them out of her shop so she might return to doing absolutely nothing. There was something about the thinness of the fabrics they were wearing that she disliked. It pegged them as outsiders. She made a disapproving face when she saw Mungo's gym shorts, his blue legs in his scuffed trainers. She narrowed her eyes when she first heard the flat, dull thud of Gallowgate's accent. *Glaswegians.* All she said was "You better tek all yer rubbish awa' wi' ye when ye leave. We dinna need city fowks treatin' yon loch lit it was one big rubbish bin."

When the teuchter woman wasn't looking Gallowgate gave her the middle finger and shoved a bar of chocolate up his sleeve. On the way back to the campsite he slipped the warm chocolate to Mungo. "Will that put a smile on yer face?"

They were leaving the cluster of cottages when they came across a red phone box. It was tucked under a clutch of yew trees and heavily overgrown. Mungo stopped abruptly. "Can I phone my maw?"

"Ah've no got any coins, wee man." He knew that Gallowgate lied. Mungo had seen the teuchter woman hand him his change.

Mungo's eye fluttered like it might spasm. He tried to focus his disappointment on searching his own pockets. He felt around in his cagoule and produced two silver coins. "S'awright. I've got some."

It was strange to be in a telephone box that did not stink of rotting piss. For comfort, someone had lined the floor in patterned carpet and put an old kitchen

chair under the receiver. On the shelf that held the phone book was an air freshener and a real living potted plant. Mungo pressed the soil and felt the dirt spring back from being freshly watered.

He pumped in his coins. His fingers hovered over the dial long enough that the line went dead and the coins were belched back at him. If only he could call James; he was the only person Mungo wanted to talk to. He was unsure of the number, and besides, Mr Jamieson was sure to have confiscated the cream telephone in his rig bag. It was stupid. What would make him think James would want to talk to him now?

Instead he dialled his home number, then without waiting he hung up. The coins rolled free, he pumped them in and dialled again. Mo-Maw answered on the very first ring. Mungo was surprised to find her there, and not with Jocky and her new family.

"Hallo?" She sounded on edge already. *"Five-five-four … eh … six-one, eh … two-two."*

"Mo-Maw. It's me."

"Mungo. Mungo ma darlin', is that really you? Are you awright? Where are ye?" The questions were tumbling out of her too quickly.

"Aye, it's me. I'm fine." Mungo started to answer the last question and then realized he didn't quite know the answer. "I don't know where I am exactly. It's green, there's a deep loch and an old castle. It was night-time when we got here so I didn't see any signs."

"Are they looking after ye?"

"Sort of."

She exhaled for what sounded like the first time. "That's good."

Gallowgate rolled his hand like Mungo should hurry up.

"I learnt how to start a fire. I learnt how to put bait on a hook."

"See!" Mo-Maw sounded like she was relieved. "That's what ah telt our Jodie. That's what ah wanted you to do this for. Masculine pursuits. It'll make a man out of ye."

Mungo turned his back to the window. He picked at the spider plant and whispered into the handset. "I want to come home now."

"Okay. Then come home."

He hadn't expected her to be so easily convinced. It unnerved him. It had all been her idea but now she was willing to fold it, throw the whole experiment in the bin. "I can't. It took ages to get here. They won't want to leave till Monday."

“Then ye jist have to tell me where ye are.”

The telephone let out three little pips. The money was running out. He felt his tic spasm. “I don’t know where I am.”

“*Oh son.* Ah’m sorry Mun—”

The line went dead. He cradled it against his chin for a while, pretending she was still there while trying to calm the mutiny in his face. He stood like that until Gallowgate rapped his ring on the glass. “Jesus Christ. It’ll be pitch-black afore we get back. The midges will eat us alive.”

His legs were covered in raised bites by the time they got back to the fireside. Relieved to have procured more drink, Gallowgate was in a chatty mood, and he talked all the way back to the campsite. He said he would show Mungo how to gut a fish, if St Christopher had caught any, and then he would show him how to set a trap for rabbits. On Sunday night they would cook a big rabbit stew. Rabbit meat and instant noodles. Gallowgate promised it would be the finest thing he had ever tasted.

Mungo watched the man closely; he tried to smile in all the right places. It was the fourth different face Gallowgate had shown him, and he wanted to keep all of them straight. There had been the sullen man on the bus, the letch with the dirty stories at the campfire, the wounded fisherman by the loch, and now this person, his excited best friend, his false big brother.

He was always slow to realize when Hamish was manipulating him. It often dawned when Jodie would yell at Hamish to stop it, to stop using Mungo as his slave, stop saying nice things just so Mungo would do as Hamish wanted. This usually came right after Hamish had been incredibly, inexplicably kind to him. Mungo had started to become suspicious of the kindness of others, but James had changed that. Now he watched Gallowgate walk in a swaggering backwards fashion through the thick ferns. He was talking excitedly about building snares and box traps. “Ah’m gonnae show you everything ah know,” said the man. “How lucky are you?”

St Christopher was drying his suit by the smoky fire when they finally reached the campsite. His underwear hung off of him and the knuckles of his spine pushed against his thin skin like snow peas in a pod. Mungo looked at the sharpness in his bones and felt sorry for the man. He looked like one of the weans he saw on the African telethons, except they had bloated stomachs and St

Christopher's hollowed inwards under his ribs and almost reached his backbone.

He was happy to see them return. Drying on a rock were seven small fish, lined up neatly, their iridescence already dulled and flaky. St Christopher circled them like a proud house cat. "It's no much," he was saying while taking each fish into his paw and stroking it gently. "But the morra we'll put them on the hooks and catch a perch or brown trout."

"Aye." Gallowgate rattled the plastic bags. "That might jist work."

St Christopher cracked open the last bottle of whisky in celebration. He took two long slugs and passed it to Gallowgate, who did the same. They held it out to Mungo and the boy put the bottle to his lips but held his tongue over the hole as a stopper.

Gallowgate clouted him. "Don't be a fanny. Get it in ye." He cradled the back of Mungo's head and tipped the bottle up to his lips. An angry, scorching wave poured down his gullet. It burned the air from his lungs. Gallowgate waited for the boy to stop choking before he tipped the bottle again. "Mair! Mair! Mair!"

Mungo was soon drunk.

He spent the evening pulling long branches from the forest and dropping them on the fire. One of the branches split like it had arms and he held it close like it was a fine lady. He turned and danced with it in the firelight. He was stumbling across the pebble shore and the men were watching him and cheering him on. They filled the empty bean cans with loch water and placed them amongst the flames to boil. Over and over they refilled the cans and poured it over the sweet and sour Chinese noodles. When they were done, each man had eaten at least two pots of the salty worms. They lay around feeling fat and content, their bellies lined with starch and full of firewater.

Mungo stared at nothing. His eyelids were growing heavy and he could feel his heart beating behind his eyeballs. Big gobbets of rain started falling and hissing on the campfire. The gobbets turned to a downpour and soon the men were scampering, saving the pathetic fish, the tweed suit, and what was left of the carry-out. They ran for cover and Mungo lost them in the sheets of sudden rain. The men crammed into the two-man tent by the bothy and he, alone, crawled into the half-collapsed shell by the waterline.

Gallowgate had given the boy a warm lager, and he was glad for the smoothness of its taste, how it was flat and soothing where the whisky had burned. He lay down and felt a rare peace. The ground was moving underneath the red tent. Streams of water coursed around his body, flowing towards the loch.

He could feel the cold of the running water, yet he was not wet. He drank his lager. He closed his eyes. Drunk for the very first time, and carried away by the rain.

TEN

They had their ears to the carpet, their buttocks to the sky, and it looked like they were praying. The children knelt in the middle of the living room and listened as he swung his fist into her softness. He was hurting her. Each time he hit her, the woman cried out in pain. It was a tremulous squeak that ended in a chewed full stop, like she wanted to swallow the shameful cry as soon as it escaped her. Even as he was battering her, she worried about his good name.

"He's gonnae kill her," said Jodie. "Do something, Mungo!"

"Lit what?" He wanted to put his fingers in his ears.

"I don't know." The pages of her geography homework were creased in her fist. She was pacing and there was a panic in her eyes. "If Hamish was here, he would know."

Rangers had lost the Old Firm game. It had started as a fine spring day. All along the road the tenement windows were open and televisions and wirelesses were blaring the game out into the street. Big Ogilvy and his twins stood at their bay window in their regimental blues, *thoom thoom thoom.* They filled the street with Orange pride. But Celtic scored early and the street fell into a tense hush, even Ogilvy's twins stopped their peeping. Collins's goal in the first half was followed by another from Payton, putting Celtic firmly in the lead. Rangers brought on their golden boy, McCoist, but they struggled to get back into the game. When Hateley eventually pulled a goal back at the eighty-four-minute mark, the street erupted in desperate cheering. In the end it was not the fact that Celtic won – for they had no chance of winning the league – it was the fact that they ended a historic run of forty-five games unbeaten for the champs. All the Catholics would be celebrating in Baird's Bar. Mr Campbell had taken it heavy bad.

"We have to do something," repeated Jodie.

“What?”

“I don’t know. God’s sake. Can you just be a bloody man, for once?”

But Jodie Hamilton was her own man. She was out the door and down the close stairs as Mr Campbell was dragging his wife across the hallway carpet. Jodie hammered on their door like a Provvie debt collector. Mungo appeared, not quite at her side, but slightly behind her. He rocked on his heels, and it took effort for him to step in front of his sister. As the door opened Jodie realized Mungo had their mop and pail in his hand.

It was rare to see Mr Campbell standing these days. But when he opened the door he filled the frame from to doorstep to lintel. “Whit in bloody hell do youse two want?”

Jodie had the peculiar courage of a girl who never expected to be hit by a man – which was strange, because all three siblings had seen their mother suffer at the hands of her boyfriends. There was no man that Jodie would not answer back, and although Mungo admired that about his sister, he thought she put too much faith in the decency of men. This belief, this bravery, gave her a gallus tongue. When they were little, Jodie opened her smart mouth amongst gangs of neds and wrote cheques that Hamish would have to cash later. More than once, Mungo had been chinned by some boy he had never met, and then told to pass it along to his mouthy sister.

Mungo spoke before Jodie could say anything. “Hallo, Mister Campbell,” he said, as cheerfully as he could manage. “It’s my turn to wash the close and I havnae any soap flakes. Do you think I could ask Missus Campbell for a lend of some?”

There was a deep lilac flush to the man’s face. He had been sweating and moving more than he had in years and his fat-clogged arteries were struggling to let the blood around his mass. The thin hair of his comb-over hung loose. “Annie is unable to come to the door the now. She’s no well. She’s in her bed.”

Mungo tried to look crestfallen, but adrenaline coursed through his veins. “Is she awright?”

“Whit’s it to you?”

“If she can’t come to the door can I come in? I know guid and well where she keeps her soapflakes. I’ll be quiet.”

The man didn’t know what to make of the boy with the mop. But the way his face curdled in disgust told Mungo he had heard enough. “Naw, ye cannae. Gie that pail to your sister and fuck off.”

Something was moving lower in the close. On the half-landing below them, a small face was peeking around the banister and watching the children at the Campbells' door. Nobody paid it any mind. Mr Campbell put his arm against the door, making to close it on them.

"Excuse me, but is everything all right?" Jodie had seen the chance slipping away and she would be more direct than Mungo. "I heard a terrible banging earlier. All ma mammy's Jubilee plates shoogled in the cabinet."

"Annie's had a wee fall," said Mr Campbell. "Ah've telt her no to dust standing on a kitchen chair." Then he smiled. "But she'll learn." He pushed against the door before Jodie could say anything more. It was almost snibbed when a voice rang out from the stairwell.

"Graham!" The voice had a clarity to it that gave it an authority. "What's all this racket?"

Poor-Wee-Chickie was slowly climbing the stairs to the Campbells' landing. He was half the height and half the width of Graham Campbell. He ran his finger around the belt of his trousers, tucking his thick jumper into the waistband. "Ye've had yer bevvy. Ye've had yer fun. It's yer bed yer needing now."

"Who the fu—"

"Don't come the wide-o wi' me." The bachelor cut him short. "Ye don't frighten me, Graham. I was raised by a wife beater."

"S'at so?"

"Aye. I have pent-up aggression. Dr Doak telt me so. Ye want to help me feel better?"

Graham Campbell had spent his life bending steel; the bones of Charles Calhoun would shatter like cold slate. Mr Campbell was swelling with rage, the lilac burned violet now and his fists knotted into ham hocks. He took a step towards the small man. "Ya cheeky wee poofter." There would be hometown glory in destroying this deviant. There would be halves of whisky and pints of warm lager at every bar north of Duke Street.

"Oh, sticks and stones," said Poor-Wee-Chickie, but he didn't step back. "Is this a cry for help? Ah've heard about those. Mibbe what you need is for me to come in there and hold you for a while." Poor-Wee-Chickie placed a hand on his hip, his tongue darted across his bottom lip. "Eh? Is that what you need? Do you need wee Chickie to put you to bed?"

It was kind. It was brave. It was undeservedly generous. It would destroy whatever was left of Charles Calhoun's good name. The halves of whisky and

the cheap warm lager would still be waiting for Mr Campbell. He could still be a hero. *Ah was gonnae batter the little shit-stabber, but ye should've heard what he said tae me next. Gen up. Ah had tae get away frae him afore he tried tae stick a haun up my arsehole. Ah'm no a Sooty puppet. Dirty fuckin' reprobate.*

The Proddy neds would hear all about it. They would feast on Chickie's bones. *Haw! Haw! Mister Calhoun. Dae ye want to put me to bed an aw?*

There was a sharp intake of breath, as if someone had forgotten to breathe for a long time. Mrs Campbell appeared in the shadows of her hallway, as though she had been behind the front door the whole time. "Stop your nonsense, Chick. Ah'm fine. Ah've had a wee fall."

There was a blue bruise on her pale face that spread from her chin to her eye socket. The skin below her orbit must have split, for her hanky was spotted with blood. Her left arm hung limp by her side, and by the way her hand was crooked in the pocket of her pinny, it seemed as though he had broken her wing.

They were all silent for a long while. Mungo could hear the whispers, the shuffling feet behind all the peepholes up and down the close.

Jodie was the first to break the silence. "Oh, Missus Campbell. I'm nothing but a daft wee lassie, I've burnt the dinner again. *Haaah-ha.*" It was a lie, but no one had the heart to unpick it. There were tears on Jodie's face for Mrs Campbell, but it was easy to pretend she was worried about a burnt steak and kidney pie. "I need your help to fix it afore I get the belt." Jodie reached into the dark hallway. There was something about her small hand crossing the threshold that was bold and foolish at the same time. Mungo watched it slide past Mr Campbell and towards the woman. He held his breath lest Mr Campbell should take affront and snap it easy as a sapling branch. It felt like an eternity before Mrs Campbell stepped towards the outstretched hand, and when she did, Jodie choked with relief. "Oh, you're a lifesaver. I don't know what I would do without you."

"Right, hen." Sounding a little dazed, Mrs Campbell stepped into Jodie's arms and allowed herself to be guided upstairs, moving hesitantly as though she had forgotten the way. Mr Campbell was blocking all the light in the doorway. Mrs Campbell turned to him, with the hanky still pressed to her cheek, and said quietly, "Ye've had enough to drink, Graham. Away to yer bed, darlin'. Ah'll put yer dinner on when ah come back down the stair."

Poor-Wee-Chickie looked like he wanted to say something more but thought better of it. He rapped his knuckle on the banister, and the knocking let them

know that this was over, that they would not speak about this hurt, not today, not ever. The man turned and shuffled quietly downstairs. With Poor-Wee-Chickie gone, Mr Campbell retreated into the flat like some belligerent cuckoo.

Mungo followed the women upstairs. Jodie had her arm around Mrs Campbell. The woman seemed so small that Mungo could imagine his sister lifting her and carrying her the rest of the way. But Jodie did not rush her and they took it step by step, solemn as a funeral procession. Mungo watched Mrs Campbell's heels rise and fall inside her fleece moccasins. Her ankles were chalky blue from poor circulation, and he resolved that he would find her some thick sports socks when they got safely upstairs.

When they reached the half-landing, the light from the stained-glass window illuminated the bruise on her face with a sickly vividness. Mrs Campbell said, "He was always a wonderful dancer. Ye widnae know it to look at the size of him." She said it so quietly that it seemed like she was talking to herself.

Jodie exhaled sharply through her nose. "Well, I think it's a bloody disgrace the way men get worked up over the football. What a bunch of sore losers."

Mrs Campbell twisted free of Jodie's grip. She climbed a few steps and then she turned. She looked confused. "No. That's no it at all."

"It is. The football is just an excuse for the men to drink and fight and get all their anger out—"

"Ye're too wee to know anything about men and their anger." Mrs Campbell took her damaged arm from her pinny pocket, she stroked it, cradled it as though it were a poorly lamb. "Every day for twenty-seven year that man went to the shipyards. Girders as big as corporation buses flying around on chains, a ton weight of steel dangling above his heid, and at any minute it could've dropped and kil't him, and left me wi' nothin' but three weans and a divot in the mattress. And he *knew* it. Aw those men knew it."

Jodie set her jaw. "Then he should be relieved that it's all behind him."

The woman's gaze travelled out the colourful window and into the back middens. She was bathed in a patchwork of green and blue light, which made her appear sectioned off like the butcher's guide to the very best cuts of meat. "Some of the men used to drink six, seven pints of lager at lunchtime. They only had an hour and yet they'd neck one pint after the other. Ah heard the barman would spend all morning pouring them, and he would line hunners, *thousands* of pints up along the bar so the men could just grab it and drown themselves as soon as the lunch bell rang. Oh and they ran for it! Does that sound like happy men to

you?”

“I’m sorry, Missus Campbell. But I know plenty of unhappy people. That’s no excuse for your …” Jodie nodded at the woman’s face. It was like she couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud.

Mungo watched as Mrs Campbell stared at and then through Jodie. Nobody ever looked at Jodie as if she was stupid, as if she was a know-nothing, and it surprised Mungo to see it now.

“When our Graham would come home, when we would sit down at dinnertime, ah would ask him how his day was, and all he would say wis ‘Aye, fine. Aye, no bad. Aye, it was awright.’ So ah would just start wittering on about so-and-so and her new fancy man, or how Mary McClure didnae like the new minister.” Mrs Campbell shuddered as she sighed. “Imagine all that fear and disappointment clogged up in there, and nobody stopped to ask him about it, to ask if he was happy in his life, if he was coping. None of the men could tell ye how they really felt, because if they did, they would weep, and this fuckin’ city is damp enough.”

Mrs Campbell pressed her hanky to her cut. She lifted it away and considered the blood clotting upon it. “And whut did they get for aw their troubles, eh? They got laid off by some suit-wearing snobs in Westminster who couldnae find Glasgow on a map, who didnae give a flyin’ fuck if the men had families to feed. They get telt that they’re the problem wi’ this country, that they’re haudin’ back progress because they’re no afraid of hard work. Then some uppity ginger bitch decides that’s the end of them with a stroke of her fountain pen. Done, finito, kaput.”

Mrs Campbell had entirely transformed before them. All the earlier frailty was gone, and now she peered down at them with a fizzing anger. “So naw, Jodie Hamilton, it’s no about the fitba. It’s no about if he likes a wee drink, or doesnae like ma cookin’. Ye’re nothin’ but a pair of daft weans. Youse have no idea what it’s all about. No idea at all.”

Jodie clasped her hands. “Please! You’re kidding yourself on. You’re letting him get away with it.”

Mrs Campbell started back down the stairs. Jodie reached out to her but the woman shrugged her off. When she was back on her landing, she turned and looked up at the Hamilton siblings. “Ah’ve known you since ye were in nappies, and ah’ve known that selfish mother of yours even longer. If anybody should understand making excuses for the person they love, then it’s you two. Can ye no

forgive me that?”

ELEVEN

St Christopher came to Mungo's tent in a sulk. The men had argued in the other shelter; the torpid, slurred fight of two soaks. It was a whiny, piteous argument, full of the poor-me's. He could hear them cast up slights from the distant past, dents to their tarnished pride, tallying their ledger of loyalties. They both sounded hurt. Mungo could only catch snippets of it through the downpour, but it sounded like St Christopher was sobbing – maybe they both were – then they were laughing together or laughing at each other, he couldn't tell. The boy rolled in and out of a stupor.

Now it was the saint in the damp suit who lay next to Mungo. This tent was too small for the both of them, but still the man had slithered in anyway. He had gone to the formality of donning his soaked blazer, but he wore no trousers, no socks, and his bloodied feet were swimming in his pair of good church brogues. St Christopher was watching him, not saying a word. Mungo blinked, he was confused at the apparition. His gut roiled with whisky. He wanted to retch in the hopes it would draw out the poison.

Mungo pressed his back against the side of the tent and pulled his knees up to his chest. He could fell the tapping sensation of rain falling on his skin, but he was strangely dry. In several places the rain pooled, and he had to press the tarpaulin to release it, to stop it collapsing on him entirely. St Christopher was staring at him in the gloaming, his eyes stagnant as puddle water.

Mungo wanted to fill the dusk. He started to tell the long lullaby about Hamish teaching him how to ride a bike. But St Christopher didn't want to hear his stories.

"Stop your talkin'." He drummed Mungo on the kneecap. At first it was a tap and then he balled his knuckles and rapped them hard against the bone. The old scab gave a dull throb. "Ah cannae sleep if ye are gonnae lie there wi' your sharp

bones sticking into me.”

“Why aren’t you in the big tent?”

“He’s a fuckin’ louse. Always cheatin’ us. That’s how.”

Mungo straightened his legs and the saint made himself comfortable. He thought at first to lie on his back again, but it was a hell to have the man’s foul breath on his face, rushing up inside his nostrils. Besides, the tent was too narrow for them to lie shoulder to shoulder. St Christopher huffed and pestered the boy till he rolled over, his face against the cold wall of nylon. The rain kept falling. The ground was disintegrating below them as an arm crept across him, just like it had the night before, but this time Mungo could tell the man was far from sleep.

Something tapped the back of Mungo’s leg. It felt not unlike two fingers, searching him, and trying to push between his bare thighs. It was warm, sticky with its own tackiness, and for a second they stuck together, like when two skins of different temperature connect, one slippery and damp, one powdery dry. It stuck to him for a second and then it slipped in between his thighs. The man gasped.

At first St Christopher seemed content with that. Then the man started to saw back and forth. His foul breath tousled the boy’s hair.

“Stoppit!” Mungo clamped his thighs tight, locked his ankles one over the other. “What the fuck are you playin’ at?” He twisted away from the man and St Christopher mewled in pain. Mungo was pressed against the tent wall. There was nowhere to retreat to.

All weekend St Christopher had seemed as hollow as balsa wood, famished and empty of any nutrition, any goodness. Now he seemed even hungrier than he looked, like he would not be starved any longer. The man wrapped his hand around the boy’s throat; every finger felt like a vice. He dug his ragged nails into the larynx and tugged like he would separate the windpipe from the spine. Then he threw a bare leg over the boy and Mungo felt the stitching of the Goodyear brogue scratch his calf. “Don’t be stupid, son. The mair you struggle, the longer it’ll take.”

“Please. Don’t,” gurgled Mungo.

St Christopher didn’t answer him. He shoved the warmth between his thighs again and started humming to himself. He was pushing and pushing and humming and humming.

The suit jacket was rolled up on the man’s forearm. He had bound both of the

boy's wrists tight in one of his long hands. With the other he squeezed the air from his throat. In the very last of the daylight Mungo could see the hairs on the man's arm. The black hair stood against the pale skin like a forest in the snow. Mungo's strained breath caught the hairs and they changed direction, flowing away and twisting like the long grass in the trout river. He tried to think of the beauty in the hills. It was raining hellishly hard.

He was cooried into the far corner of the tent when Gallowgate pulled back the flap. It was almost completely black inside the red tent, but the faint embers of the campfire lit the side of Gallowgate's face. Mungo could hear St Christopher pissing into the loch. His humped back must have been arched with satisfaction, maybe relief; the high arc of his piss splashed noisily on the surface of the water. The man loosened his guts and farted into the night.

"Are ye awright?" asked Gallowgate softly. "Whut happened? Why is he whistling?"

Mungo shook his head. Several feelings he couldn't process all fought to push to the front of his mouth. He didn't know the words to explain what St Christopher had just done to him. Even if he had known, the shame clamped his jaw shut, the pain in his throttled throat choked the sound.

Gallowgate was dabbing at the sleeping bag. He rubbed something between the tips of his fingers, sniffed it, and recoiled. He left Mungo in the darkness as he went back out into the night. Mungo couldn't tell if he struck the man, or shoved him, but there was a panicked splashing, and a gasping as St Christopher struggled to right himself and make it back to the shore. Gallowgate parted the tent flaps again, he sounded genuinely angry. "You are well out of order! Ya dirty basturt. Ah'm phoning the fuckin' polis."

The boy could hear St Christopher chuckle; the slap of his wet blazer as he cast it on to the rocks. Then came the sound of his labouring to bend down and crawl into the other tent. The satisfied sigh as his weary bones hit the sleeping bag.

Gallowgate reached into the darkness and searched for Mungo. *"Here, here."* He was trying to be soothing, beckoning Mungo from the corner. "Ah'm dead sorry. Look, ah'll talk to him in the morning. It'll be awright."

Mungo's voice sounded faraway. His throat was inflamed with the throttling. It hurt to swallow. "It's no right. He fuckin' touched us! He shouldn't have done

that.”

Gallowgate had to come closer to hear him. “Ah know.”

“My big brother will fuckin’ kill him. *Murder him.*”

“Ah know.”

“Please. I just want to go home.”

“Ah know, ah know. We will. In the mornin’.” He pulled the boy towards him and put his arm around his shoulder.

Mungo was soothing himself by telling Gallowgate all the things Ha-Ha would do to St Christopher. He could picture him with the tomahawk tucked into the waistband of his denims, doggedly turning out all the darkened pubs of the Saltmarket, the Trongate, near the Briggait, scouring beneath the railway arches, searching the faces of all the inebriates until he found the cunt he was after – and he always found the cunt he was after – then the keen edge of his tomahawk would sing.

Gallowgate listened patiently, sighed in all the right places, waiting for the boy to calm his breathing. He was running his hand along Mungo’s back, soothing him like a patient father, patting him as though he were a child with trapped wind. They sat together in silence and listened to the noisy anorak rustle under his caress. Mungo picked his twitching face.

“Gallowgate?”

“Aye?”

“If I just wanted to leave now, like *right* now, which direction should I walk?”

“Shhh, it’ll be light again soon. Everything feels better in the light.” Gallowgate’s arm must have grown tired. The fatherly hand started moving in a circular motion. It moved round and round and lower and lower until it slid under the toggled waistband of his cagoule. As it gently brushed the warm divot above Mungo’s backside – the little valley where fine dander was just starting to sprout – Mungo flinched. Gallowgate’s sovvie rings were chilled as they travelled up the vertebrae of his spine.

Mungo hadn’t realized he had been crying until Gallowgate told him to stop. He had never been a great one for crying as a child. For as long as he could remember Hamish had taken a pleasure in trying to break his temper; trying to find and pierce the water balloon filled with tears that sat inside everyone. Hamish would sit on his chest and thump away with piercing fingers like his breastbone was a typewriter. At the end of every sentence he would twist his ear like it was a crank and with an open palm, clatter the side of Mungo’s face. New

sentence.

How am I, Mungo Hamilton, such a wee gullible fanny? Type, twist, clatter. New sentence.

Why do I, Mungo Hamilton, always get myself into bother? Type, twist, clatter.

Even Jodie had used his stoicism when it suited her. She would get Mungo to go into Mo-Maw's secret stash and steal potato scones for the pair of them. They would sit in the quiet of the airing cupboard and gorge themselves on the stodgy triangles. When Mo-Maw would catch them, Jodie would say it was Mungo's idea, and he would get the leather sandal across his legs. Jodie would hide behind his bedroom door and wait for him to come into the room smarting in pain, but dry-eyed. She would give him a hug and tell him that's why he could bear the blame, because he never cried, he never gave anyone the satisfaction of his tears.

Gallowgate hissed at Mungo to stop crying. He had his hand on Mungo's football shorts and was trying to pull them down. Mungo used all the strength in his body to clamp one hand on his waistband and brace the other against Gallowgate's chest. All the years of defending himself against Ha-Ha had given him a defensive sort of strength: muscular legs that could support another man's weight, a taut body that could curl shut, and clench tight as a clam. For a second it seemed like he could lift the weight of Gallowgate off him.

The last of the firelight caught Gallowgate's eyes. By the set of his jaw, Mungo could sense his determination. The man hammered his fist into Mungo's face, in a way Ha-Ha never had. He dropped his elbow on to his already bruised windpipe and pushed upwards until Mungo's head tilted all the way back. Then he turned the boy over.

TWELVE

In the weeks following Mo-Maw's resurrection, she was neither here nor there. Jocky would call and Mo-Maw would sweep her life into her handbag and run back to him. Every five days or so he would return her like an overdue library book, and she would appear so dog-eared, so sodden with drink, that it looked like she had been dropped in the bath. Jodie said she thought Jocky was a bad drinker too because he would call at any hour of the day or night. They could hear him as he told Mo-Maw, over and over, that she was lovely. Mo-Maw wanted to believe it, even though she knew she was not lovely, she told him she was too tired to be lovely now.

The night shift had made her nocturnal. More than once Mungo woke up for school and found the front door wide open and Mo-Maw sitting at the kitchenette table in her heavy coat.

The guts of her brown handbag would be spilled across the floor, out the front door, and dribbled the length of the close as she had stumbled home and searched for her house keys.

Mrs Campbell chapped the door twice in the one week. With her purpled face and yellowed eye socket, she asked Mungo how school was going. Without a word, or a downward glance, she took his hand and folded Mo-Maw's white bra into it, and still talking about the foul weather, she curled his fingers silently around it, and left without casting an aspersion on Mo-Maw's name. The next time she brought him a Fray Bentos steak and kidney pie, roasting hot from her own oven. Then, in a plastic bag, she handed him the debris Mo-Maw had dropped the night before: half a dozen panty liners, a bottle of Avon perfume, and a stack of defrosted square sausages.

Mungo closed the front door and carefully returned all of Mo-Maw's belongings to her bag. His mother had taken her bra off again, but that morning

it was on the kitchenette table and she was shelling monkey nuts and dropping the shells into the upturned cup. There was an empty bottle of fortified wine on the table. She looked like she had been sat there smoking and drinking since before the dawn.

“Ah shut early,” she declared, although he did not ask. “Ah jist couldnae be bothered anymore.”

Mungo kissed her warm crown. She had tightened her perm with money they didn’t have. Her scalp smelled like it had been burned with chemicals. He put on the kettle and poured her two strong mugs of black tea, just the way she liked. Her head was drooping on to her chest, it bobbed in bunting waves, like a toddler past bedtime. Mungo watched her fight sleep, he tried to take the ashy cigarette from between her fingers but she pushed him away.

“Stop hoverin’. Sakes. Yer like a wee wummin.” She ashed on to her own leggings, then brushed it on to the floor. He dared not sweep it up.

Across the back green, above the cluster of communal bin sheds, there were already bright lights in the flats opposite. Mungo watched the light come on in James’s house, a single light that he switched off whenever he left the room. Mungo knew he woke early to go to the doocot. He would spend an hour feeding and exercising the birds before there was any danger of another dooman sending a lure into the sky. That was the thing with the East End doomen: they were mostly unemployed, so they didn’t keep standard business hours.

James was silhouetted against the bright light of his kitchenette. He looked out and saw Mungo watching him. They still had not spoken, not even once, but he gave Mungo the thumbs up sign, with a face like it was a question. Mungo returned the salute with a definite thumbs down. James laughed.

“Come away from that window,” said Mo-Maw. “Stop watching wummin get dressed for their work. That’s aw ah need. To have raised a peepin’ Tom.”

Mo-Maw had taken to stealing meat from the caravan, arse ends of black puddings and half-defrosted bricks of sliced bacon. Mungo turned on the electric ring and prepared her a hot breakfast to line her stomach. The eggs rolled across the frying pan in a white greasy liquid of their own, catching bits of bacon fat and scraps of yesterday’s black pudding in their wake. He waited until the centre filmed over before he flipped them gently. The plate made a chalky sound as he slid it across the tabletop towards her. It was exactly as she liked it.

Mo-Maw made a retching sound. “Ah cannae be looking at that.”

“I could make you some porridge.”

“Stop fussin’.” She sounded tired but far from sleep.

“Maybe you want to go and lie down?”

She stubbed her cigarette into the egg roll. Her eyes cleared. The routine of the night shift was in her. “Ah want to go out.”

She could barely walk. With her arm around his shoulders Mungo carried her down the stairs. At one point she climbed up on the banister, and she was so wilful that he had to hold her as she slid down it. *Wheeee*. Mo-Maw began cackling and it was impossible not to be affected by her glee. Jodie would be furious that he hadn’t buffeted her from the door, that he hadn’t used all his wiles to deflect her to the settee and make her sink into the softness that she couldn’t rise up out of.

The early morning light was a pale-blue wash, it muted the vividness from everything it touched, it stole the life from the faces of passing strangers. He needed to put his arm around his mother to stop her from stumbling along the Parade. At times she leaned on him so heavily he felt like he had her whole weight against him. Then she would take a few shuffling steps and pitch the other way and he would stagger after her. It took all his strength and concentration not to tip them both into the gutter.

The early shift gawped down upon them from warm corporation buses. From the pity in their faces, Mungo could tell they made a sorry sight. Mungo tried to hold his spine straight and keep his eyes on the horizon like there was a purpose to their journey, but there was not; she had taken the notion for a walk and he had been powerless to stop her.

“We used to do this all the time when ye were wee.” She wasn’t any soberer but the cold had pinched her nose and now she looked fully awake. He was holding her at the waist and she had both her arms around him like they were young lovers. “Ah couldnae cross the doorstep but ye would be clinging to my skirt. The other two couldn’t have cared less if I got hit by a bus. But no you, you were always there for me.”

She had oriented their walk towards the city centre; maybe the casino would still be open, or the penny puggies under Central Station. Tattie-bogle liked lights. He had hoped she would lose heart, but she didn’t. The drink could flatten her or give her a peculiar stamina. The terror lay in the fact he never knew which it would be.

To get to the city centre they needed to pass in the direction of the Necropolis. The air would be freshest there, the steep hill would be best for clearing her

head. It would be quiet that time of the morning, when no one could see the strain or embarrassment on his face. He bumped into her like a gentle tugboat, and steered her towards the cemetery. The view from the Necropolis spanned the low city. He could see the tall fingers of Sighthill and the dense cluster of Victorian buildings that made up the centre of the city. The Tennent's brewery was already belching its yeast into the sky.

"Ah don't think Jocky loves me." Her American trainers were caked with mud by the time he dropped her on the steps of the John Knox memorial. "He's taking me for a mug."

Mungo crouched near the statue of a scowling clergyman to pick crocuses that were already past their peak. It was hard to find ones that had not yet collapsed in on themselves. "Maybe he doesn't like you when you're drinking."

"Sakes. Ah'm only thirty-four. All ah should be doing is drinking. Drinking and dancing and laughing." Her face looked sunken in the morning light. She took a bottle of fortified wine out of her bag. Mungo could feel his eyelids start to fill with electricity. He had emptied the drink from her bag before they left, but she had been wily enough to put it back in when he wasn't looking. "Ah bet that sounds dead old to ye, din't it? Ah wisnae much older than you when ah came down wi' our Hamish. Your father was stunned. Ye should have heard the terrible things his mammy called me."

Mungo couldn't remember his grandmother. He had a lingering sense of a Presbyterian snob, a woman that spread jam on salted crackers and pretended they were fancy biscuits. "Tell me what my father was like?"

"Oh, no this again." She struggled to light the end of a bent cigarette. Mungo worried she would forget he had asked about his father, but the nicotine seemed to focus her mind, and she eventually said, "He wisnae anything special. There was plenty better looking. But he was a cheeky and charming big bastard. A brave soul like our Hamish and soft in the centre like you." Her eyes were fixed, somewhere out over the snaking Clyde.

"Why did you let him fight in the gangs if he had weans?" Mungo had asked her this a thousand times before. All three of them had.

"Ah couldnae have stopped him. Ah tried, but he never belonged to me, no really. We had only been living the gether for half a year afore he got stabbed. Jodie was still sleeping in a pram because we couldnae afford a bed for Hamish. We were only playin' at houses." Her eyes were rheumy with the cold. "Ah mean, ah wisnae even the first person that the polis told. Ah had to phone his

mammy when he didn't come round that night. She was the one who telt me he'd been stabbed. Ah was at home in an unfurnished flat nursing his two weans and she didnae even think enough of me to phone me herself."

Mungo had been planning on giving the half-wilted crocuses to his mother. He let them blow away down the hill. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

She held her hand out to him and he sat beside her. "Don't be daft, ye've never brought me a minute's sadness in my life." He could hear her sniffling. "It was a lovely surprise to know you would be born. Ah buried him on a Tuesday and on that next Monday Dr Doak telt me ah was pregnant wi' you."

"You must have gotten a fright."

"Ah did. Seeing as how ah only went to see him for some anti-depressants." She flicked her dout out over the headstones. "They came to see me, ye know."

"Who?"

"The wee boys that stabbed him, a handful of wee Fenians. They'd taken the notion to wear their good communion suits, maybe their mammies had forced them to do it, but it was like a foreign delegation when they chapped the door. Awful brave for four wee Catholic boys to walk those streets after they'd killed the bold Ha-Ha. They must have felt guilty. Ah remember they were soaking wet and shivering. They'd waited till it was a pure belter of a storm. Safer that way."

"Did you want to hurt them?"

"Ah did at first. Ah was screaming and roaring. Jodie wouldn't latch on, she was always a fussy wee thing, and with everything that happened, ah was up to high doh. But these boys were all about your age, they looked so young standing at my door. Ah think they thought they were hardmen when they'd first stabbed him. It was in all the papers and in time their own mammies got on to them after they heard Ha-Ha had two weans and well, that's a rotten thing to bear. It was the wimmen who felt bad. They were only wee boys running wi' scissors."

"Hamish will get his own back one day."

"So he says. But a funny thing, they used to buy Hamish nappies. For a while they even sent me money, mostly Provvie checks and maybe an occasional tenner at Christmas." She drew a deep breath. "Aye, well, it's aw fun and games till someone loses an eye, eh?"

Mo-Maw had an affectation when she was feeling sad, a soothing tell of sorts. She spread the fingers on one hand and caressed each finger, rubbing the length and pressing into the soft webbing between each, tamping down gently, as though she were wearing fine gloves. Mungo was thinking about how he should

save up and buy her actual gloves. But she straightened up suddenly, the stone step leaching the heat from their bodies. “Did I ever tell you how ye got yer name?”

“Aye, like a hundred times.”

“Oh am ah boring ye? Ah must’ve been mad to give ye such a name.”

“It’s a Fenian name.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Naw. The saints belong to aw of us. But ah can remember the registrar staring at me like ah was mental. Ah *was* mental. Ah wisnae even a widow – ah couldnae even call myself that. Your father was always ‘*poor Jocelyn Hamilton’s boy,*’ he was never my man, never ‘*poor Maureen Buchanan’s fella.*’ Ah just felt ye needed somethin’ of Glasgow. It was probably the only thing your father really loved. Ah thought it could help bring some peace.”

“Not to me.”

“But you are. You are my dear one.” She rubbed the back of his hand. “It’s a hard name, ah suppose.”

“Stephen would have been fine. David. John.”

Sat at the top of the hill, they could smell the sweet diesel in the crisp morning air. The Parade was already choked with congested traffic all trying to make its way into the grey city. Mo-Maw kissed his cold cheek. “It’ll absolutely kill me.”

“What will?”

“When you meet a lassie and leave us.”

“You left me first!” His voice pitched higher than he would have liked.

She waved her hand like he didn’t understand. “Ah can barely handle sharing ye wi’ Jo-Jo as it is.” There was truth to this. It sat uncomfortably between them. “Ah know she thinks ah’m a terrible mother. She doesnae miss a trick to remind me she could raise ye better herself. The judgy prig-faced wee cow.”

“Maw!”

She slapped his knee. “Whit have ah telt ye about calling me *that?*” At least she rubbed where she had slapped. “But ah will. Ah’ll die when ye start the winching.” Without regarding her, he knew what would come next – she was not a woman given to subtleties – he could practically hear her eyes swivel towards his face. “So, have ye met somebody yet?”

“No.” He pulled her tight to his side. “You’re my only girl.”

She wasn’t laughing as she pushed away from him. “Darlin’, ah’m starting to

worry about you. Ye'll be sixteen at Christmas, ye should be chasin' lassies. Ah had every father from Govan to the Garngad at my door by the time Hamish wis your age." She went quiet for a moment. "Is there anything the matter?"

"No." He felt himself flush.

Mo-Maw looked uncharacteristically concerned. Jodie had told her about their possible eviction and she hadn't bothered her shirt. Hamish had gotten a girl-child pregnant and she hadn't ruffled a feather. But now she stared into his eyes and she looked genuinely worried.

"I'm just not that interested." Then he added hopefully, "Yet."

She sniffed. "*Listen.* Just cos ah've been away don't think ah've no been watching. Missus Campbell tells me everything ye've been up to. She telt me ye've been in at Poor-Wee-Chickie's."

"Mister Calhoun needed a hand."

"Aye, ah bet he fucking did!" The back of her jaw was jutted out to the battle angle. "And your soft wee hands will do very nicely thank-you-very-much. Stay away frae him, Mungo. Dae ye hear? Ah'll be damned if ah raise a bachelor."

Mungo was glad to stand up. He arranged the hood on her thin anorak. The fake coyote fur matched the speckled tones of her dyed hair. "Let's go home, you look done in."

"Thanks very much." Mo-Maw wiped the streaking mascara from underneath her eyes. He pulled her to her feet, and they almost toppled into the crocuses.

"Listen, ah need yer help. Ah need to cut out the drink. Nae kiddin' this time." Then, without any irony, she downed the last of her fortified wine. Mo-Maw pummelled her small breasts, hoisted them a few centimetres higher, and sighed when they drooped back into place. "See, ah cannae let Jocky get away. If ah do there might never be another go-around for me."

Mungo agreed to nothing. He led his mother down the boggy hill. When she slipped, he picked her up.

He did not go to school that day. While other children were running for the first bell, Mungo ran his mother a lukewarm bath. He put a stack of towels in the oven to heat them, and when he put her to bed, he laid the towels over her so she was warmed through. Mo-Maw was roiling and restless. Mungo took off his school uniform, and climbing in beside her, he held her till the shakes subsided and she fell asleep.

The sky had dimmed again by the time Jodie came in from school. She cracked the bedroom door and their eyes locked in the silence. He thought she would be relieved, but Jodie just looked her usual disappointed self.

When the evening news came on Mungo made a heaped plate of dry toast and sat with Mo-Maw while she ate as much as she could. He never let her from his sight, lest she find a secret stash of fortified and calm her tremors with it. He laid out clothes for her to wear and together they caught a corporation bus into the city and went to the meeting hall.

He had been to AA before, but rarely without Jodie. Mo-Maw had tried the Twelve Steps over the years, but her sobriety had always been fleeting and vague. Like a gallus child that thought it could ride a bike without stabilizers, she pronounced herself *cured* after a few weeks, but soon crashed and skinned her knees on the drink again. She wasted a lot of breath arguing that there was a difference between *taking a drink* and *being a drunk.* Jodie had babysat him at the back of enough meetings for him to know that if you were an alcoholic, one or one hundred drinks were the very same thing. Mo-Maw disagreed; sobriety bored her.

The meeting room was at the back of an old Masonic hall. It felt like a school assembly, with painted floorboards that ran the length of the room, and a raised wooden stage. There was a connecting hallway leading to a small windowless kitchen and before and after the meeting the members liked to gather around the scalding tea urn. Mungo felt most comfortable there. He held Mo-Maw's coat and when the meeting convened, he leaned against the urn and let the warmth radiate through his body as he listened to everyone's confessions.

When the meeting was finished the alcoholics gathered around the folding trestle table. This particular meeting housed a tight community; humble folk who, regardless of the varying sizes of their wage packets, rubbed along with genuine empathy. Mungo liked to be amongst them and even though his eyes started to sting from the smoke, he liked the hugging sensation their puffy winter jackets gave him as he squeezed through the tightly packed crowd.

Mo-Maw took his hand and dragged him towards a cluster of women who were chewing on gammon sandwiches as they gossiped.

"*Weh-ll,* would ye look how big yer gettin'? And to think it was only the other day ye were doing forward rolls on my guid carpet." Every-Other-Wednesday Nora cupped his face in her cold hands. Her cigarette gave off a tendril of smoke. His eyes were twitching, not bad, but enough. Mo-Maw sighed.

“*Weh-ll,* is yer face still giving ye bother?” Every time E-O-W Nora saw him she asked the same thing. She was a stocky woman; a home help from Roystonhill who had searching eyes and skin that had yellowed like old kitchen paint. Her salt-and-pepper hair was clipped short and her mouth was puckered with fine lines from smoking forty a day for forty years. When she spoke, she prefaced everything with a long, drawn-out *weh-ll.* It served as a “who am I to say?” It seemed she said this as if to undermine her own opinion, in case God disagreed with her, and would crack the heavens and contradict her.

“*Weh-ll,* never mind the twitchin’, son. You breakin’ hearts yet? I bet the lassies have to keep their hands over their ha’pennies wi’ you.” She winked at Mo-Maw. This was another thing she said every time she saw him.

“Ah wish he would, Nora. It’s a late bloomer ah’ve got on ma hands.”

“Well, lucky you. Enjoy him while ye can. I never see my sons anymore. Ye should see the miserable articles they’ve married.”

Mo-Maw pointed a finger at his crotch. “Ah had our Hamish have a wee look. Apparently, it’s aw there and working fine.”

“Mammy!” His voice pitched and broke. Several heads turned, cigarettes clenched between teeth.

“Ya wee bugger. If ah’ve telt ye once …”

The circle of women were appraising Mungo as though he was a second-rate bullock. E-O-W Nora put a calming hand on Mo-Maw’s arm. “*Weh-ll,* yer wee mammy is just worried about ye, Mungo. It’s hard raising boys when ye are a wummin on yer lonesome.” Then she turned back to Mo-Maw. “Ah mean, look at ma eldest boy, a brand-new motor, a glass conservatory, two weeks all-inclusive in Torremolinos, and here ah am sitting in the Garngad with kitchen wallpaper that won’t stay on the wall.” She dropped her dout into the polystyrene teacup. “As Rod Stewart is ma witness, if ah had it to do all over again, ah’d only have daughters.”

Mo-Maw scoffed. “God. Anything but that.”

THIRTEEN

Jodie stared out over the fallow fields of North Ayrshire. There had been a late frost and now the ploughed rows looked like stitched panels on a quilt, each channel picked out by snow-white thread. The brown fields rolled all the way towards the horizon where the charcoal sea met the flat dull sky. The suspension had worn out on the bus long ago and as they rattled their way towards this line of nothingness Mungo wouldn't talk to her. He drew his hood up over his head and couldn't bring himself to face her.

Mr Gillespie had run away. He and Jodie had such a habit of discretion that it was Mungo who told her that Mr Gillespie had disappeared.

Usually Jodie and the teacher haunted different wings of the sprawling high school. She preferred the quietness of the arts and languages prefabs while Mr Gillespie hid in the teachers' study. Occasionally she would look up and find him peering down at her through the wired safety glass at the head of the main stairs. A smile would ripple across his face, a spark of lust in his eyes, and then it would be snuffed. Jodie had liked that. She thought she was slick.

Thursday was their day to meet and fuck – and the occasional Saturday when he told his wife he was at the golf – but mostly Thursday evenings when they would drive to the tin caravan. He had stood her up before, left her standing in the shadows of the tenements, and later he would give her some excuse: a wean with measles, a wife with a sprained back. Then he would haunt her more that following week, floating down corridors in the cloud of her Cachet. Sometimes he would shout at her in the hallway, contriving some small infraction, anything that would allow him to drown her in his shadow and make her cast her hazel eyes in his direction.

This past week when he missed their Thursday at the caravan, she was glad of the peace. After the weekend, he didn't haunt her in the hallways, and when she

went to the Modern Studies block, he was not there as usual.

Her brother was getting dressed in front of the electric fire when he sang, *"I know something you don't know."* He was alternating between buttoning his school shirt and bending over and spooning heaps of dripping Weetabix into his gullet. He never took his eyes from the cartoons. "Are ye not gonnae guess?"

Mungo was bare-arsed and innocent as a wean. There was no heating in the rest of the flat, but it wasn't right that he was naked in front of her, not now he was fifteen. He was physically a young man, if not yet inside his head. A rash of light brown hair dusted his groin and thighs, and the round chubbiness of his buttocks was becoming lean and square with muscle. He waggled his bare arse at her.

"Stop your nonsense and put your underpants on." She mourned the sweet little boy that he used to be. At night she could hear him through the wall, rubbing fast and finishing much too quick. She knew what he was doing when his bath took an eternity and the immersion ran out of hot water. There had been a time she'd had to chase him with a washcloth just to get him clean.

"I know something you don't know." He baited her with a grin but Jodie would not guess. *"Fine!* Fat Gillespie has run away. Mr Goodart says he'll be teaching us from now on. I heard him say Gillespie didn't show up for work, didn't phone in sick or nothing. He just vanished." Mungo was pulling on his long black socks. "Goodart asked us if Gillespie had given us homework and we fuckin' lied." He sank to one knee, strummed a fantastic air guitar. He didn't expect Jodie to start sobbing.

Jodie felt the floor tilt underneath her. Like a gable end slated for demolition, the front facade of her fell away and the private contents of her life rolled out. She was being torn down, and every mismatched bed sheet in her mind was to be exposed for all to see. She knew why the teacher had gone away. She knew what she had done to make Mr Gillespie disappear.

Mungo wouldn't sit next to her on the bus. He sat on the bench opposite and flattened himself against the glass, his eyes fixed somewhere over the black fields. Jodie couldn't remember a time when he had been this disappointed in her.

It was a long while before she could stop crying. Then she had told Mungo all about Mr Gillespie, about his holiday caravan, the frontier of the vast sea and the

excitement of the screaming waltzers. For every thing she told him, there was a thing she could never tell. She didn't tell him how Mr Gillespie had said he believed in her. How easily he had groomed a daft wee lassie into believing that she might get out of the city; that she might escape the dreich streets that held them all stuck and be free, at last, from the burden of her brothers. She had a good brain, sure, *but she was nothing special*, not compared to these Perth lassies with their tutors, and the Edinburgh debutantes from the Mary Erskine School. She had a good head on her shoulders but he was the one who would make sure she would go far. How could she tell Mungo that as he was fingering her that very first time, she had already started to trust him and doubt herself?

Mr Gillespie had promised to help her get into Glasgow University, and she had doubted she was bright enough to manage that on her own. To Jodie, the university was another city altogether, one whose postcode was a moat that kept East End middens like her out. It was the ancient seat of learning that respectable Englishmen came to when they wanted a sense of frontier plus a top-drawer education, not to mention four years of shenanigans with local girls who liked to get fucked off their faces on eccies and pints of snakebite and black.

Hamish said he knew all about it. When he had a supply in, Hamish sold dank hashish to the university freshers. He cut it with plain rolling tobacco and crumbled a beef Oxo cube over the top of the mixture. He could make the smallest amount stretch across a whole class.

His timing had to be perfect. He had to catch them during freshers' week while they still had envelopes of money from their grandmothers and before they learned the hard lessons the city had in store for them. He always struggled to straighten his grin as Toby and Dom sniffed at bags of tobacco and Mo-Maw's out-of-date Bisto and exclaimed it smelled just as good as the skunk they had "that one time in Goa."

Hamish called this last week in September "Plum Season." You had to con the bastards before they got too ripe and Glasgow rotted them on the vine. Soon enough the city would show them its true nature and then it would be too late. But three years running, he made enough money to pay off all of Mo-Maw's Provvie loans; he even bought a video player and with the remainder he rented a full-body sunbed for Sammy-Jo.

The last time Hamish had come in the door buzzing and flush with freshers' money, Jodie was already lying with Mr Gillespie and dreaming of making it to the West End. She was slack-jawed as Hamish talked in awe about the grand

tenements the students lived in, the fancy ones off Byres Road, with their wide wood floors, high ceilings, and big centre lights that cast a sparkle upwards, not downwards from a garish bulb. It filled her head with daydreams.

Every Plum Season, the English arrived in their mothers' battered Volkswagens, all the better to not flaunt their wealth – the good Mercedes was simply too much for the north. They slouched down the Great Western Road in balding corduroys and waxed Barbour jackets. Their hair was artfully unbrushed, an old Proust was dog-eared and protruding conspicuously from the flap of a canvas bag. They were dressed for shooting grouse in Aberdeenshire.

"Ah think they've had the Walkman too loud when their mammies were telling them about Glesga being full of peasants. Daft cunts thought she said it was full of pheasants." Hamish told that joke to every single one of his Protestant boys, and twice to Jodie. "You can only dress like ye don't care if ye have money. I mean serious, neverhave-to-count-it money."

Glasgow teenagers in the very best of gear they could afford and caked with make-up and body spray watched the slouching corduroys from the top deck of the bus and felt a spur of shame. It would be a dream to afford beautiful clothes. It would be another dream entirely to be able to shun it and dress however you pleased.

Hamish took their money quickly. He sneered as they told him they planned to visit their big sisters – invariably called Tilly or Tanya or Tess – at St Andrews or Robert Gordon's. They asked him the best season to visit Skye. "How the fuck should ah know?" he would say. "Ah'm no yer fuckin' ghillie pal."

These students went home for every holiday. Whenever anyone asked them where they studied, they would answer *Glasgow,* and the friend would nod approval; how bright and brave young Dominic Buxton was, and just the acceptable level of debauched. They always went home after graduation. They would never actually settle down here.

Yet to Hamish, the worst of them were not the English. The worst were the chinless lambswool milksops from the West End or Perth or Edinburgh. These Scots spoke the Queen's English with a snooty clarity that would embarrass even Etonians. They knew more than one Rabbie Burns poem by heart, and actually enjoyed ceilidhs and bagpipes without taking the piss. They knew all the best walks around Loch Voil and thought the Drovers Inn did the best Sunday roast, though it was "ruined by day trippers." To Hamish, these Scots let themselves be minstrel dollies. Middle-class Glaswegians were the worst; they had no loyalty,

when it suited them they draped the city about themselves like a trendy jacket, but they knew none of its chill, none of its need. These Glaswegians were acceptably foreign and endlessly entertaining to the English. Their das were not being put out of work on the Clyde or pulling slag from the coalfaces in Cardowan. Their daddies were catching the commuter flight down to London and eating smoked Scottish salmon at business lunches in Canary Wharf. They preferred to take their oatcakes with French pâté and drank uisge beatha by the glass, not by the bottle.

Hamish took one look at them and knew he hated them. He was jealous in every way. Then, howling at their gullibility, he took their money and gave them a lungful of powdered beef.

He told Jodie that university life was not available to her. It was not for Glaswegians like her.

Jodie listened to the scream of seagulls and knew she couldn't explain any of this to Mungo.

What she had told him was enough. In the tenement, with milk pouring down his chin, Jodie had told Mungo about the baby Mr Gillespie had put in her belly. This was why he had disappeared. She told Mungo how Mr Gillespie had said it wasn't his. How he had screamed at her in a lay-by and panicked like a midden rat trapped by Staffordshire terriers. It was funny, she had thought then, for him to act so trapped when he wasn't the one who would be stuck. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel as he'd listed a long list of Protestant surnames, her classmates. He'd recited them alphabetically, gruffly, like he was reading the morning attendance.

"Was it McConnachie?"

"No."

"Neely?"

"No."

"Nicholson?"

"No-ooo."

"Rattray?"

"Nein!"

"Ahhh, come on now. Don't lie to me, girl. I bet it was Rattray. I've seen you all giggling and scratching his name on the inside of your desks."

"God sakes. No way." It was not the bold Rattray.

"Buchanan?" he asked. "Was it wee Buchanan then?"

“Wait, what? Buchanan doesn’t come after Rattray,” she’d sneered at him. “You’re slipping.”

Mr Gillespie had rattled the steering wheel. “Murchison?”

“No!” Jodie had let out a long sigh. “I have slept with nobody but you.” His face blanched like over-boiled cabbage. “*Sir,* it’s your baby.”

Usually he liked it when she called him *Sir.* He asked her to call him that when he was on top of her. But not now. He would not believe that the foetus was his. “That’s what lassies like you do, ye roam the streets like dugs in heat. Ah knew it. Ah knew ye were just like every one of those slags from the scheme.” He was muttering over and over to himself, reprimanding himself for his stupidity. “Ye’ll never get to university now.”

She couldn’t tell him that she hated lying underneath him – she had enjoyed it so little that it would be an age before she ever let another boy put himself inside her.

He didn’t bring her back to the East End that day. He left her near his home, in the Cowgate out by Kirkintilloch. When she asked where she was – she knew nothing about this part of the world – he said “*Cow*-Gate” and slammed the door. She would have expected more maturity from any of the boys on his register.

Now Mr Gillespie was gone and they were on the bus to Largs, looking to connect to the next one to West Kilbride and then the caravan park. It had been Mungo’s idea – it was a stupid idea – but she had none better.

Jodie slid across the aisle and sat next to her brother. She pressed against him until he was squashed up against the window and forced to acknowledge her. She expected him to look disappointed or angry; but when he looked at her it was with profound sadness and she found she didn’t like the mirror of his gaze and wanted him to turn away again. Mungo uncurled his fingers. He had a handful of Jelly Babies and he had separated the red ones just for her.

Mungo had never seen the sea in the daylight. When they changed buses in Largs, he pulled her towards it and Jodie felt lousy that she couldn’t let him linger. The next bus dropped them at the mouth of the caravan park. They walked the tarmac cul-de-sacs until they found the row of caravans that she knew best. Although it was still cold, Glasgow retirees were preparing for the short summer: replanting beds of dwarf geraniums in old whisky barrels, reconnecting frozen water lines. The retirees watched the children suspiciously

and Jodie regretted that they hadn't changed out of their school uniforms.

It was a stupid idea to look for him here, but a part of her had half-expected him to be at the caravan, because she could not picture him anywhere else. She had few images of Mr Gillespie, except him standing in front of a pull-down map of South Africa or lying on top of her on the pull-down table. She had never seen him walking along a street. Did he whistle "Billy Boy" like Mr Campbell, or weasel and strut like Hamish? She had no real idea of him outside what he taught her in school and then what he did to her afterwards; what he gave to her mind and what he took back from her body.

The caravan was a beige tin can that was cold to the touch. They peered through the proud net curtains into the empty interior. Mungo started tugging on the door.

"What are you doing?" She knew a dozen eyes were watching their every move; this schemie scum didn't belong amongst their manicured flower beds.

"He might have left a note inside," said Mungo, "or *mibbe* there's something with his real address on it. Some way we can find him and make him help you."

Jodie hadn't thought this far ahead. She hadn't imagined what she wanted from him. It was foolish, but she just needed to make sure he had understood, that it hadn't been a misunderstanding after all. It was a burden to have a trusting soul. Sometimes she just couldn't believe the worst in people. All these years with Mo-Maw should have learned her better.

Mungo tried pulling on the galvanized handle again. The door was thin and Hamish could have kicked it in easily, he would have known just where to aim his Samba. Mungo searched in the kangaroo pocket of his cagoule. He drew out the small knife Hamish had given him. He had no idea how to force a lock, but this was barely a lock. He jammed the knife behind the bolt and the door burst open.

It was clean and cold inside. The Gillespies had left just enough furnishings to sell it on to the next Glaswegians. With none of Mrs Gillespie's fussy knick-knacks it looked foreign to Jodie. She had to check again to make sure she had not mistaken the sameness of all the caravans. No, this *was* the one. She ran her hand along the underside of the collapsible kitchen table and felt the sharp pitted mounds of dried mucus. Mr Gillespie had liked to pick his nose after they fucked and wipe it on the underside of the veneer. This was the place.

"It's like a magician's hat in here." Mungo marvelled at the empty space. The Gillespies had two spoiled children; they had splurged on the deluxe upgrade.

Mungo found the chemical toilet and was pissing noisily into it. It sounded like a cheap plastic bucket. “Aw man!” he cried, lifting his feet high. “I don’t think this is plumbed in.” Pools of sugary yellow piss were leaking out around the base of the commode. Instinctively, Jodie found herself looking for a tea towel to clean up the mess.

“What are you doing?” asked Mungo, tucking himself away. Before Jodie could answer he took his hand and swept the last remaining photo off the wall. A twee thing, a black-and-white photo of Inveraray that had been tinted with watercolours. It smashed on the floor. He smiled.

Jodie filled with blood. She ripped at the sheets of the double bed; the bed that belonged to his wife, the same bed he wouldn’t let her lie down in. Giro-Jodie had to make do with the folding table or the tweed banquette and its uncomfortable bouclé fabric, or if he was in a real rush, she would brace herself against the tin sink and listen to the jangle of cutlery while he hiked her school skirt up above her haunches.

Jodie ran her hand over his pillow. It was freshly laundered but so deeply slept on that it held the traces of his sweat and his hair pomade. She could smell him on it. She ripped the covers from the pillows and tore the goose feathers from their guts. She had disembowelled two whole pillows and was screaming, red in the face, before she finally ran out of breath. Her brother stood in the narrow doorway and watched her shoulders heave with the exertion of it, every breath rounding them a little more as the anger bled out of her. “Wait. You can get pillows full of feathers?” Mungo’s eyes were wide with wonder. “Fuck him!” He picked up a pillow and bloofed Jodie with it. She fell against the rosewood wall and her shoulder burst through the veneer. He hit her again and the air filled with fresh goose snow. Jodie found her own weapon and they made a great game of climbing around the caravan, bouncing from bed to banquette and walloping each other without mercy. It was a far-roaming, rolling war and they destroyed everything in their path. The caravan squeaked and tilted on its tyres.

They only stopped when the last pillow was flattened. Jodie’s left ear was bloody where her gold hoop had torn free, but she couldn’t care less, she didn’t even shout at Mungo. Every surface was thick with fibre and feather. “That’s what he deserves,” said Mungo proudly. But it was all too childish. It was not enough payback.

When they went outside, the winter sun was setting below the clouds, and Mungo could at last see the break between sky and sea. There were feathers in

their hair and stuck to their school uniforms. Mungo crouched beneath the caravan and removed the brake bricks from the rear wheels. Jodie watched him do it with a nervous giggle. “You’re wasting your time. He’s gonnae sell it on. He’s never coming back.”

Her brother pondered it for a second. It was unfair to harm whoever the next holiday makers were. Hamish would not have cared. But it was cruel to send total strangers rolling and screaming into the Irish Sea.

“You’re no fun,” pouted Mungo, but he did not replace the bricks. He cantilevered the stand at the front and put the guiding wheel back in contact with the earth. The caravan shifted as he pushed it. It started rolling downhill, started gathering speed. “Ah, ah. Fuck!” he cried. “Run. *Run!*”

Jodie was curled up in the armchair and had been ignoring him as he tried to read John Donne. His face flushed with the effort but she was not paying attention to him. She was thinking about something else. He hadn’t even noticed that she was crying.

“How the fuck can auld McGregor do this to us?” he moaned. “It’s no fair to bully a Scotsman into speaking proper English and then throw it for a loop and saddle him with this shite.”

Mr McGregor was notorious for it. For those *special* weans – the boys who were going nowhere in life – he prescribed “the Big Donne.” The English teacher knew they were beyond his help. He administered the poet like it was a massive dose of penicillin for someone who had already withered with TB. If any child could not manage the curriculum, he was not going to waste any more time dragging them through *The Mayor of Casterbridge.* They were put to the back of the class and got the Big Donne. Most of them spent the hour drawing on the inside cover. Mr McGregor didn’t care.

> *“It suck’d me first, and now sucks thee,*
> *And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;”*

Mungo clawed at himself. “That wummin has scabies and he’s writing a love song about it. And auld McGregor has the cheek to give you the ruler if you say *hame* instead of *hoh-m.* But this auld soap dodger spells any fuckin’ word any fuckin’ way that he likes and gets called a ‘master.’” Mungo pitched the thin volume across the room.

“I like that poem,” said Jodie, mostly to herself. She wiped her face and tried to smile. “The poet is trying to con a woman into sleeping with him. They should teach every girl that poem the minute we get a chest.”

Mungo shook his head. “I’d like to dig up John Donne’s bones and punch them.”

“Punch? *Would you?*”

“Aye.” He eyed her suspiciously. “What’s wrong with you now?”

Jodie tugged at her woollen tights. She stood up and met him in the middle of the floor. “I’ll make you cheese on toast if you do something for me?”

There was that sudden kindness; Mungo knew he was about to be manipulated. “I’m no hungry.”

“I need your help. I need to ask you to do something and you need to be a man about it.”

There it was again, that phrase. They all wanted to see this man inside him. “I won’t agree until you tell me what it is.”

“Well.” She paused again. “I want you to punch me as hard as you can.”

He laughed great ugly guffaws. But Jodie was not laughing. She took his hand and laid it on her stomach, over the nubby fabric of her acrylic jumper. It was taut feeling and it was radiating an even type of heat. “If I have this baby, I’ll never get to read any more poems.”

He pulled his hand away. “Are you mental?”

She held on to him. “It’s nothing. It’s not even a baby yet, it’s only a wee tadpole. If I wait much longer it will have nerves. It will have earlobes …” Jodie had always been good at Biology. She was using what she had learned to pressure him. “Don’t worry. It’s only a sac of mucus and cells. If I get it out I can just flush it.”

“I can’t. It’s a baby.”

“It is not. And when all’s done, it never was.” She sighed and tried to talk softly to him. “Mungo, if I have this baby, I’ll be just like Mo-Maw. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Of course not. But mibbe I could look after it. I’m not going anywhere, so what’s the harm? You can just still go to school. You can go to college. The council will give us a wee flat. We’ll get brilliant benefits.”

The thought chilled her. She hadn’t imagined a life with her brother *and* a baby. “No. I’m not living like that. If you won’t help me then I’ll need to find work. They’re taking on trainees at Maguires, I can fold cardboard.” She stroked

his bonny face and smiled. “But you’ll help me. I know you will.”

“I willnae.”

Jodie stepped away from him. In one smooth motion she stepped on to a chair and then on to the windowsill.

“What are you playing at?”

She turned. “Do you remember Tattie-bogle, when she wanted Mo-Maw to jump? If I don’t get this baby out of me, I *will* jump.” He remembered well. He would never forget his mother on the wet window ledge, how she clambered up there every so often, any time she felt the children did not love her enough. A shadow crossed Jodie’s eyes, a flicker that she sometimes got when she solved a particularly hard equation. “Huh. I understand why she did that now. I won’t live like this.”

Mungo put his arms around her waist and dragged her down. Then he shoved her so hard she flew back into the easy chair. The soles of her feet went skyward. “Fuck you.”

“Mun—”

“Fuck you.”

Mungo sulked in the dark kitchenette. He ran his finger around the field-flower wallpaper and enjoyed the way the pattern was padded to give it a three-dimensional feeling. He stared at the back of James’s tenement. They still hadn’t spoken since James had cried. He wished for a friend now.

The middle cabinet was full of pint glasses that Mo-Maw had stolen from the old men’s pubs on Duke Street. He took one and into it he emptied all the liquids and condiments in his mother’s kitchen: brown sauce, red sauce, yellow sauce, and sour separated milk. He added a raw egg, Askit painkiller powder, and half a shaker of black pepper. To the top of the sundae he added a long squirt of dish soap and a dash of toilet bleach. He topped it with a wad of his phlegm.

“Here, drink this.” He handed the potion to Jodie.

She was sitting on the windowsill looking out at the narrow street. She had been crying again. Then she laughed. But then she got herself stuck somewhere between tears and laughter. He stepped away from her, offended. “You asked for my help. Drink it.”

Jodie wrapped her arms around his shoulders, she tousled the hair at the back of his neck. It felt good. “You silly eejit. Mungo, they are not connected. The uterus and the stomach. I’ll likely shite myself, aye, but the blob won’t shift.” She put the foul glass on the windowsill. They could still smell it from across the

room. “Punch me, or you can kick me, if you prefer. Just the once. I promise.”

Mungo was ashen. He shook his head.

His reluctance confused Jodie. There had been wet summers where they had amused themselves by slamming the door in each other’s faces, waiting till the exact moment their sibling was crossing the threshold and then *wham.* You got double points if they were carrying a mug of tea.

“All the hours,” she began quietly, “all the afternoons I’ve sat in that airing cupboard and nursed your hurts. And you won’t even do this one thing for me?” Jodie wiped her tears. “I thought you loved me. *Haaah-ha.*”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t. You only love what I do for you. You’re as bad as the rest of them.”

He pressed his thumb knuckle to his twitching eyelid. “Just once?”

She nodded. “Aye. Just once.”

“Now, you said. Just. Once.” He needed to reiterate it, to have it notarized.

Jodie pushed his hair from his eyes. She let him know it was okay. “Just once.”

He spent a long time working up to it, never quite touching her, hoping she would change her mind. Jodie yelled at him. Eventually her brother drew his fist back and with a pained scream he struck her in the stomach. He had pulled it short. The blow didn’t even dislodge the air inside her. But now Jodie had the momentum she needed. “Good. Again Mungo. Harder.”

“But you said just the once.”

“Aye, but you need to hit properly.”

He hit her again, harder this time, but he let his wrist roll over the fist.

“Harder.”

He hit her again. The gasping was all his, not hers.

“Harder.”

He hit her again. She barely moved.

She gritted her teeth. “Please, Mungo. For goodness’ sake. For once. Be a man.”

He drew his fist back. All was white and red. He swung it into her, and he followed the curve of his fist with all the power in his narrow shoulder. It connected and the wind blew out of her. He hadn’t expected what he felt; his hard fist against the tender pillowy-ness of Jodie. Her flesh had easily absorbed it and not resisted. As she bent double, he found himself marvelling at her; a

woman’s superior design, able to take the blows and reward them with a feeling of warmth and protection. It wasn’t like when you punched a man. On the rare occasion he dared to retaliate against Hamish, Hamish’s very fibre reached back out with bone and gristle and muscle to return the pain up Mungo’s arm. When you hurt a man, he hurt you back.

He had a picture of Mrs Campbell then and he hated himself.

When she regained her breathing Jodie composed herself. She took Mungo in her arms. All the colour had drained from his face; even the tic, starved of blood, lay motionless. It was her with the bruised gut, yet she was comforting him again. As in everything in life, he couldn’t be there for her. They both thought it but neither said it. *Useless.*

“Thank you, Mungo.” She coddled him. “Shall I heat some of Mrs Campbell’s broth and we can have a wee cuddle? *Scooby-Doo* will be on in a minute.”

In the end it didn’t work, but Jodie didn’t tell Mungo that. It was better they didn’t talk about it again. She had asked for violence out of a gentle soul and it made her feel like she had trampled a patch of fresh snow.

It didn’t work, her belly continued to swell. Poor-Wee-Chickie – always watchful behind his net curtains – noticed the happy girl no longer smiled as she came along the street. He told Mrs Campbell and Mrs Campbell brought Jodie a steak and kidney pie. The following week she did what girls in her day had done, and she took Jodie to see a Romany woman down in the Calton. The never-was baby was gone, and Mungo thought it was all his fault.

FOURTEEN

Mungo lay flat upon the earth. After the men had used him, he neither slept nor moved. He thought if he played dead, he could invite death to take him away. Several times he tried denying his own breath, not with a puffed-out chest, hoarding oxygen, in the way Jodie had taught him for swimming, but on the edge of his exhale he simply stopped breathing and refused to take more air inside of him. It never worked. His body was a treacherous thing.

The sun rose early. The rain had ceased but it left the air thick and moist to the touch. As the sun came overhead it illuminated the red tent and everything was bathed in a furious cherry glow. Gallowgate had not bothered to close the zipper when he left, but he had wiped Mungo almost tenderly and raised the football shorts back around his waist. Although the tent flaps blew loose, the air was stifling and hard to breathe. It stunk like sweated whisky, like blood and watery shit. Fat horseflies were landing on the nylon siding and fucking each other, inches from his face.

Mungo could tell he had a black eye; the slightest touch from his fingers made him recoil in pain. He hesitated before he searched the length of himself. There was a gash on his chin where the zipper on the sleeping bag had caught him and then the waterproof matting had rubbed it open. His ribs were tender and the hair at the top of his head sang where Gallowgate had gripped it and pinned him down. His legs felt wet and sticky with his own blood, and his own shit, and other things that were not his own. But the worst of the pain was deep inside him. Somewhere above his stomach and below his heart. He tried to search it with his fingers, but he couldn’t get at it, and it grew.

There were no voices outside the red tent. All he could hear was the gentle lapping of the water and the lazy buzz of clegg flies. He needed to go to the lochside, to lower himself into the numbing water and wash it all away. He

wanted to sink beneath the surface and never come up again.

Mungo rolled over. There was another sensation, a new feeling; like he needed to sit on a toilet and evacuate himself entirely. Mungo removed his sock. He used it to wipe the worst of the mess from his bare legs. Then he crawled out of the tent.

The men were sitting at the dead campfire in silence. The bars of toddler's chocolate sat on a rock, like a rabbit trap.

"Oh. What time do you call this?" St Christopher was looking Mungo straight in the eye, a face free from remorse. Mungo didn't want to, but he dropped his gaze to the ground. He wanted to look at the man in the face, make him drop his eyes, but found he couldn't. "Ah thought mibbe ye were gonnae sleep the whole day away. What a waste. We've got trout to catch."

Gallowgate had his back to the boy. He didn't say a word. St Christopher came closer, he squinted at the boy and considered his bruises. "Dear God, that's a fuckin' shiner ye've got there. Did we get that loaded?" There was an odd tone of pride in his voice. He seemed to be innocently enjoying the thought that they had become rowdy, and Mungo wondered what, if anything, the auld lush remembered. "Fuck me. Ah must've tain a bad blackout. When ah've got a drink in me, ah could start a fight in an empty coffin."

Mungo backed away without turning his back on them. He was inching towards the tree line, back to the cool quiet place where he had felt unfettered and free the day before.

"Where are ye going?" asked St Christopher. "Ye've no touched yer pot noodle."

"I just need to—" Mungo gulped painfully – "to use the toilet." The sound that escaped his lips was hoarse, it lacked power. He touched his swollen throat.

Gallowgate was gutting a small perch. He turned slightly and watched Mungo recede into the canopy of trees. He spoke to the boy over the blade of his shoulder. "Dinnae go far, Mungo. Bad things happen to wee boys in dark forests."

Mungo went deep into the forest. He ran and ran till he came to his rushing river. He crouched in some tall ferns and let his body empty itself. It stung as it poured out of him, and he knew he was split. When he was finished, he took off all of his clothes and stepped into the torrent. Fresh violet bruises were rushing to meet the old blue bruises he had brought from Glasgow. Yesterday the frigid water had made him recoil and shriek. Now he plunged his whole body

underneath the surface, and he could barely feel the cold for the scalding inside him. He searched the riverbed and found a porous stone. He scrubbed himself with it, dragging it like a pumice all over his skin, till he was pink and chilled and stinging from the roughness. It was no good. He felt filthy. He vomited then, big arching torrents of yellow and puce. He watched it float downstream to the loch.

“It was only a wee game,” said Gallowgate. “It just got a little bit out of hand, that’s all.”

The man was leaning against a beech tree, near to Mungo’s discarded clothes. He was smoking and digging the dirt out from under his thumbnail with the gutting knife. The blade caught one of the few rays that snuck through the canopy and glinted menacingly.

Mungo’s bottom lip started to tremble. He pinched it, pushed his nail into it until it was steadied. “It wasn’t a game to me.”

“Ah, c’mon. You know what boys are like. Everybody does something lit this. It’s all part of growin’ up. It’s easier than getting a lassie in bother.”

Mungo was angry at himself. He couldn’t look the man in the face and found himself talking to the river’s surface. The raspy voice didn’t sound like his own. “*Just you wait.* Wait till I tell my big brother what you did. He will fuckin’ kill you. He has a tomahawk and he’ll split your stinkin’ skull with it.”

Gallowgate knew nothing about the legend of Ha-Ha. He chuckled as he fussed with his neat fringe. “Be a shame to ruin a guid haircut.”

Mungo launched his pumice stone, but Gallowgate was too quick for him and dodged it. It clattered off a tree trunk and skittered through the ferns. The understorey swallowed all sound. They were alone again. Gallowgate folded his blade and tucked it away. “Look, it’s possible that I went too far. But are ye sure you didnae enjoy it?” He was grinning now, small sharp teeth. “Even jist a wee bit?”

Mungo shook his head slowly. “No.”

The man sucked in through his teeth. “Fuck, then I’m *really* sorry, pal.” Gallowgate considered it for a moment, he even seemed a little remorseful. “But ah’m surprised to hear that. Specially after what Mo-Maw telt us about ye.”

There was no blood at all left inside him, yet every inch of him felt bloated with a blistering rage. He blanched and flushed at the same time. “Whatever they say I’ve done – it was never anything like that.”

“Z’at so?” Gallowgate looked contrite for a second, but the sharp point of his

incisors stuck on his bottom lip and he became an animal again. “But that’s no what ah’ve heard. It’s the whole reason ye were sent away wi’ us. To sort you out. To make a man out of ye.”

“This is how ye make a man out of me?”

“Naw. S’pose not,” he said. “But we’re doing this out of the kindness of our hearts, taking a wee waif to gawk at the heathery hillside. So don’t be ungrateful. Don’t be so fuckin’ stingy wi’ the favours next time.” Gallowgate picked up the boy’s underclothes, his T-shirt and boxer shorts. “In Barlinnie ye weren’t allowed to wear yer own clothes. Ye were never given the same pair of underwear twice and by God, they never, ever fit right. Even when they had been washed ye could still smell some other fella on them, still feel the hundred fellas that had worn them afore you.” He ran the grey cotton between his fingers, then he pitched Mungo’s underwear into the river. “Ye should wash them. We cannae be carryin’ on like pure animals.”

Mungo had to flounder downstream to catch the discarded clothes. He regarded them, familiar things he had worn a thousand times and wondered who they belonged to now.

Gallowgate had become bored watching the boy flail around. He was irritable in his sobriety. “Anyhows, hurry up with that. Auld Chrissy is still gonnae show ye how to catch trout. It’ll be a laugh if nothin’ else.” Turning back towards the campsite he stopped short and flicked his cigarette dout towards Mungo. “And jist in case ye take a funny notion, ye cannae tell anybody about what happened. Not yer mammy, not yer brother. Ye’ll never be a proper man if they knew whit ye did and how much ye liked it.”

“I did not like it.” He spoke as clearly as he could manage.

“Really?”

It was then that something changed for Mungo. This was not something your mammy could kiss away. It was not a bully that your brother could chib with a blade. Nobody could make a pot of soup for it. The shame and the guilt were his to bear. Mungo knew Gallowgate was right. He couldn’t tell anyone.

“Besides,” said Gallowgate as he disappeared into the ferns, “everybody knows ye’re a dirty wee poofter. A filthy little bender. It’d be yer word against mine.”

Then he realized the men would do it again.

By the time he arrived back at the campsite Gallowgate was emptying Mungo's backpack, making it ready for a run to the village shop. Mungo watched him dump his sketchbook and the board game out on the shingles. These were things that belonged to a wee boy. Things that no longer felt like his own. It could all sink into the loch for all he cared.

Gallowgate had taken a survey of the leftover alcohol. When he saw it was only the dregs of whisky and a few cans, a panic had arisen in the men. They were circling and roaring, turning out every pocket. Everyone at the campsite had an empty stomach, but it wasn't until Gallowgate realized they would also have dry throats that he decided on another run to the shop.

Mungo saw his chance. "I could help you carry the drink," he said, trying to sound as casual as he could manage. If only he could go to the post office, he could ask the teuchter woman where they were. He could telephone Mo-Maw again and she could telephone Hamish, and then Hamish would come with his shipbuilder's tomahawk and chop these men to pieces. Mungo needed to get back to the little post office.

Gallowgate saw Mungo's wounded smile and laughed to himself. "Mungo. Ye cannae kid a kidder. Ye are not going to any shop wi' a face like that."

"How?" Mungo raised a hand to his tender eye. The socket was swollen and the eye was closing over. He was having some difficulty with his peripheral vision but his tic had been beaten into submission, the flesh too tender and damaged to misbehave.

"Never you mind *how.*" Gallowgate swung the empty bag on to his back. "That auld teuchter cunt already thinks we're pure scum. If she sees the face on you, she'll phone the polis and we'll get the jail for fightin'. Naw. You stay here. Make sure that idiot doesnae drown himself." Gallowgate turned and walked away from them. He stopped on the edge of the ferns and said, "Don't wander off. Don't try anything daft. It's yer word against mine, and yer family already knows what you're like." Then he disappeared into the trees.

Mungo slumped on a lichen-covered rock. He could walk, he could run, but in which direction? He wondered what Mo-Maw had told Gallowgate, he wondered what would make his family take this stranger's word against his own. As his face burned and his guts throbbed with pain, he pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his good eye on his kneecap. He suddenly felt alone again, not in the magical way he had yesterday, but in a way that stripped all the heat from his body. He had a feeling then, a fear that he might never go home, never see

Jodie or James again.

“Cheer up, son. It might never happen.”

He found himself watching St Christopher gouge tiny minnows with the hook and drop them into the loch. His nervous nature meant that he barely left the rods alone long enough for any fish to come near them. The man was hunched and searching for prey, his face too close to the surface. “Fuck it! There’s no one single fish in this whole scunner of a loch.” He was complaining to no one in particular. “Ah used to fish the Cart River every Saturday wi’ ma faither. We used to take home big buckets full of perch, stinking wriggling fat buggers they were. We’d catch that many ma da would send me door to door, practically givin’ them away.” The man took off his bunnet and scratched at his bald head. “This loch must be fuckin’ broken.”

It would be a long time till Gallowgate would return and Mungo couldn’t listen to this moaning. He thought to send the man away from him; it would give him a chance to think about what he should do next. “There’s a river over there. It’s teeming with some kind of fat fish.” He held his hands shoulder width apart.

St Christopher’s eyes grew wide. “That’s where the buggers are hiding.” He reeled in his line. “Show us, eh?”

It took longer to lead St Christopher through the forest than it had to explore alone. The man couldn’t climb over fallen tree limbs, he had to stop, sit down on the tree, and then swing his legs over one by one. It was odd to see this man in his old working suit stumble through the thick carpet of ferns. Every now and then his fish hook would get caught on a branch or a leaf and Mungo would have to pick it out for him. The third or fourth time it happened Mungo studied the man’s face for a long while as his dextrous fingers worked the knotted fish gut. Under the dappled canopy, the sunlight refracted off the man’s eyes and they had a filminess to them Mungo had not noticed before.

Mungo knew now why the man lowered his face so close to the water, why he slipped on every single rock. His eyes were dying. St Christopher could hardly see.

As he followed Mungo to the river he talked non-stop. Mungo wasn’t listening and didn’t stop to consider the quiet magic of the dell. It had been ruined for him. Now he kicked the heads off fat bluebells and ran his hand spitefully up the fern stems, stripping them of all their fronds and leaving them to die.

They came to the river and found a spot where it was deepest. There was a

widening where Mungo could see lazy fish eat skimming bugs. He pointed at the fish and watched St Christopher follow the arc of his arm. But the boy knew he couldn't see the fish for himself, not anymore. The man cast his rod downstream and secured it between two boulders. He took out a cigarette and lit it, then he thrust his hands in his pockets and waited like he was at a bus stop.

Mungo waded across the river. He wanted to be far from the stink of the man. He had been damp since that first rainfall, but this water did something for him; it distracted from the stinging in his face, and from the low throb that was now spreading across his ribcage. If you forged slowly, the footing was good, there was only one boulder that was unbalanced. Mungo felt it teeter under his weight and he quickly adjusted himself, careful not to topple over into the current. It was childish, but he made up his mind not to tell St Christopher about it.

On the far side there was a fallen log sitting in the wet mud. When Mungo stood on it the ground let out a wet fart. He rocked on it for a while, pressing and releasing the sinking wood while he dreamt of bolting into the understorey, wondering how fast he could run through the ferns.

"It's no fuckin' use," said St Christopher eventually. "None o' these fuckers are biting."

Mungo could see where the fishing line bounced in the current. The man had missed the place he had pointed to and the coloured weight was bobbing too violently in the eddy. "Why did you do it?" Mungo asked.

"Ah thought that's where ye pointed."

"No. That's not what I meant. I meant why did you do that to me last night."

St Christopher was only a short distance away, the river being only twenty feet wide at this point. Still, Mungo could tell the man was not looking directly at him; he thought he was, but he was not. "Have ye never been a Boy Scout?"

Mo-Maw had never been able to afford the uniform; what use were knot-tying and astronomy badges on the streets of the East End?

"Well, they're aw at it. It's what us boys do when we're alone. A bit of fun. 'Asides, it's like a tradition to some folk. You're jist no supposed to mention it when you're poor, but when ye're rich, haw, haw, *haw.* It's what all they posh boys do the gether. Oxford is full of it. Aw they boarding schools. They all love a bit o' casual buggering down there." St Christopher took out the toddler's chocolate and held it out to Mungo.

Mungo wondered how many times St Christopher had told that story to boys. It slithered off his tongue so easily. How many times had he held out a chocolate

bar to a greetin' wean? It made his head throb.

"You weren't in the jail for vaykri …" Mungo stumbled over the word.

"Vagrancy?" offered St Christopher quickly. "Naw. Ah wisnae inside for that."

Nobody said anything after that. The river rushed between them.

Mungo was afraid of Gallowgate. There was a swing to his head that reminded him of a fighting pit bull; there was a ragged muscularity to his body that made him look like he had been whittled with a dull knife without being sanded smooth afterwards. But St Christopher did not frighten him, not anymore. Now he was angry at what he had let the old man get away with. He swallowed once, shouted as loud as he could with his battered throat. "Why don't you take that chocolate and shove it up your arse."

The man laid the chocolate on the riverbank, as though Mungo was a dog he could tempt to inch closer. "Suit yersel. Besides, you should come to enjoy it. It's safer than getting a lassie in bother."

That lie again. Mungo thought of Jodie and her *bother.* He thought of her small, distended belly and he wondered if the man in the caravan had forced that into her.

St Christopher sighed. He scratched at his stubbled cheek and changed the subject as though they'd been discussing the weather. "Mungo son, where are these fishes ye promised me?"

Mungo was on the far side of the river. He could have turned then and slid into the tall ferns and been gone, St Christopher would never be able to follow him. But where would he go? For all he knew he was a thousand miles from home. Or the tenements could be just on the other side of the Munros.

Above them the leaves sounded the first tap-tap-tap of a heavy rain. Gallowgate would get soaked. Mungo pointed at the school of fish near his feet. They were not brown after all, but an iridescent shimmer of multicoloured scales. "You'll not get them from over there. Your lure will be carried downstream. If you use those big stones you can cross and catch them from here." He turned away, not certain he wouldn't cry again.

He was stripping the heads of some bluebells when he heard St Christopher enter the river. The man let out a prayer as the frigid water knocked the breath out of him. Mungo allowed himself a smile for the man's discomfort. He was intent on macerating the blue petals into a thick paste as he listened to St Christopher push against the current, moaning "Jesus Joanie, Jesus Joanie," over

and over. The man was almost at the far shore when the incantation stopped.

St Christopher had found the loose boulder. His leather brogues slipped on the mossy riverbed. The water was only waist-high, but he landed face first into the river and let go of the rod and the bag of fishing supplies. Mungo watched his wool bunnet float away as the man shrieked in fear and pain.

Mungo feared he might drown, and without thinking, he leapt into the water and waded out to him. The man flailed and swallowed a bellyful of water as he struggled to find his damaged footing. “Ma ankle!” Mungo reached out and hooked him by his lapel. There was no weight to him, he was a sack of marrowless bone. Mungo steadied him in the eddy and using all his strength he hoisted the saint upright.

St Christopher was hacking water, his lungs were weak from years of smoking and sitting and smoking some more. Mungo hauled the man towards him and with his one good foot, St Christopher found his footing, and wrapped his fingers around Mungo’s forearms.

There were so many details to consider: the graceless man, how the spears of cold rain made the river feel almost warm, the ruined fishing supplies, so many things to capture Mungo’s attention that it was a funny, insignificant detail to fixate on. But Mungo stared. He found himself glowering at the man’s hands and the way the long fingers wrapped around his forearms. These fingers that ended in nicotine-yellow pads, with grooved, bark-coloured fingernails; with black hair that sprouted above the knuckles and each knuckle that was as gnarled as a grafted sapling. These were the same fingers that had bound him the night before. The same dirt-caked nails that had pierced the skin at his wrists as the man had stuck his stinking, fetid cock into the warm space between his thighs.

There was a trick Ha-Ha had taught him once. It was a very clever trick. He called it the “Cheerful Friend”; a trick meant to disarm any wide-o or bully who sallied up to him looking to start a fight. Ha-Ha had shown him how he must look at the person square in the eye, with no twitching or signs of aggression in the centre of his brows. Ha-Ha had taught him to look at the person and smile with his mouth *and* his eyes, his widest, brightest smile. It had to be full and generous, the way you would look at a basket of puppies or a sky full of fireworks on Guy Fawkes Night. Then, when the wide-o was wondering why you were smiling like an imbecile, you hooked your right leg behind both their ankles and you pushed as hard as you could into their chest. Then – if you were carrying (and you should always be carrying) – you knifed them.

Water was dripping from the tip of the man’s pitted nose. Mungo smiled. It brightened the dimming day.

Mungo hooked St Christopher’s good leg, and with his hands on his lapel, he shoved the man backwards under the water. St Christopher let go of his wrists, his arms flayed out, searching for solid ground where there was only water. Mungo held him there and counted to five.

Despite Ha-Ha’s lessons, Mungo was a deep well of goodness. He counted to ten and then he hauled the Saint by his lapels again and tugged him from the water. He had only wanted to scare him. He had only wanted him to take his hands off of his body.

St Christopher erupted like a geyser. His lungs burst with river water and he coughed and spat it in Mungo’s face. His dull eyes were roving wildly in his head. He was desperate and panicked. *Good,* Mungo thought, *let him be feart.*

The boy opened his mouth to warn him, but St Christopher swung a loose fist at his face and connected with the tender skin under Mungo’s bruised eye. The boy let go. He felt the riverbank under his torn backside, and as he spun under the water, the world dropped from view.

When he found his footing, he had a rock in his fist. It was a small rock, only about the size of a Christmas satsuma, but when he swung it, it cracked off St Christopher’s temple and the man fell backwards into the water.

Mungo gripped his collar again. He put his knee on the man’s chest and pushed with all his might. He shoved until he felt the man come to rest on the riverbed. Then he stood on him. The saint’s fingers grabbed for the heavens, but Mungo denied them to him. After that, it didn’t take long to drown St Christopher.

FIFTEEN

Gallowgate was quicker without the boy trailing behind him. On the far side of the loch, the clouds hung around the hills as though they were trapped and couldn't find a way out. The loch appeared restless, angry, as the wind hurried down the hillside and raised its hackles. The rain began to fall in sheets and by the time he reached the little shop he was soaked to the bone.

The teuchter woman watched him closely as he dripped up and down the only aisle, filling his arms with tinned ravioli and fruit cocktail. Her limited selection of alcohol made for a poor man's pantry. He was forced to choose a fine whisky that was too expensive for necking and a nooseful of lagers that had a thick coat of stour on the top.

"How much for a smile?" he asked, stalling for time. But the shopkeeper was immune to his charm. She sent him out into the pouring rain and locked the door behind him.

Gallowgate sheltered in the red phone box and squelched down upon the wooden chair. The rain rattled against the glass, but it was mostly dry inside. Taking the phone book, he laid his cigarettes out on the cover like little wounded soldiers. He tried to save them, and he burst the tobacco from the ones that were beyond repair and piled the loose baccy in his pocket. Blowing the stour from the top of a can of lager he took a long, grateful pull.

The sky had come low. The clouds closed completely and the last shafts of sunlight were gone. It would take a long time to stop raining. Gallowgate read the phone book. There were very few names here and what surnames there were repeated over and over. People tended not to move far in this part of the world. He chose a name at random and turned a coin in his hand. There wasn't much money left; they had gotten through more alcohol than he had budgeted for and when he counted his change, he realized he didn't have enough to get them all

safely back to Glasgow on the bus. He thought about Mungo and wondered if that was a good idea anyway, to take the boy back to the city where he could tell his side of the story.

It happened all the time. Young boys from the city drowning in lochs, the water deeper and murkier than any chlorinated swimming pool. The evening paper was full of stories of inexperienced young men freezing to death on hillsides or caving their heads in on a steep Munro. It would be believable. It happened all the time.

Gallowgate pushed the coin into the slot. He dialled the number and waited. He was about to ring off when a faint voice answered at the far end.

“Hallo, is that Mrs E. Beaton?”

The woman sounded winded, like she had travelled a long way to reach the telephone. Perhaps it was another phone box that sat in the middle of a cluster of cottages, perhaps she had been in a hot bath. “It’s Dokter Procter from the hospital. Ye know, the *big* hospital.”

“What hospital, Doctor? I’ve never even been to any hospital.”

“The biiiig hospital. The wan through in Edinburgh. Well, we got your test results back, *aye*, your GP sent us yer case notes. *Dr Deacon*, that’s right. Well he sent us yer notes to take a look at and ah’m afraid we’ll need to take both of them.”

“Both of what?” said the woman. “I only went to see auld Deacon about my cough.”

Gallowgate was drawing flowers in the condensation. “That’s the thing now, Mrs Beaton. We need to amputate both of yer legs in order to make your cough better. It’s all connected see. Don’t cry now. We could try and save them from the knee down but the surgeon couldnae say for sure till he had a look at ye himself.” The phone rang its three pips and the call disconnected. Gallowgate sniggered to himself.

The rain was driving sideways now. The loch disappeared, then the white houses, then the yew tree. Gallowgate flipped through the phone book again. He found a name he liked the sound of and decided to tell its owner that he was their long-lost son. He hoped the woman was old enough, but then everyone up here seemed old; anyone with a spark of life had already left for the city or further south.

When he was in Barlinnie he had passed many an empty hour doing much the same thing. He had nobody of his own to call, so he dialled Glasgow numbers at

random and talked to whoever should answer. The people were generally kind, a little confused maybe, but kind. They would go to their window and describe the weather to him in considerable detail. *Rain*, it was mostly always raining, but to hear the different strangers describe the thousand different types of rain gave him a calming pleasure. Some folks would open their *Evening Times* and read him the day's headlines. Occasionally they would forget who they were talking to and would stop halfway through a story about rape or murder and would try instead to find something about local politics. Lonely old men were the best company. These men would tell him about the Old Firm game, running through the match in such meticulous detail that he felt he had been pitch-side at Parkhead for Celtic's victory.

Other times Gallowgate had gotten a wean, a child who was home alone while her mammy ran some messages. Sometimes he got a wee boy and then, nearly always, he hung up immediately.

He was dialling the number and thinking about what this woman's son might be like, when he stopped. He waited for his coins to be returned to him, then he dialled a different number. Something from deep in his memory.

A young girl answered the phone. He could hear the tinny sound of a pop record blaring behind her, and from the tangle of different voices he could tell the house was full of people, and thick with happiness. *"Hallloo-oo,"* she sang.

"Jacqueline, is that you? It's me. It's Angus."

He could practically hear the girl's face harden, the song wiped off of her lips. "What do you want? I thought we telt ye not to phone here again."

"Ah know. Ah'm out though, ah'm on the outside and ah'm getting help. Ah'm getting better."

"Outside. Outside where? Where are you, Gus?" There was a tinge of panic in her voice. He could imagine her looking around herself like he might step out of the hallway cupboard or from behind the settee.

"Ah'm up north, ah've gone away for a fishin' weekend with a couple of the lads. Ah just remembered what day it was and ah thought ah should phone." He took a slug of the dusty lager. "Ah'm no drinkin' anymore, Jax. Ah'm past all that. So, can ah speak to Mammy?"

Jacqueline didn't answer. He heard her put the receiver gently on the table and talk to a person in the other room. There was a succession of doors closing and the pop record grew faint. There was a familiar voice on the other end. "Angus? What do you want?"

“Hallo, Mammy.” He pumped more coins into the phone. “Ah just wanted to phone ye.”

“Okay. Is that it?”

Gallowgate wondered what she looked like now.

He could picture his mother in happier times; a time when she had rented a cream and claret caravan down on the Saltcoats coast for the Fair Fortnight. She had taken the three of them away on the train, Angus, Jacqueline, and young Evan. The rain had fallen in solid curtains all that week. She had spent the first afternoon crying and staring out of the caravan window as the rain hammered a maddening drumbeat on the tin roof. He knew how hard she had worked to afford the week away. She had put money aside the whole year, saving what she could from her job cleaning the local school.

While the weans had jumped on the banquette she had left the caravan and gone down to the beach. She came back with buckets full of gritty, wet sand and upended them until there was a sandpit on the linoleum floor. All afternoon she went back and forth in the pouring rain bringing sand back to the caravan for her children. Gallowgate could not remember a happier time than the four of them sheltered from the rain and playing on their private beach. The steam rising from his damp mother as she knelt before the gas fire.

There was not a sliver of that warmth in her voice now. “I asked you to stop phoning here.”

“Ah know. Ah wanted to tell ye ah was out of prison, Mammy. That ah was working at it.”

“So I had heard.”

He was rubbing his thumb against the mouthpiece. “Ah’ve got myself a wee job. Nothing fancy. Just laying underlay for a carpet fitters out on the Royston Road.” He waited for her to say something, but she didn’t say anything. “Ah’ve been going to AA meetings in the evenings. Ah’m trying my best to stay away from the drink.”

“Where are you phoning me from?” He heard the same worry in her voice that had clouded his sister’s.

“It’s awright,” he said. “Ah’m nowhere near the house. Ah’m away fishin’.”

He had expected her to find a calming ordinariness in this. He was far away from the Gallowgate housing scheme. He could not be a bother to her. But instead of being calmed, her voice pitched and went up in tone. “Who are you fishing with?”

“Naebody special. Just an auld guy ah know from some of the AA meetings.”

She must have moved her mouth close to the receiver because her next words had a muffled quality to them. *“Angus. Are there children there with you?”*

“No. I know the rules.”

Gallowgate was a born liar. He had learned the skill when he was young, and he had found no better way to make the things he wanted come to him: sympathy, chocolate eggs, an afternoon off school, new Diadora football boots, or a look at the private place on the wee boy next door. For a time there was almost nothing he couldn’t lie his way into. It had started insidiously enough but by the time he was sent down to Barlinnie it had become more than a grease to ease his way in life and was now a facet of his nature. Gallowgate was a born liar; his mother had learned that the hard way.

“Dear God,” she whispered. “Angus, please don’t hurt the boy.”

He didn’t know when she had stopped loving him, but he wanted to find out and go back to a time before it. She had accepted the real truth about his nature now. She had taken Evan’s side, believed his brother’s stories, and then she had called the police. Now, as Gallowgate let the last of the pennies die, he knew the four of them would never sit in a sandpit in a cream and claret caravan on the Saltcoats coast again.

The telephone let out three quick pips. Gallowgate savoured the last of his mother’s sighs. There was a rasp at the bottom of her breath now, a sandpapery sound that said it was too late to stop smoking.

SIXTEEN

Mungo sauntered through the doocot grass. He stopped now and again, and pretended to be interested in something at his feet. He went unnoticed and for every minute that passed, he inched closer to the structure, until he was so near he could no longer pretend he was just casually strolling by. James was inside, hunched over a cage of brown doos. He was pouring medicine down a bird's throat, whispering to it as he squirted a syringe into its gullet. Everything around him was dim, drab, except for him and the fledgling, illuminated from the skylight above. He looked like an oil painting, as though the heavens were smiling down upon him. His hair shone like a crown spun from pulled sugar.

Mungo slouched against the door frame, he laid his cheek against the painted wood. "A woman I know was almost murdered by her husband."

James didn't flinch, he didn't jump at the voice. Mungo knew then that he had seen him orbiting the doocot and had not bothered to reach out.

Mungo searched around for something, anything, to talk about. In the corner, under the lowest bench, lay two piles of roofing slate. Mungo used them to pry open a conversation. "Did you buy roof tiles?"

James glanced at the slate. "Naw," he said, and that seemed the death of it. Mungo felt his fibre push away from the door frame. It seemed clear that their friendship was over, and it was time for him to go. Then James spoke again. "There was a couple leaning against the door one night. The next night there was a couple mair. They're dead heavy. It's the strangest thing."

"Just like that?" Mungo knew it was not just like that. He knew Poor-Wee-Chickie would have worked hard to bring the slate to the boy. It would have taken several nighttime trips to deliver the tiles, his shopping trolley squeaking in the dark, a nervous Natalie pulling on her leash and the pair of them staying to the shadows.

James handed Mungo a Manila envelope. Inside were countless slate nails, a tile punch, and a precise technical drawing of where to put the nails through the tiles. Mungo unfolded the foolscap, it was drawn in a neat hand but it was unsigned. “Jeez-o. A slate roof. You’ll have the nicest gaff on the scheme.”

“Aye.” But he didn’t look happy about it. He could still not look Mungo in the eye.

Mungo understood that feeling of shyness and shame, and he felt a tenderness for James. “Look, if we plumb this doocot you could get forty-five pound a week for it. It’s practically two floors. You could get a single mother, six weans, and four pit bulls in here, easy.”

James didn’t seem to be in a mood for jokes. He turned his back to him again, hunched over the doo, picking sawdust and shite out from between its claws. It seemed like he wanted to be alone.

Mungo turned to leave before his face started to sputter. “Listen, I don’t know what I did, James. But I’m sorry. I really am.” He scuffed his shoe, there was a crunch of rat glass underfoot. All Mungo had done was comfort his friend when he had been grieving his mother. There had been nothing dirty about it, but everything felt wrong.

“Don’t be stupit.” The light from the doo trap cast hard shadows across James’s face. It made his ears stick out more.

“I’m not funny, if that’s what you are thinking. It was only a hug. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know.” James sealed the envelope of nails and tossed it to the side. “You’ve been picking your lip again.” He paused, then he added, “Do you want some cake?”

“Cake?”

James nodded into the corner. There was a white box on the bench. Mungo lifted the lid and inside was a Victoria sponge with whipped cream oozing from between its golden layers. There was a decorative teddy bear, and edible letters where someone had misspelt *Birtday Boy.* Mungo stared at it for a long time. He felt rotten. “Do you have a bike?”

“How? Did ye get me one?”

“James, I didn’t know it was your birthd—”

“I’m only joking. Aye, I have a bike.”

“Then let’s just go somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere nice. Somewhere we’ve never been.”

“But where?”

Mungo shrugged. He extended his arm and held out his index finger, he spun slowly. “Say when.”

It was the first smile James had given him that day. It was small and it was crooked but it gave off more brightness than the doocot skylight above them. “Ye’re a fuckin’ eejit.” He watched Mungo spin for several revolutions. “Awright, awright. Stop.”

Mungo stopped. His arm was pointing eastward. It was as good a direction as any.

They filled James’s schoolbag with cans of sugary ginger and the white cake. Using a wheezy football pump, they reinflated the wheels of Mr Jamieson’s Rattray. The bike was rusted from disuse and the rubber handles had worn away with sweat, leaving Mungo’s hands black and sticky from just wheeling it out of the close. The white frame had been patterned with alternating stripes of gold and green plumber’s tape. *Proud to be a Fenian.* James sensed Mungo’s reticence to climb on to the narrow seat. “But it’s been blessed by the Pope himself.”

“It’s a bit much. I’ll get fuckin’ stabbed.”

James pedalled the old Rattray racer and Mungo sat pillion behind him. He held his body rigid and touched James’s waist only slightly. James hunched forward and bobbed up and down, working hard to propel them both forward, pumping the pedals like a shire horse. At first, they glided up and down the familiar streets. They passed the same faces they saw every day, and Mungo alternated between fearing that James would stop pedalling and want to go home or that they would corner into Ha-Ha’s crew and he would be beaten to death for riding behind a boy on a bike bright with Celtic colours.

“You’re not doing it right. You *have* to go in the direction you chose. That’s the only rule.”

James huffed but he turned the bike eastward and when a street tilted the wrong angle, they took the next left, and kept cycling away from the afternoon sun. Several times James looked like he wanted to give up. At first the streets seemed to be getting worse. They passed tight-packed tenements that were heavy with a sense of lack and need. They rode between rows of bombed-out flats

where all the windows were boarded up with protective covering. When James faltered Mungo dug his hands into his side. “Keep going, keep going, keep going.” There had to be more.

Eventually the city started to expand as if it was breathing, the houses started to spread apart, and there was more sky than sandstone. The council houses changed to a four-in-a-block formation, but the small gardens were mostly untended and riddled with weeds. When they dead-ended into Barlinnie Prison, Mungo almost admitted defeat. James was panting from the hill, and they stood and stared at the barbed-wired monolith, massive and forbidding as a Victorian workhouse.

“My uncle, Paddy Grant, is inside for aggravated assault,” said James.

“Mo McConnachie’s there,” said Mungo, “and Joe McConnachie as well.” Everyone knew someone on the inside of Barlinnie.

Was this all there was? Was this what was at the end of the road, as far as their legs could carry them? Mungo could feel all enthusiasm ebb from his friend. He switched places with James, forcing the larger boy to slide back on the narrow seat. “Let me pedal for ten minutes more. If we don’t see anywhere nice then I’ll pedal all the way home. Okay?”

“Aye, okay.”

They rode on, but slower now, heavier of heart. They debated whether to cross a bridge over the roaring motorway. Mungo had a distrust of bridges; it was only an overpass that separated the Protestant Billies from the Catholic Bhoyston. On the far side he could see another housing scheme, but beyond that was a low line of trees, and there were no tower blocks, nor gasworks, to spoil the horizon.

They rode to the line of trees and were delighted when they opened on to some grassy slopes. There was a golf course to one side, where plump middle-aged men looked as cheerful as bonbons in their pastel jumpers. Beyond this lay a large pond almost like a small lochan. The pond itself was choked with algae and filmy as a cataract, but pretty swans glided over the green surface. It was peaceful. It was theirs alone.

“See. Telt ye. Happy birthday.”

James cuffed him in the side, “Jammy bugger,” but he was smiling.

Mungo wove the bike along a path, cycling in great lazy circles, and tried to dip low enough that James would fall off. They spent time laughing and dragging each other to the water’s edge and trying to pitch the other man into the

swan scum. When the swans grew tired of them and floated away, the boys climbed a low berm and Mungo pushed the old racer through the long grass till dew glistened on all the spokes. From the top of the hill they could see the dense, grey city to the left of them; to the other side were new houses, half-built and generously spaced, made of bright orange brick, for families with cars and good-paying jobs.

James opened the box. The cake was flattened and the letters had bled into the sponge. It didn't matter. They shovelled sticky handfuls of it into their mouths, lay back on the grass, and let the warm cream choke them. James had a hidden quarter-bottle of Famous Grouse in his anorak pocket. He took a long slug and passed it to Mungo. "Put some hairs on yer baws. Go on. They cannae arrest us for drunk-pedalling an auld racer."

He only swallowed a dribble. Drink scared him but he didn't let James see that. The whisky tickled on the way down, but under the low clouds and on the fresh grass he liked how it tasted like woodsmoke and peat. It was like bonfire night, before they put old bike tyres on the flames, before Ha-Ha buried cans of hairspray and watched them whine and explode.

James took out a packet of crumpled cigarettes. "Watch this." He turned his head from Mungo, and when he turned back, he had four cigarettes in his mouth, each stuck between a different gap in his teeth. He grinned and rolled his eyes.

"Ye're a bam," laughed Mungo. "Honestly. I can't believe what a moody basturt you are. Laughing like an eejit. Two hours ago I thought you'd jump off the roof of that doocot."

"Well, ye've cheered us up."

James lit a cigarette and offered it to Mungo, but he shook his head. Anyone who had seen Mo-Maw hacking in the morning, ash-fingered and raking through the douts, would never smoke. He could hear Jodie's voice in his head. Jodie, the hypocrite, who had already done something much, much worse than smoking.

James frowned at him. "What's wrong with you now?"

Mungo hadn't realized his face was knotted. "See at your school, do the Catholic teachers try and shag the students?"

"Naw. Don't be daft. There was a Father Peter that taught fitba that we called Father Paedo but that was it. He stood in the corner and *monitored* us when we were in the changing rooms. But I just took it as him being a cunt." James blew smoke rings into the air. The boys watched them float down to the pond. "How? Are the Proddy teachers trying to touch yer ring?"

“No, not mine,” said Mungo. “But I’d let them if it meant I never had to study Maths again.”

“Oh. Shove it in, sir. Just a wee fraction more!” James laughed. They watched pensioners take slow laps around the pond. “I don’t mind Maths. It’s the languages that I can’t stick. Priests fuckin’ love their Latin.”

“Do you have to go to chapel all the time?”

“No, but we pray most mornings at school.”

Mungo thought about it for a while. They had weekly assembly in the Protestant school, and they were expected to recite the Lord’s Prayer at lunchtime. So, what was it about Catholics that made them so different? What was it he was supposed to hate in them? “How do ye remember all the dance moves?”

“The rituals? Och, they teach ye all the moves when yer a wean. Ye just know after that. Catholics aren’t all that big on freestyle, ye know.” James made the sign of the cross. “At least it’s just school. At home we don’t go to chapel on a Sunday anymore. Not since my mammy died. Ma da doesnae like to get all dressed up to sit in the pew. He says it’s like good china without a working teapot.”

“What a poet. He’s the next Rabbie Burns.” James’s eyes were bright under his flaxen hair. He seemed less like the sullen boy from the doocot. Mungo was sure James was happy again, and that he could take a teasing. Mungo put his hand on his hip, he did a fey half-dip and said, “Besides, you’re the teapot. You big bender.”

Something flickered between them. He had misjudged. He had gone too far. For a second he thought the shutters would come down over James’s eyes again, that the bright eyes would fall back to the ground. He regretted having said it. Then James took a last draw of his cigarette. “Teapot? Aye. Well. Takes one to know one, eh.”

It was what they didn’t say next that made Mungo nervous. James didn’t break his stare and he didn’t say anything. His grin widened slightly and with each millimetre it grew, Mungo’s smile widened to meet it. They sat like that, just grinning until their faces hurt.

“You look like your da,” said Mungo eventually.

“Fuck ye, I don’t.”

“You do. You’re friendlier looking. When you want to be.” He picked at the grass. “You should try not to be so heavy sad all the time.”

James reached up and pushed Mungo’s hair out of his eyes. It was so quick it almost didn’t happen. His hand was furtive and fleeting, like a darting doo.

A fissure Mungo hadn’t known about cracked open in his chest; beneath it was a hollow feeling that had never bothered him before. It was an agony not to raise his own hand and touch the hairs James’s fingers had licked. It burned. He wanted nothing more than to feel the warmth left by his touch. He closed his eyes and said, “I feel sick.”

It was as though a sky full of clouds passed over James’s face, it was rain and it was fear. Mungo saw the change. It made him look up. They had been sitting close together on the berm but sending clumsy semaphores like it was the Clyde Valley that divided them. James leaned across the distance and placed a kiss on his lips. It was dry and his teeth scraped Mungo’s bottom lip. They bumped heads.

Mungo rubbed his forehead. “Did you just headbutt me?”

“We could pretend it was a headbutt if you like?” The smile was fleeing his lips again.

“Don’t be daft.” Mungo looked both up and down the hill, and then he kissed James quickly on the lips. It was like hot buttered toast when you were starving. It was that good.

They had buried James’s mother at Lambhill on a blowy spring day, when the wind stripped all the blossoms from the trees, and the white petals clung to the black mourning cars.

After the funeral, his father had spent his time helping James build the doocot. The whole thing had been his father’s idea; pigeons were a good, manly pursuit that would teach James discipline and how to care for something smaller than himself. Besides, if they kept busy building something together, then they didn’t have to talk about his mother.

His father missed three work rotations. He stayed away from the rigs as long as he could. His father had promised, “Listen, if ye spend an hour at the doocot every day, I’ll be back in no time at all.” Then he packed his rig bag and left James to an empty house and all the tears they could never have shed together.

James lay on his bed in a motherless house. The bed sheets were clean but they smelled sour. His father had left them too long on the clothes pulley and it had not occurred to him to turn and air them as they dried. It was these small

things that made James feel heaviest. Small things his mammy would just have known to do.

He had done as his father advised. After school he had gone to the doocot and returned before it was dark. He had played with himself and then he had fed himself, and then played with himself some more. Once the fleeting sense of euphoria had ebbed from his body he was left with the stillness of another empty evening. He turned on the wireless in the kitchen and the television in the living room and then he lay on his bed and wondered if he was being punished for something.

He tried to push away the pictures that came into his mind, but they wouldn't leave. They had started in the New Year, when the Catholic boys were put out on the North Field and played shinty with tartan-blue legs. The rain and the wind flayed anyone who would not keep moving in the smirr. They pulled their socks up to try and reach their short hems but Father Strachan shouted at them to stop making such a pitiful show of themselves. "If you are cold," he yelled above the high collar of his long-sleeved fleece, "then run faster."

After battering each other with caman sticks for ninety minutes, the boys were grateful for the lukewarm showers, water that was barely warm enough to return the feeling to their toes and wash the red clay from their legs. James stood under the end jet. He crammed his blue fingers inside his mouth. He tried not to look at Paddy Creek, with his lazy smile and broad, muscular shoulders. He tried to not watch the stream of shampoo as it trickled down his back, and ran between his buttocks. Like the stubborn oose you pick from an acrylic jumper, some unseen static kept pulling his gaze back to the boy. James turned away. He knew if they caught him staring they would have a hundred names for him before he had a name for himself.

James dangled his leg off the edge of his narrow bed. He reached overhead and took the newspaper out from the space between the headboard and the wall. Fetching the cream-coloured telephone through to his bedroom he dialled the number he found in the back of the paper. He could have rung it by heart. He dialled it partially three times before his fingers found the courage and committed to dialling the whole thing. There was a mechanical click and a tinny recording welcoming him to the party line.

A place where boys like you can meet boys like you.

He couldn't tell how many men were on the line, but there were many voices in the dark. Some were like his, the heavy Glaswegian glottal, but others came

from faraway parts of Scotland, with sing-song or refined voices, well-educated or shamed into sounding their vowels properly. They were talking and they were laughing. He listened to them talk about music, and the bars they liked and pubs they sometimes went to, where they could meet, places where landlords were more tolerant and would let them enjoy a pint in peace. Some older men came on and were fishing harder than the others. They would ask bluntly for what they wanted, words James didn't know the meaning of but liked the sound of. Sometimes the men would find the thing they were hunting for and the two of them would agree to meet and click through to a private, more expensive line.

Usually James didn't say much. It was comforting just to listen. Tonight, he could tell that some of the men were already touching themselves. The first time he had called, it was enough to shock him, to clamp his hand over the receiver and giggle nervously. But he got used to that rhythmic paddling sound; the way the receiver was cupped between their chin and chest, how they breathed hard and shallow through flared nostrils as they used their hands for other, dirtier things. It would start easily – or it would have already started by the time he rang on – a man (it was always an older-sounding man) would ask someone to describe himself and that someone would. The younger man would tell them all about the map of his body, the colour of his skin, the way his hair created a peach fuzz across his stomach and under the hard muscles of his arse.

"A swimmer's body, not very muscular like, but lean, you know?" the Dundonian was saying.

"I like that," panted the Perthshire farmer. "How many fingers can you fit inside?"

They would be gathered together, a semicircle of strangers, and as they listened to the young man, they would hope that the beautiful things he said about himself were true.

The farmer spent his mess. Some lines went dead, some new sounds added to the crackle. There was another voice in the background, a melodic, light voice, the voice James had come to listen for in the crowd. "*Hah-llo,*" it said. "Is there anybody out *theeere?*"

"Fraser, is that you?" asked James.

"Oh, guid." The cheerful sound of a Gaelic speaker, turning himself to English. "I was hoping you were on here, Tonalt."

James had lied when they had asked him his name. *Donald,* he had said, or in reality it sounded like *D-awnaul-Dh,* heavy with a flat Glaswegian *D.* He much

preferred the way Fraser sang it. *Tonalt.* “I finally listened to that song, Tonalt,” Fraser said. “I stayed up half the night until it came on the radio.”

“And did you like it?”

“I did,” said the boy with real pleasure. His voice sounded gauzy and light, like he was hidden in a wardrobe with the phone cupped close to his lips. “I even taped it, but the cassette is chewy. I think next time we’re in Inbhir Nis I’ll need to get it on vinyl. But the ol’ lade is sick to the teeth of it already. She said I should be saving for headphones first.”

James liked how he dropped Gaelic words into his sentences; they stuck out, like half-hammered nails. The boys had once spent an hour laughing over the Gaelic translation of gay slurs; the party line went silent while Fraser presented and then repeated the words: Càm, *càm.* One by one, the disembodied men parroted the word, like an evening class full of study-abroad students. *Fliuch*, *Boireanta*, or James’s favourite, the unimaginative conjunction of boy and bum: *Gille-tòiin.*

“I could send a vinyl to you,” said James. “If I knew where you lived.”

“That’s all right, Tonalt. Maybe some other time.” Fraser buffed the offer away, there were ears on here from all over, it would be indiscreet. “My dad and I sailed to Tober Mhoire at the weekend. There was a lost pigeon in the harbour, a gormless, grey thing, and I thought of you.”

“He might be mine,” laughed James. “I’m no getting the hang of pouting. I’ve lost more birds than I catch.”

Fraser tutted. “Too bad. Just stick in there …”

“I’ll stick it in ye, son,” said a gruff voice. It made James flinch. For a moment he had forgotten they were not alone.

“I’ll stick it right up ye.”

All afternoon they lay in the long grass and watched the clouds roll down from the Campsie Fells. Mungo was glad they were lying down, for if he had been standing he would not have known what to do with his limbs. Waves of loveliness ebbed over him followed by waves of shame. They came like Jodie alternating the hot and cold taps and trying to balance a bath with him already in it. This time, though, he couldn’t pull his legs to his chest and escape it, he would be burned or he would be chilled as it happened. There was no pulling away.

The boys lay a discreet distance apart. James's pinkie found his and they knotted them together like they had that first night in James's bedroom. "Do you mind?" It was tentative, all politeness and consideration. Constant searching for the next stair in the dark.

"Naw, I don't mind," said Mungo. "James?"

"Aye."

"Does your da not like me?" It had been weighing on him. "What did I ever do to him?"

"Nothing. 'Asides, it's me he hates. No you."

"How can yer own da no like you?"

James rolled on to his elbow. He kept opening his mouth to talk, but each time he swallowed his words and said nothing.

"You can tell us. I'm good at keeping secrets."

Eventually, James told him about the chatline, about the number from the newspaper he had carried with him, ever since he had been unable to stop thinking about Paddy Creek. "… The chatline was nothing dirty. Just voices, boys talking to one another about music, about where they liked to buy clothes and stupit things like that. Sometimes you'd get an older man and he would ask you dirty things but mostly it was just young lads talking and having a good time and telling jokes."

James sat up and pulled his knees to his chest. "There was one boy, wee Fraser, he had the funniest accent you ever heard, he'd tell you something dead-dead-sad and you'd have to be careful not to laugh cos it sounded like a mad chirpy bird. I liked him best. His dad had a sheep farm, he used to complain that there was nobody around him but blackface lambs, that he spent whole days just wandering and being by himself. To him it was pure murder, but to me it seemed like he could be himself, all day, and not pretend. I wanted to know what that felt like."

"But how is this about your da?"

James shook his head. "I'm getting to it. But you have to understand that I hardly ever said a word." He wiped the dirt from his palms on to his denims. "Ah didn't know it would cost a fortune, did ah? Honest to God. My da came off the rig and opened all the bills. He called the phone company when I was at school and they told him what the number was for. 'A sex line for men who like men,' they said." James shook his head. "It wasn't *only* that. Honest."

Mungo sat up. He felt Jodie turning on the hot tap over him, and he was up to

his neck in shame.

“Ma da knows. He knows what I am.” James took a punishing gulp of the whisky. “He hasn’t looked at me right since.”

James was bigger than him, a whole head taller, a whole year older. There was a dark road and James was on it. Mungo knew he should not follow, if he didn’t step on to the road, he could still turn away. James looked at him, and as though he could read his mind, he laid his finger on Mungo’s twitching cheek and said, “Don’t be lit me Mungo. It’s not too late for you.”

But it was already too late. It had always been too late. When they were younger, Mungo and Hamish had been playing in the bathroom. They had filled the scalloped sink and they were slamming Action Men together in an underwater battle. Hamish was resting his weight on the lip of the sink, and Mungo couldn’t see, so he jumped up and did the same. There had been the tiniest fracture in the porcelain – Mo-Maw had dropped a glass ashtray into it one time – and now the weight of their play breached it and the water poured everywhere. Just before the sink split, Mungo put his hand over the crack and tried to hold back the water – it worked, and then it failed, and he was soaked and bloody from the chipped porcelain. He tried all afternoon, but there was no way to put the crack back together.

Mungo raised himself on his elbows and kissed James. Even more than the others, it felt like his first proper kiss, clumsy and with too much pressure on his lips. He buried the tip of his nose in James’s cheek and gasped when he felt the secret warmth of James’s tongue. It thrilled him. The tongue tasted sweet like cream and powdered vanilla, and his mouth was hot like burning peat and golden tobacco.

It was James who put his hand on Mungo’s chest and pushed him gently away. It was not safe on the hill so near to the prison.

The Rattray lay on its side and James began spinning the front wheel, seeing how fast he could make it turn. “Did she deserve it?” he asked after a long while. “The wee wummin whose husband nearly kilt her?”

Mungo didn’t want to think about Mrs Campbell and her purple eye, not now. “No. You cannae deserve a belting lit that.”

James put his foot against the tyre, it stopped instantly. “How no? Ask ma da.”

“Is he handy with his fists?”

“Naw. He is fast with the back of his hand though. Ye should know he will

kill me if he finds out what we just did." James spun the wheel again and laughed. "He'll kill you first though."

There it was again, the road, the path, the turning, the warning. "Naw man. I'm a Hamilton," he said bravely. "I'll shank the Fenian bastard."

James pushed him over. "Yer a dirty Fenian kisser now, ya daft walloper."

The tap, the hot water, more shame.

"He can never find out, Mungo. He's bad. I mean it." James pumped the wheel. "Like, it was my job to do the dishes when I was wee. Sometimes I'd forget to shut a cabinet or close the drawer all the way. It'd be almost closed, but like, not one hunner per cent. His favourite game was to wait until ye had just fallen asleep, you know that lovely feelin' where ye stretch out your toes and properly sink into the mattress and float away. He'd time it jist perfect. He'd wait and then barge in, the big light blaring, and wake you up and make you get up and close the cabinet door. He'd slap the back of your head all the way to the kitchen and slap you all the way back to bed again."

"Just for an open cabinet door?"

"Aye. He'd pass it all day and just leave it ajar. He could have shut it himself wi' one finger."

"Even Ha-Ha isn't as twisted as all that."

"One time our Geraldine sat on the coffee table and her fat arse broke the glass. She blamed me and he leathered me and then every weekend for a year I was apprenticed to a glazer's in Parkhead just so I learnt the value of glass. I was only twelve."

"How much is it worth, then?"

"How the fuck should ah know? My job was to sit in the empty van when it was double-parked." He stopped the tyre again. "I spent a whole year of weekends in that white van. Afterwards my father had the cheek to ask me how I don't make any friends."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. But I meant what I said the other night." James picked through the ruins of the cake. He rolled the decorative bear in his palm. It was a cheap plastic thing. It had been poorly printed and the misalignment made it appear as if it was half melted. It was too childish a thing to be wearing a sash that said "Sixteen." James was emancipated now. He could do what he liked. He was a man. "I'll stay for as long as I can. But when I have to go, I will go."

James made to throw the bear away but Mungo stopped him. He took the bear

from James's hand. He licked the sugar from it, and when James wasn't looking, he dropped it into his pocket.

James pedalled into the city, heading downhill, back towards the East End. The Rattray flew through the smirr, it sliced and turned, thin and fast as any whippet. Mungo held his body away from James like before, but now, when he held on to his waist, he used his whole hand and gripped the sharp bone at the top of his hips. He allowed his thumbs to slowly creep up under James's Fair Isle jumper and brush against the warm skin. It was a nothing that felt like an everything.

When the traffic thickened the boys took to the pavement, riding against the evening rush, bumping up and down each wet kerb. The rain clung to everything it touched. It dripped from the end of Mungo's nose and coated his eyelashes, which made the glare from the headlights explode like a concussion.

"I thought you had a bird?" asked Mungo, over the growl of a corporation bus.

"A doo?"

"No-o. A robin big breast, a pair of blue tits. A lassie."

"Who? The girls from the fountain?" James stopped pedalling and rested on the razor saddle, sliding himself between Mungo's legs. They coasted slowly downhill together, closer than they had been all day. "No, I don't have a bird," James said. "But I was trying my hardest to get one. After my da found the phone bill he called us every name under the sun. He threw me out and I went to sleep in the doocot, propped up a'cos of all the glass on the floor. It was about half past eleven when he came to the doocot. He tried to kick it down with me inside. He would have wrung the neck of every doo, and mine as well if I had let him. I had to climb out of the top trap and dreepie down the back edge. He dragged me through the streets and called us names I'd never heard afore. He was roaring so loud that there were wummin hanging out of windows from Culloden to Ballindalloch."

Mungo rested his chin on James's shoulder.

"In the morning, he said I could only live under his roof if I got a girlfriend. He said I could 'even get her pregnant' if I wanted. He didnae care either way. But I needed to get a bird, or I would have to leave his house." Headlights streaked across them. "I promised to try. After all, I'd still not done anything I couldn't undo, not really. So, I'd go to the park with a fresh packet of fags and

try to find someone to winch. I knew a couple of lassies from my class who didnae have fathers. To them I was just a walking ice cream van. They use me, I use them."

Mungo's face was stinging with the threat of a gift taken back so suddenly. He opened his legs slightly and released James. The damp air filled the space where the other boy had been.

They rolled past the prison and, without a word, James shifted on the narrow seat. He filled the space between them and this time he pushed his spine into Mungo's cavity. Each bony vertebra was a knuckle that pressed into the places that hurt the worst. Mungo exhaled into the sandy hair. His arms disobeyed him as they wrapped around James's waist. He laid his face against the Shetland wool and inhaled the grease of the lanolin and the musk from his armpits. James leaned back into him as hard as Mungo was pressing forward. A diesel lorry chugged by, its air brakes hissing in the rain.

Then James said, "We don't … We don't have to do anything like that again. I mean, if ye don't want to?"

SEVENTEEN

There was a bend in the river where a tilting birch tree grew too close to the bank. The soil was worn away and the dissolving riverbank was held in place by a mesh of exposed roots. Mungo floated the body behind him and tucked the old man under the canopy of roots. St Christopher would be safe in this dark hollow, where the eroding earth and the tree formed a hidden pocket.

His rod and fishing bag hadn't floated far, but Mungo searched and could not find the man's tweed bunnet. His teeth were chattering as he pulled himself up on to the riverbank. The rain fell heavy as hailstones.

His whole body was shaking by the time he made it back to the campsite. The belongings Gallowgate had dumped on the ground were scattered and ruined; Ludo pieces had blown across the shingles and his favourite sketchbook was a sodden, bleeding mass. The flaps were open on the tents and the mouth of the larger tent was submerged in a puddle. The sleeping bag, the fishing supplies, everything was wet. Mungo crawled inside and tried to sweep the puddle out but it was futile. He shrank against the back wall and felt all the adrenaline leave his body.

The sky was dimly lit with a dull blue gloam. The clouds hung low and Gallowgate struggled to find his way back. If it hadn't been for the outline of the ruined bothy, he might have missed the campsite entirely. The rain had hammered the tents and several guy lines had come loose. They were half-deflated and looked defeated. No one had lit a fire.

It was too quiet at the campsite. Gallowgate went to the two-man tent expecting to find St Christopher sulking and sober. He had to reach into the darkness until he felt something that wasn't wet polyester or a puddle of rainwater. His fingers brushed skin. There was a leg, it was cold to the touch. He

sparked his lighter and the boy sat up.

“Where’s auld Chrissy?”

“He’s in the other tent,” said Mungo, though it hurt to speak. “He went to bed in a huff.”

Gallowgate made a movement to retreat and check on his friend. But Mungo took hold of his wrist and tried not to let his panic show. “Leave him. If he’s sleeping then he won’t want any drink,” he said. “Besides, I’d rather share a tent with you.”

Gallowgate smiled, the white of his teeth looking almost ultraviolet in the last of the blue light. The man shed his anorak in the rain, then he lay on his back and inched out of the sodden denims. Gallowgate swept more of the water out of the tent. He pulled the zipper closed and they sat in the darkness together. There was a spark of the lighter and a tiny tea light candle illuminated the space between them. He had bought it at the shop and it was like the ones the Chinese takeaway put in the window at Christmas; a happy, festive thing. Mungo picked at his wounded cheek, wondering if he could use the candle to set the tent on fire.

“How was the fishin’?” Gallowgate asked, trying to warm himself over the little flame. His naked skin was covered in ink from his ankle to his cuff.

“Terrible.” Mungo didn’t yet know what he was going to tell the man, he hadn’t gotten that far in his mind. He only knew that whatever he was going to do, he would do it in the morning when it was dry, when he could run.

Mungo watched him burst open the backpack and take out the tinned ravioli and the Isle of Skye whisky. He handed the boy a tin and Mungo realized he hadn’t eaten since the night before. There was a ring pull and the lid separated easily. It was sharp as a razor blade. Mungo licked it, found a comfort in its sharpness, and placed it carefully to the side. Then he held the tin over the tea candle, tried to warm the cold pasta, but it only sent big black puffs of smoke into the air, so he gave up, and ate the ravioli cold. He was ravenous, shovelling big handfuls of the mushy pasta into his mouth and breathing through his nose to swallow it quicker. Gallowgate unscrewed the whisky and offered it to him. Mungo drank it in easy gulps, quickly becoming used to the taste.

“Are ye looking forward to going home the morra?”

Mungo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, it left a smear across his chin. “Aye. When will we leave?”

“Och, no rush,” said Gallowgate. He wasn’t interested in the food. “Let’s gie

auld Chrissy a chance to get that bastardin' trout, eh?"

Something that had felt like hope dampened inside Mungo. Gallowgate reached out his hand and locked it around the boy's kneecap. "Here!" he said. "How did ye get that?"

There was a gash on Mungo's calf, it wasn't deep but it was long. He must have cut it on a sharp rock when he was pushing the last of the air from St Christopher. Gallowgate poured some of the whisky into his open mouth. He leaned over Mungo's calf and let it dribble out. It hit the gash and burned. Mungo struggled to pull his leg away but Gallowgate gripped him by the back of the knee. He laid the length of his hot whisky-soaked tongue against his cut. Then he licked the blue shin bone like it was a sugary ice pole. "Saliva is meant to help. Does that feel better?"

"I don't want to do that." It was the flattest voice he could manage. Mungo pulled his legs underneath himself and tucked them inside his cagoule.

Gallowgate took another throatful of the whisky, the tea light throwing his shadow against the side of the tent. "If ye don't want to do *that*, how comes ye saved me the sleeping bag next to yours, eh?" Gallowgate removed a burr that had stuck to Mungo's face. He burned it over the candle.

Mungo realized he had made a mistake. He had only worried about hiding the truth about St Christopher, not what might come after. Gallowgate twisted like he was uncomfortable. He stretched out his left leg, where there was an inked banner above his knee that read in bold blue letters: *No Retreat, No Surrender.*

"It's funny," said Gallowgate. "After your mammy telt us the stories about you ah thought ye would've jumped at the chance to get away for a wee weekend. She is disgusted by you, ye know. She practically begged us to take ye away. She's terrified ye'll become a wee soft boy like the Fenian ye were messing around wi'."

Mungo's face was pulling and he could tell his eye wanted to twitch despite the swelling around it. His spine was against the side of the tent and he could feel by the tilt of his body that he was as far away as he could squeeze himself. Gallowgate reached out his hand again, he cupped it around the back of Mungo's neck and dragged him back towards him. He tilted his head and locked his lips over Mungo's. It was an insistent kiss, his tongue pushing Mungo to part his lips. Mungo thought about opening his mouth then, allowing the tongue inside, and biting down on it, ripping it out whole, till it lay fresh and quivering like some of the butcher's meat that Mo-Maw liked so much.

“Stop.” He couldn’t push Gallowgate away from him, so he collapsed, allowed himself to become heavy and slip from his grip. *“I don’t want to do that.”*

Gallowgate’s lips were wet with his own saliva. There was hurt in his eyes. “Well, we’ll see.” He wiped his mouth and drank more of the whisky. “‘Asides, what makes ye think ah’m going to let you go home to Glasgow if we’re no pals? Ah cannae have ye running around all over the place telling tales on me, can ah?”

“I won’t tell.” Mungo meant it. His family already thought of him as something less than a person and he couldn’t bear the shame. He pictured Chickie Calhoun in his dead mammy’s flat, with his comfortable indoor shoes and the way he used his spectacles to keep the feathered hair out of his eyes. He knew how the scheme looked at Chickie. *“Please.”*

Gallowgate looked like he was weighing something heavy in his heart. He was shaking his head and looking at Mungo with a great pity. “Ah don’t know if ah can trust you, Mungo.”

Underneath the waterproof sheet the ground had been pulsing from the pouring rain. Tiny rivers of water tried to find their way past the tent and around the boy to lower ground. Now Mungo’s head felt like it was spinning too. Everything was shifting. This was the sixth face Gallowgate had shown him: the victim, the hurt person, the one who was disappointed in Mungo.

He tried to steady himself with thoughts of Glasgow, of Jodie and the warm front room of the tenement flat, the way the air smelled of static on the days when they cooried in together away from the world and watched television.

“You can trust me,” he tried to smile.

Gallowgate wrapped his hand around Mungo’s wrist. The tent shuddered in the wind. “Ah mean, if we’re no pals, mibbe ah should stop being so friendly.”

EIGHTEEN

For the past few days he had been lousy with optimism, stupid, stocious with happiness. But now he lost all his bottle. All his newfound confidence ebbed away, and his shoulders took on their familiar slouch. Mungo made himself smaller again, and cringing, he held the gift behind his back and wished he hadn't said anything at all.

James lay sprawled upon the navy-blue carpet, his head resting against his father's settee, his neck at an angle that looked broken. "C'mon. Don't be lit that."

"Just forget it."

James sat up and wrapped himself around Mungo the way monkeys did – maybe this is what Mungo had wanted all along. James was peering around him and snatching for the parcel. Mungo held the box at arm's length, but James's arms were longer. "Awright. Fine. Get off of me."

"You don't want me to get off of you, not really." James was grinning, but he did as Mungo asked.

Mungo sank back on his haunches and reluctantly handed him the small gift. It was wrapped in a hand-drawn paisley pattern, made up of a hundred swooping pigeons, with wings outstretched and tipped with stripes, swirling across a sky full of puffy clouds. He had drawn it specially for James and he had held his breath as he sliced the page from his sketchbook. Hours upon hours of meticulous linework with a fine-nibbed pen, intricate as Toile de Jouy wallpaper.

James unwrapped the cassette and turned it in his hands. "What's on it? It's no rave music, is it?"

Mungo shrugged. "Naw. It's nothing. Just some stuff I like from the charts."

James set the cassette aside, like it didn't matter much to him. Mungo picked at his cheek. He tried to pin down the hurt that already piqued the muscle to stop

it spreading. It was only a cassette, after all, but by the way he felt when James put it to the side it could have been his heart. Then James did something unexpected. He smoothed the paper flat and holding it up to the sunlight he looked at it like it was the most magnificent thing he had ever seen. Mungo watched his fingers trace the spirals tenderly. “Is this for me as well?”

“Only if you want it.”

“Aye, I love it.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

James sat forward and kissed him. It was all so familiar now. They had moved beyond the clumsy petting and munching. Mungo would stop frequently to apologize, he felt so inept, and James would cradle his face and guide Mungo’s lips back to his. Now their kisses were soft and tender and offered without the fear of refusal. A kiss lasted hours. They lay with their mouths together and Mungo cupped his nose in the divot of James’s cheek, and then they led each other in a silent ramble, one would change the direction and the other would follow, over and over until an arm went dead, or the microwave pinged. A hand might slip under a T-shirt but it never dared to do anything else. Mungo knew he wanted to spend his life doing this, just kissing this one boy. There was no need to rush.

Mungo winced. The skin around his lips was chapped with too much tenderness. They looked bee-stung and had swollen slightly and grown rosy in colour.

“Shall we take a wee break?” Usually, James didn’t stop, he just kissed over the bud of Mungo’s cheek, down past his earlobe and across the pale skin beneath his shirt collar. They had been lucky. A few times they had gotten carried away and Mungo had spent a tense twenty minutes pacing in front of the hallway mirror checking for love bites, James hovering behind him, juggling ice cubes in his hands.

They lay in a nest of their own filth, discarded schoolbags and empty crisp packets. Cereal bowls ringed the carpet in front of the large television, like it was an altar. Half-watched videocassettes were strewn around, stripped of their fake encyclopaedia cases, alongside unfinished homework that had been abandoned in favour of kissing and staring. Mungo thought that if *Lord of the Flies* had been more like this, he might have paid some attention.

He had been surreptitiously borrowing articles of James’s clothing, intimate things, that he swapped out for his own perfectly clean, if not especially nice

gear. It started with a pair of thick socks, after he complained that he was cold, even though James's flat had central heating that left him dehydrated and with a dull headache. Then he stole a too-big pair of boxer shorts from the clothes pulley, and wore them for three days in a row, under his school trousers, bunched up like Victorian bloomers.

All week they had floated in the mornings from the doocot to separate schools, then back to the doocot, before spending long evenings in James's front room: top floor, facing the moody sky, far from the eyes of anyone else. When they separated to their own bedrooms, across the back middens, they spent hours gurning at the window, feigning being murdered, and flicking each other the finger all while trying not to laugh too loud.

He had been mooning across the divide one afternoon while Jodie was clearing the dirty dishes. "But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?"

"Whut?" Mungo was resting his cheek on the glass, enjoying the cool condensation.

"What's her name?" asked Jodie.

"None of your business." He felt more gallus now. No longer a solitary soul.

"Keeping secrets. That's not very nice." She tickled his ribs, inspected his sore lips.

"Secrets!" he howled unkindly. "You're like the Finders Keepers of secrets." He poked her in the belly and she flinched. He hadn't known what he said. He was referencing the adverts they had loved on Saturday mornings, where American lassies wrote silly little secrets and locked them safe, in the belly of a stuffed bear. Smiling wee lassies who hadn't had a teacher's wean in their gut, stupid wee lassies with no real secrets worth keeping.

Jodie slapped his hand from her stomach. "Ye get more like Hamish every day."

"God, Jodie, I'm sorry. I didnae think. I didnae mean it."

"Make your own dinner, Romeo." She threw the tea towel at him. "And if your girlfriend scabs your face that sore, make sure and think twice afore you put anything else near her."

The slow hours he spent away from James felt overwhelming. His legs thrummed with a restless energy that irritated Jodie. The hours felt filled with nothing. It was time to sleep and eat and think of things to tell him when he saw him again, stupid little things hardly worth repeating, but he knew James wouldn't mind.

As they lay around James's living room one afternoon, James had seemed restless, swinging his shinty stick while they watched television. He sat up suddenly with a demented look upon his face. He was giggling to himself as he draped a blanket and then a bath towel across his shoulders. He pulled his woollen hat upwards till it sat on the very top of his head and resembled a peaked mitre. "Wait. Wait." James held his caman as though it was a ceremonial mace, and then he turned to face Mungo. He extended his right hand, holding his index and ring fingers aloft as though he was hailing a bus. "Guess who I am?"

Mungo snorted. "Ah dunno. A bam in a bath towel?"

"Naw. I'm you."

There was a mug of tap water they had been sharing; it somehow made the water taste sweeter to be drinking from the same vessel. Mungo motioned for James to pass it to him. "Fuck off, James. How's that me?"

James threw his arms wide in a show of saintly grace. He flicked his fingers in an invitation for the believers to come forward and adore him. "Come to me, my child."

Mungo thought about it. He wanted to obey.

"It's you. It's St Mungo." James turned his profile to the daylight. "It's the statue they have of you above Kelvingrove Museum. Have you no even seen it?"

Mungo had never been to Kelvingrove, and although it was only a few miles away, he had never been to the West End. To admit this would bring out a feeling of inferiority in him and he wanted so badly for them to remain equals, the very, very same. Mungo rolled his eyes and motioned for the communal chalice again.

James handed him the mug of tap water with a papal flourish of his hand. "Bless you, my son."

Mungo took a long slug of water. "Wait. Are you wearing your big sister's trackies?"

James looked down quickly. "Naw!" They were the same trackie bottoms he had been wearing for the past three days. They could do with a wash. "Piss off. Don't come wide with a holy saint, son." Mungo was laughing to himself when James looked up again. "How? Is that a bowl cut you've got?" He stepped forward and tugged on Mungo's forelock. "Wait, you *do* have a bowl cut?"

They had crossed this line a day or two before. They had wandered from timid tenderness to affection wrapped in insults. It was a lovely place for two boys to be: honest, exciting, immature.

"It's not a bowl cut." Mungo slurped the metallic water. He peered at James

over the chipped edge. “Besides, nice try, wingnut. Your first miracle as a holy saint should have been to fix those massive ears.”

“Don’t you like ma ears?” James was towering over him.

“Aye,” he grinned. “But can you move a bit to the left? I cannae see the sky.”

James made a grab for the mug. He tipped it and poured the water on to Mungo’s lap. “Piss yourself often, do ye?”

Mungo hooked his leg around James’s and brought him easily to the carpet, water sprayed everywhere. He had found someone he could say the cruellest things to and they would not leave. He didn’t care anymore if his lips were sore. They kissed and sucked and bit and lay on top of each other all the way through the evening news and well past the sour trumpets of *Coronation Street.* As much as they had kissed it had not yet gone any further. It was enough to put his hand up James’s shirt and feel the broad muscles of his back undulate as he rubbed himself against Mungo. James preferred to keep his own hands in the crook of Mungo’s back, softly stroking the downy hair that was growing above his buttocks. It made Mungo feel sleepy, it made him feel safe.

They pushed against each other harder now. He could feel James stiffen through his thick trackies. He moved his hand and used the back of it to rub where it was warmest, then he turned his palm to it and cupped it gently. James let out a low sigh. He pressed his forehead against Mungo’s, his breath was sweet with sugar and cereal milk. “Do ye want to?”

“I dunno.” Mungo was not sure what he was asking. So far James had been walking down a path ahead of him, while Mungo trailed behind. He led Mungo almost by the hand and several times when he stopped to look at him, it hurt Mungo to feel that the boy with the sticky-out ears might have already been down this road with someone else. He had wanted them to walk it for the first time together.

James raised himself on to his elbows, the front of his trousers tented and damp. As he left the room Mungo felt abandoned, exposed. Pulling his knees to his chest, he wondered what he had done wrong.

“I wanted to show you something.” James came back into the front room, a magazine in his hand. He was flicking through it, looking for something in particular, and Mungo knew from the naked contorted bodies and the cheap sound of the paper what the magazine was. “I visited my aunt once in Dundee. They sold these in the bus station. I missed two buses home before I grew the courage to buy it.”

“They let *you* buy it?”

James shrugged. “Aye, twelve ninety-nine *is* twelve ninety-nine, after all.”

The magazine was full of bloated Americans. Men with swollen muscles and lines of amber tans that showed the ghost of their missing swimming trunks. They didn’t have the long, thin limbs of him or James, the soft downy trails of hair, or the white skin that flushed when you touched it, that turned blue or pink depending on temperature, on emotion. Everything about these Americans was artificially plump; they were shaved and plucked, lying on their backs, legs in the air, more like Christmas turkeys than men. There was a painful rictus on their faces, glazed eyes, false winces of pleasure. One man was grinning at the camera while he choked his floppy cock, strangling it like it was an empty tube of toothpaste.

“No way. He’s shoved it up his arsehole.” Mungo was pointing at two baseball players on a slatted bench.

The magazine was not allowed to show a fully erect penis, but by how the men were arranged together, the idea was clear. He had thought about the curved hillock of James’s arse but the centre, the dark hidden part, was not yet something he had thought much about. On the next page, there it was, a man on his back, his legs in the air, his fingers probing himself. It looked painful.

“Aye,” James laid his head on Mungo’s shoulder. “That’s what we do.”

“Who’s *we?*” scoffed Mungo.

“People lit us.”

“Well. Who is the man and who is the woman?” Mungo asked sincerely.

“Well, *you* are the woman.”

He shook James from his shoulder. “*You* are.”

The pictures aroused him. Sometimes – when Jodie was in bed, and Hamish was sleeping at Sammy-Jo’s – he would take his brother’s stiff magazine full of buttery soft women. He liked the spreads with men in them the best and so he folded the page, turned the women to the back, and gave them a little rest. The first time he had doctored a page he had been too firm with the paper. Afterwards, no matter how he tried to smooth it, the telltale crease remained; it would surely grass him up. It was torturous to erect the screeching ironing board without waking his sister. Even after he ironed the page to the point of lifting the inks, the faint crease was still visible. The line still separated the woman from her own mouth and the flaccid cock that she tickled with the tip of her tongue.

James turned the page and amongst all the Americans and their army jeeps –

even the cars looked bloated – was a realistic vignette of a bus conductor and a cheeky truant. It looked like the top deck of a Glasgow corporation bus, but the conductor had the boy over his knee and was leathering him with the flat of his hand. The schoolboy was grinning at the camera.

"He must have forgotten his monthly Transcard," said James.

"Probably tried to get away with a half-fare."

"Aye, he looks about forty-five."

James tore the magazine from his grip. Mungo watched it sail across the room, but the images were already burned on the back of his retinas. They would be there, later, projected on to the underside of his duvet, like the pictures they played up at the Parade Cinema.

The first time Mungo saw James naked, the closeness of him made it hard to take it all in. Mungo wanted to push him away, pin him on the floor, stand over him, and just simply look. But they twisted together, brow to brow, mouth on mouth, and everything was like peeping through a crack in a door: an eyeful of alabaster and rose, the glacial blue of inner arms with their veins like violet rivers, the chafing at James's elbows that Mungo wanted to kiss so badly, and the fields of fevered carnations blooming high on his pale collarbone. The boy was all growing bones and unblemished skin; a paint chart of the softest whites.

Lying on his back, he had ribs like the hull of an upturned boat, two tiny pink nipples, comically small for such a broad chest. The hollow cavity of his stomach collapsed under the canopy of his ribcage. His pronounced hip bones spoke of a framework he had not filled out yet, but from the muscles of his back, and the globes of his buttocks, it was clear that he would. His body was covered in a fine dusting of white-gold hair, as though pollen had settled upon him. He sparkled faintly in the gloomy daylight.

The feathered mustiness of his armpits and the down that dusted his arse cheeks tickled the tips of Mungo's fingers. His skin was a bigger and more unexpected landscape than anywhere Mungo had ever been and he was glad to explore it. He travelled along the train tracks left behind by the tight boxer short elastic, the touch of it ribbed and musical under his fingertips. They explored each other, their gangly limbs wrapped together, clumsy and inexperienced, hands too hurried, greedy fingers too eager to rush on to other delights. Their bodies parted and James lay with his forehead pressed against Mungo's and his

breath, all toffee and milky tea, was hot against his face.

They used their own hands on their own bodies now. Apart but together. They stole pleasure for themselves, shared it through the mixing of their breath, faster, shallower, until James's bottom lip snagged on the tip of Mungo's nose, and his breath grew faster still, his lips sticky over dry teeth. They kept pace with each other. Then just as quickly as it had started, James arched his back, and it was over.

Mungo was dazed, happy, until James left him splayed on the carpet for the second time that afternoon. Mungo reached out for him but James had already rolled on to his knees and was wiping the mess from his own stomach. Kneeling below the bay window, he turned his back to Mungo and there was a pattern of creases from the carpet across his kidneys and flank. He reached for the dregs of a family-sized bottle of ginger and the plastic creased and collapsed as he swallowed it in thick gulps.

The passion had blown across them too quickly. Now James sat there knotted. The rivets of his spine and the struts of his ribs looked like a Govan carcass. When he finally turned, he pushed his back tight against the wall and sat there staring at the floor. They were only a paisley rug apart, but they were not looking at each other, separated as though by a teacher that could no longer tolerate their disruptiveness.

"What did I do?" asked Mungo. *What did I do?* It was what he had been trained to say. Never *what's wrong with you?* or *are you okay?* Only *what did I do?*

James coughed his hacking rattle. He rubbed at the centre of his chest. Sometimes his ears and his gappy teeth gave his face a friendly, cartoonish feel, but not now. Now, in the dying light, when he tilted his head and stared at Mungo under the bone in his brow, the muscles in his jaw tightened and his gaze crossed the room, as cold as a draught. His speckled green eyes were like the slate tiles, more grey than green now, sharp and flinted. "Do you think I'm funny?"

"Funny-ha-ha, or funny-peculiar?"

"Peculiar. Do you … Do you think I'm like Poor-Wee-Chickie?" James sucked on his inhaler.

Mungo didn't know what to answer. He tried hard to see what James was saying but he couldn't imagine James hiding in a ground-floor flat, with no fresh air in his hair, and no wide grin on his face. "We don't have to do that ever

again.”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?” Fear replaced the shame in James’s eyes.

“No. How? Will *you?*” He knew he wouldn’t, but the bond required that he state it out loud.

“Never.” He made the sign of the cross and this seemed to relax him slightly. He wiped the snot from his nose. “Look at this fucking mess. Auld Jamieson is back in three days. He’ll skin me if I don’t find a lassie.”

“He’s gonnae skin ye anyhow,” said Mungo. “He sounds like my Hamish.”

James’s eyes were ringed and sore looking. He had travelled so far since he had lain with Mungo; such a distance to cross in seven minutes. “I don’t know how you cope.”

Mungo was picking the lint out from beneath his toes. “It’s got easier since I met you.” He tried to coax a smile.

“Ha. Do *you* want to be my girlfriend this weekend when ma da’s home?”

“What? Get a wig? Pretend to be wee Mairead from up the Parade?”

“I knew it. I knew you were the woman.” James laughed his half-choked laugh.

Mungo would have done anything to have kept him there, with that grin back on his face. “What are you looking at, ya big-eared basturt?”

“Nothing,” said James. “I just like looking at you. It’s a shame in a way. We’ve lived across the back middens from each other for our whole lives.”

“S’okay. We have three more days before your da gets back.”

“Three more days,” James agreed. “Then no more Chickie Jamieson.”

Mungo lunged at him then and cracked his fist off his chest. He dared him to strike back. Violence always preceded affection; Mungo didn’t know any other way. Mo-Maw would crack her Scholl sandal off his back, purpling bruises curdling his cream skin, then she would realize she had gone too far and pull him into the softness of her breast. Jodie would scold and demean his poorly wired brain and then, feeling guilty, make a heaped bowl of warm Weetabix and white sugar. Hamish would wind him with a fist and sit on his chest. When Mungo started calling for help, Hamish would clamp his hand over his face, that hot hand whose fingers covered his eye sockets and whose meat crammed into his open mouth. They would sit there for a long time, Hamish crushing the wind out of him, until Mungo acquiesced, easy as flattened grass, soft as an Easter lamb.

First came the hurt, then came the kiss. Wrapping his long arms around him, James raised Mungo off the floor in a bear hug. He squeezed with all his might

until Mungo couldn’t breathe. He hoped it would never end. Then James farted, a long, growling thunder. It stunk heavy and rancid, pure dairy and white sugar. Mungo braced himself against James, but he could not get free. And he was glad.

The Jamiesons’ bathroom was a creamy mint colour. Of the four shelves above the toilet, only one still held any toiletries. Mungo picked through the canisters of deodorants, fungal foot spray, and a rusted tube of haemorrhoid cream. At the back was an old-fashioned shaving kit, with a badger brush and a straight razor; he had never seen anything like it. Mungo took Mr Jamieson’s shaving brush down from the shelf. He sniffed it. The traces of lather smelled like men from another time. It had the bright tang of menthol and pine, and the faint medicinal whiff of aniseed, almost like carbolic soap. He ran the soft badger bristles across his bottom lip, enjoying their tickle.

As he waited for the bath to fill, he traced the brush across his collarbone and then down his neck, across his bare chest and around his left nipple. As he did so he tilted his head back and looked up at the patterned ceiling. Mrs Jamieson must have lowered it herself. She had nailed pins around the perimeter and then strung twine back and forth in a decorative pattern that looked something like macramé. There was a bowl of potpourri on the cistern, but when Mungo sniffed it, it no longer held any scent. Other than this, there was nothing that suggested a woman had ever lived here.

Their bathwater was lukewarm by the time they both climbed in. Mungo got in first and claimed the end without taps. He felt clammy, like he had just passed the worst of a fever, but happy and peaceful in every corner of his skin. James got in and poured his long legs around him. He rested a heaped plate of sausage rolls on the toilet seat and Mungo nodded at the party treats. “Who’s the missus now, then?”

James didn’t rise to it, instead he ripped into one of the pastries. A dozen buttery flakes stuck to his chest and dissolved on his damp skin. The rest floated on the water like leaves in a puddle. Mungo popped one into his mouth. The gristly meat was scalding hot. He ladled tepid bathwater into his open mouth.

James was wearing his fisherman’s cap again, chewing and laughing with an open mouth. Mungo reached out and pulled the cap from his head. “I’m no gonnae sit in a bath with you if you’re wearing a bunnet. It’s too weird.”

James covered his ears with his hands. “I wish someone had pinned them back. You don’t know what it’s like. You try going to school wi’ these. Never even think to sit at the front of a class.”

“I don’t mind them.”

James squirted brown sauce into his mouth. He shoved in another steaming roll and grinned through the sausage meat. “I think you might like me.”

“Mibbe.” Mungo lowered his chin on to the water. “I only have to look at them for three more days. I think I can hold my boak that long.”

“Three days.” James had forgotten for a moment. The green eyes turned to grey again.

Mungo shoved his toes under James’s balls, until the boy squirmed and a wave of water hit the carpet. Then he sat forward and, grabbing James’s cheeks, he pushed upwards till James’s fat lips parted in a forced smile. “Listen, if I only get three days I don’t want to spend it with a moody bugger.”

Mungo lay back down in the bath, while James glowered and rubbed at his face. “I bet I could kick the shite out of you.”

“I bet you couldn’t.”

“Only because ye’ve got hauners.” He tilted his chin in a challenge. “You only talk to me lit that because of Ha-Ha.”

Mungo nodded. “Correct. So watch your Fenian mouth or I’ll tell my big brother you showed me your willie.”

“But you *liked* it.” He sent a tidal wave of bathwater over Mungo.

“Aye, but I won’t tell him *that.* Will I?”

They lay back in the dissipating warmth. Mungo took James’s foot in his hand. He hadn’t looked at it closely before. His sole was surprisingly soft, it smelled of nothing at all. He put James’s big toe in his mouth, and they sat like that, with unflinching expressions, until James cackled first and tried to pull it away. Mungo picked a piece of sock oose from the tip of his tongue and under his breath he said, “You’re no fit to drink my bathwater.”

“Whut?” James was dabbing his finger into the water and eating the pastry flakes that were still bobbing there.

“It’s just a funny thing Mo-Maw says all the time. Some auld woman in the butcher’s will run her eyes the length of her and she’ll be like, *‘Auld cow, she’s no fit to drink my bathwater.’* I mean, imagine a line of wummin with thermoses in the hallway and Hamish working a velvet rope. ‘Not you Irene, you cannae come in. I don’t like the look o’ thon orthopaedics. Nae bathwater for you.’”

“I wish I could meet her someday. The bold Maureen.”

Mungo shook his head. “No chance. She would give me a showing up.”

“She sounds like a laugh.”

“Our Jodie doesn’t see it that way. But I don’t mind her, she’s only a danger to herself.” Something bright glimmered inside him. He held James’s foot to his face and dialled the soft underside as though it were a telephone. “Hallo-hallo. You want an appointment with Mrs Hamilton? Elevenses for three? Usual table, sir?”

It was ticklish. “Aye. Why not …” James started coughing again. He reached for his inhaler.

Mungo let go of his foot. “You need to see a doctor. I don’t like it when you hack like that.”

James rubbed at his bare chest, he tried to catch his breath. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. I think it’s the doos.”

“Probably.” He tried to steer the conversation away from the birds. He wanted to wipe the concern from Mungo’s brow. “It feels nice to have someone worry about me though.”

Mungo slowly lowered his face under the water and tried to hide a broad smile. He bobbed back up. “Does it now? Do you think you’re my boyfriend?”

“Only if you’re my girlfriend.”

Mungo pressed his knee outwards and against the inside of James’s thigh. It made the blond boy writhe for submission. “Okay! We’ll no tell Mo-Maw *that*, but aye, I’ll be your boyfriend, Mungo Hamilton, for the next three days, anyhows.”

It had been his turn to forget for a moment. Mungo lay there a while, thinking about the time that was left, rationing his allocation and deciding on how he would spend the sweetness. Of course there could be more of this on the far side of Mr Jamieson’s visit, but that hardly seemed to matter. He was feeling childish – why did James’s father have to come home at all? James watched Mungo’s face darken. He made the boy turn around in the bath, until Mungo was settled and lying against his chest. They sent slops of bathwater on to the carpet. Mungo said, “Okay. You can meet her, but only for a minute.”

When James spoke again his lips were against Mungo’s ear. He bound Mungo’s wrists, held him still. “Good. Who knows? Maybe I can date yer Maw and be yer new da. Two birds with one stone. After all, you’re turning out a wee bit funny.”

Mungo went early, to see her for himself, and if he had to, to keep her away from the worst of the drink. James knew where to come and when. She kissed him and then she tucked him under the snack bar counter, out of view from the regulars. Mungo was gazing up at her while she charmed customers with snatches of gossip and false smiles. When she looked down at him the smile slid off her face.

Mo-Maw stole sleekit mouthfuls from a polystyrene cup. When she wasn't looking, he checked the cup. It was filled with fortified wine that smelled like cold medicine and rotted fruit. She must have been drinking and refilling the same cup for a long time. The lip of it was ruined with lipstick and she had chewed all along the edge.

The snack bar smelled sweet with fried onions. The late-night radio played soft rock from Mo-Maw's youth: Dr Hook, Eric Clapton, Kenny Rogers. Mungo sat on the plastic cooler and she handed him a tub of bread rolls. "If yer gonnae bother me at ma work, then ye might as well make yersel useful."

Her new perm had set tighter than she had wanted. Between filling rolls with potato scones and fatty bacon, she tugged at it and tried to steam it straight, holding it out over the sizzling griddle. "That Pauline, the glaikit bitch. She had the nerve to charge me eighteen poun' for this. For this! Ah went to her house and had her weans climbing all over me. By the time I came out I was looking like Orphan-fuckin'-Annie." She tugged until she winced. "Sun'll come out tomorrow. My arse."

"It looks awright." It looked like she had been electrocuted.

"Couldnae even get a decent cup o' tea out of her."

Mungo was ripping the guts out of the bread rolls and eating the soft dough. With a plastic knife he spread bright-yellow margarine on both sides. He thought he was doing a thorough job, he imagined the drivers would want their rolls dripping with grease, but Mo-Maw slapped his hand with the fish lift. "Stop eating they rolls. And stop wasting so much bloody margarine. Big Ella will be on me like a rash." She went back to relaxing her perm. "Why are you here anyway, is it money?"

"How, do you have some?"

"Naw."

"Then I came because I missed you."

She tickled him under the chin. “Ah suppose you do. Ah’m sorry, ma darlin’. Have you been stickin’ in at school?”

Mungo wiped some margarine from the front of his jumper. “Not exactly. I was hoping I could leave soon. Get an apprenticeship or a job or something.”

Mo-Maw crouched beside him and lit a cigarette. She smoked it under the counter, hunkered out of view. “Ah wish you would stay in school.”

“I don’t think it’s for me. I think I’d be better off working.”

“Then do what ye like. Ah can’t force ye. Fat load of good school did me.” Then she squinted at him. “But Mungo, see if ah get the School Board at ma door, ah tell ye, yer feet will no touch the ground.”

“You won’t. They’ll be glad to see the back of me.”

“Aye, well, yer almost a man now. Time ye grew up and paid yer own way.” She took a long drink out of the half-chewed cup. As she opened the bottle of wine to refill it, the metal Buckfast cap rolled away across the greasy floor. “Ah, bugger.” Mo-Maw shrugged and took a long swig from the bottle as though she had better finish it now. She offered it to Mungo.

He shook his head. “And I wish you wouldn’t.”

“It’s got a wee buzz. It keeps me gaun through the night.” Then she added, “And it makes me mair fun. Men prefer women that are mair fun. Ah get better tips.”

Of all the alcohol Mo-Maw enjoyed, Mungo feared Buckfast wine the most. He had heard Ha-Ha’s boys refer to it as the “Commotion Lotion.” Its high alcohol content mixed with its high caffeine content meant it made his mother blindingly drunk and too jittery to subdue. Mungo tore at a bread roll and held the doughy guts out to her. Mo-Maw pushed his hand away. “Have ye seen the shape of me? If I get any heavier this caravan will pop a wheelie.”

He crammed the bread into his own mouth. “How’s Jocky?”

Mo-Maw suddenly became animated. She spun and splayed her hands out wide, and Mungo could tell he had struck a seam of gold. There was such excitement on her face that, combined with the tight perm, she looked like she was convulsing. “Oh. Ma. God! Ah cannae believe ah didnae tell ye already. Jocky found some widow’s wedding ring that a wee house-robbing basturt tried to fence through his pawnshop. He got a cash reward, but better than that, he’s on a promise of a caravan in Burntisland for two weeks. Can you believe?”

There was a hole in the calf of her sheer tan tights. Mungo traced it with his finger. “Can I come?”

Mo-Maw brushed his hair away from his face and made a little moue. “Oh, sorry son. It’s still what morning telly calls the honeymoon period. We have to focus on *us* the now. It’s very important.” She clawed at her waistline. “Oh these tights are killin’ me. Ah should know better than to stand at this griddle and smother myself.”

He pushed his finger into the hole. “Can I?”

She huffed, and then she nodded. “Aye, go on. If it’ll make ye happy.”

Mungo felt the stubble of her leg hair against his knuckles. He tore at the hole and the tiny stitches ran away, they poured down her leg like raindrops. He pushed more fingers inside the tear and he tugged them apart. The tights ripped from her ankle bone up beyond the line of her skirt. He burst a hole in the other leg and ripped that one too. Mo-Maw clung to the counter and squealed in delight. They had loved this game as children. When her tights had become laddered beyond decency, she let the children rip them. They never split at the gusset or the toe seam so they made a game of pulling their mother out of her chair by her stocking feet, dragging her giggling across the floor until, finally, the pale softness of her legs thudded to the carpet, like chicken meat escaping from a string bag.

“Oh, I can breathe again.” Mo-Maw stepped out of her destroyed tights. She stepped back into her trainers. Mo-Maw put her foot up on the low shelf, picked at some ingrown hairs, and traced a finger along a varicose vein. “That one ah got from nursing you. Such a needy wean. You would never let me put ye down.”

Something in the darkness caught her attention. Mungo watched her lean out and peer beyond the glare of the fluorescent light. “Hello there, son. Can ah fill you a roll?”

Mungo sat up and peered over the top of the counter. He was there, shifting nervously, at the very edge of the light. James Jamieson was scrubbed pink from a hot bath, his hair slick and neatly parted. Mungo grinned at the effort, he would noise him up about it afterwards. “Mo-Maw, this is my pal. This is Jamesy.”

“Wait. Ye’ve made yersel a wee pal?” He watched her calf muscles tense as she leaned into the darkness to shake his hand. “Pleased to meet you, son. Ah’m Maureen, ah’m Mungo’s big sister.”

Mungo opened the caravan door and jumped down into the dirt. He could tell Mo-Maw was appraising James favourably. However, when James turned his back to say hello to Mungo, Mo-Maw pushed behind her own ears and mouthed

silently, *Shame about those.*

"How did youse two start playing the gether?" she asked.

"Jesus. Come on, we don't *play.*"

"Ah don't know the slang, do ah? So when did youse two start going to the bingo the gether? Bridge? Canasta?" She pulled a smart-arse smile. "Is that better?"

Mungo's eye started to pulse. "James has a doocot. He raises pigeons."

Mo-Maw mugged as though she might be sick. "Ah don't know how ye could, beady-eyed wee buggers. Ah swear they just need to see me and then they try an shite on me." She was peering at the tawny boy as she leaned out of the serving hatch. Mungo wished she would button her blouse. James let himself be pored over. Mo-Maw cocked her head in recognition and fell back into the snack bar. "Here now, are you Jimmy Jamieson's boy?" Before James could answer, Mo-Maw slapped the counter. "Ye bloody are. I can tell. Ye're a big handsome wan just like yer da."

James didn't answer, but he looked uncomfortable. Mo-Maw took a polystyrene cup and poured James some of her wine. "Here, ah winched him once. Years ago. Your granny had a conniption when she heard I was a Protestant. But ah've always believed in bringing the religions the gether."

James reached up and cradled the cup with both hands, as though it were a communion chalice. "Thanks for doing your part, Mrs Hamilton."

Mo-Maw had warmed to the young man instantly. She raised her cup in salute. "But here, Mungo, think how different it would be if Mr Jamieson was your da." She snorted, and waved her hand. "No, wait, what am I saying? James, think how much fun it would be if ah was yer mammy. Eh?"

"I'd like that," he lied. The front of his teeth were already staining with wine. "I like your perm."

"See!" Mo-Maw had a weakness for compliments, she never seemed to care if they were sincere or not. She pointed accusatorily at Mungo. "He's only been my son for five seconds and already a nice word. Now that's how ye talk to a wummin."

NINETEEN

The second time they lay together the greediness of the first fever had broken. Now there was no hurry, no selfishness. Afterwards, they lay in the glare of the three-bar fire and turned only when the heat became too much. The electric fire was crowned with a layer of fake plastic coals in imitation of a real fireplace. There was a tinny fan underneath the coals that whirled and sent an artificial firelight dancing across the ceiling. Mungo lay back on the blue rug and watched the flames flicker. James told him how his mother had come to hate this fire. She had loved it when they were children, but as her end came nearer, she said the flames made her think of hell.

Mungo held him tight. James walked his fingers across Mungo's belly. He allowed himself a daydream as he traced his imaginary walker across the pale stomach, into the gullies of his hips and across the rise in his breastbone. Mungo's skin was a snowy plain, a landscape of unblemished emptiness. James teased the line of fine hair that ran down the centre of his stomach. He blew on it and said it reminded him of the grass verges between two fields.

"Imagine living somewhere quiet like this. What it would be like to see as far as you could, nothing but fields and not a soul for miles and miles."

His talk of leaving had begun to irritate Mungo. He wanted James to be here, in the now, not staring into the far distance, worried about his father's return. Mungo ran his hand over his body, he pushed his luck. "Why would you leave? You already own all this."

"Is it mine?"

Mungo nodded.

James used the edge of his hand. He ran it across Mungo's sticky belly like he was slicing him up. "In that case, how much do you think I would get for it if I subdivided it and parcelled it off for a Barratt estate?"

“Nothing. Nobody else wants it.”

James tweaked at the faint line of pubic hair that ran from Mungo’s cock to his navel. “I dunno. How many head of cattle do you think I could feed on this?” He lowered his muzzle to Mungo’s belly and grazed lightly.

Mungo relaxed under the light kisses. “If you left, where would you go anyhows? Edinburgh?”

James collapsed across him. “Nah. I went wi’ the school once. Four poun’ for a cheese sandwich. Too fuckin’ stuck-up. Can ye imagine what they would say about how we talk?”

“London?”

“No way. *Really* expensive. ‘Asides, ye get mad riots down there, don’t ye? In Brixton and that. It looks rougher than the Calton.” He started singing “Guns of Brixton” to himself, a fair distance from the actual melody. *“Yeese kin crush us, yeese kin bruise us, but yeese’ll huv tae answer to, ohahwoaoh, the Orange drums of Cahhl-ton.”*

The Clash reminded Mungo of Hamish; he had once stomped a boy to unconsciousness while singing “Police and Thieves.” Mungo slid his hand over James’s mouth to silence him. Then he pushed two fingers between his lips just to see what it felt like. He probed the soft fat of his cheek, the scarred ridges of his back molars. He was quiet a long while, recording all these private textures.

James spat out the fingers. “Ardnamurchan.”

“Ard-na-*how?*”

“Murchan. It’s Gaelic for *jutting out into the sea* or something. We went there when my mammy was sick. It was the last holiday we took as a family. It’s just this quiet, lonely wee bit of Scotland that sticks all the way out into the sea. There were definitely way more sheep than people and the road was so narrow they only let one car go at a time. There was one day, when it was too dreich for my mammy to be outside, that I went walking by maself. I found a quiet bay, you had to scramble down the cliffside to reach it. It was terrifyin’, but I could see there was something down at the water’s edge. When I got down there, there was a cluster of old stone bothies just abandoned by the people that used to live there. A whole village. Poof, up and gone.”

“Poof?” Mungo chuckled.

James rolled over and continued his lazy grazing. “It’s the most secret place I’ve ever seen. There’s another less hidden beach on the far side of the peninsula that wraps around into a horseshoe and has perfect white sand beaches and

crystal-clear water all year round. White sand, pure white, like sugar. They dared me to go for a swim, and I did, all the way out to a big skerrie and back."

"The sea air would be good for your cough."

"Well then, mibbe that's the place. Ma da said it's hard for the farmers to get good help, on account of it being heavy remote. He stopped at one farm and tried to sell Geraldine cos she was moaning of carsickness."

Mungo ran his fingers through the flaxen hair. He wanted to shake him, to scream. Instead he tried his hardest to look unbothered and said, "If you wait till I'm sixteen then we could split the cost. It'd be cheaper."

James stopped his grazing. It would be seven more months before Mungo turned sixteen, before he could finish school and not have the Social come after him. It seemed a lifetime. "What if I can't hide till your birthday?"

"*Fourteen*, only fourteen more shore leaves with your da. It's not that much when you think about it lit that." He held up his fingers. "Look, it *almost* fits on two hands."

"He will kill me, Mungo. I know he will. What if I can't make it to then?"

James lay his head on Mungo's stomach again, he rubbed his face on his belly like his nose was itchy. Mungo liked to look at the untouched pinkness behind his ears, how the wheat-coloured hair curled slightly, and was a thousand different shades as it crept towards the nape of his neck. Of all the intimate parts of James he was discovering this was his most favourite. He liked to think he was the only person to care about it.

There was a blackhead forming on his neck; Mungo dug at it with his nails. "You can make it. You have made it so far already. I'll go anywhere with you. But if I leave afore I'm sixteen there'll be bother. I need to be sure Mo-Maw is awright. And I can't lump her on our Jodie. Cos I need to be certain Jodie makes it to college. She's worked too hard for it."

"Mo-Maw seemed fine to me."

"You've no seen her with a good soak in her. When Jocky ends it, somebody has to be there for her."

James rolled over to face him, he squinted in disbelief. "Chickie Calhoun."

"Whut?"

"Ye'll be Chickie Calhoun. I get it now."

"Stop saying that."

"I can see exactly what you want and it's not guid. If yer no careful, you'll be stuck here with her, with Mo-Maw, for all your days. A wee bachelor living on

the third floor with his poor mammy and shuffling about in a cagoule to buy his messages. Suffering Jesus. The best part of your day will be standing outside the butcher's and talking to the other old wummin about the weather. Then you'll carry your fish supper home in a string bag and lock every snib behind yourself. And for whut?"

"For her."

"Then ye're as daft as ye look."

"Yeah, you wouldnae understand." He inhaled sharply as if he could suck the cruel words back out of the air. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He felt James go stiff as a board.

"Aye, I'm sorry my mammy is dead an all."

"I didnae mean it."

James scowled up at him. "I suppose I could wait. I suppose I could try harder with the fountain girls. See if you ever grow the fuck up."

"Aye. Do that. If you must." Suddenly he wanted James off of him, but Mungo didn't have to ask because James sat up and wiped the spume from the corner of his mouth. "How can you be like this?"

"Lit what?"

James leaned forward and turned off the electric fire. The flames on the ceiling flickered and died. "Christ's sake, Mungo. You must be steamin'. Have you forgotten what it's like out there? If they knew, they would stab us! Rip us from balls to chin just for something to talk about down the pub."

"I know."

"We're lower than shite to them."

"I know."

"Those lassies. I'd only be doing this for you."

"*Me?* I never asked you for anything."

The boys were staring at each other. James was colouring, digging at the gap in his front teeth. "Can you no see? If I stick around for you then I need to follow his rules. If I'm under his roof I need to try."

It was a trick, it felt like one of Ha-Ha's. This is for your own good. *Blam.* I'm only doing this because you asked for it. *Blam.* You will thank me later. *Blam.*

They had slid further apart; all sharp shins and hollow clavicles, nothing but angular bones wrapped in blue-white skin. They drifted on the sea of navy-blue carpet like calved icebergs that were pulling away from each other. Mungo

reached for his discarded clothes.

“Where are you going?”

“Away.”

“Naw.”

“Don’t fuckin’ tell me what to do.”

James grabbed his ankle and started dragging Mungo back across the carpet towards him. The carpet burned. His body filled with electricity. Mungo was unsure how to feel, he knew he wanted to kick him in the face, but what he wanted more, infinitely more, was to be tethered to his side.

James wrapped his arms around Mungo until the twitching stopped and the desire to flee abated. They wrestled for a while. He tried to tilt Mungo’s chin to look him in the eyes. But again and again Mungo wriggled free and buried his face in his neck. He didn’t want to be reasoned with. He didn’t want to be all grown-up.

“Don’t be so fuckin’ moody.”

“You can talk,” said Mungo, except his lips were pressed against the muscles of James’s shoulder, so the sound that escaped was unintelligible.

“Whut? Whut?” James tickled him. He only wanted one more smile. Mungo dribbled pools of slaver across his skin. James didn’t wipe the spittle from his shoulder, he didn’t ask Mungo to move, even after their arms had fallen asleep, and their legs began to prickle with pins and needles. They sat wrapped in one another for a long time, long enough for the chill to enter the room. There was the distant jingle of an ice cream van. James kissed him. “Ye have nothing to worry about. Yer ma girl now. Until ye can come away wi’ us. I’ll do what I can.” James pressed his fingers between Mungo’s ribs, played a silent tune, and moved them up and down as though Mungo was an accordion.

In the end, three more days of happiness became only two and a quarter. Mungo felt short-changed, stopped short, swindled. All day, he had a sense that something promised had been stolen; like when you chose the biggest bag of crisps, opened it, and it was mostly just empty air.

“Are ye sure ye want to come?” asked James. He had asked the same thing four times now. It was already the gloaming and the park was getting dark. Far from the amber glare of the street lights, the evening was a watery type of grey.

“I do,” said Mungo. He knew if he didn’t go, he would hide at home, and the

horrors he could imagine would feel one million times worse.

The boys stunk of the same cheap aftershave. Their armpits were caked in aerosol deodorant that they had applied so thickly that it slithered like whipped cream beneath their shirts. James rammed his shoulder into Mungo's and knocked him from the path. "Listen, don't torture yourself, awright? I *have* to go through with it."

"Don't worry about me." Mungo tried to smile and found that he couldn't. "Mibbe they will do a two-for-one special. Poke one lassie, get one poke free."

"I dare ye to suggest a loyalty programme." He laughed, green eyes blazing. "And then run as fast as ye fuckin' can."

The park had only just started to come into spring leaf. There was a break in the cold rain, but everything was still dripping wet. A black path wound through the grass like a slick tongue. The fountain girls were huddled along the back of a rotted bench, bobbing and beady-eyed, like the cold pigeons that waited for the pensioners who came with the end of a loaf. Men's jumpers were pulled down over foreshortened school skirts, and their hair was gelled and scraped away from their faces. Each of them had a fringe, spindly and stiff, that they had rolled and lacquered over a round brush. Now they shot out and curled over their bright faces like awnings on a shopfront.

"What did ye bring us?" asked Nicola, the largest of the three girls.

James emptied the pockets of his anorak and produced a small bottle of MD 20/20, a ten-packet of Embassy Lights, and up his sleeve was a rolled-up copy of *NME* with a haloed Morrissey on the cover. He laid them on the bench and stepped back.

"That magazine is ancient. Who is that on the cover?" asked Nicola, her mouth a cage of metal braces. It was one of James's sister's magazines, almost a decade old by now. Nicola peered at Morrissey with a look of disgust, saying she would have preferred something with Take That, EMF, or The Shamen.

"Bout time you learnt some of the classics."

"You like the same stuff as my Granny Eileen." Nicola sniffed. "Anyway, I thought you had chucked us the rubber ear."

"Aye," agreed the smallest and prettiest girl. Her skin was clear and pale as moonlight, her fine bones made her look even younger than she was. Her face told that she was still discovering how to use make-up, and she looked like a child, painted and rouged from her mammy's dresser. But she took a drag on her cigarette and when she spoke she had a voice deep as a man's. James told

Mungo later that Ashley had seven elder brothers at home and that she had a mouth like a publican on Old Firm day. She said, “It’s a pure disgrace the way ye can keep three beautiful lassies waiting. I’ve got half this splintered bench up my hole, all because ah’ve been sat here waiting for the grand Prince Wingnut to arrive.”

Mungo saw James fidget with his wool bunnet. “My doos were sick.”

“Naebody cares about yer stupit pigeons. It’s embarrassin’.” Ashley glanced towards the park gates. Then she yawned. “Ah could have been away wi’ Jimmy Fitzsimmons. His big sister’s got a new sunbed.”

“Don’t say that,” James said. “You know I think ye’re a pure honey.”

Mungo must have flinched. He knew what he was here for – he had begged James to let him come along – but it still hurt to hear his lips make sweet words for someone else. Ashley ran her eyes over him. “An’ who’s this wee bender?”

James introduced him. “He telt me he liked your Angela.” He nodded at the girl who hadn’t spoken.

“Ma name is *Angelique.*” She pronounced it *And-Jahr-Leak-Ee.* “Get it right.” She scowled at Mungo. He knew her vaguely from the talk of the streets; she excelled, strangely enough, at German, and could swim further and stay submerged longer than any boy on the scheme. “Are you Ha-Ha’s wee brother? Ah telt him no to chase Sammy-Jo. Everybody knows she only wanted a wean so she could get away from her maw and get a council house of her own.”

“She’ll have a long wait,” said Mungo. “She can’t leave till she’s sixteen and even then her mammy will have to throw her out to show emotional distress or something.”

“Aye, that’s what I telt her. Gullible bitch.” She laughed bitterly. She had already warmed to Mungo. “Yer much better looking than yer brother.”

“Do you kiss better an all?” asked Nicola, who was still holding Morrissey at arm’s length. The girls all erupted in squeals of laughter. Suddenly they were fifteen again, only children after all.

“What did ye bring us?” asked Ashley. James already had his hand on her knee, he was moving his lips from her earlobe down to her fine neck.

Mungo dug around in his cagoule pocket for three bars of Terry’s mint chocolate.

Nicola immediately tore into it. “Whut? I’ve no had my dinner. My mammy’s at the infirmary with my wee brother. He swallowed an Easter ornament.”

James’s lips were locked over Ashley’s. Their mouths were opening and

closing so wide that Mungo could see the muscle strain on James's jaw. It was more of a mauling than a kiss but Ashley was swooning, encouraging him with little groans of pleasure. The ash from her cigarette dangled and fell on to the wet ground.

The other girls ate the chocolate and passed the bottle of Mad Dog between themselves. "Here, if you mix them, it tastes like one of they fancy cocktails."

Mungo stood in the middle of the damp pathway and tried not to watch James. The girls flicked through the magazine, laughing at the dated haircuts on pop groups that had long since disbanded, and ignored Mungo entirely. He was certain he could walk away and no one would call after him. Angelique eventually looked up at him and studied him for a moment. Her face was peppered with pretty ginger freckles. "My mammy says you have roulettes. Is that true?"

"Roulettes?"

Angelique blinked half a dozen times in quick succession. Her tongue hung out of the side of her mouth like a strangled dog's. "Do ye?"

Mungo watched the double-decker buses chug along the Parade. He imagined himself on the top deck, going somewhere, anywhere away from here. He didn't know if he had Tourette's – he didn't want to know. When his blinking and ticcing had first become noticeable, Jodie had taken him to see the doctor. Dr Chaudhry had not seemed too concerned. She asked Mungo if there was stress in his life, if he was experiencing a particularly anxious time. Jodie had started laughing – not her usual affectation, but a nervous giggle that worsened the more she tried to hold it in. It was infectious, and Mungo began to laugh at the sight of his sister struggling to maintain her composure. Dr Chaudhry had become annoyed with them, and accused them of wasting her time. Jodie eventually gathered herself, and apologized, and said yes, she believed Mungo had stress in his life, and that it was nothing especially new.

The doctor said the stuttering facial muscles were not anything to be worried about, not yet. She said that they should increase the vitamins and magnesium in Mungo's diet, but that if it didn't calm down in six to nine months they should return, because it might be a sign of nerve damage or, more likely, Tourette's. Fourteen months had passed and Mungo hadn't returned to the doctor. He would rather not know and live in the faint hope of the ignorant; praying that it might clear up one day, in the same way his eruption of teenage acne had come and gone.

“I don’t know,” said Mungo.

At that moment five men appeared on the crest of the path. They passed under a canopy of trees and dipped in and out of the gloomy daylight. Each man had a single golf iron over his shoulder, and they walked, bandy-legged, towards the young lovers. Mungo froze. James stopped mauling Ashley and looked to the advancing men, trying to discern if they were neds or actually golfers. Imperceptibly, the boys rose on to the balls of their feet. As the men came closer, one of them was swinging his club as though the youths were a thicket and he wanted to clear a path through them. Mungo stepped back and on to the grass, and the men passed by without incident. Mungo and James shared a glance. They didn’t take their eyes from the men until they faded from view.

“So, which one of us do ye like?” asked Angelique.

“What?” Mungo turned back to the girl. He shrugged. “I think ye’re both lovely.”

‘Well ye cannae kiss us both, we’re no perverts.”

“Ah should go wi’ him,” said Nicola, the chocolate clotted on her braces. “Ah winched his brother.”

“What, is it a family account?”

“Naw. Ah’m just saying, everybody already knows ah’ve been wi’ a Hamilton. This one wouldn’t count a whole different person. It’s like a half-point or somethin’. It’s no as bad.”

“Wie du willst,” said Angelique in gruff German. She took up the *NME* again and was flicking through the pages. “But I’m no standing at the bushes keeping edgy for ye.”

Nicola stepped off the bench and held out her hand like he had asked her to dance. Her assertiveness terrified him. She led him across the path and into some muddy ground surrounded by thick rhododendron bushes. It was a gloomy kind of dark in the centre. With no hesitation, she pressed up against him and took him in her arms.

Nicola was easily a head taller than James, and Mungo had to arch his back and stand on his toes as her mouth reached downwards and clamped over his. She smelled of fresh apple shampoo and like she lived in a house full of smokers. He could feel the jagged edge of her braces as she opened her mouth wide as a bin lid.

Mungo tried to match what she did and started counting from a thousand back to zero. He made it to 944 before she pushed him away. Nicola began smacking

her chocolatey lips, as though she tasted something she hadn’t enjoyed. She peered at him in the darkness. The last of the daylight, dying somewhere far away, glinted in her pupils.

TWENTY

Mungo stood just beyond the bend in the road and watched them through the smirr. He picked at a patch of green paint that was clinging to the rusting fence. As he watched the laughing girls, he pushed the shard between his nail and nail bed, gritting his teeth as the paint flake cut into the soft skin.

The girls were huddled in the dry doorway. They were struggling against each other, two pushing inwards while the smallest one tried to hold them at bay. It looked like a fight but they were shrieking with glee and talking so loudly that women had gathered at their windows. Nicola easily reached over Ashley's head and held her finger against the old close buzzer. The electric intercom shrieked. The sound carried down the narrow street, *tweeeee-eee-eee-eeee*, *tweeeee-eeee-ee*, *tweeeeeeee-ee*.

"Ah'm gonnae murder you," Ashley hissed, but she was clearly delighted. She turned to run, but Nicola had hold of her anorak hood, so she threw her ringed fingers over her face, splayed wide enough to keep watching what was happening. "Ah'll die of embarrassment."

"Hallo. Is anybody there?" It was James's voice, as friendly as it must have sounded to the masturbating men on the chatline.

The girls took turns to squeal into the intercom declarations of love for him and confessions of how Ashley was mad in the passion. Ashley tried to clamp her hands over her friends' mouths, but they twisted free, and it was a battle she didn't really want to win.

"If ye come out to the park, Ashley says she'll let you dae *whatever* ye want to her."

Ashley shrieked. "Oh. My. God. I cannae believe you jist telt him that."

Mungo did not hear the rest of their nonsense. He was too busy watching the top floor window. Mr Jamieson had his hands in his trouser pockets. His back

was arched in pride, he was rocking on his heels. He stood in his window and watched the foolish schoolgirls declare true love for his son. Mungo watched the smile pull at his top lip.

“Have you been chewing the telly remote again?” Jodie pounced on him as he came in the door. It wasn’t a question, and she didn’t wait for an answer. Most of the time he wasn’t aware he was doing it, but he liked to chew the grey remote. It fit perfectly inside his mouth, and he could push it all the way into the back and clench his molars down on to it until he felt calmer. The plastic squeaked satisfactorily, and it was strong enough that he could clamp down his hardest, till he was vibrating with the effort. Crushing the remote between his back teeth focused the current that ran through his body. He hadn’t chewed it in a while. But this afternoon, he had found a familiar comfort in it. Jodie pulled a sour face as she wiped it on her skirt.

There were six books laid out on the carpet: three fine art books, a dog-eared novel, a manual of Fair Isle knitting, and a book of traditional Scottish weaving. Each book was opened to a specific page and pinned down by something personal of Jodie’s. She had arranged them in a semicircle.

“What are they?” he asked sulkily.

Jodie blinked once, very slowly. “*Those* are books.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I’m going to read them.”

“But how?”

Jodie gave him one of those looks that tired women give to stupid boys; it was hard to tell if she felt sorry for him or sorrier for herself for having to suffer him. She looked worn out in her work uniform. Her ice cream costume was prim and old-fashioned with its raspberry piping and scalloped collar, but Mungo could see that it needed ironing and he resolved to wash it for her. Jodie still wore the kirby grips that held her paper hat in place, and as she drew them out, she used them to point at the books. “Actually, I got the books for you.”

“But how?”

“Stop saying that. For goodness’ sake. It’s *why,* not *how. Why* did I get them for you. Are you going to talk like a schemie wee bam your whole life?”

Mungo kicked his trainers off. “Didnae realize I was such an embarrassment to you.”

“Don’t you want to go somewhere in life, Mungo?” Jodie was out of patience. “Sakes. I got them because I need to talk to you.” She dropped heavily to the floor. Sitting in the semicircle, she pushed one of the books towards him like it was a Ouija board. It was a white-covered book with drawings of different-coloured boxes stacked one on top of the other: *Ellsworth Kelly, The Museum of Modern Art.* The cover was already yellowing, but when Mungo checked the inside flap, the library ticket showed it was the first time it had been checked out.

“I had to ask the Mitchell Library for their copy. I’ve been waiting on some of these for a few months.”

Mungo flicked through the book; page after page was covered in organized hatch marks or supremely controlled line drawings. Rectangles of fine lines that collided to make patterns and depth of tone from their layered repetition. It was very controlled. He found it calming. “Why are you doing this?”

Jodie sighed. She reached into her schoolbag and pulled out an official-looking letter. Handing it to him, she spoke in short, complete sentences, almost as though it would be better parsed out this way. “I’ve been accepted. Unconditionally. I start in September. I’m going to university.”

“Glasgow?”

“Yes. To study Biology.”

He lunged at her and crushed her with his body weight. Underneath him, he could feel her relax as though she had been stiff with tension. They lay against the settee and she returned his embrace. “That’s bloody amazing.” He chanted into her hair. “I knew it. *I knew.*”

When they sat up again, she was weeping with relief. Her face was slick with tears and her hair was sticking to her damp cheeks. “God. I’m glad you’re happy. I was worried. I got this letter last week and I had nobody to tell. *Haaah-ha.*”

He picked at his cheekbone as his memories of James tinted with feelings of guilt. He had been a glutton with his three days. He had been selfish. “Wait just a minute, okay?” Before she could protest, he spun from the room. When he returned, he had a plate with a towering sandwich on it. There were eight layers of bleached white bread and between each layer he had smeared thick raspberry jam. Mungo had carved it into a rough cylindrical shape, then he sliced it into quarters. He crowned the cake with a blue birthday candle that was half-spent.

Jodie clapped her hands and counted the slices of flattened bread. “*Huit-feuille.* My compliments to the chef.”

“I dunno what you are banging on about, but if you close your eyes, I bet it tastes just like Victoria sponge.”

They sat cross-legged on the carpet and Mungo cheered as Jodie blew out the candle. She didn’t tell him what she had wished for. They tried to eat a slice each, but only Mungo made it further than one bite, scarlet jam gathering in the corners of his smile.

“Are you. Going to be. A doctor?” He couldn’t eat, talk, and breathe at the same time.

She picked at the sweet sandwich. “No, I want to learn about the ocean. I’m going to specialize in Marine Biology. S’pose that’s one thing to thank Fat Gillespie for. All that time on the Ayr coast and I realized I didn’t know anything about the sea.”

“Can’t ye just watch David Attenborough and learn about it lit that?” Mungo crammed more bread into his mouth. “‘Asides, I wonder. How long. The bus will take?”

“What? To the sea?”

“No. To university. You’ll have to change buses in town you know.”

Jodie slid her plate away from herself. “I won’t get the bus.”

“Well you can’t *walk* that far.” He was incredulous at her stupidity. Jodie was never stupid.

“No, you’re right.” She wiped the corners of her mouth. “I’ll need to move to the West End. Into the halls of residence with the other students.”

An image of James flashed across his mind. “But I can’t move.”

“I know.” She pushed his hair away from his face. “The halls have single beds. I need to go alone. You’ll need to stay here. *Haaah-ha.*”

“Oh.” Several expressions crossed his face. He slid from happiness to disbelief and finally tried to cover his own rejection and embarrassment with a stoic tightening of his lips and eyelids.

“Mungo, you’re bleeding everywhere!” Jodie shot to her feet. There was blood on the carpet and the cover of the Ellsworth Kelly book. Jodie hated anything to happen to a book. She mostly kept hers in the safety of her bedroom, safe from their double lives as tea coasters or dustpans to sweep cigarette ash on to. Jodie took his bleeding hand into her own. “You have a piece of metal stuck into your thumb.”

“I do?”

“Mungo, how could you not feel that?”

Jodie used her teeth to pull the shard of paint from the nail bed. Without a second thought, she put his whole thumb into her mouth and sucked the blood from it. Mungo could feel her quick tongue worry the edge of his nail. She drew it out and looked at it closely again. “Stupid bloody boy. How could you not know you had a piece of metal in your nail? You’re gonnae need a tetanus jab.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

She was squeezing the nail, inspecting it for more rust and then cleaning the blood that came forth.

“When do you leave anyhows?”

“What?” She had forgotten all her news in her concern for his thumb. The earlier joy that had flooded his face had now drained away. His cheekbone was already twitching as his eyes reddened with a hurt he was trying to hide from her.

Jodie sat in Mo-Maw’s comfy chair. She pulled Mungo towards her and at first he resisted. But Jodie held tight. “C’mon. You’re never too big for a cuddle.” She drew her brother on to her lap and held him close to her. He was much taller than her now. His gangly legs twisted upon themselves till they were both curled up, like two Siamese cats, cradled in the softness of the burst recliner. “You’re getting too heavy for this.” She took his bleeding thumb and inserted it into his mouth. He sucked on it for a while. He could taste her spittle, it tasted like sweet raspberry jam. “My little baby is growing up.”

“Cansh I come vishit?” He was lisping around his bleeding thumb.

“Anytime you want. I’ll even dandle you like this in front of strangers, if you like.”

He toyed with her cabled ponytail. “Well done, Jodie. You’re a credit to yourself. I didn’t mean to thspoil it.”

She pointed with her toe at the books on the floor. “I thought we could talk about some things that might inspire you.”

He took his thumb from his mouth to see if it was still bleeding. It wasn’t but he went on sucking it. He started to bite down on it, grinding, testing it, then clenching it between his back teeth.

“You like to draw, don’t you? Maybe you could do something with that when you leave school.”

Mungo gazed at the books. Then he dropped his head again and nuzzled into her shoulder. “Naw. I’m not smart like you.”

Jodie could hear his molars squeak against his thumb, it raised the hair on the

back of her neck. “You’re smarter than you think. And perfectly capable.” She squeezed her brother. “Hey? Is this about Mo-Maw?” Mungo didn’t answer her. Jodie watched her brother as his eyes slid towards to the soundless television. Something dimmed in his gaze.

She hadn’t needed to ask if it was about Mo-Maw. Everything about this boy was about his mother. He lived for her in a way that she had never lived for him. It was as though Mo-Maw was a puppeteer, and she had the tangled, knotted strings of him in her hands. She animated every gesture he made: the timid smile, the thrumming nerves, the anxious biting, the worry, the pleasing, the way he made himself smaller in any room he was in, the watchful way he stood on the edge before committing, and the kindness, the big, big love.

Jodie often marvelled at it, but mostly she hated it: the way he gave Mo-Maw love without thought of reward. Or maybe it was that he heaped and heaped it on in the hopes he would get a fraction of it in return, like his love was some undervalued currency. It made her think of the lassies in her Home Economics class who came back after the summer holidays, with their hair in beaded braids and all their tan on the fronts of them, from the burned tip of their noses to the top of their sore-looking thighs. Two weeks in Benidorm and now they spoke of being millionaires, but their newfound wealth was in pesetas, and Jodie knew they were worth just as much as they always had been.

Mungo’s capacity for love frustrated her. His loving wasn’t selflessness; he simply couldn’t help it. Mo-Maw needed so little and he produced too much, so that it all seemed a horrible waste. It was a harvest no one had seeded, and it blossomed from a vine no one had tended. It should have withered years ago, like hers had, like Hamish’s had. Yet Mungo had all this love to give and it lay about him like ripened fruit and nobody bothered to gather it up.

Mrs Campbell had once said Mungo’s forgiveness was biblical, but Jodie didn’t care much for the Bible, she thought it was stupid of him to be so easily exploited. She thought it was a little bit sad, a little bit weak. Her brother had all this love and forgiveness for an elfin wee woman who thought about herself first and last and in between. She was a terrible mother. Jodie didn’t like to say that about another woman, but she was. She was terrible. Hamish knew it. Jodie knew it. She wondered when Mungo would too.

Mungo sighed in a way that shook her bones. She could see the television reflected in his limpid irises; his pupils had expanded, his gaze was unfocused. “I wish you would talk to me, Mungo.”

He answered her without looking at her. “I talk to you every single day.”

“No. I jist wish you would tell me what you are feeling.”

“Feelin’?” He thought about it for a moment, and then said, “I’m hungry again. But I can’t be bothered to get up.”

Jodie shoved him away from her.

He was Mo-Maw’s youngest son, but he was also her confidant, her lady’s maid, and errand boy. He was her one flattering mirror, and her teenage diary, her electric blanket, her doormat. He was her best pal, the dog she hardly walked, and her greatest romance. He was her cheer on a dreich morning, the only laughter in her audience.

Jodie shunted him again but Mungo only grumbled and curled tighter around her.

Her brother was her mother’s minor moon, her warmest sun, and at the exact same time, a tiny satellite that she had forgotten about. He would orbit her for an eternity, even as she, and then he, broke into bits.

Jodie flicked the tip of his nose. “Sputnik.”

“Whut? Shh. I’m watching this.”

Jodie ran her fingers through her brother’s hair. Mungo smelled of a strange new deodorant, something animal and loud. It was the type of scent the boys in her year smothered themselves in, it was full of pheromones and held promises of a fight or a fingering. It didn’t suit him. She sniffed the top of his head.

“Pack it in!” He shifted like he was uncomfortable. As he slowly resettled beside her, he took care to make sure he wasn’t squashing her. Jodie thought about how Mungo had moulded himself so entirely around Mo-Maw, how she had formed him into the exact component piece that she had been missing, and now that she didn’t need him anymore, he was stuck in this weird specific shape. She wondered what lay ahead for her baby brother. What woman would love him now? She hoped for someone who would be grateful for his good looks and reticent ways. Someone who would feel blessed by his quiet attention, who would take all his love and keep it safe. There would be girls who would want to mother him forever, who’d be reduced by the helpless dip of his eyes into some primitive need to cook and clean and care for him. There could be others who would exploit him, who would feel so low about themselves that they would see his love for them as weakness, something he should be punished for.

Mungo’s eyes came back into focus. He turned his head to meet her gaze. He frowned. “Who the fuck are ye staring at?”

“You. Mungo. I like you. You’re good stuff.”

Mungo looked a little surprised.

Jodie returned his attention to the books on the floor. “I know she doesn’t take an interest in you. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take an interest in yourself.”

“Eugh! What wummin’s magazine did ye get that guff from?” Mungo wiped his thumb on his denims. “Anyhows, I think I’ll just sell speed for Hamish. There’s guid money in it.”

Jodie slapped him in the centre of his chest. He blinked in shock. “Listen, I will cuddle you anytime you want, Mungo. Even if we are eighty-five you can sit on my knee till you break my hips, awright? Just *please* don’t get tangled up with Hamish.”

Mungo nodded slowly. She could tell it pained him to lie to her.

She dropped the subject of education, hoping that if she left the books where they lay he would start to sniff around them for himself. They sat curled up together and watched the end of *EastEnders*. And then Jodie ate the rest of her slice of bread cake just to please him. She went to bed and was unable to sleep, shivery with sugar, and feeling guilty about her brother.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Hamish had a wild-eyed look to him as he let Mungo into the McConnachie flat. It was the middle of the day and he wore a pair of boxer shorts that hung off his wiry frame and flapped about his lean, muscular legs. He slumped on the edge of the settee and resumed watching his television programme; children’s nonsense about squeaking puppets on a moon made of cheese.

Adrianna was in her bouncing chair gazing up at her father. The baby was gurgling to herself, her fat fist in her mouth, her chin slick with spit. With his bare foot Hamish pressed on the bouncing chair. He pumped it like he was a machinist who had been told there was no overtime pay. He was distracted by the television and was bouncing it too hard. On the table was a decent amount of speed that he had been dividing into clear baggies. Mungo wondered how long he had been hunched like this, chronic with adrenaline.

Hamish asked him again. “Where have ye been?”

“Nowhere.”

“I telt Jodie four days ago I needed yer help.”

Mungo mimicked the cooing noises he had heard Mrs Campbell make at her grandchildren. He plucked the baby from the chair before Hamish did it a harm. He stepped quickly to the side, fearful of blocking the television and the squeaking mice. The baby was damp, slick with sweat. He undressed it, better surely to be out in the dry, cold air than damp and warm in its onesie.

The mice blasted off in a rocket. Hamish made a deep inhalation, like he had forgotten to breathe and suddenly discovered the magic of it again. He looked down at the amphetamine piles on the table and then up at his brother and daughter. Mungo did not speak until he was spoken to.

“So, where have ye been?” Hamish had been chewing his bottom lip.

“Just around.” Mungo doused the little girl in some talcum powder, the baby blinked in surprise. He rolled her in it, like he was breading chicken.

Hamish threw his arm around the speed. “Watch it wi’ that, you.” Then he thought again and snatched the talcum from Mungo. He loosened the top and added a handful to the amphetamine and stirred it through. He dabbed at it and licked his finger to see if it was too much. He winced.

“It’s perfumed.”

“I see that now. What do ye mean, just *around?*”

Mungo wrapped the baby in a towel and sat her on his knee, glad to have the talisman of her between Hamish and himself. “I dunno, I’ve been here, where else would I be?” He tried to divert the questioning. “Did you need something?”

“Did I need something?” Hamish pulled a sour face. “Naw. I’m out here trying to build a family business and look after a greetin’ wean. All the while I’ve got to creep around cos I smashed a polis just because you were wanting to play doctors and nurses wi’ a ginger glue huffer. Naw. Ah’m fine, Mungo. Thanks for asking but I can manage.”

On the television two stuffed bears were reading a book to each other while a gormless blond man pretended not to be surprised. Hamish watched it a while and ran his tongue around his mouth. He seemed to be unable to stop biting at his own lips. “So, is it a girl?”

“Is what a girl?”

“Whoever the fuck you have been just *around* with.”

“No.”

Hamish blinked once behind his thick lenses. Then he laughed, a false, deep, threatening laugh. “I see you are feelin’ gallus the day. I admire that. However, I will still slap ye across this room, even if ye are holding my daughter. So, do us

both a favour. Cut the shite."

"I've just been around, Hamish. I've made a pal."

"Aw I see. Here I am getting ready to do battle and yer playing like a wean. Did ye enjoy making mud pies? Or are ye more of a fly-my-kite-across-Glasgow-Green kind of rascal?" Hamish was not expecting a laugh. "Who is he?"

"Nobody you know." Mungo tried to sound easy.

"Try me."

Mungo could feel that he was running out of road. "His name is James."

Hamish sucked on his front teeth. "Wee Jimmy Gilchrist? Gimpy Jimmy? Rabbie's twin, Jamesy-Samesy? Don't make me guess. Jimmy *who?*"

"James Jamieson."

When they were smaller, there was a puggy machine at Mo-Maw's favourite bingo. Mo-Maw called it "the babysitter" and for twenty minutes' peace she gave them each a handful of coins. When you dropped a coin in it, you listened to it bounce off a series of pegs and rattle into the machine's belly. The drop took an eternity before the machine lit up and blinded you with its party lights. Sometimes the coin bounced its long route only to miss the trigger and fall out of the machine again. Hamish hated that, the anticipation and then the disappointment, he huffed on his coins and polished them until they gleamed, thinking this would make a difference. Now Mungo tensed up and watched and waited for Hamish's proverbial penny to drop. He hoped it would slide past him, not trigger him, and then Mungo could pretend to drop it and James's name would roll under the settee.

"James Jamieson?" Hamish shook his head. Then his glasses shifted upwards slightly as he wrinkled his nose in recollection and then disgust. "You don't mean that wee papist?" All his lights were ablaze now, and as he sprung to his feet, he drew his arm back.

Mungo recoiled in the chair, he pulled his knees to his chest and held the baby between them. Hamish tried to reach around the laughing girl but Mungo moved her quickly like a human shield. "We're just pals. We just hang around the gether." He was almost screaming. Hamish stepped back, he loosened his fists and the blood returned to his knuckles. He started pacing the front room. Mungo knew not to speak unless he was spoken to. He dared not lower the laughing shield.

When Hamish finally spoke again, he was sitting on the edge of the coffee

table, knee to knee with his brother and eye level with his child. There was a mess of clean baby clothes on the arm of the chair. Hamish started folding them carefully and talking sweetly to his daughter as though Mungo was not even in the room.

“You will stop hanging around with him.”

“Hamish, c’mon.”

“Listen. You *will* stop hanging around with him.”

“You can’t tell me what to do anymore.”

Hamish nodded once, Mungo watched the muscles in his shoulders tighten and then relax. He whispered sweet nothings to the dribbling baby. *You’re a lovely wee thing aren’t ye?* And then he added in a low voice, “You will stop hanging around with him and on Saturday night ye’ll be next to me when the Billies kick the fuck of out the Bhoyston.”

“But I don’t have any other pals.”

Who’s a gorgeous wee thing? “It’s the one we’ve been waiting for. They have their two best fighters coming back from a stint working down in Liverpool. They’ve been bamming us up for months now. Ye’ll be there and ye’ll chib the Fenian bastards.”

“I don’t understand, Hamish. Why? Why do we have to fight them?”

Hamish kissed the baby’s fat belly. *Ye’re getting a wee fat tummy just like yer mammy, aren’t ye.* “James Jamieson lives in the tenements over the back green, right? He has a doocot behind the new-build houses?”

Mungo wanted more than anything not to have to answer that question. “Mibbe.”

“Mibbe! Ha!” *Ooh yer Uncle Mungus thinks he’s a right hardman.* Hamish went on folding the tiny outfits. “Mibbe!” Hamish chuckled to himself again. He was genuinely impressed by his brother’s sudden boldness. “Think yer wide as fuck, do ye? Think yer smarter than the rest of us?” Hamish shook his head. “Well, yer Jodie Hamilton’s double, right enough. Ah should have nipped that in the bud years ago.”

“All I said was I don’t know why we have to fight the Catholics.”

“See, Jodie’s problem is she thinks she’s slummin’ it wi’ us. She always has. All she’s been doing is biding her time till she can get the fuck away. D’ye think when she gets where she’s going she’ll want to know ye?”

“She’s my sister. She’ll always be my big sister.”

“Ah bet Jodie disnae even think of you as her brother. She thinks of ye as the

unwanted wean who was dumped on her who she's had to raise. And she's fuckin' sick of it. Talk about resentment."

"That's not true."

"Jist you wait to the day you meet her on the street and she crosses it to avoid ye. Jodie cannae wait tae get the fuck away from ye. Ah'll bet ye a hunner quid."

Mungo slid back in the chair. He wrapped his arms around the baby and held her close, the top of her head smelled sweet, like talcum and powdered milk. The brothers sat in silence for a while. The gormless man on the television was gluing some toilet tube rolls together to make a child's telescope. Hamish watched it with a slack mouth. Mungo could do nothing but wait.

Hamish didn't turn back to face his brother. He was engrossed by the man who was turning rubbish into treasure. "Are ye listening to me, Mungo?"

"Aye."

"Well heed me when ah say, if ye don't show face on Saturday night, ah will go to that doocot. Ah will go to the doocot and ah will lock the papist in. Once ah have locked him in, ah will set fire to it with him inside. James Jamieson will scream for his mammy, but he will roast." Hamish paused, and then he asked, "Do you understand me?"

Mungo nodded, although Hamish did not turn around to see it.

The man on the television glued pieces of blue- and rose-coloured film to the end of the paper telescope and suddenly it became a kaleidoscope. The screen filled with pretty colours. Hamish was grinning madly. He turned back around and gently laid his hand on Mungo's knee. He rolled his tongue around his mouth as he thought about what Mungo had asked. "And your earlier question about fightin' Catholics. It's about honour, mibbe? Territory? Reputation?" The baby reached out and grabbed Hamish's pinkie. Hamish smiled sweetly. "Honestly, ah don't really know. But it's fuckin' good fun."

TWENTY-ONE

Mungo made three separate pilgrimages to Glasgow Cross over the course of two days. It took him forty-five minutes to walk down there and, feeling defeated, an hour and twenty to lumber back home.

The pawnbroker was tucked away on a tatty back street behind the Saltmarket. There were a few half-shuttered shop fronts where the owners were pecking out a living, and a utilitarian-looking pub that wrapped around the corner. Every now and then, a man would shuffle out into the daylight like a cuckoo, blink up at the sky as if trying to judge the time of day, and finding the damp weather unchanged, shuffle back inside. Mungo had been delighted to catch a glimpse inside the boozer and spy a cluster of stout women dancing together, gyrating across the floor like washing machines that had juddered loose from their brackets.

The back street had a feeling of a shortcut to it, a quick way to travel from the Briggait to the Barras. Mungo bought a poke from the chippy and leaned against the lamp post. He enjoyed watching the different types of people come and go: the hawkers and housewives, the slick yuppies and the slick junkies. A troupe of middle-aged dancers in tap shoes and silver leotards emerged from a side door. The women scuffled down the street, twirling and giggling, sharing some in-joke and passing around a single cigarette. They soft-shoed around Mungo, red lips smiling as they went.

On each of the trips Mungo had watched the pawnbrokers from different vantage points but he had never seen his mother, and he had yet to summon the courage to step inside. The claret exterior was covered in gilded letters, proudly offering the “best cash for ladies jewellery” and a “massive selection of engagement rings.” Yet when Mungo peered through the shuttered windows all he could see was stuff that looked like discarded tat. One window held

televisions and stacked stereos, a jumble of dated electronics that were wrapped in their own wires as though they had been hastily removed. Another window held a mixture of cumbersome musical instruments and a smattering of labourers' tools: a used angle grinder, old-fashioned wood planes, and a proud shelf of Stanley knifes that made Mungo think of Hamish's boys. There was a display case of photo frames and trinket boxes, heavy bric-a-brac made in a tarnished metal that looked worthless to him, but when he peered at the little price sticker, it made him straighten up in shock. There was a display of fine-looking cameras, of a kind that Mungo had never seen anyone use in real life.

Mungo was pretending to consider a shelf of christening spoons, but really he was glancing up at the stocky man behind the counter. It was hard to see much of Jocky. The interior was dimly lit and he was tight-faced as he counted his money, safe behind the Perspex security screen.

Mungo had almost summoned the courage to step inside when a van bumped up the kerb with a shudder. A young workie in a black donkey jacket rushed into the shop, lugging what must have been a saxophone or a tuba in a battered case. Mungo stepped away and went back to the windows.

"Excuse me. Do you know how pawnbrokers work?" asked a posh-sounding young man.

Mungo was startled by the voice beside him. He turned to the young man. He had been standing before the Japanese cameras and had an intelligent, quiet expression that said he might even know how to use one.

Mungo answered him. "Naw. Sorry. I've never pawned anything myself."

"Okay. Thank you." The young man was tall and angular, his body drowned in an oversized black parka. His ebony hair was overlong but neatly parted. There was worry sitting in the corners of his mouth.

"Look, it cannae be that hard," said Mungo. "What have you got for pawnin'?"

The young man slid his holdall from his shoulder. He opened it carefully and Mungo peered inside. Nestled amongst some soft cloths was a collection of porcelain ornaments; Mungo could make out a coy shepherdess and several frolicking kittens. "I don't even know how much to ask for?"

"Me neither." Mungo shrugged. "How much do you need?"

"As much as I can get. I'm starting at the hairdressing college next week. I wanted to buy some new scissors and that."

Mungo's eyes scanned the window again, he thought he had seen a pair of

electric hair clippers somewhere. For a while they both peered into the pawnshop and watched the workie haggle with Jocky. The labourer was moving animatedly, as though he was recounting some yarn about the pedigree of the saxophone, but through it all Jocky's face remained an impassive mask.

"My mother was never a big fan of pawnshops." The man said it in such a way that he seemed to be talking to himself. "She found them quite a low place, dead common. A necessary evil, she said."

"Why don't ye ask her how they work?"

The young man's eyes flickered to meet Mungo's gaze and then they fled again. "Well. I can't."

The workie came banging out of the shop. He had a thin wad of notes in his grasp, "Ye're a parasitic little pirate. Conning guid, hard-working folks out of their fuckin' treasures. Ye should be ashamed of yersel." He slammed the door with such force that the window shutters rattled in their casings. The workie turned to Mungo. "Listen pal, do yersel a favour. Whatever ye've got to pawn, take it elsewhere. Nothin' but a robbin' aul' basturt in there. He'd have the teeth out of your granny's heid."

Mungo was at a loss for words. He felt winded. The labourer had thick, dark lashes and eyes of such a pale shade of blue that Mungo couldn't help but stare. He had been unprepared for the rare beauty of this man. The man's lips were generous against a powerful jawline, and even in his anger he was smirking, his eyes twinkling. "Can ye no talk, mucker?" Something in the knowing way the young man was smiling back at Mungo said that he was used to having this effect on people. "Is it a séance I'll be needin' to reach ye?"

Mungo recovered himself too late. He willed his eye muscles not to betray him. "Aye, I can talk. I heard what you said."

The worried young man with the black hair stepped forward then. "Mister. If I shouldn't pawn my stuff in there, would you know of a place I could take these?" He tilted the bag towards the workie, the man seemed unimpressed as he peered inside.

"Are ye robbin' yer mammy's good china to buy yersel some smack?"

The young hairdresser bristled. "No. Of course not."

The man smiled. Mungo had to look away to stop staring. He would dream about this man later, he would think about how his thick fingers crammed into the pockets of his jeans, how there was chafing on his muscular neck where the coarse wool of his jacket irritated his stubble. The man laughed. "What is it wi'

you two? Is it yer first night on earth?" He looked inside the duffel bag again. "Auld Jocky is better for shanking blades and the odd oboe. Ah'd take these out to the West End, look along the Byres Road. They've got fancy houses and antique shops out there. There are *actual* pedlars of other people's old shite, if ye can fuckin' believe it." With that the workie put his money in his breast pocket. He strode across the pavement and got back into his van, the engine came to life with a great rattling shudder.

He leaned out the window and said to the hairdresser, "Haw, you wi' the trinkets. If ye want a lift ah'm heading out yon Finnieston way. If ye don't mind a wee walk I can drop ye close enough to the West End?"

The young man nodded and walked around to the passenger side. The workie was watching Mungo. He leaned out of his window and tapped his hand on the door as though Mungo should come closer. Mungo crossed over to him, and the workie said, "Here, how old are you?"

Mungo hesitated a moment. "Nearly sixteen."

The man smiled and Mungo felt his pulse quicken. The workie pointed at the side of the van. "Can ye read that sign?"

Mungo gazed at where the man was pointing. *Davey MacNeil. Plumbing, Bathroom and Kitchen Fitting. Fair price – fast work. Duke Street. Tel: 554 6799.* Mungo nodded, he was confused. "Aye, I can read it."

"Can ye remember it?"

Mungo glanced at it again. "Aye. So?"

"Guid. Ah'm Davey. See when you turn twenty-one, can I take you for a drink? Will ye gie us a wee phone?" The workie winked at Mungo, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. Mungo must have nodded, but he wasn't aware of it. Davey released the handbrake and the van trundled off. Mungo watched it join the evening traffic.

A new voice cut into his thoughts. "Haw. Whit's yer game, pal?"

Mungo turned on his heel. Jocky was standing in the doorway of the pawnshop, he had a claw hammer in his hand. "Ah've seen you every day this week, just watchin' the place. You one of the young Tongs? Think ye can fuckin' rob us?"

Mungo shook his head. "Naw. I'm no from the Calton. Are you Jocky?"

"Whit if ah um?"

"I'm looking for Maureen Buchanan. I'm Mungo. I'm her boy."

Mungo wasn't sure what he had expected, but he had a feeling that the man

would have been annoyed at his sudden appearance. Mo-Maw had given him the impression that Jocky didn't like the messy bits of her life, that he and his siblings were like the used plates that she kicked under her bed and hid beneath the bed skirt. Jocky surprised him when he lowered the hammer and said, "Right, Will ye be wanting a cup of tea?"

The inside of the pawnshop was more cluttered than the windows. There was a battalion of upright hoovers along one wall, and behind the security glass were the cases of rings that the signwriting promised. Mungo peered at them, he knew nothing about the fashions of ladies' jewellery but all the women he knew had quick, busy hands and these rings seemed heavy and impractical. Jocky locked the door, he led Mungo behind the counter and into the storeroom at the back. He rinsed two tea mugs and filled the electric kettle. There was a rail of wedding dresses gathering dust.

"Do you sell everything?"

"Aye. Every manner of thing if there's money in it." Jocky shovelled heaped spoonfuls of powdered milk into the mug. "But it's no really about sellin'. It's about haudin'. Sugar?"

Mungo nodded. "I've never been in a pawnshop."

"Och, there's nothing to it. It's just a big storage shed. Money lending, int it?" Jocky offered Mungo a biscuit, and when he took one, Jocky pushed another on him. He pointed at a low stool for Mungo to sit on. "That fella ye were talking tae. He brings his trumpet in here every so often. Every time he pretends like ah came up the Clyde in a banana boat. But ah gie him a couple of poun' for it, and then when wages day comes, he buys it back for a wee bit more than ah gave him."

Mungo chewed the soft biscuit. "So, how much do you want for my mother then?"

Mungo had meant it as a joke, but Jocky handed the boy a cup of tea and carried on as though he hadn't heard him. "There used tae be guid money in it. Decent families needing a wee bit o' cash to tide them over tae Friday. But now it's aw junkies rippin' electronics out of their mammies' flats and puntin' it fur skag." Jocky nodded at a stack of record players. "And who wants tae buy used stuff anymair? It's aw new, new, new wi' people these days. It breaks: they bin it. It doesnae go wi' the wife's latest haircut: they bin it."

Mungo looked around the storeroom with a different perspective. What had first seemed like a bounty of treasures waiting to find new homes now seemed

like a dumping ground for unwanted relics.

Jocky slumped on his stool with a groan. He was a short man and stout, but his fat hadn't slackened into corpulence yet, there was still a muscularity to him; he looked like he could handle himself in a fight. He slurped on his tea. "What the polis can never know is ah make a killin' wi' blades and shanks and the odd shooter. Thank fuck the Young Teams are aw fightin'. That's where aw the money is these days, drugs and violence. The rest of it widnae buy ye a lick of an ice cream cone."

Mungo wondered if Hamish had ever been here.

"Did ye know there is a vogue to weapons? Like an actual fashion trend? Some of these fighters carry on like they were lassies buying dresses in Paris. 'Oh naw, ah don't want a bowie knife – every cunt already has a bowie knife. Ah want somethin' mair elegant. Somethin' that screams *me*.'" Jocky chuckled as he lit a cigarette. He offered his packet to Mungo, but Mungo declined. Now that they had discussed the pawn business there seemed nothing left to talk about, other than the woman who was strung between them and tied them together. It seemed like neither of them knew how to broach the subject of Maureen. The silence went on for an uncomfortably long time. Jocky smoked his fag. Mungo's tea cooled.

"You don't look anything like her. Maureen, that is."

"I know. She's says I look lit my da but …" Mungo didn't bother to finish the sentence. "How is she anyhows?"

"Fine. Ah saw her this mornin' as she was comin' in frae her work." Jocky exhaled a long plume of smoke. "Does she always drink that much?"

Mungo thought about it a moment. "If ye can keep her happy, distract her, then she drinks a wee bit less. She's best when she's got something to look forward to. It doesnae have to be big. Tell her you'll take her to the pictures on a Friday. Mibbe tell her you'll take her shopping in the town centre. Jist wee promises to look forward to."

"You know aw the tricks."

"Our Jodie knows better than me. Jodie says it's like minding a sugary wean."

Jocky laughed. "Ah have one of those baby bouncing chairs around here somewhere."

"I bet she'd fit in it."

"She never said ye were funny." Jocky glanced at his wristwatch, it was a heavy silver thing that called attention to its own value. "Ye should go on up the

road and see her. She'll be awake now. Ah can gie ye the address of the flat."

"No. It's awright." He lowered his chin into the neck of his cagoule. "Can you do us a favour? Please don't tell her I came here. She asked me not to."

Jocky leaned forward on his stool and his gut sank between his thighs. "Look, son. Ah didnae know she had weans of her own. Honest. As soon as ah found out, ah papped her."

"Naw. Don't do that. We won't get in the way."

"Och, it's no *that.* Ah'd known yer mother for three weeks. She'd telt me how she loved prawn cocktail and Tom Selleck afore she even telt me she had weans. What did ye want me to dae?"

"Honestly. It's awright."

"Ah papped her so she would go up the road and look after youse. What type of wummin doesnae go home to her weans?"

Mungo didn't know how to respond to that. His mother was like a carnival magician, she was forever working some sleight of hand, sucking in her paunch, or turning different faces to these men. Jodie had said it was like how McCallum's the baker kept turning their old wedding cakes in their window when the icing had yellowed in the sunlight. By the time some poor punter sliced into the fruit cake, it'd be too late to complain that it was claggy and unappetizing and soaked in rank old booze.

Jocky swirled his cup, he swallowed the dregs of his tea. "Ah think she worries that youse don't need her anymair and that she'll be left wi' nuthin'. She says ye're all growin' up too fast. That must be hard for a mammy."

It wasn't true; Mungo felt like he would always need her, but he was never allowed to admit that out loud. "My brother said she's cracking on with her life, and so we should crack on with ours."

Whenever he thought unkind thoughts about Mo-Maw, he tried to remember the stories that his mother had told him about her own childhood. About how she was the youngest of four girls, and how, after her mother had died, her father, a grain-hodder on the Clyde, had taken the girls and parcelled them out to anyone who would be able to give them a good home. It had been an ordinary Wednesday when the adults came to the house in their Sunday clothes and carried the sisters away.

It had been agreed not to tell the girls in advance. Instead, each of the couples planned a fine day out: outings to the zoo, or shoe shopping, and then in the evening they took the girls back to their new homes and that was the end of it, no

discussion. No one had been able to take all four sisters, so Cathy, the eldest girl, had gone to live in Ballachulish where she could help Granny Buchanan around the croft. Alice and Jean had been sent to England to different cousins of their mother's and had made quiet successes of their lives. Only Maureen, at three and half years old, had remained in the East End of Glasgow. She had been taken in by a childless couple, a scrap merchant and his wife, who lived over the back middens. It was near enough where her father could keep an eye on her, which he did, until he married again and moved through to Falkirk to work on the Union Canal. She hadn't seen him since she was six.

Mo-Maw said the scrap merchant and his wife were good people, phlegmatic but harmless. Mungo believed her, because Mo-Maw could find the skelf in any caress, and so she would have said if they'd been cruel, or miserly, or otherwise. But as easily as Mo-Maw had come into their lives, she had drifted out of it again when she was fifteen. In the evenings the scrap merchant had liked to sit with large leather headphones on, listening to the wireless, old dancehall songs from before the war, or the endless football commentary. His wife had sat on the settee next to him, flipping through her programmes on the television, together but alone. Mo-Maw said that was how she had found them, and that was how she had left them.

Mungo looked down at his feet, his big toe was bursting through the seam of his trainers. "Do you love her?"

Jocky answered too quickly. "Naw. Naw, ah don't."

Mungo looked up at him.

"Listen son, at ma age love is a nuisance of a thing. What ye want is some easy company on a Tuesday night, a bit of help runnin' the hoose, and if yer lucky a bit of nookie as long as ye can both lie on yer side while ye're at it." Mungo didn't laugh at the joke. Jocky dropped his dout into his mug. "What ye want is an easy life. There's nothin' easy about love."

Mungo finished his tea. He put the mug in the sink. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Another one?"

Mungo nodded. "If she asks you if you love her, just tell her 'aye.' She deserves it."

The man didn't answer one way or the other. He got up off his stool with a wince. "It does the spine nae guid to be standing at yon counter all day. If ye want ma advice, when ye go out into the workin' world, try and choose a

profession that keeps ye movin' aboot. And be wary of sittin' amongst the refuse of other people's lives."

When they went back through to the shopfront, there was a young woman banging against the locked door. She had a VCR in her arms and a desperate look on her face. When she saw Jocky she bounced on her toes and looked like she might weep. Jocky sighed wearily. "If the skirts get any shorter, they'll start doing without them all the gether."

He drew a couple of pound coins from his trouser pocket and slipped them into Mungo's hand. "Listen, ah like yer mammy, ah do. But she needs to cut back on the cheeky juice. Ah've got weans of ma ain to be worryin' aboot. She cannae be sitting around aw day drinkin'."

Mungo nodded as Jocky unlocked the door. He stepped out into the sunshine just as the silver dancers went twirling up the street.

The doocot door was open to the fair weather. James's head was lowered in concentration. He was humming to himself as he mended the broken hinge on a cage. Patient and self-taught, James knew how to fix or build almost anything; the slates were already on the roof, he didn't need anyone's help.

As James worked, Mungo gazed upon him. He liked to watch him unawares. He didn't know how much longer he would be allowed to do that, and he wanted to dub him on to the videotape in his brain while he still could.

The last time he had seen James, the hair at the nape of his neck had come to a ticklish point, like a little duck tail. Mungo had liked to touch the tip of his nose to it while James napped. Now his hairline was pink and precise where it had been edged by a straight razor. Mungo could picture Mr Jamieson holding his son's head in his hands, asking him about Ashley, as he lathered his neck with the badger brush. Mungo swallowed the little ball of jealousy that rose up inside him. It slunk down his throat and bounced off his ribcage. He could feel it roll around inside him, like a marble dropped into a children's toy.

James put down his pliers and drew a bird from the cage; it panicked as his hands encircled it, but he squeezed lightly and it stopped its nervous bobbing. Mungo watched the fingers cradle the pigeon, half-wild, half-stupid, and he was jealous of the bird, and its ignorant blinking. Mungo stepped into the doocot and kissed the secret pink skin behind James's ear. He had tried, but he could not stay away a full week.

James flinched, his eyes darted beyond Mungo back into the daylight. “Don’t do that. Not here. Not now.”

The look in James’s eyes made it clear there would be no long fingers to hold him tight and make him feel calmer. He had a terrible urge to break something now, to tear the rickety shelves down and set all the birds free. Mungo stood with his arms by his side. He forced himself to remain very still.

“It’s almost over. Two more days and then he’s gone again. We are *so* close.” James was shaking his head. “He’s gonnae leave early to go see that wummin in Peterhead. Just two more days and we can be by ourselves.”

“Yeah, until next time.” He knew he was being callow.

“I cannae help that.” James kissed the pouter and put it back in its cage. He busied himself before he grew calm enough to ask, “What have you been up to anyhows?”

“Nothin’.” He didn’t want to talk now. He had no generosity in him to be good company. He found himself looking up at the small skylight, wondering if James could escape through there when Hamish came for him. “Absolutely fuckin’ nothin’.”

“You need a hobby.”

Here was yet another person telling him what he needed, how he should act, the person he should be. Another person who didn’t think he was enough just as he was.

James watched him turn to leave. He was talking to Mungo’s back as he dipped at the low doorway. “Ma da took us to Celtic Park. I haven’t been to the fitba since I was twelve. The whole match he stood there with his arm around me like he used to, proud, like. After the fitba, he treated Geraldine and me to a curry up in the West End. He took us to the pub and bought me ma first pint. He lied to the barman, telt him his son had just turned eighteen.”

“At this rate you’ll be sixty before I’m sixteen.”

“He’s had the best week he’s had since my mammy died. I didnae want to spoil it for him.” James was twisted-looking, embarrassed at his own happiness. “He hardly mentioned his fancy-wummin.”

Mungo tried to breathe through his hurt. All he wanted was the long fingers to wrap around his ribcage and hold him still, stop him floating away, let him know somebody cared. There was a long nail with a shackle padlock hanging from it, he ran his torn thumbnail along it and felt the metal scrape his wound open again.

“Another thing. He said he could get me a job on the rig.”

Mungo pushed his skin on to the nail. “Oh?”

“He said he didn’t see why not. They’re moving him to a new oilfield, on to a newer rig they’re building, called the Gannet or something. He said when I turn eighteen, he could get me in for caterin’ or janny work, maybe as a roustabout. Given time, I could work up to be a derrickman or driller. He said that’s where the money is.”

“That’s guid.”

“If I worked offshore with him, we could spend more time together.”

“Won’t Ashley mind?”

“Who gies a fuck about her?” James dipped his head to look Mungo in the eyes, peering under the curtain of his fringe. “I wouldn’t go, you know that. It’s just nice to be asked. Let me enjoy that, for Christ’s sake.”

“Do you like her?”

“Who?”

“Ashley.”

“Naw.” James seemed irritated. He busied himself by scooping bird pellets into a cup. “I sort of hate her. Every single thing she says is either stupit or about herself. She moans if I don’t give her attention every five minutes. Her hair always looks wet, but it’s dry and hard as a fuckin’ rock and when she touches me, you can tell she’s counting in her head, like she’s adding it to my bill. But …”

Something else had snagged on Mungo’s mind. “Have ye shagged her yet?”

“Naw.” James pushed the meat of his palms into his eye sockets. “But she keeps asking me to. Her maw and stepda are away in Majorca next week. Empty house.”

“But.” It was a small voice that came next. “We haven’t even done that yet.”

“I know.” James seemed tired now. He was just a wee boy, acting like a man, pretending to be a different type of man.

Mungo pulled his finger off the rusted nail. “I’m glad you are fixed, James. You’ve worked hard to get better. You deserve it.”

“I’m not *fixed,* Mungo. Ah’m just a liar.”

“Yeah, well.” Mungo tapped the shards of glass from the sole of his trainer. “I’m too many other bad things. I don’t want to be a liar as well.”

For a moment James looked like he was going to correct him – he was already a liar – but he bit his tongue. He crossed the rat glass towards him. In the

half-light, he put his index finger on the nape of Mungo's neck. It was the slightest of touches, a hand that could easily turn to a bully's flick if someone came across the scabby grassland. In a downward motion he gently stroked the line of fine hair that grew there. Mungo tilted his head forward and closed his eyes. He wanted it to last.

"This is what you do when a bird gets distressed."

"Is it not kinder to jist snap their necks?"

James laughed. "It'll be over soon. Then we can pick any direction and ride our bikes there."

"And what about Ashley?"

"You ask too many questions."

"If you do shag her, I would understand." It was a gamble to say it, he could lose, but he needed to say it regardless. "But, like, I will also die."

"Nah. You're harder than ye look." James stopped stroking his neck and drew his knuckle gently across the twitching cheekbone. When Mungo opened his eyes ten digits were splayed before him, he added his own hands and extended four more, then James folded one away. "Look, only thirteen left now. Ma da has only thirteen more shore leaves til you turn sixteen." He seemed like he wanted a smile from Mungo before he left. Just one single smile. Mungo would not surrender one.

Mungo found himself staring at the countdown. It had seemed innocent as an advent calendar a few days ago. But now he pictured Jodie with her bags already packed, Ashley sprawled on her parent's bed, and Hamish, wild on his own supply, with a bottle of siphoned petrol in his hand. Thirteen fingers, thirteen shore leaves, was a distance too far to imagine. They wouldn't both make it. Not safely. Not together. "I can leave now, if you can? Tonight. Who cares if somebody phones the polis? Who cares if the school sends out the Social Work? We can hide. Let's just fuckin' go."

James chewed the inside of his cheek. It was worse than he had thought. He reached beyond Mungo and closed the doocot door. In the darkness his strong fingers encircled Mungo, they pressed against his ribs and moved around to his spine as the long arms snaked around him. Mungo suffocated himself against James's chest, he found the prickle of Shetland wool solid and comforting. James's breath felt hot against his crown. "I listened to your mixtape. I stand in the dark at my window and listen to it every night. I thought you said it was all top forty but it's only one song over and over."

“I felt embarrassed. I lied.”

“I love the Smiths.”

Mungo rubbed his face on the lambswool. “But how come Morrissey didnae think there was panic on the streets of Glasgow? There’s plenty of fuckin’ panic here.”

“Probably because Glasgow rhymes with fuck all. Well, anytime I hear it I will think of you. Ya handsome wee devil.” He tilted his head towards Mungo’s lips and kissed him deep on the mouth. Then he shoved him back to arm’s length and shook him slightly. “Cheer up. I love you, Mungo Hamilton.”

“Don’t.” Something in him could not stand to be loved.

“How no? I can love you if I want.”

“It’ll just make it harder for me. When everything gets spoiled.”

James took his hands away. Mungo felt like the doo again as the anxiety flooded his body. Without opening his eyes, he could hear the rusty hinges of the heavy door, could feel the cold, weak light on the pink of his eyelids.

“Not everything good goes bad.”

Mungo wanted to believe that.

James took up the pliers again. “Only two more days. We can be the gether again. Can you come over on Saturday night? He should be on the last train back to Aberdeen by then.”

“Aye, okay.” Mungo tried his best to sound nonchalant, when in reality he would look forward to that moment for every minute in between. Then he shook his head, and his hair fell over his eyes again. “Wait, naw. I can’t come on Saturday night.”

“How no?” James looked crestfallen.

Mungo would never admit it, but he liked to see James’s disappointment, the slight swing back of power. It was a twisted payment for the starvation he had suffered the past week. “Nothing. It’s jist our Hamish’s nonsense.”

“Can’t you just tell him no?”

Mungo laughed at the absurdity of the idea. “*That’s funny.* Let me tell him I don’t like his glasses while I’m at it.”

“What can be that important it cannae wait?”

“I hate it. But there’s a fight planned for Saturday night across the Royston bridge. The Bhoyston have been bamming them up. He said I needed to be there to give them hauners. It’s a reputation thing. I’m a Hamilton.” He skipped over the threat about burning James alive. “Hamish wouldnae take no for an answer.”

“So, you’re just gonnae go and chib some Catholics?”

“Honestly, I’m brickin’ it. But I was hoping to jist show face, then stand at the back, like.” Mungo found a bottle of penicillin on the shelf. He shook it like it was a maraca.

“But I’m a Catholic.”

“You’re no really. It’s no the same, you’re different. You don’t even go to chapel.”

“It’s *exactly* the fuckin’ same.” He turned his shoulder on Mungo and said just loud enough for him to hear. “Ye’re a wee coward.”

Idiot. Weakling. Poofter. Liar. Coward.

“You do well worse things to hide yourself.”

“At least ah don’t hurt other people.”

Mr Jamieson would be hurt, Ashley would be hurt too, but she would recover swiftly. Mungo did not want to breathe life into these people and bring them back into the doocot between them. “These Catholic fighters, the Bhoyston, they want to hurt me as well. If I don’t stand up to them, I’ll run into them one day in the Trongate or the Briggait, and they’ll slash me from here to here.” Mungo ran his fingernail from his earlobe to the corner of his mouth. He pressed so hard it left a bloodless line that flickered and faded. It was pure Ha-Ha talking.

James was hunched over the broken hinge just as Mungo had found him. It was strange to see; it was like he had never even visited, as though he had not altered James’s day one bit. His life would go on without him. “If you fight the Catholics, don’t come on Saturday. Don’t come near me on Sunday or Monday or ever again. If you do that, I don’t want to know you.”

TWENTY-TWO

Mungo dared not fall asleep. It was his third night at the lochside and his head was bobbing on his shoulders. Gallowgate was in no hurry. He rolled a mean cigarette from scavenged baccy and smoked it inside the collapsing tent. As he told his stories he held the glowing tip too close to the combustible fabric. Mungo didn't care anymore. Let it burn.

By the last light of the tea candle, the inked man advanced upon him slowly, territorially, painted knuckles on the ground. He touched him almost tenderly and caressed the boy with a gentleness that made Mungo feel sick. Mungo put his hand over Gallowgate's mouth – he couldn't bear to hear him say sweet things – but Gallowgate took it the wrong way. He licked the inside of Mungo's palm, nibbled from the meat to the fingertip, his tongue slipping in and out between his fingers.

The tenderness quickly evaporated and the inked man began pawing at him, forcing rough hands inside Mungo's clothes. His greed possessed him, his eyes looked bottomless in the candlelight, and he scratched the boy as he grabbed at his flesh. Mungo didn't want what came next. He spat into his own cupped hands and then wrapped them around Gallowgate's swelling. In the flickering light, he worked as quickly as he could to give the man what he wanted, and to send him back into the darkness.

When Gallowgate was spent, he lay back and threw his arms out to the side as though he had been crucified. He reached out to the boy and ruffled his hair, a look of satisfaction upon his face. Mungo listened to the rain beat against the tarpaulin. A question burned inside him, he asked the universe as much as he asked Gallowgate, "Does this mean you're a poofter?"

Gallowgate had slithered across the floor and had begun to snake his naked body around the boy. Now he shoved him away. The distance felt good to

Mungo. “Call me that again an’ ah’ll knock ye out.”

Mungo must have dozed because it was already brightening when Gallowgate woke him. The man crawled naked from the tent and went for a piss. Mungo could see the clear morning light through the flaps, it seemed the rain had stopped for a spell. He wrapped the sleeping bag around his shoulders and followed Gallowgate out to the shoreline, feeling safer in the open rather than the sweaty, fetid trap of the tent. The prehistoric boulders were slick again with rain, and new pools of water were already busy with flies. Gallowgate stood at the water’s edge. Even his back was a tapestry of tattoos; a life-like pair of women’s eyes were painted on his shoulder blades, the eyelashes flicking up like feathery wings. Only his buttocks were untouched, and glowed a ghostly white.

Mungo stared at the one-man tent. It no longer resembled a shelter and lay almost completely flat, a red puddle on the grey shore. It didn’t look like it could house a man’s body. Mungo pulled the sleeping blanket tight around himself, he walked away from the pissing man and crouched by the water. The face that stared up at him was not his own.

It seemed Gallowgate was impervious to the cold. The last of the drink was burning him from the inside out. “So, what do ye want to do the day?”

Run, run all the way home. But Mungo pushed his face into the frigid water, let the loch chill his tic. Then he shook himself, steadied himself, and shrugged. “Should we not pack up and think about heading back?”

“You sick of me alreadies?” Gallowgate shook the last dribble of piss from the end of his cock. He frowned at the boy.

Mungo sat back on his haunches. Ha-Ha had trained him well. They were a lot alike, Gallowgate and his brother. They were moody, self-made demigods who demanded constant offerings and could turn vengeful for no reason. Mungo saw the trouble forming. He crossed the short distance and placed a placating kiss on the man’s lips. It was the first he had ever offered him.

Gallowgate beamed at him proudly. Now he was convinced of his own allure, happy that he had known what was best for Mungo all along. All the boy had needed was a guiding hand, a father figure to show him the way. Gallowgate flicked his own chin upwards, his sharp teeth tugged on his bottom lip. “See, we are pals.” He encircled Mungo’s waist with his arm. “Ah think ah’m gonnae show you how to catch some rabbits the day.”

“Seems a shame to kill a thing and not even eat it. Can you take it on the bus?”

“Course ye can.” He was studying Mungo closely. “‘Asides, yer maw’ll love it. She’s gonnae be expecting to hear about yer adventures. And if we catch two she can have a new pair of slippers.”

Mungo lowered his gaze. “Don’t worry about Mo-Maw. She’ll have forgotten I was even gone. She’ll be worried about herself, as usual. ‘Asides, I learned how to build a fire and peg a tent and …” Mungo put his lips to Gallowgate’s ear and whispered the last part.

The man flushed. “Ya dirty wee bastard.” He bit the boy’s neck. “Ah knew what you were like the first time ah saw ye.”

Mungo’s jumper hung over his knuckles, he blew warm air up his sleeve. “Let’s just go. We can catch those rabbits another time.”

Gallowgate thought about it for a moment. “Awright then. Do ye promise?”

Mungo nodded.

Gallowgate let go of the boy and turned towards the red tent. “Let’s get this auld bastard on his feet and we can get going then.”

Mungo caught the man’s pinkie with his own. “Do we have to? I mean, can’t we just leave him here. He’ll find his own way home.”

“That’s a laugh.”

“I can’t be his friend and your friend. I can’t.”

The man pulled Mungo under his armpit and hugged his head hard, twisted it like all the bullies he had ever known. “Don’t worry about that. Ye’re ma special pal now. But ah cannae leave him here. That tent belongs to a fella at ma work. Ah’ll be out sixty poun’ if ah don’t return it to him. He’s gonnae ask me for money anyhows, cos auld stinky baws has been fartin’ away all night in it.”

All that lying, all that forced tenderness had been for nothing. Mungo’s stomach lurched as Gallowgate kicked the guy line. The last of the air blew out and the red tent collapsed with a defeated sigh. There was the faint hummock of a sleeping bag, but it seemed impossible that the tent could hold the body of St Christopher, no matter how rotted and hollowed out the man was. Gallowgate stepped on the sleeping bag. Then he tramped up and down the length of the collapsed shelter. “Where the fuck is he?”

Mungo was bone-tired. He was so plain-spoken and honest that guile exhausted him. It was sapping the last of his energy to pretend he felt anything but hatred for this man. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s gone fishing?”

Gallowgate stumbled along the waterfront, his shrivelled cock bouncing comically. He peered up and down the banks of the loch. “At this hour? Where’d ye see him last?”

Mungo didn’t know what to say. He spread his sleeping bag. He threw it open like a pair of quilted wings and revealed his thin body. It lay in the centre like some knock-kneed offering.

Gallowgate shook his head. “Naw. C’mon. There’s nae time for that. We have to find him.”

Mungo wrapped himself up again. He lied as best he could. He told a half-truth about the day before, how St Christopher had been a terrible fisherman and so he had taken him to a spot where the fish seemed lazy and easy to catch. Then he told Gallowgate how he had lost all of his little sprats and grown frustrated even there. The saint had bloodied feet when he came back to the campsite, and scratching for a drink and finding none, he had sealed himself into the tent in a huff. That was the last the boy had heard from him before Gallowgate had returned in the gloaming. “Maybe he’s gone home?”

“Naw. He must’ve had the bad shakes.” Gallowgate was pulling on his rain-soaked clothes. It was a sick relief when he covered the eyes on his shoulder blades.

“He was definitely tremblin’. It looked somethin’ awful.”

“Then we need to find the auld arsehole. Ah cannae leave him here and expect to show ma face up at the probation office.” With that, Gallowgate trudged towards the trees.

Mungo wrapped the sleeping bag tight around himself, certain now that the chill was coming from inside him. He wanted to cast it off and run the other direction. He could bound over the rocks and boulders and make for the other treeline. He was sure he could run faster than Gallowgate; Mungo had seen the damage the drink had done to the man. But where would he run to? What way was home? The man stopped; he snapped his fingers and whistled as though the boy was a terrier. Mungo nodded and followed him into the understorey.

Everything was dripping wet underneath the trees. Soon the sleeping bag was sodden. It grew heavy and Mungo was tired, so he laid it over a fallen tree and shivered in his shorts and cagoule. The way Gallowgate was creeping through the undergrowth unnerved him. It was like he didn’t want to wake the spirits that slept there. He tried not to picture St Christopher waking from his place below the birch tree, pointing a bony finger in his direction, the right side of his sallow

skull caved in.

In the distance, on the far side of the river, a roe buck browsed a low clump of goosegrass. It stopped Mungo in his tracks. He held his breath as the deer raised its head and looked in their direction. Its eyes were as dark and wet as two peeled plums. The deer flicked its ears, scanning the forest for any unfamiliar sounds. On its head was a small set of underdeveloped antlers, and it made Mungo wonder where the deer's mother was. Gallowgate crept nearly to the riverbank before the young buck startled and disappeared with a flick of its tail. As suddenly as it had appeared it was gone again. Gallowgate was beaming with delight. "Now, ye have to tell Maureen about that. Ah get a bonus point for that, don't ah?"

The river was higher than it had been yesterday, and it looked more violent than Mungo had remembered it. Gallowgate was scanning the riverbank for a sign of his crony but Mungo's eyes were fixed on the rushing water. He stood near the point where he had bludgeoned St Christopher, and imagined he saw a glint of silver sovereign lying on the riverbed.

"Over here," said Gallowgate as he bent by the riverbank. He had the tweed bunnet in his hand. It had washed on to a boulder and the wet wool had stuck it there. It was a drab, dull grey and Mungo had missed it in his panic. Gallowgate was turning it in his hands, he held the sweated label out to Mungo. *Christopher Milligan.* The man was no saint. Mungo was sure he would remember that name forever.

"Fuuuuuuuuccck." It leaked out of Gallowgate in a long groan. "We need to keep lookin' for him. If the daft bastard's fallen in, they're gonnae think ah killed him. Ah'll end up back in Barlinnie for sure." For the first time that weekend there was a look of real fear in his eyes.

Gallowgate walked further downriver. Mungo could see the birch tree at the bend but there was no sign of the man's body. He had hidden it well. He tried to reassure himself of what a quiet place this was. Of how the only footprints had been theirs and how the ram's skull had lain undisturbed for years, decades perhaps. They would never find St Christopher. No one ever would. It was as good a grave as the man deserved.

Gallowgate wasn't moving carefully anymore. He was wildly scanning the riverbank and slipping on mossy stones; frightened for what he might find, worried for what he might not be able to find. He stumbled downriver, moving closer to the loch. Mungo drew in his breath as Gallowgate rounded the next

bend.

It must have taken only a few seconds, but it felt like several minutes. All Mungo could see was that Gallowgate's back had straightened as he pulled himself up to his full height. Gallowgate's right arm extended and he was pointing at something in the distance, not at the birch tree but at a shallow bay further downstream. The man said nothing. But as Mungo turned the corner, he knew what he would find.

The heavy flood must have dislodged St Christopher from the rooted cave. It had carried him downriver some and beached him on some sharp rocks. The body was lying face up and his eyes were wide open. The man's head was trapped between some large boulders, his neck certainly broken. The lanky body was full of false life, bobbing in the current. Mungo's heart stuttered. From where he stood it looked like the saint was floating peacefully on the surface, quietly contemplating the heavens.

TWENTY-THREE

The falling darkness ate the clouds out of the sky. As the lights came on in the slick streets the Protestant boys began to pour out of the tenement mouths and crow at one another like nocturnal scavengers. Mungo watched from the third-floor window as the older Billies congregated outside the Paki shop on the corner. They gathered in the light of its open doorway, fluttering like colour-blocked moths. From high above, Mungo could tell they were jumpy and unpredictable with adrenaline, looking forward to a fight, dreaming of their own glory, anything that would put a shine on their name. They hung on each other affectionately, wide manly hugs, bodies never touching but full of love and rage, eager to stab and maim the Royston Catholics.

Mungo pressed his face against the cold glass. He rolled his forehead back and forth. The room behind him was too hot and much too close. The electric fire was on high, filling the air with the stale smell of lager and sweat, and giving off a needling static that made his head sore. The condensation on the window felt good after a long day spent inside, hovering and worrying as Mo-Maw cracked can after can, running her tongue along her teeth, moaning about how Jocky had papped her again.

The day had started as innocently as a tea party. At first Mo-Maw had sat them both down and poured them tumblers of heavy ale. She pinned Mungo and Jodie against the settee with lurid stories of how Jocky had done her wrong: how he had promised her a week in Burntisland and then invited his weans to join (the nerve of this prick), how he had kept a house full of drink and moaned if she enjoyed it just a *wee* bit (the parsimonious basturt). Mungo watched his sister become marble-faced as Mo-Maw droned on in self-pity. When the urge became too much, Jodie excused herself and quietly left without telling them where she was going. It was the tinder that lit the fire. Now Jodie would be sulking at the

café or the library, and Mo-Maw wanted company – Tattie-bogle demanded an audience – somebody, anybody to listen to her tale of unrequited shoves.

Mungo pretended to draw as Mo-Maw chapped on different doors in the close, not ready to be alone, not ready to be without Jocky. Mrs Campbell turned her away gently. Kindly, timorous Mr Robertson didn't even answer. But then Mr Donnelly opened his door and it was sickening to hear his mother cajole the widower for company. "God sakes, it's Saturday night," she said it over and over, "come on, come on, come on!" Mo-Maw escorted him downstairs and led him into their flat, coaxing, pulling on his sleeve as though he were a stray, or a beast to the blade. The man had hastily packed a plastic bag with all the leftover drink he had in the house and here she slipped it from his grip.

At first, thirsty Donnelly had shown a polite interest in Mungo, nodding and listening as Mo-Maw made him tell of the things he had learned at the doocot. On cue, the lean man had said how bright he was and how proud Mo-Maw must be – both of which were a fiction. Mo-Maw smiled wanly before her eyes glazed over and filled with a faraway look. It was the look that the melancholy singers got at Hogmanay; the old men who gathered in corners and burst into mournful song, ruining good spirits, making old women cry. "Ah've given the best of my years to raising those three. And what did ah get in return?"

Mungo babysat them as they got drunk. From how Donnelly gawped, his mother must have been the loveliest thing the lonely widower had seen in a long time. Donnelly had gotten dressed in shoes, blazer, and hat, simply to step over his own threshold. His manners were from another time and he seemed too ashamed to admit that he wanted to stay. So the man sat in his Harris blazer, baking in the heat but unable to take it off. He would shift, uncomfortable on the soft couch, and stick his fingers in the neck of his threadbare shirt.

Mo-Maw curled her legs under herself and sat on her flash trainers. She asked the man questions as though she were a daytime telly host, knowing full well that men liked it best when they talked about themselves. Mungo smirked. Anybody could see she wasn't listening to the answers, but she kept the man talking and drank more than her fair share.

With the stifling heat of the room Mungo wished she would fall asleep; then he could take the old man by the elbow and lead him to the door, thank him for coming, and hand him the dregs of the carryout. It was getting late, he would need to go soon, leave his mother and take his place beside his brother. It would not be possible to get out of it. Not this time.

He had spent the afternoon brewing up excuses. Mungo thought about blaming it on Mo-Maw's return, explaining that Mr Donnelly from the top floor was trying to get his brogues under their table. Hamish hated Mr Donnelly, but it would not be enough to get Mungo excused; Hamish would burn James alive as easily as he set fire to the stolen Capri.

Mo-Maw had dipped her eyes a couple of times in the heat, her permed head lolling on her chin, but each time Mr Donnelly would light a cigarette and hand it to her with a nudge. The nicotine would pull her back towards the living and she would start a wearisome story about caravans and snack bars. Mungo drew an interminable spiral. It seemed her happiest memories were all housed on wheels, temporary, and without foundations.

The pair of them smiled at something in the far distance and bobbed drunkenly on the sofa like they were adrift on their own small boat. Mungo thought how it wouldn't be long now until he could put her to bed. Then he could throw the windows wide to the fresh air, clean the ash off the carpet, and head out into the night. Mo-Maw paused in mid-ramble and drew luxuriously on her cigarette; the ash was a long finger that threatened to burn a hole in her tan leggings. She closed her eyes.

Mr Donnelly reached inside his thick blazer and pulled out a thin wallet. He rifled through some notes and stopped at a small blue five; he considered the determination on Mungo's face before pulling out something bigger, browner. The sound of money made Mo-Maw's eyes flutter open, and she seemed surprised to find a cigarette clamped between her lips. Mungo and Mo-Maw stared at the bank note like it had said something. "Why don't ye away and take yersel to the pictures, eh?"

Mo-Maw made a delighted face, like she was watching Mungo unwrap a lovely Christmas gift. "Would you look at that. What do you say, then?" Her manners suddenly remembered. It was a funny thing, to be in such a sorry state but still mindful of the social graces of others.

Mungo looked at the note and thought about all the things he could buy. What he wanted more than anything was a bus ticket with James. A ticket to somewhere far away, where he could be himself and James would be safe. He didn't want to take the money, but he found himself leaning forward. "Thank you, Mister Donnelly."

The man's eyes narrowed again. The note made a crisp, clean sound as it passed between their hands. Mungo sat for a minute until the man turned to him

and said, “Well then?” He took a draw on his dout. “Away ye go tae the pictures.” The adults stared at Mungo expectantly. Mo-Maw nodded once, deliberately and slowly.

Mungo tidied his sketches away. He folded the banknote again and again and again, and as he did a new feeling settled over him, a self-loathing that he was a boy who had sold his own mother. He stood up and extended his hand towards the widower. “Right, I’ll see you out.”

“Whut?” The man’s little black eyes took an age to focus.

“I’m going to the pictures, so I’ll see you out. You can’t stay here, alone, with my maw.”

Mo-Maw and the widower looked at one another. Mr Donnelly cycled through several expressions; swinging from confusion, to suspecting he was the butt of some sick joke, to settling on a look that said he thought he had been conned. “Maureen?”

“Mungo, ye cannae talk to Mr Donnelly like that. This is my house.”

Mungo was too tired to laugh. He reached over the coffee table and took the man by the elbow. Mr Donnelly squirmed like a child resisting bath time. Mo-Maw slapped Mungo’s hand. She sat forward and made to stand up, but Mungo pressed her back into her settee. He thumbed over his shoulder. “Mr Donnelly, do you really want me to go get our Hamish?”

The man looked to Mo-Maw for support, but she was loose-jawed. Mungo took the man by the elbow again and hoisted him to his feet. With his other hand he snatched up as much of the man’s possessions as he could manage. Mungo escorted him to the front door, and as he left the man blinking in the bright close he slipped a can of lager into one hand, and his hat into the other.

When he went back into the living room, Mo-Maw had her arms folded like a huffy toddler. She was scowling at the darkening sky. Mungo dropped into the armchair and began to lace up his trainers.

“Ah don’t know who the fuck you think you are!” she spat.

“Aye? Me neither.”

She had been gearing up for a fight but this disarmed her. Mungo pulled his cagoule over his head. They sat in silence for a moment before he said, “You’re my maw. You’re my only maw. I just want guid things for you.”

Her tongue was clamped between her teeth as she poured the dregs from several glasses into her own. “And there’s not a single fuckin’ thing on the telly.” Mo-Maw moved in slow motion. Her concentration betrayed how drunk she

was. “Anyway, yer a liar. Ye’re just like they other two. Ye only want me happy so I can make your life easier. Ye only care about what ah can do for you. And ah’m sick of it.”

Mungo came out of the close and joined a pack of Proddy boys heading to the waste ground. He fell into formation amongst the baby-faced warriors. He swung his meatless legs in imitation of their gallus way of walking; his shoulders about his ears and a sour scowl on his face. This swagger was a uniform as ubiquitous as any football top. It had a gangly forward motion like a big-balled, bandy-legged weasel, head swung low, eyes always fixed on the prey ahead, ready to lunge with either a fist or a silver blade. Mungo tried his best to wear the uniform but he felt like an imposter. It was a poor imitation.

The smirr wetted them to the skin. The fine mist found its way into the cracks of clothing and pushed through their shoes, making their white socks damp and grimy. It ate them from the feet up, inching inside their denims and soaking them through to their underwear. The spitting rain was only visible when they stepped into the pools made by the orange street lamps. These orange lights gave a feeling of warmth that had been missing in the grey daylight hours. Now and again the boys stopped and huddled underneath them. They passed half-bricks and homemade shanks between themselves as if they were swapping toys.

Mungo was shivering by the time they reached Ha-Ha and the older boys. It was clear that Ha-Ha had bumped some speed; it showed in the way he was grinding his jaw and dancing like a shadow-boxer. He clapped his brother on the back. “Ye made the right decision, fuckwit. Shame really, ah like bonfires. They’re pure lovely to look at.”

Now, as one disorganized rabble, the boys turned the corner into the darkness. Sprayed across the waste ground were wooden boards and old pallets; debris that the younger boys had turned into ramshackle forts and dens. Sat in the mud and weeds it looked like a medieval settlement. Some of the dens had low doorways and were built atop patterned scraps of linoleum. Some had fancy feminine touches and sticks of once-fine furniture. Ha-Ha kicked the side of the smallest hovel. Five or six small boys spilled out of it and soon the whole settlement swarmed like a tiny village. One of the bigger boys flashed a torn pornographic page at Ha-Ha, a woman on her back with her legs splayed.

“Who’s that?” asked Ha-Ha as he passed the woman around. “Yer maw?”

Mungo wanted to stay in the shanty town. It reminded him of the goodness of the doocot. These boys had been getting along, cooperating constructively in the process of building the little village, making something good out of nothing, just like James had.

Ha-Ha snatched the dirty picture and tucked it safely inside his anorak. “Who’s comin’ up the bridge wi’ me? Let’s fuckin’ do this!” Like an Orange piper, Ha-Ha marched the boys on through the weeds and into the night. They whistled their fight song in fair tonal unison. Mungo hung back. He could see that some of the boys were still as young as nine or ten, a few were in T-shirts or light knit tops and most were occupied in licking the dribbling cold off the ends of their noses. There were a handful amongst them, Ha-Ha’s closest lieutenants, who were more than grown men. They carried heavy ceremonial swords, taken from Masonic fathers, and lengths of lead pipe stolen from pulled-down tenements. The ginger-headed boy still had his arm strapped across his chest, but in his other hand flashed the silver teeth of his mammy’s serrated bread knife.

There were no street lights over the waste ground but Mungo could see the man-made glow of the bridge ahead. The narrow footbridge spanned the motorway, connecting the Protestant scheme with the Catholic scheme that lay on the far side. This was a bridge that no young Protestant fighter would ever cross alone.

The motorway was pulsing with Saturday day trippers returning from a jaunt to Edinburgh Castle; contented weans who had rubbed the snout of Greyfriars Bobby.

Mungo could see hooded figures loitering at the mouth of the bridge. There must have been another ten or fifteen Protestant boys, all older than himself, all standing tight-faced in the cold rain. They parted to let Ha-Ha through. It was a great turnout. Ha-Ha looked swollen with pride.

Someone crouched in the dirt and picked up a rock in one hand and a ginger bottle in the other. Like potato farmers, the smaller boys began digging for other missiles. Mungo looked down and saw a half-brick, red and heavy, a relic from some other battle. He dug it out, its edges sharp and violent, and straight away he wanted to put it down, to turn and head back to James.

One of the hooded Billies turned his way, taking a long draw on his fag. “Ah see we finally got young Hamilton out here. Bout time, shitebag.” The man’s mouth was a collection of broken teeth. He had a grin like a graveyard full of wrecked headstones. “Ah thought ye were gonnae let the family name doon.

Turn out to be a fuckin' bender."

Mungo did his best to pull himself up to his full height. He knew that it didn't matter what he said next, it only mattered how he said it. "Haw, fuckface. If ye like they wooden pegs ye call teeth ah'd shut yer fuckin' mouth." The hooded boy had come too close to the truth. Mungo rolled the brick in his hand as his fear turned to adrenaline. He sensed Ha-Ha nod approval somewhere over the sea of warriors and one by one, the boys turned away from him.

The mass of fighters now numbered forty or so. As the traffic rushed by beneath them, they huddled under the single pool of street light with hands and ears tucked deep into anoraks and sang Rangers songs. As they sang, their warm breath escaped over the top of their chimney-stack necklines. They told dirty stories and lied boastfully of fucking each other's mothers. It was decided that a blond boy – square-jawed for eleven – had the most fuckable mammy. Several of the older Billies stepped forward and claimed to be this boy's father. "You look lit me," one crowed, "Naw. Sure. Ye look mair lit me." They amused themselves for a time by extending their fists and having the boy crawl back and forth in the mud to kiss their gold-plated rings, which he did, grateful to have been noticed by his elders.

Someone passed around a bottle of Buckfast and the men drank it down in gulps. A couple of the younger ones reached for it, eager to earn respect, and then pulled faces as the sour wine hit the back of their throats. Mungo shifted nervously, feeling his wet socks squish between his toes, and folding and unfolding the ten-pound note in his pocket. He thought about how James had turned away from him in disgust. Then, without wanting to, he thought about Ashley and how her eyes flickered backwards when James kissed her neck in the park. She would soon know James like he never had.

A high ululation sailed over the heads; someone was on the bridge. In an instant, bricks were raised up, and silver blades pulled from pockets. Two of the boys drew long rusting swords from the legs of their trackie bottoms, and Mungo noticed one of the smallest boys had a log splitter that he needed both hands to hold up. As quickly as the weapons were drawn the crowd began to part. Boys pulled back into two rows, creating a narrow gauntlet. Through it came a tight-faced girl. She was pushing a wobbly pram with a sticky-looking child in it. She wore the same baggy tracksuit as the boys, distinguishing herself as female through her large hoop earrings and her light-pink trainers. The girl pushed the plastic pram over the shortcut of waste ground. The squeaky wheels slipped on

the weeds and shoogled the baby about. “Aw, grow up. Ye should be bloody ashamed of yersels.” The girl carried herself like a warrior queen, her hair scraped back and caught into a bejewelled headband. Several of the plastic gems were missing, their bezel casings looked empty as gouged eyes. When she had safely passed the Billies, she sneered and shouted back, “I hope they Catholics kick the shite oot o’ ye.”

The boys looked from one to another, searching for a leader, someone who would tell them how they should feel about this insult. A loose bottle flew through the air and smashed at her feet. The boys let out a single unified whoop.

The sticky wean started to cry. Having been raised in the fighting way of all Glasgow women, the girl took the bait. She let go of the pram and shot back across the dirt, wet ponytail whipping behind her, her chewed claws out, ready to tear them to ribbons. She caught the hair of the gobbiest lad and brought her fist down on his neck and head. The boy tried to run, but she had him by the hood and kept hitting him. The other boys stopped their laughing. The bottle thrower shrank into the crowd. The battered boy wriggled out of his hoodie and stood there shirtless and shivering in the rain, dodging out of claw range. It was the most degrading thing that could happen to a fighting man: to be so publicly skinned by a girl.

Mungo slid to the edge of the rabble. He dared himself to run while the crowd was distracted. The men started to circle the shirtless boy, trapping him and pushing him towards the spitting girl like a hen at a dog fight. Her nails tore long pink streaks of skin off of his arms and the scalping of his fair hair was audible even over the excited squeaks of the boys. Each time he freed himself, the Billies moved to block his escape, pushing him back towards the young mother. She kicked into his pure white body, blackened him with her muddy feet.

From out of nowhere another bottle spun through the night air; it shattered across the temple of one of the smallest boys and when it did, it sparkled like the lights at the school disco. As he fell, the small boy’s blood sprayed a wide arc across the shirtless boy.

They had all been distracted by the furious girl; they hadn’t noticed the group of Fenians standing on the apex of the narrow motorway footbridge. The Catholics stood grinning in the dim light, each dressed in a uniform of green and white hoops.

The Billies started to swarm like a leaderless hive until Ha-Ha’s voice mustered them to action. “Haud it the gether.” And then: “Kick their fuckin’

cunts in.”

The gang reorganized and with a hateful roar, the first of their projectiles sailed up through the air and into the bright motorway light. The Bhoyston danced backwards, letting the glass shatter at their feet. They watched the weapons turn to glitter, and then one by one their green tops flashed in the bright light as they launched back down on to the waste ground. The Catholics held the advantage; by shooting downhill their weapons travelled further and found their targets more easily. Half-bricks made a dull thud and crack as they caught boys in the ribs. Other boys jumped and danced like nylon scarecrows as bottles of piss exploded at their feet.

The air was thick with volleys of religious hate, but the boys were enjoying themselves, having the time of their young lives. The Bhoyston soon found their half-bricks and stones returned to them, dirty and wet from the Dennistoun mud. Rocks thrown by the younger boys missed the bridge altogether and clattered dangerously to the busy motorway below. There was a blare of car horns.

Mungo was rooted to the spot. The brick had slipped from his fingers and his legs disobeyed the order to run. As missiles flew all around him, some of the wounded boys started to retreat back to the little wooden village; they had purple welts on their blue arms and bloody hands clamped over ears that were surely ringing with pain. Half-grown men fell to the ground clutching split skulls, the bravest warriors screaming for their mammies.

The night went suddenly quiet, the sound of splintering glass and stone on bone stopped. The Bhoyston on the bridge had thinned, their casualties retreating back to Royston. The Dennistoun Billies started to clap their cold hands together, roaring over the motorway. The shouting gave the scared boys courage and it coalesced in a bawdy, shouty round of “The Sash My Father Wore.” The Bhoyston had lost control of the high ground. When only a few remained, some of the older Billies picked up their hammers and swords and charged the bridge. The Billies threw their arms wide as though they were scaring grouse from the heather. But not Ha-Ha. Ha-Ha ran with purpose, determined to catch the Fenians. Mungo watched his brother pursue the last of the Catholics back into Royston, well beyond the point where he was safe. The edge of his tomahawk glinted in the car headlights.

The wounded Protestants let out a cheer. Bobby Barr, the broken-armed ginger, raised his serrated knife into the air. “If ah ever see that wee Tim bastard wi’ the bleached hair ah’m gonnae knock the fuck out of him.” The other boys

made similar pledges: the revenge they would take, who had fought well, whose bottle had found its target. The bragging and showmanship made Mungo's stomach lurch. It seemed cowardly. He slunk into the darkness, glad it was over.

He had done what had been asked of him and, best of all, he hadn't hurt anyone. Mungo burned to tell James this: he would go there now, he would run, he would press his face into the tenement buzzer and declare proud, mad love as Ashley already had. Why should he not? Mungo was drunk with the hope of it. He threw his head back, enjoying the rain on his hot face, and exhaled all the air he had been hoarding inside.

He had half-turned towards the estate when it caught him on the side of the head. The crack was so loud that he thought his skull had exploded, it was a sound like a hockey stick hitting a tight, water-filled drum. His vision exploded like the sky on fireworks night. Then everything went white.

The side of his head was hot with pain and, with his hands still in his pockets, he fell sideways into the mud. When the bright light faded and he could finally open his eyes he saw the Billies scatter like spooked sheep; some tucked their tails in tight and ran in a gallop, others ran backwards, flailing under the blows of their attackers. Mungo lay on the ground and watched the green and white hoops tear through the royal blue. Only one or two of the bravest stood their ground with weapons drawn. They were soon run through, fresh faces sliced open with box cutters, tennis rackets cracked over skulls. He watched Bobby Barr run as a boot flew into his kidneys. His face had twisted in pain, but all the wind was booted from his body and he couldn't even scream.

Mungo was writhing in the dirt, blinking, when soft brown eyes looked down at him and there was a flash of a perfect, dazzling smile. He was a beautiful boy; dazed as he was, Mungo was still winded by his beauty. He had the broad-boned nose of a proud Sheltie and dark eyebrows under thick black hair, parted as neat as any parish priest's. He seemed to be saying something, but Mungo couldn't hear him over the din in his skull. Mungo raised his hand to ask for help. Then the boy's foot rose up high and came down like a hoof on the side of Mungo's head.

The white flooded back. It felt like when he sat by himself in the darkness and Jodie turned on the big light, the bare bulb with no lamp-shade, and it burned his skull. The foot came down again and again, trying to sever his head from his body. Mungo could hear the rubbery squeak of the trainer against his face. He could taste the blood from his ear and the salt from his eyes in his

mouth and in a delayed reflex he pulled his hands up to cover his face.

The stomping took on the rhythm of a happy jig. Mungo couldn't see through the pain. The foot came down again and then travelled the length of his body. Then the beautiful boy walked the length of Mungo. He did it in marching strides, like a cartoon Nazi. He turned above Mungo's head, goose-stepped on his heel and made to walk back down the fallen body. The next foot never fell.

Ha-Ha was there, the tomahawk above his head, and he cleaved it down on the beautiful Catholic and the boy fell like a wasted sapling. The side of his brother's face was scarlet. There was a curtain of his own blood falling from a line that stretched from his ear to his mouth. It was already raised and puckered white at the edges, like the torn fat on a rasher of bacon. Ha-Ha tapped Mungo with his toe and then he turned, axe above his head, and started hacking at the forest of Fenians.

Mungo lay on the wet ground. He could not lift himself from where he had been stamped into the earth. He would have frozen but for the inferno of his pain. And as the fighting raged above him, he closed his eyes.

The Catholics retreated over the motorway bridge. Mungo could hear Ha-Ha roar after them, singing sweet promises of chibbing and buggery. He lay in the mud and the spitting rain was cool against his face. He gently probed the inside of his mouth with soiled fingers; he had torn through the fat of his cheek and at least one of his back teeth was cracked. The mud protested as he tried to stand. Several times his legs slid out from under him and he fell back into the grass. When he eventually freed himself, he saw how he had left a perfect outline, like a snow angel that had been pressed into the filth.

Other boys had not been so lucky. There was a crowd gathered around a twelve-year-old who had liked to skateboard and always helped his granny wash the outside of her windows. Mungo had seen him out on the high ledge as his granny clung to his waist. On the other side, some Billies had caught a flame-haired Catholic boy, and in a circular ceilidh, they were taking turns to dance on him. He would be lucky to live.

Mungo held his hands to his ringing head as he stumbled across the battlefield. He was having trouble breathing. He feared that his ribs might be broken as he inhaled the damp night air in little lopsided sips. His eye had scabbed shut already and there was dirt trapped under the swelling; he could feel

it scrape against his eyeball. It caused a blinding pain to put weight on his left foot, but because the pain shot up from his ankle through his hip bone, he couldn't tell which parts of him were calling for attention. He wanted to sob, to cry for the waste of it all.

Ha-Ha would see tonight as a defeat. Those who could still fight would be shamed into returning next week to save face. It should be over, but Mungo knew better. It was more of a beginning than an ending.

Mungo stumbled on and swallowed his hurt just like he had been taught. His tears caught in the back of his throat where they mingled with his own blood. He gulped until he had choked on too much, and then he hauched black spittle into the grass. He was glad that he could not see the redness under the dim lights.

Young men hurried in all directions. All the dauntless warriors were limping home, bragging of their glories, screaming threats of retaliation. But by how they tucked their tailbones Mungo could see that they were shaken. They were gulping, chewing on their hurt until they could be across their front doors. They kept their chests puffed out until they could be safe in their mammies' arms again; where they could coorie into her side as she watched television and she would ask, "What is all this, eh, what's with all these cuddles?" and they would say nothing, desperate to just be boys again, wrapped up safe in her softness.

The first of the polis sirens echoed off the tenements. The young men who could still run started running. Mungo came to the cluster of dens. The little settlement was destroyed; the shanty town pushed flat and broken to bits. The gutted porn magazines lay upon the grass, and the open-mouthed women, their faces twisted in agony or pleasure, lay scattered about like dead villagers.

When he reached his street, he felt an anger for the happy glow coming from the different flats. Families would be tucked in together, eating fish suppers and watching the Saturday night variety shows. When he came to his close, he struggled to climb the stairs. Inside the Hamilton flat it was dark and quiet. Jodie was home from the café and already in her bedroom; Mungo pressed on it gently, almost pleadingly, but her door was snibbed tight.

The living room was empty. It hung with a low cloud of stale smoke, flat ale, and sweat. Under the fug was a memory of Mo-Maw's vanilla perfume – the one they had chipped in for and bought her for Christmas – and he was sad to not find her on the couch, snoring off the drink.

Mungo flicked on the electric fire and struggled out of his wet clothes. It took an age to undress; every ordinary movement caused an extraordinary pain and he

had to stop often to catch his breath and summon the courage to continue. It was hardest to take off his cagoule – he found he couldn't lift his arm over his head – and by the time he was in his boxer shorts, there were tears of rage and hurt streaming down his face. He downed a mouthful of leftover lager from Mo-Maw's glass. It stung the tear in his cheek, but the drink tasted sad and flat and the smell of it made him long for her, made him want to lie next to his mother.

Out in the hallway he listened at her bedroom door. He could hear Mo-Maw's rolling snore coming from inside. Mungo knew he was too old for these feelings, he knew that Jodie would disapprove, but as he reached for the handle all he could think about was how much he wanted to climb into bed beside his mother and feel safe in her arms. He cracked the door slowly, the room was dark but for the faint orange glow coming in through the undrawn curtains.

"Maw?" he whispered.

Mungo inched along the wall until he bumped into her bedside table. There was a tinkle of tea mugs and perfume bottles. In the faint street light he could see his mother's pale face above the sheets. Her head was turned to the side, and she was asleep. Mungo watched her for a moment. Her make-up had smeared on the pillow and there was tension in her face, a puckering in her eyelids, as though she was caught in the purgatory between the drink and its sugars. *"Mo-Maw?"* His bottom lip began to tremble with self-pity. Mungo peeled the candlewick away from his mother; he turned to slip in beside her but as his one good eye adjusted to the dark, he realized that her tiny frame made too large of a hummock in the bedspread.

Mungo lifted the sheets slowly.

The street light washed across the strange bodies. The old widower from upstairs was nestled beside his mother. He was burrowed below her armpit, his mouth was clamped to her breast, his long arms wrapped around her waist. He was like an undernourished tick suckling at her side and it took a moment for Mungo to make sense of the tangle of limbs, for his mind to arrange the horror into something that made sense.

It was as though they had been in the middle of some dance when they had both fallen asleep, or had simply given up.

Perhaps it was the sudden cold air. Perhaps it was the faint light. Mr Donnelly opened his little black eyes. As he lifted his mouth from Mo-Maw's skin, there was a long slaver of spittle. He unfurled his body like some rodent in a nest. His thin hair was sweated across his face and as he blinked and looked up at the boy,

his eyes were like two puddles in the darkness.

Mr Donnelly had not expected the placid boy to turn on him. When Mungo grabbed the man by the hair and dragged him out into the close all the old chancer could say was “Aye, nae problem chief, ah didnae mean any bother.” It rolled off his tongue in a jovial manner as though he was a first-footer who had stayed too long after the Hogmanay bells.

Mungo hurled the man on to the hard stairs. He paced the landing, flagellating himself, slapping his own face, cracking his fists off his temples. It was this that unsettled the old man the most. His fury sent Mr Donnelly cowering into the corner of the stairwell, where he sank to the floor with his hands covering his head. Mungo was angry at the man, but he was angrier with himself. It was a nightmarish sight to see the man without trousers but with his old blazer and shirt on and his tie still knotted. His bare legs were pallid against the concrete and the tip of his shrivelled cock was hanging below his shirt hem, tacky in the close light. Mr Donnelly had seen his opportunity and taken it, he hadn’t bothered to waste time on swooning or sweet teases. It was a low way to live.

Mungo spat on the man, a great shower of directionless spittle.

“Thank you, son. Aye, thank you.” The old man seemed grateful to have gotten off so lightly.

Leaving Mr Donnelly hunkered in the close, Mungo went inside and locked every lock. He returned to Mo-Maw and pulled the sweated bed sheets across her. She didn’t stir. Her head was tilted backwards, her mouth open and ghastly with her own smeared lipstick. *Tattie-bogle.* He would pretend she had been Tattie-bogle all along. Without glancing at her pinkest flesh, he lifted the empty shell of her most gently and stuffed the sheets underneath her. It brought her splayed legs back together. Then, as though he was preparing her for burial, he wiped the last of the paint from her lips. She lay there, drunk out of her memory, looking like a baby that would not sleep without being swaddled.

The struggle with the old man had roused Jodie. She was growling to herself like she could not wait to be gone from this madhouse. He heard her fill a mug with tap water. Then she sealed herself back inside her bedroom.

Mungo couldn’t sleep after that. Inside and out he was in agony. He crawled on to his bed and felt rotten for all the mistakes he had made, all the poor-me’s he could conjure: Jodie and the baby, Ha-Ha and the Bhoyston, Mo-Maw and the dirty money, but most of all for James.

He had been so scared of Ha-Ha that he had ruined the best thing he had ever

known. Now, in the darkness, he knew that Ha-Ha would not keep his word, not for long – he never did. It was only a matter of time before James would be hurt, and for what? For liking Mungo Hamilton, the ruiner of all good things.

TWENTY-FOUR

As the sun broke over the tenements Mungo went to the bathroom and cleaned the blood and mud with a damp cloth. He crunched two of Jodie's painkillers and smeared Mo-Maw's tubes of ointment over his ribs till they were thick with pungent grease. He wrapped his kidneys in strips torn from of an old cotton duster and tested the bruises that were spreading up his flank. His outsides looked as dead as his insides felt. It seemed only right.

There was a congealed split under his hairline where the hockey stick had cracked his skull. He cleaned the swollen area and then covered it with a bunion plaster, the only thing he could find that was adhesive. Mungo tried to hold the edges of skin together while it set, and he combed his hair, still matted in places with his own blood, over the flesh-toned rubber. When he swept it back from his face there was a bruise around his temple so he took some of Jodie's foundation and spread the too-orange cream from the outside of his eye up to his hairline.

It hurt to pull clean clothes over his body and the bandages and the pain meant he could not bend properly as he packed his schoolbag. He burst his piggy bank and wrapped the pittance inside Mr Donnelly's tainted note. Unpinning an old school photo of Jodie from his wall he placed it safely into the pocket of his cagoule. It didn't take long to pack the things he loved, and when he was finished his bag was still light enough to lift, despite his tender sides.

He forced himself to wait and try to eat the end-slice of the bread. Wincing, he ate it slowly, while the cut inside his cheek screamed. As he chewed he stared across the back greens at James's darkened windows. He hadn't hurt any Catholics, surely that was worth something. They had both done what they needed to hide their true selves. He would show James his bruises and James would understand that. James would put Ashley aside and then they would leave together on a fast bus, going in any direction Mungo pointed.

Mungo closed the door behind him. He stumbled down the sleeping close as weak sun spilled through the stained-glass windows. When he reached the ground floor he was surprised to find Chickie Calhoun stepping back into the close mouth. Natalie was tugging on her leash, her beady eyes bulging out of her skull. Mungo nodded politely and squeezed past them. He had his hand on the heavy door before Poor-Wee-Chickie spoke.

“Is the circus in town?”

“Pardon me?” Even in his low state he remembered his manners.

The little man stood in the shadows at the deep end of the close, the dog leash wrapped around his hand. “Well, you’re creepin’ about with a face full of make-up and a packed bag. So I figured maybe ye were running away to join the Ringlings.”

Mungo smiled although he didn’t feel like it. He reached for the heavy door again.

“Listen, if I were you, I’d wait a wee minute afore going out there. The polis have been up and down that street so often the council will need to lay some new carpet.” Mungo peered through the frosted glass. It was the start of a fine Sunday morning outside. The sun had pushed wide cracks in the thick clouds and it promised a blue sky when it could manage. Still, sure enough, two unmarked CID cars crept along the street; they were conspicuous on a street where few could afford motors of their own. They rolled slowly to catch unawares any boys still trapped out from the fighting. Poor-Wee-Chickie nodded towards his own front door. “Son, have you eaten anything hot yet?”

“No.”

“Well, come in then, let me make you some liver.”

“I don’t like liver, Mister Calhoun.”

“Och, naebody likes liver, son, but you look like you could use the iron.”

Over the threshold, Poor-Wee-Chickie locked all the deadbolts behind them. He drew off his anorak and put on his cooking cardigan, buttoning it all the way to the neck. He pushed the purple liver around in an old pan then put it down in front of the boy, still quivering and bloody. The smell of it turned Mungo’s stomach, but he brought his knife through it to be polite.

“Can you no eat?”

Mungo shook his head. “I’m sorry. My mouth hurts.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie fished around in the pocket of his cardigan and put on his reading glasses. He took Mungo’s head in his hands and told him to open wide.

“Awright, haud still.” He used a pair of eyebrow tweezers and pushed against Mungo’s cheek. There was a tug, and he pulled out a sliver of tooth from the cheek fat; it was long as a sliced almond. “Ye’ll need to get that tooth looked at.” He handed Mungo a water glass cloudy with cooking salt. “Rinse with this and the cut will do much better.”

Mungo swilled the salty water with a wince. He did it again and spat the bloody water into the sink.

“Are you awright, son? Yer face is twitching somethin’ rotten.”

Mungo pinched his tic. “Sorry, Mister Calhoun.”

“Och, no need to apologize to me.” Poor-Wee-Chickie was indulging him. “But don’t grab yer face too hard, ye’ll spoil yer lovely foundation.” He took Mungo’s face in his hands for the second time that morning. He watched the blinking tic for a moment and then with the tip of an old tea towel he wiped the boy’s face. With careful fingers he was gently blending the thick foundation better, feathering it away at the edges. “After the fine-upstanding-family-men-of-the-roofers-union drove me out of the business, I went to work at the King’s Theatre. I jist minded the back door, but sometimes they used to let us watch the big stars, you know, while they put on their make-up and wigs and that. I was *mad* for Dorothy Paul, so I was.”

Mungo Hamilton, never one to cry, started to cry now. He ground his top teeth into his bottom lip but it would not be controlled.

“Here, here, it’s awright. You can let it out. I mean, auld Dorothy is no the singer she once was, but ah wouldnae greet about it, son.”

Mungo found himself choking between laughter and tears.

“Let it out. It’ll do you good.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie refolded his tea towel. He pointed out into the back green. “Ye know, I knew a brave wee sodjur once. He was parading up and down that back wall out there.” The man mimicked a rigid little soldier, marching with pride. “He had a wee wooden gun and one of his mammy’s old berets; pure proud as anything, he was. I was just standing at my window watching him have a great time, pretending to shoot the opposing army of weans, all of them screaming into walkie-talkies, chucking fake grenades, the whole pantomime. When all of a sudden, this big general came up ahind him and kicked the sodjur off the wall. Just shoved him without blinking. Oh, it was a pure sin! This general was in the *same* army, can ye believe it? He just shoved his own man off

the wall lit that." Chickie shook his head. "Anyway, this brave wee fella fell about four feet, hit the midden roof, rolled once and fell eight feet on to the paving slabs. *Blamm!*" Poor-Wee-Chickie winced as he slapped his hand on the countertop. "That wee sodjur didn't even make a sound. He was winded but he was brave. Any other wee boy would have screamed for his mammy. But not this little sodjur. This wee army man jist stood up and got on with it."

Mungo let out a low gut roar. He had balled his fists and was trying to shove them backwards into his brain through his eye sockets. His face was bright red.

"It's awright son, let it out. Every brave sodjur gets tired and cries at some point."

Poor-Wee-Chickie didn't rub his back or pat his shoulder, he just stood there and gave Mungo the space to scream inwards into himself. He lit a cigarette and when the boy finally took his fists from his eyes he asked, "Does the boy with the slate roof like you as much as you like him?"

Mungo flinched.

"It's awright, I won't tell anyone yer secret." He crossed his heart and saluted the boy. "On ma Girl Guides honour."

Mungo looked at Chickie through swollen eyes. Poor-Wee-Chickie who stood behind net curtains and saw everything had arrived at the very heart of it. He could see clearly what had been going on. "He did, Mister Calhoun. He liked me a lot. But I've ruined everything."

"Och! Weans! Everything seems a hunner per cent more dramatic at your age. It'll pass." He handed him a clean tea towel.

"Do you honestly think so?"

"Aye."

Mungo wiped his face. "He asked me to run away with him and I asked him to wait. Now I don't think we can hide much longer."

Poor-Wee-Chickie was thinking again; he had tilted his head to the side and was running his tongue along the back of his teeth. "I want to show you something. Don't run away now. It's no a big kiddie-catching net, no matter what the other weans might say."

He was gone only a short while, but long enough for Mungo to wipe his face on the tea towel and feel stupid. When he returned there was a burgundy book in his hand, a diary with "1957" stamped in gold deboss. Flicking through the pages, he saw that each cream surface was warped with tiny, obsessive script. Chickie's feelings were crowding the page, and when the page was full, they

twisted and continued up along the margin.

Tucked in between the pages were two black-and-white photos. The first photo was square with a white frame. It showed a young man with thick hair, standing outdoors and leaning against the open window of a tenement. He had a broad Sunday paper folded in one hand and a short cigarette in the other. His face was tilted upwards towards a rare sun and he wore a heavy wool jumper and some high-waisted trousers. He was carefree and laughing at whoever was taking the photo.

The man in the photo was handsome and had the confidence of youth. Everything lay ahead of him. It was all unspoiled. “Ye were bonny, Mister Calhoun.”

“*Were?* Cheeky bugger. I have a jawline that could etch glass.”

In the next photo six teenage boys were in the back green of a tenement, this same tenement, sitting cross-legged on trampled grass and beaming at the photographer. Two of the boys sat slightly to the side on an old Mackintosh coat laid out like a picnic blanket. It was the smallest thing. The six were smoking after a football match, but those two seemed special, ever so slightly separated, an island of their very own.

Poor-Wee-Chickie pointed at the man sitting next to him on the coat. A towheaded boy with a dimpled chin and a crooked smile. “That fella’s name was Georgie. A kind boy, really, truly kind and considerate. We trained through in Ayr for the Merchant Navy the gether. On the first day he felt bad for me when he saw I didnae have socks thick enough for the boots so he gave me a pair of his. My mother had given me money for a sandwich and a bottle of ginger at the train station back to the city, I saw he didn’t have any so I made sure he got half of mine. That’s all it really was, wee things. Over the next three months, it was just wee kindnesses here and there. I loved him, though. He gave me my first kiss. My best kiss.”

Mungo was struck dumb.

“He asked me to emigrate to Australia with him.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Och, I had a hunner good reasons back then, none of them make much sense now. Usual shite: ma mammy wisnae well, ma daddy never came back from the war, ma sister would be left to cope by herself, I didnae look guid in short trousers. Utter nonsense. All stories I telt myself to cover my fear. Australia! My wee arsehole was twitching like a rabbit’s nose.” Poor-Wee Chickie sighed as he

filled the kettle. “Still, you know, ah suppose ah did what any guid son should do. At least my mammy was happy all her days.”

“That was decent of you.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie shook his head. “No, you’re missing the point. It was cowardly. I wanted that badly to go with Georgie. I’ve spent the last thirty-odd years imagining it. I just didnae have the guts.”

“Was there nobody else?”

“What. Around here?” Poor-Wee-Chickie pulled at a loose thread on his cardigan. “People became scared to death of me. They think what I have is catching. What man would get close to me?”

Mungo looked at the photographs again. The laughing boys, the happy teenager smoking and reading the paper. Poor-Wee-Chickie had been surrounded by love. Where had it all turned for him? “Where’s Georgie now?”

“Och! Georgie is married now, so mibbe it was for the best. He writes to me sometimes. He always asks me if I go back to Ayr and I tell him I do, but I never have. I couldnae face it.”

“What should I do, Mister Calhoun?”

Poor-Wee-Chickie ducked his head slightly and looked deeply into Mungo’s eyes. “That’s easy son. Put yourself first for once.”

Mungo drew his school bag over his tender shoulder. He nodded at the liver. “I’m sorry, I can’t eat that.”

Poor-Wee-Chickie laughed. “Och, that’s awright. Natalie loves liver. She’ll be in pure heaven.” He checked the sliver of sky peeking above his net curtains, and as he sighed, he caught Mungo staring at him. “Och, don’t worry about me, son. Ah’ll take a wee dauner up the shops, get something nice for ma dinner. Mibbe there’s a guid film on later.”

It was still early. Mungo waited for a break in the CID patrol before he emerged from the close mouth and lurched along the road. His leg throbbed as he stood on the corner and vacillated between heading to James’s tenement and the doocot. If he went to the tenement, James might not let him in, and the neighbours would hear him plead into the intercom. He could not stomach the shame of that.

So he went to the doocot and hunkered out of view on the far side of the shack. The sun came over Glasgow as he waited for James to do his morning

feed and exercise. As he waited he rehearsed everything he wanted to say, but it all sounded clumsy, the small things too small, all the big feelings, overwrought and showy as an American film. He didn't have to wait long. He heard James's cough before he saw him.

When Mungo emerged from the far side of the doocot, James wouldn't look at him. He opened the heavy locks and stepped into the darkness as though Mungo was not even there. "*Whrooup, whroooup, whrooup.*" The birds sang it back to him.

"I'm ready. I will go anywhere you want to go." For all the rehearsing, Mungo couldn't control himself now. Ashley and Ha-Ha had already wedged too much between them. He needed James to know the depth of everything he felt. It would tumble out of him, even if James shamed him with it later.

James didn't turn around. He was holding a jug of cold water up to each cage, letting the birds drink through the bars like prisoners. It was reinforcing in their small brains that he was a benevolent jailer. That he alone loved them, and he alone would take care of them, if only they promised to return whenever he released them. He wouldn't look at Mungo. "Anywhere? That's brave of ye." It didn't sound as if he meant it. "How is yer self-loathing gaun?"

"We have to go. Now."

"Do we? Funny that. You being ready to leave just when things get a bit better for me." He took a small sepia hen from the cage and stroked her neck. She was not drinking the morning water. "Ah thought you would be happy for me. Ah didnae expect you to be jealous."

"I'm no jealous."

The stiffness in James's shoulders softened slightly. Then he coughed, his damp, raking rattle. "Ah don't think ah want to go anywhere with you. Ye're as bad as your brother."

"I didn't do it." He was circling now, trying to push himself into James's line of sight, but the other boy always found something to tilt away towards. James denied him the comfort of his gaze. "I want you to know I didnae hurt anyone last night. I went. I did as Hamish asked but I didnae fight." He lifted the side of his cagoule to show the navy bruise, but even at the nylon rustling, James did not turn. "I let them hit us and stamp on us and I didnae even fight back."

"That doesn't make you any less of a fuckin' bigot."

Idiot. Weakling. Liar. Poofter. Coward. Pimp. Bigot.

Mungo wanted to say he had done it for James. He had done it so Ha-Ha

would not hurt him, so he would leave the one thing Mungo loved in peace. But what was the point now? Either way James seemed lost to him. Mungo tried one last time, but the word escaped him quiet as a sigh. “Please.”

James wouldn’t look at him.

Mungo picked up his school bag and turned to leave. Where would he go if he was not following James? He knew then that he would go nowhere. He would go straight to Ha-Ha and stand in his line of sight so that he never felt the need to hunt for this Catholic, never felt the need to set fire to him.

“I wish I wasn’t like this, James. I wish I was all right but I’m not. You don’t have to be like Chickie. Ashley is gorgeous and it’s a lovely thing that your da loves you. Those are good things. I lied. I am jealous.”

There were mongrels sniffing in the doocot grass. Old men, their eyes obscured by flat caps, stood nearby and whistled gruff commands. Everything would go on as it always had.

“No. Ye’re wrong. He doesnae love me.” James turned and squinted into the light. “He doesnae even know me.”

The heavy cake of Jodie’s foundation looked like a crusted scab in the morning sun. The skin around his temple was already purpling with blood. There were heavy bags of worry under Mungo’s eyes and the side of his face was swollen both on the inside and out.

“Fuck sake!” James crossed the rat glass and put his hands on the sides of Mungo’s head. He tilted him like he was an ashy doo. His eyes searched the wounds, and his fingers pulled on his bottom lip to check his teeth.

“Sssttt,” Mungo winced.

“Where does it hurt?”

He didn’t know where to start. “Nowheres. I’m fine.”

James was pulling at his cagoule, raising his jacket to his chest. Seeing the outline of heel prints under the ointment, still blooming and darkening across his pale trunk, he laid his fingers gently on it. “Sweet suffering fuck.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone. I wouldn’t do that.”

James was turning the pale boy around, his eyes scanning every inch of his torso, his fingers running the outlines of his pain. Mungo tried to laugh the hurt away. “Catholics, man. Everybody thinks they’re the good guys.”

James jammed his knuckles into his eye sockets. He was repeating *okay,* over and over, like it was a chant. The blood had drained from his face. He stood that way, thinking, chanting, for a long while. “Fuck it. Awright, we’ll leave.”

Mungo shook his head despite himself. “Naw, I was being selfish. You’ll be awright. You can go away to the rigs. You can have weans with Ashley.”

James clamped his hands on either side of Mungo’s head. “It’s too late.”

Mungo winced. Then he smiled, a tremulous, fleeting thing. “Are you sure?”

“Aye.” His thumbs were caressing Mungo’s bottom lip. “Ah think ah have more than enough saved. We can go north and rent a caravan for the whole summer. Ah can find work. We’ll be awright.”

The men who were walking their dogs in the early sunshine glanced their way. The boys separated. They stood a respectable arm’s length apart and laughed and smiled at each other like they were demented. James sank to his knees, his eyes were swivelling back and forth as he thought about all that would need to be planned.

Mungo sat on the grass beside him. His teeth were rattling now. The pain caught up to him and the last of his body heat was leaching through the welts on his side. James drew off his own jumper, the barley and gorse Fair Isle, and then he helped remove Mungo’s cagoule and redressed him in the knitwear. Up close there were a thousand different colours all running through the knit, not only the porridgey cream and golds, but also bluebell blues, mossy browns, and an acidic, punkish pink. Mungo wanted time to sit and study it closely, all these little things he had never noticed before. It was alive with the warmth of James, he felt him all around him. Mungo chewed the right cuff, the wool squeaked between his teeth. It calmed him down.

“Better?” James helped pull the cagoule back over Mungo’s head and zipped the neck closed all the way to the top, taking care to avoid pinching his chin.

Mungo folded himself over the soft schoolbag, suddenly very relieved, and more tired than he could say. He let the weak sun wash over him. “Today?”

James shook his head. “Tomorrow maybe. I need to go see Mac Munroe up in Cranhill. He’ll be desperate to buy the doocot off us. He’s been keen to fly my prize pouters for ages. Between the cages and the birds there has to be about four hunner pound all in. That’ll be a big help to us.”

James went to the doocot and exercised his doos while Mungo slumped on the grass and felt bad about his meagre savings. James retrieved his flask and sandwiches and they ate a shared breakfast together as the pigeons circled overhead. The tea was milky and sweet and it soothed the cut in his mouth. There was no school today, there would be no school tomorrow. The boys made lists of things to pack; useful things like bandages, firelighters, sleeping bags,

and then many impractical things: a ghetto blaster, tins of heavy Ambrosia rice, and James's mourning suit, in case farmers expected a formal job interview. Afterwards they lay on their stomachs in the morning sun, nothing more to say, drunk with relief at what lay ahead. James snaked his hand across the grass and lifted the back of Mungo's jumper. He ran his fingers through the downy hairs at the base of his spine. Mungo closed his eyes.

"Do you think people will like us?"

"In Ardnamurchan? Ah dunno, we don't really need people to like us. We just need them to leave us alone. There's hardly any people there, ah think it'll be awright."

No women watching from windows. No gossiping voices at the landing below you. No Ha-Ha wanting him to man up. No Jodie wanting him to grow up. Mungo could not imagine. "Will you tell your da?"

"Aye. Ah've already written the letter. Ah wrote it last year after he battered me for the chatline." James stroked the base of Mungo's spine, ready to pull his hand away should one of the dog walkers come too close. "Will you tell Mo-Maw?"

Mungo thought about it. "Naw. I'll tell Jodie. She'll know how to break it to Hamish and Maureen. 'Asides, they willnae want to know me after they hear what I am."

"Maybe Jodie will." James trusted in the legends of her good-heartedness. It spoke as many lovely things about him as it did about her. "Mibbe one day we can tell her where we went."

"Aye. Mibbe."

"Mungo, you do know we can't ever come back here? Once they know, we'll be as bad as Chickie Calhoun."

Someday Mungo would tell him what he knew but for now all he said was "He's no all bad. He's awright. We're awright."

"Whut? No shuffling to the Paki shop in your cagoule, making soup for Mo-Maw, living for the guid weather when you can watch bin men take their taps aff in the summer sun?"

Mungo was grinning, spit pooling in the side of his open mouth. "You're a cheeky basturt for a Catholic. You still have to apologize for saying all that cruel shite to me."

"Ah was just keeping the Protestants in line. Yeese think ye run this town."

"That was kind of you, wingnut." Mungo snickered as he twisted James's ear.

James batted his hand away. He looked up at the sky full of birling birds. There was some other man's hen in the sky. She was a drab, eggy yellow against the ash-grey clouds, but now and again the sunlight hit her and she shone like gold. One of James's pigeons started to circle her, a plump little bully that he called Henry-the-Weighth. The pair dipped out of view behind the tenements and in that moment, James knew that his bird was lost forever. It would have devastated him only hours ago, but now he huffed, and felt strangely happy for Henry. He chuckled to himself. "Here, ah realized something the other day. Do you remember that chatline ah telt ye about? Well, ah realized ah started phoning it well before my mammy died."

"Aye. So?"

"She must have been getting those bills for months. She must have seen what those numbers were for, and just paid them. She never let on. She never said a word."

It took a moment for Mungo to realize what it was James was telling him. "Oh. She knew about you. That's guid."

James whistled at his birds. "Aye. That's guid."

Mungo turned his face away from James. The sunlight was making the crown of his head warm, and he wanted to feel it kiss his other cheek. "Just think. This time next week. No more John Donne."

"Who?"

The soft fingers on his spine had lulled him into a stupor. "It doesnae matter."

The sun would hold. The boys closed their eyes.

While the boys had been watching the birds fly over the scheme, Hamish had come upon the doocot from the park side. Like a deerhound he had the instinct to start at the widest point and sweep inwards, coursing his quarry back towards home. He had come through the park and then slipped between the missing railings in the iron fence.

Earlier that morning he had gone to the flat to look for Mungo and found Mo-Maw slumped at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. Last night had been a blur of adrenaline, flashes of emerald green and white and spit and blood. But through it all he could clearly picture his baby brother lying in the dirt, choking on his blood, while the gleeful Fenian stamped down upon him. When Hamish saw Mungo's bloodied, discarded clothes in the hallway, and found Mo-

Maw weeping to herself at the table, he imagined the worst. He shook her. She looked up. She screamed.

For a moment Hamish had forgotten about his own torn-up face. Mo-Maw's screaming brought Jodie through from her bedroom. His sister stood in the kitchen doorway, her hair curled around a tonging iron, the plug dangling from the end where she had ripped it from the wall. It was unlike Jodie to be at a loss for words. She stared at Hamish, and at the blood that was already seeping through the bandage, and as she stared, the tongs singed through her hair and a long, ringleted clump came away in her hand.

Mo-Maw had been nursing a hangover, she hadn't been weeping for Mungo, she thought he was still in his bed. Hamish guffawed at his own stupidity.

Hamish cast no shadows. Mungo didn't know what instinct made him look up from the long grass, what shift in the air made him glance over his shoulder. But when he rolled on to his side, Hamish was standing over them, blood dripping down his neck.

Mungo had thought it would be too early for his brother to be up, too soon for the father of a young baby to be dressed and prowling. Still, here he was – a ginger bottle full of siphoned petrol in his hand.

There was a sour grimace on Hamish's face and his teeth were grinding from the speed. Bleeding and raw, the left side of his face was covered with a large white bandage, but the ointment and coagulating blood seeped through the thin muslin adhesive. The outline of it looked like a half-grin, like one of those carnival drawings you turned upside down to make it either grimace or smile. Hamish had been slashed from his earlobe to the left corner of his mouth, a rusty carpet blade having sliced through most layers of his skin. He must have been in the Royal Infirmary, being stitched together, most of the night. He had taken a bump of speed and had not yet been home to sleep. The stitches were not holding.

"I thought ye were fuckin' dead." His eyes were wild.

"Hamish, it's no what you think." Mungo could only fear how much he had seen, how much he had heard.

There were real tears streaming behind the thick lenses. It was this detail that scared Mungo the most. Hamish was shaking his head like he didn't want to believe it. The two boys lying side by side in the grass. The Fenian's hand tickling the base of his brother's spine. Hamish let out a single choked sob. "Naw, Mungo. Ye cannae be one of them. Ye cannae. Ye just fuckin' cannae."

James's hand – the same gentle fingers that had caressed Mungo's skin – was lying in the grass, supporting his weight. Hamish stepped forward and brought his boot down upon it. He stamped down twice, all the force concentrated in his heel, and the thick sole of his Doc Martens made a terrible crunching sound. James rolled on to his side, terror blanching his face. He curled into a defensive ball and cradled his broken fingers in his other hand. Mungo went to him.

James's mouth was open wide, but he made no sound. He started crawling backwards, away from Hamish, trying to make it to the doocot. Hamish lifted his glasses and wiped at his wet eyes. He turned his gaze to the Fenian, then he swivelled it back to Mungo. A dark look of relief swept over him. He had the answer he needed, even if it was not the truth.

"Ah. I understand now. Ye're being diddled by this fucker, eh? This dirty Tim bastard that likes to have his way with wee boys. Typical. I blame the fucking priests."

Hamish crossed the grass towards James. It was what he wanted to believe. It was a far easier thing to understand than the other truth, that Mungo had lain with this boy and enjoyed it, that Mungo had dreamt of the cereal sugar on James's breath, that he had taken him in his mouth, or nuzzled his nose into the soft blond down at the crack of his arse, or rubbed himself against James in a cold bath till they made soft bubbles in the flat water. Hamish could not be the brother of a deviant. He would not be the brother of a poofter.

"Ye're a fuckin' child maleshtur."

James Jamieson did something strange then. He stopped trying to get away.

The young man nodded only once, very faintly, as if he had swallowed a pill with no milk to wash it down. He looked at Mungo now and the left corner of his mouth pulled back in acceptance of what would come next. *I understand. It's okay.*

Mungo was too late to see what they were not saying. Hamish had rushed forward before it dawned on him. "No! Hamish. Don't!"

The first kick caught James on the underside of his chin. It split the soft skin and cracked his disobedient teeth to pieces. The second kick came down on to the middle of his face and sent a spray of blood skyward from his broken nose. The boy stopped moving. He lay, wheat and crimson in the sunlight, his head tilted backwards, his arms wide, like a saint waiting for ascension. Mungo was still on his knees. His hands were clasped in prayer. It had taken only two kicks to destroy James Jamieson.

Hamish would not let Mungo go to his side. Mungo darted around his brother, but as he knelt over James, Hamish took a firm grip of his hair and dragged him away.

Hamish unscrewed his ginger bottle and doused James in petrol. It poured out in a galloping stream. Mungo rammed his shoulder into Hamish's gut and tackled him. He used whatever strength he had left to shove his brother away from the body. Mungo struggled but Hamish was stronger, faster. He huckled him to his knees, he put his boot into Mungo's ribs and Mungo became helpless as a newborn calf. With his right hand he twisted deep into his hair, with his left, he gripped the back of Mungo's jumper and dragged him on all fours towards the housing scheme. "Get a haud of yersel. I've saved ye, Mungo. Ye'll thank me one day. I saved ye."

At first Mungo let himself be pulled away, he was glad of every footstep he put between his brother and James's body. But as they reached the pavement, Hamish stopped and roared back at the Catholic. "I'll be back for you. I'm no fuckin' finished."

Mungo twisted wildly. He used his nails to pierce the back of Hamish's hand, but Hamish knew what he was doing. He brought his elbow down into the tender bruise on Mungo's face, again and again, until submission flooded over Mungo. Then he dragged his brother on his knees back towards the tenements, stopping every now and then to shake him, and tell him to quit his fucking greetin'.

TWENTY-FIVE

It turned out to be a beautiful day. The loch was alive with sunlight as Mungo helped Gallowgate drag the dead man back to their campsite. They kept dropping him and St Christopher's bony body rolled away and disappeared beneath the horsetail ferns. Each time they picked him up again, Gallowgate took care to brush the muck from the sallow skin. There was real grief etched on Gallowgate's face as they dragged his friend across the carpet of pearlwort moss. Mungo couldn't look at the body. He wished the dead man would shut his eyes.

They laid St Christopher inside the two-man tent; Gallowgate had insisted on the decency of it. They couldn't get him all the way in because his soaked tweeds stuck to the damp floor and he wouldn't budge any further without bringing the structure down upon himself. So he lay there, his legs sticking out from the kneecap down, as Gallowgate gathered clumps of purple heather and sprinkled them on his chest.

Mungo searched for dry wood to start a fire with, while Gallowgate sank three lager cans, one after the other, without speaking. There was no dry wood and it was a pitiful fire, smoky and slow to catch, but it burned well enough for Mungo to place two tins of ravioli into the flames. He sat across the firepit and watched Gallowgate sink into the drink, finishing the lagers and swilling the spirit bottles for the last dregs.

"He looked after us in the jail." Gallowgate spoke into the fire. "He shared his commissary. Always gave us a few of his smoked douts when he knew ah was short."

It seemed like no great charity to Mungo to receive the blunted leftovers of someone's cigarette. But Gallowgate looked moved by what he was saying.

"Naebody in the jail would talk to me at first – neabody but auld Chrissy. From day one, he was ma pal."

“Was it bad inside? Was it hellish?” Mungo wanted to know. He tried not to look at the dead man’s feet.

“Ah dunno, it was jail, win’t it? It could be good and bad. It was overcrowded, two men to a single cell and you had to eat yer meals on yer bed. They kept us all in the same wing. All the guys that were inside for sex crimes. The governor had taken a notion to try and rehabilitate us. He let us organize activities, gave us a yellow tea kettle. I think they were studying us.”

“They don’t keep you apart?” It didn’t seem right to Mungo. How could it punish someone to surround them with people who liked the same things they did? Mungo thought about the first-year boys at school. How every autumn they would lose their minds for football stickers. They would huddle in concentration as they bartered for what they wanted, and moved as one large, writhing mass.

“No. They lump you the gether. There were some right monsters in there. Men that chopped up wee lassies in their Easter dresses. Other men that wouldnae leave me alone at night.” He emptied the last of the whisky down his throat. Gallowgate buried his chin into the neck of his bomber jacket. He was staring at the man’s protruding feet. “Auld Chrissy was different, though. His father used to own a famous butcher’s out on the Paisley Road. They saved up for years and bought a second shop further down in Govan. Chrissy was to run it by himself.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“He did, for a while, and it did really guid. He’d learnt the skills of the trade from his father, and wi’ two shops the quality of meat was better and the prices were just that wee bit lower. It was goin’ great guns.”

“How come he looked like a pure jakey, then?”

Gallowgate glowered at Mungo. “Watch yer mouth.”

No apology would cross Mungo’s lips. He went back to picking at his midge bites. “So? What happened with the butcher’s?”

Gallowgate shrugged. “He got done for a Saturday boy. He had taken a shine to an eleven-year-old that used to scrub the trays at the end of the week. His father used to work for auld Chrissy and the boy would come in for a few hours and make deliveries and stuff like that. Chrissy thought the boy was fond of him. Chrissy couldnae help himself.”

Mungo found he could look at the feet now. The fear he had felt pushed to the back of his mind and suddenly he didn’t feel that bad. It was like the shuffling of cards, remorse sliding to the back, and on top lay something like relief. St

Christopher was a very bad man.

“Do you think it hurts to drown?” Mungo had to know.

“How the fuck would ah know? He looked like he cracked his face in. Ah cannae tell if he did that afore or after he went in the watter.”

Mungo felt the knuckles in his spine relax, and he breathed in fully for the first time since they had found the body. He saw now the uneven wear on St Christopher’s shoes; the leather soles were worn away on the inside of each arch; the saint was pigeon-toed. “So, like, you don’t know how he died?”

Gallowgate shook his head. “Naw. The only person that’d be able to tell for sure is the coroner. They’ll cut him open and look.”

Mungo nodded, although he barely understood. “After that do you think it’ll be okay? He was just an old man who drowned, *right?* We could just leave him here. Why would they bother looking for us?”

“Naw.” Gallowgate stared at him for a long time and then he snorted at the boy’s naivety. He had forgotten he was talking to a child. “It doesnae work like that. As soon as they find out they’ve got a dead sex offender out in the middle of nowhere they’ll look into it.”

“How?” It made no sense to Mungo – surely a dead bogeyman would be a blessing.

“Because when one of us shows up dead they want to know who we were wi’ last. Or more importantly, who was unlucky enough to be wi’ *us.*” Gallowgate was becoming jumpy. “Ah don’t want to go back to the jail.”

Mungo collapsed back against one of the mossy boulders and closed his eyes. He felt empty, yet at the same time, he felt lousy with a knot of feelings he could not untangle. He had to get home. What would they say about him now? He was more of a hardman than Hamish could ever imagine. He wasn’t the shy little boy with the spazzy face. He wasn’t the poofy Fenian lover who was no good at fighting. They had broken into his body. He had killed a man. He had bludgeoned him and then he had drowned him. It was a funny feeling, to know that he was more of a man than Hamish would ever be, and also less, at the very same time. He had to go home. He could never go home again.

His mother had given him to a pair of child molesters with a bag of dog-eared comic books and a Ludo game, fun for the whole family, ages 6–14. She had thought that they would make a man of him; that they would show him things to put him right, things that a father should have taught him, things that she could have taught him if only she tried, things he would never even need to know if he

lived his whole life in Glasgow, which he would, because that's what everybody he knew did.

Mungo's face was wet with tears again. Gallowgate came to him, he put his arms around his shoulders and kissed his hairline. "We can fix this. We can take his body out into the loch and sink it."

The ravioli tins were bubbling and Mungo used this to scuttle away from Gallowgate's embrace. He hunkered like a sulking primate. He sat the scalding tin on the ground and began to pick the pillows out one by one. The sauce burned his fingers but he would not stop.

The midday sun streaked across the Munros on the far side of the loch. The pockets of snow were moving. Mungo watched them walk across the sharp crest of a crag before he realized it was actually a herd of disorganized sheep looking for the sweet green grass that grew between the rocks. He found his disposable camera amongst the assorted junk in his cagoule pocket. He wound on the noisy film and tried to take a photograph of the wandering snow. Then he wound it on another frame and tried to take a photo of Gallowgate. The man hissed. He put his hands over his face. It didn't matter – a small trickle of river water poured from the plastic case.

As they ate, Gallowgate seemed keen to know what Mungo would say, and what he would not say, when he returned to Glasgow. They spent a long time getting their story straight; Gallowgate feeding the boy a line, and Mungo feeling like there was a hook in his mouth. When Gallowgate spoke to him it was in the tone of voice that Mungo hadn't heard since that evening in the tent. It was like they were best pals again, the two of them united against the world. "So, what will you tell yer family about this weekend?"

Mungo stopped chewing. "Just that I had a nice time. I liked the water. I saw some hills."

"Naw, I mean, what will ye say about us? Auld Chrissy and that?"

"What is it you want me to say?"

"Mibbe just tell them we were dead sound. That we taught ye how to build a fire, how to fish. Tell them ah spent my entire two weeks' giro getting us up here. Tell them that." Gallowgate used his tongue to dig some gristle out from behind his bottom lip. "When they ask, where will you say ye slept?"

Mungo nodded to the two-man tent, or what was left of it.

"Naw. Better tae tell them we put ye in the one-man tent. Make sure and be clear that they understand ye had the whole thing tae yersel. Tell them that ye

were scared or some shite, that the deer and the rain were creepy as fuck at night." He hooted like a sad owl. "Tell them that ye braved it anyhows. Aye, tell them that ye had a whole tent tae yersel."

"Okay."

"So what will ye tell them?"

Mungo's eye stuttered. He felt slightly mad. But Gallowgate would not go on until he responded. "I'll say that I slept in this wee tent down by the water's edge all by myself. I'll say that it was cold at night. It was terrifying." His voice was as flat as new tarmacadam.

Gallowgate dug some food out of his back molar and flicked it across the shingle. He didn't like the flatness in Mungo's voice. He was squinting at the boy as though he could not be sure if Mungo was being facetious or not. "Mind and tell them about the big roe buck you saw. They'll picture that above everything else. And castles – mammies *love* castles."

"Okay."

"And how will ye explain them bruises?"

Mungo shrugged. "They won't care."

"Well if they do, tell them you tumbled down a hill. These hills get awfy slippy in the thaw. Ye can stave yer whole face in with one wrong step. Daft wee humpty dumpty."

"Awright."

They were quiet for a long while after that. It was pointless to bother chewing the mushy food, so Mungo just moved it back and forth in his mouth till it was a sludge he could swallow. Gallowgate was watching him the whole time. "Look, it'll do ye no guid to feel sorry for yersel."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah'm no daft. Ye might be tempted to tell tales when ye get up the road. Start spreading lies about me just so everybody feels sorry for ye."

It took effort for Mungo to swallow the next mouthful.

"Pity only feels guid for a minute. It gets stale awfy quick and then it starts to fuckin' stink. But I suppose if ye tell them your lies then ye can have a good greet and ye'll get a couple of lovely hugs. Ye might even get a fish supper out of it."

"Okay."

Gallowgate hauched, his bottom lip gleamed with spit. "But know this – the people ye tell will never look at ye the same again. Yer mammy will feel heavy

rotten. She'll take a wee drink and tell somebody, just so as to feel better. That's what wummin do; they cannae be trusted to haud their own watter. Then that person will tell somebody else and then they'll tell somebody else, and afore ye know it, every bastard on the scheme will know how you let two strange men fuck ye in the woods."

"But I didn't."

He looked like he felt sorry for the boy. "Naw. But is that what ye want people to think?"

Mungo shook his head. "No."

"Cos they will." Gallowgate jabbed his thumb in the direction of the dead saint. "'Asides, if the Hamiltons want tae start somethin' wi' the polis, then we'll aw need tae explain *that.*"

He was hungry but he could eat no more. After a while, Mungo stopped his quiet crying. He turned his face towards the loch and wiped his eyes discreetly. "What if St Christopher's picture is in the evening paper?"

Gallowgate answered with a sad laugh. "Naebody will put his picture in the paper. Naebody will miss him." The man swirled the last of the lager cans, but they were empty. He sat staring at Mungo for a time, a darkening glower, before he asked. "So how long exactly have ye been lying tae yer maw?"

Mungo was confused. "I don't lie."

"Come on." Gallowgate seemed suddenly irritated. He rubbed his temples, his head was surely louping, crying out for one more drink. "Ye've been lying about that Fenian. Ye've been lying about being a wee bender."

"I'm no—"

"See! Ye're lying now."

Mungo's hips had seized in the cold and he stood up with a wince. He moved further away from the man and crouched closer to the weak fire. "A minute ago you wanted me to lie."

Gallowgate snorted. All the syrup in his voice had evaporated. "Aye, yer guid at it. Ah'll gie ye that."

He wasn't a good liar, but he didn't feel like fighting anymore. He gave in, like he always did, and he shrugged.

Gallowgate tossed a mossed stone at his feet. "So, will ye keep yer story straight?"

Mungo hesitated, not because he felt defiant – he knew he wouldn't be able to stomach the look on Mo-Maw's face if he ever told her the truth – he only

hesitated because he was tired. Gallowgate's mercurial mind moved too quickly for him. He was tired of his leash being jerked by this man as though he was a dog that couldn't keep up. He was tired of the damp cold that rose off the loch, tired of the pathetic, worn brogues that were sticking out of the tent. Mungo met Gallowgate's eyes for the first time that afternoon and there, in the centre of his brow, was a slight knotting, the first flicker of doubt, fear perhaps. Mungo was glad to see it. He paused and savoured it a half-second longer. "I'll no tell anyone. Promise."

"Oh, Mungo." He sighed. The man's face changed again, and now he looked at the boy with profound sadness. "Ah telt ye, there's no fuckin' way ah'm going back in that jail."

Gallowgate forced the last of the ravioli into his mouth and smeared the red sauce across the back of his hand. Then he spent a time licking his palm and smoothing his short, straight fringe against his forehead. His eyes fell out of focus and he seemed to lose himself in his thoughts. Mungo sat in a daze until Gallowgate leapt to his feet. "Right. Ah need ye to make a pile of stones, heavy ones but small enough so we can fit them into pockets and the lining of his coat." Gallowgate pointed out into the silent water. "About five or six metres out, the edge drops off in a shelf, from there the loch could be a hunner thousand metres or so deep." Mungo must have looked reticent, because the man added, "Dinnae worry, there's nae monster in this loch."

Mungo didn't believe him. He was glad to turn his back to Gallowgate. Scotland was made of splintered rock and he soon gathered a large pile of heavy stones. Gallowgate dragged the dead man from the tent, then he carried him to the water and waded out into the deep as if he was going to baptize him. Mungo followed almost reverentially, head bowed and with an armful of offerings. Gallowgate waded out about six metres into the water before he had to tilt his head backwards to breath. "Hurry up," he spat, "fill his pockets as fast as ye can."

Mungo took the stones and stuffed them into St Christopher's waistband, into his jacket pocket, into his trousers. Gallowgate motioned to him for more and he waded back to the shore for another armful. He slid the last pebble into the saint's open mouth.

Gallowgate showed a great strain on his face, his lips were bloodless and blue. The dead man must have been heavy with all the rocks. Suddenly Gallowgate dropped below the water and Mungo imagined him giving the body

one last shove into the nothingness. There were some bubbles and then it was still again. Mungo could picture the glimmering cataracts receding into the dark.

Gallowgate surfaced with empty arms, sputtering and huffing from the cold. His teeth were chittering as they waded back towards the shore. When the water was between his chest and his waist, Mungo felt Gallowgate's hand grab his wrist. "Wait. Do ye know any prayers?"

"Naw."

He pulled the boy back towards him and held him in his arms like he wanted to steal all his warmth. Mungo braced his hands against Gallowgate's chest. He didn't want the man's affection. But Gallowgate held him tight. Then he tried to kiss him.

"Please, just let me go home."

Gallowgate was looking deep into his eyes. His sincerity was unsettling. "Mungo, ah want ye to know, wee Maureen didnae say bad things about ye. What ah said the other day, it wisnae true."

Mungo was too empty to care now.

"She said she named ye after a saint. That after she did, ye never once made her regret that. She said that you were the softest, sweetest boy she had ever known."

Mungo felt his feet leave the ground as Gallowgate embraced him. The man clung to him and began to kiss his neck. He was sobbing and muttering that he was *sorry* as his lips searched Mungo's chin then his cheek for the softness of his lips. Mungo thought he was apologizing for the bad things that had happened, for the pain in his gut, for the dead body. But then the man forced his kiss on Mungo, his hands shifted to his throat and he pushed him under the water.

It was incredibly still beneath the surface of the loch.

Mungo opened his eyes; the water was so clear that he could see the strain on Gallowgate's face, the roped muscles protruding on his inked neck as he tried to drown him. He felt the air inside his cagoule buoy him up to the surface, only to be countered by the force of Gallowgate's fist punching down into his belly, into his heart. He had the sensation of being alone again, the desire to float away into the quietness of the loch, his pockets filled with wildflowers.

Mungo remembered the disposable camera in his pocket – it was a foolish thing to think of but it had been stupid of him to forget to take it out. Now he would never be able to show Jodie the beautiful castle, he could never show James the bleached ram's bones. *James.* He wanted to go home so badly then.

He didn’t care about Hamish or Mo-Maw or Gallowgate; he wanted to see the oil rigger’s son one last time and kiss the pink softness behind his sticky-out ears.

That was a thing that could never happen.

Gallowgate stopped punching into the boy. His hands clamped around his throat again as he choked the last of the air out of him. Mungo was barely aware that his own hands were flailing, grabbing for the sky. He was grabbing for Gallowgate’s face, but he couldn’t reach, his arms were too short. He saw St Christopher in his last moments and knew now how much drowning burned. Funny that. He saw the Catholic boy and his beatific smile as he marched the length of him.

With Gallowgate’s hands on his throat the last air pockets in his clothes tilted his body till it was inverted and his feet were skyward. He felt the disposable camera and Gallowgate’s discarded lager can slide out of the kangaroo pouch. It was all shifting inside him, turning upside down, Jodie’s school photograph, James’s birthday bear. Then something came to his mind, something he had forgotten.

He fumbled the blade Hamish had given him. He gripped it tightly and swung it into Gallowgate’s stomach. His hand stuck there, pinned to the man, and he had to tug hard to pull it out before he could swing it again into his ribs. The loch water was freezing cold, but he could swear he felt the warmth of the man’s blood pump over his fingers. He swung wildly, again and again, until the hands released his throat and he floated out into the loch.

Mungo was out beyond his depth by the time he regained a normal breath. He was way beyond St Christopher’s body and he couldn’t feel the bottom. There was a sucking current and several times he was pulled under the surface. He could imagine the sightless saint reaching up from the depths and wrapping his long fingers around his ankles. It took the last of his energy to tread the water. Everything felt like it would be better if he just sank. If he just gave in.

As he was struggling up and down, he caught brief glimpses of Gallowgate. The man stumbled from the loch. He was clutching his side and his good Italian denims were ruined with a black inky liquid. Gallowgate made it to knee-depth before he sat down in the water. He plonked down on his backside like a toddler. He searched his pockets for cigarettes, and finding them ruined, he tossed them into the loch. Then he tipped over.

It could be another trick.

Mungo treaded water as long as he could and then he doggy-paddled to the shallows. He gave Gallowgate a wide berth as he struggled to reach the shore. It took him some time to come near. He was circling and dripping and shivering, inching closer and closer by degrees.

The tide was a pretty pink colour. The man's face was half-in, half-out of the water. Gallowgate's green eyes were open and his right hand gripped a boulder, like he could rise up at any moment. It took a long time, but eventually Mungo summoned enough courage to come close enough to read the ink on his knuckles. *Evan.* He wondered if that was Gallowgate's real name. He prodded the man with his toe. Then he stepped back and waited.

Gallowgate was still bleeding into the water. His blood was unfurling in scarlet swirls. It looked like the man was being consumed by medieval flames. Mungo picked at his cheek and watched him burn for a while.

In his search for cigarettes, Gallowgate's wallet must have fallen out of his pocket. Mungo fished it out of the shallows. It was almost empty of money – there were no bank cards or credit cards – but in the plastic identification sleeve was a monthly bus pass. Mungo studied the scowling picture. He read the name out loud: *"Angus Bell."*

Tucked into the billfold was a single postcard. It was a photo of Angus Bell in ill-fitting prison gear standing before an artificial Christmas tree. In the bottom right corner it was decorated with holly and bells, and stamped in a Victorian script: *"Thinking of you at Christmastime."* Mungo turned it over. There was a second-class stamp attached, but no address, no festive message.

TWENTY-SIX

May evenings were bright enough that they did away with the need for the flickering fluorescent lighting. The natural light gave an unnatural glow of health to the fellowship. The top table called the meeting to order, and as the alcoholics took to their chairs and began with their announcements and affirmations, Mo-Maw sat in the very front and centre, stiff and upright and earnest, a teacher's pet. She was trying hard to show Mungo that anybody could change.

Mungo stood in his usual place by the hot tea urn, only half-listening as the top table ran through the Twelve Steps with unusual gusto. They were cheered by the turn in the weather and encouraged by the half-dozen new faces and the high amount of returning fellowship. Their good mood was not contagious. Mungo filled six polystyrene cups to the brim with scalding black tea. He organized the cups, balanced them precariously along the edge of the folding table.

Skrriit, skriiit, skrriiit, skrit, skrriiiitt, skrit.

He ran his thumbnail along the polystyrene about a centimetre from the bottom of each cup. Slicing his nail into one, he moved to the next and when he had sliced along all six cups, he started again into the groove he had made in the first. The anticipation distracted him, gave him something to look forward to; waiting to see which cup would fail first and burn his legs with hot liquid.

Behind him, the fellowship welcomed all the new members. They listened patiently to those who felt brave enough to share their journeys, until Mo-Maw cut into the end of one man's speech, when she stood to share her story. Mungo had heard it all before.

Skrriit, skriiit, skrriiit, skrit, skrriiiitt, skrit.

"Hallo, ma name's Monday-Thursday Maureen and ah'm an alkahawlick."

"Hallo, Maureen."

“Ah’ve been struggling with drink, on and off likes, for about twelve years. Ah know, ah know.” She let out a well-practised giggle. *Wait for it,* he thought. “Ah don’t look nearly old enough but it’s true. Anyhows, where was I? Aye, well, ah’m a single mother.” Slight pause for sympathy. “My man’s been dead nearly sixteen year and it’s been hard raising ma weans on ma lonesome. It would be hard enough with one, but ah’ve been blessed with three and I tell you, they’re all so challenging you would barely believe it. Ye never get a minute’s peace. Ye turn yer back to help one and the other is up to his neck in some bother. Boys are the hardest, int they?” There was a faint murmur of agreement. Mo-Maw seemed underwhelmed by the lukewarm response. Her voice went up an octave, there was the quiver of poor-me’s at its edges. “It’s hard to raise a boy without a man around, you try your hardest but sometimes they don’t turn out quite right.”

Skrriit, skriiit, skrriiit, skrit, skrriiiitt, skrit.

Mungo pressed his nail a little harder. It was the fourth cup that failed first, a torrent of scalding black tea shot out of the hole. The spray hit him in the thigh and poured down his right leg. Mungo gritted his teeth. He moved his thumbnail to start on the fifth cup.

Someone wrapped a hand around his wrist. Every-Other-Wednesday Nora had popped to the ladies and found him making a nuisance of himself.

“*Weh-ll,* look at the mess ye’ve made, ya silly article. Away. Out of it.” She was already mopping up the mess as she shoved him roughly out of the hallway.

Mo-Maw didn’t break her affirmation monologue, but she heard the commotion and threw her son dirty looks over the heads of the crowd. They glided like spears over a battlefield. “That!” She raised the back of her hand to him. “That, ladies and gentlemen, is the reason ah take a guid drink.” Forty heads turned as one to see this poor woman’s burden for themselves. Mungo waved. He had so little to fear now.

The Hamiltons had gathered like a council of feuding union bosses, each of them gesticulating furiously and trying to talk over the top of the others. Hamish told his mother and sister what had happened as Mungo hung his head, his fingers still stinking of petrol. It was to be Hamish’s narration of events: the older Fenian boy molesting his naive little brother. The room fell silent. They looked at Mungo with alternating faces of pity and shame as though he was a china

plate that had a bad chip and they were deciding if they would keep it or not; such a lovely thing to be so ruined.

Mungo watched, cold as the Clyde, as the three of them started roaring at each other again: assigning blame, listing their failings, casting up the selfish natures of others. When Mo-Maw and Hamish finally ganged up on Jodie for "not raising him right," Jodie swept her hand along the mantelpiece and broke every picture frame in the house.

Mo-Maw said, "Ah'm tired of you thinking ye are the main attraction around here."

As they were gathering up the glass, Mungo saw his chance. He slipped out the door.

The mud had already dried on his knees as he ran back to the doocot. The back of his head sang where Hamish had dragged him through the streets and now faces loomed down at him from the tenement windows; children crowded around their mammies, everyone had a seat, keen to see what the next embarrassment in the Hamilton pantomime would be.

Mungo was winded by the time he reached the patchy grass. The door to the doocot was slamming in the wind and at first it raised his spirits; James was here, he was hurt, but he would be alive.

There was too much blood on the grass for Mungo to ignore. It was flattened where he had lain, and there were splintered shards of his front teeth, luminous in the mud. Mungo picked them up and put them carefully in the pocket of his cagoule.

But James was in the doocot, it would be all right.

Mungo held the swinging door firm and peered into the darkness. He was looking for the pool of bronze light; the golden hair that refracted the shaft of sunlight into every corner of the dark loft. But James was not there. All the doocot cages were open, some of the doors were hanging loose, the hinges he had carefully maintained were ripped from their bearing screws. There was a solitary doo flapping in the corner, unable to gain any flight. His left wing was extended, it was broken.

Mungo stepped back out into the daylight. There were some pigeons sitting on the new slate roof, but in the grass beyond the doocot were the rest of James's prize pouters, dead and flung about. A few looked like they'd had their necks wrung. There was a cluster of three, the bleached doo, the ashy hen, and a new bird that Mungo had never seen. There were golf tees next to their bodies, and

these bodies had no heads. Someone had held them still, for a great laugh, while someone else took a swing with a putter. The sun was not yet fully overhead in the sky, and everything beautiful was all already ruined.

Mungo stepped back inside the doocot. The injured bird was still flapping in panic. He just wanted to hold it like James would, run his fingers along its throat and settle it down. He cooed to it and bobbed gently like he had seen James do. It rested for a moment and he snatched it up and held Little Mungo in his hands. Its heart was thumping against its breast. It was in so much pain.

Whroup, whroooup, whrooup. He chirped into its matted nape till it calmed itself. *Whroup, whroooup, whrooup.* He wept as he wrung its poor neck.

He went to the Jamieson flat, but peering through the letter box, he could tell that no one was home. When he came back home, he was told that Hamish had gone out searching for him again. Jodie had hidden her brother in the warm airing cupboard. She was holding his T-shirt over his head and turning him to look at his bruises. “What Hamish said, is that what really happened? Was that Catholic boy doing dirty things to you?”

“Naw.”

Jodie stopped rubbing Germolene into his bruises. She brought her lips close to his ear. “Were you doing bad things to each other?”

“Aye.”

She kept rubbing the pink ointment between his ribs but all the colour had left her face. The immersion boiler clicked on and filled the cupboard with a suffocating heat. He used to enjoy that.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You could get the jail for what you were doing.” She was handling him too roughly, scrubbing the lotion into his bruise like it was a stain she could lift with a good brush. “They used to lock men up for that. *Haaah-ha.*”

“I can’t help it.”

Jodie brought her face so close to his he could count the freckles on her nose. “Do you want to catch AIDS? Is that what you want? Because you *will* catch it. They’re aw getting it. That Fenian boy could have it and give it to you, simple as that.” She snapped her oily fingers.

“James wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t he? What on earth would you know about the ways of men, eh?”

Jodie scoffed and he could see the little hard bits of Mo-Maw in her now, sure as knots in a fine wood. She was hurting him as she rubbed the lotion into his skin, and he could tell that she meant to. “You’re a daft wee boy. A tender-hearted eejit.” She spun him and slathered ointment across his kidneys. “We’re aw knocking our bloody pans in, trying to make something of you, trying to make a man of out you. And what are you doing, eh? Carrying on like a daft lovesick lassie. It’s time you toughened up.”

He repeated himself. “I can’t help it.”

Jodie spun him to face her. She shook him hard. “God sake! You have to help it. You can’t be like that and expect to be happy about it.”

Mungo went to the rear of the meeting room and slid down the tall iron radiator. The hot fins felt good against the bruising. The welts had not started to shrink yet, but they had stopped blooming their terrible purple flowers, and Jodie had said that was a good sign.

The warmth of the radiator spread through him, it made a deep clanging sound and a constant hissing that lulled him into a state of sleepwalking. From the floor he could see under the tideline of the plastic seats. He watched the members’ legs fidget anxiously with boredom or fresh shakes. Some of the alcoholics were eager for the meeting to be over, others were worried about what would happen when it was. Faces turned to one another as they said the final benediction. The meeting adjourned, and the fellowship gathered around the urn and passed around plates of gammon sandwiches.

They congregated in groups of four or five and shared their news. Mungo couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he appreciated the way they laid hands on each other’s arms, and when they spoke, he liked how everyone listened and seemed to feel it deeply in their own bones. It was a funny thing to observe; near strangers who had shared some of their deepest shames, their most vulnerable moments, were now gathering to make small talk about the weather or if Cranhill-Cathy would make it to the regionals in the ladies curling tournament. They had told the most heartbreaking truths, and now in the space of twenty minutes, they were laughing about Hyacinth Bucket.

Mo-Maw was near the front stage. She chatted with Mount Ellen-Ellen, a woman more mean-mouthed than herself, and occasionally they looked over to Mungo and shook their heads. The circles half-rotated as though dancing a lazy

ceilidh and two new members joined the pair of women. They were shaking hands and making small talk about nothing in particular: different sides of the city, how meetings in other schemes compared to this one, how the top table here did a great job in making everyone feel like family. *Family,* Mungo thought, *whose real names Mo-Maw would never know.*

He watched Mo-Maw pick the flatness out of her perm, running her eyes appraisingly up and down the new men, ladling them both equal amounts of charm, until she knew which one liked her soup best.

Mungo had never seen the men before, but he had seen the likes of them. The older man seemed to like Mo-Maw. He kept leaning closer to her and smoothing his thin hair across his waxen head. The younger man was more out of place. He seemed only a few years older than Hamish, and by the way he took pride in his appearance Mungo could see the drink had not yet brought him so low. His trainers were a painful white, and his hair was gelled forward and cut in a short Caesar cut.

Every-Other-Wednesday joined the circle. She shook hands with the new members and was swatting at the younger man in a girlish fashion. He was not returning her flirtations. Mungo watched her put her hand on Mo-Maw's arm and say something about the hot tea that made Mo-Maw shake her head. As one, the alcoholics all turned and looked in Mungo's direction.

Just as swiftly they closed their backs to him in a wall. He knew Mo-Maw was pumping them for sympathy, sharing his supposed shame at the hands of the Catholic boy, explaining how he was not turning out right, and as a single parent, a woman, she did not know what to do about it. The men nodded a well-timed *poor you,* and it travelled along the wall like a Mexican wave. The younger man, the one with the Caesar haircut, mimed a long fishing rod that he flicked out over the linoleum tiles. Mo-Maw scratched at her perm again. Then she nodded once. *Okay,* she was agreeing, *if it would be no bother.*

No bother at all. They shrugged and then they were all laughing like old friends.

She beckoned Mungo over, her hand outstretched like a fine lady's.

"Mungo, this is Mister Christopher, and this is …" she paused. "Sorry, whit did ye say yer name wis again?"

TWENTY-SEVEN

A scald of panic caused him to flee. For a time, he raced around mindlessly, gathering things, dropping things, stumbling and falling. He bolted into the forest, only to return to the loch, legs twitching, before bolting back in the other direction. It took all the willpower he had, but he eventually stilled his body even as his mind screamed at him to run. Feeling overwhelmed, he stood in the middle of the ruined campsite and closed his eyes and clamped a hand over his mutinous face. Mungo tried to steady his thoughts and think what Hamish would do if he were here. Hamish would do the dishonest thing, the self-serving thing. He would destroy what he could and hide the rest. Then he would lie and pretend like it never, ever, was.

Gallowgate was heavier than he looked, denser, meatier than St Christopher. Mungo could not haul him out to the underwater shelf alone, but he dragged the body as deep as he could and loaded his pockets with small skimming stones. His teeth chattered as he waited for the body to submerge. Mungo stood on the body. He bounced three times and watched Gallowgate's last breath bubble to the surface. He could still see the whites of Gallowgate's eyes as he came to rest on the loch bed.

Mungo tidied up the campsite as best he could. He filled the plastic shopping bags with all their scattered debris and then weighted them with small rocks and hurled them into the loch. Tucking the tents into their rolls, he buried them alongside the fishing rods, deep under the thickest ferns where the ground was peatiest. He tidied his own ruined, childish things into his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Trembling with the last of his adrenaline, he crouched at the edge of the loch and cleaned the dirt from his face, pumiced the worst of the blood stains from his nylon shorts.

As Mungo leaned over the water he focused on his reflection. He wondered

what it was the men had recognized in him. Where was this signal he could not see, the semaphore he had never meant to send? Was it in how his eyes never quite met theirs, how they turned themselves down submissively? Was it in how he stood with his hands limp at his side, his weight on one leg? He wanted to find the signal, and he wanted to end its transmission.

The men had looked at him as though they knew what lay inside his soul, things he still had not even admitted to himself. They knew the inescapable shame of it, how isolated it made him feel, and they had used that to separate him from his home and do as they pleased.

His tears fell and distorted his reflection. He thought about James, and the lovely things they had done on his navy carpet. Three days of happiness, three days marked with Chinese burns and clumsy caresses. Greedy little kisses that were full of bumping teeth and shy apologies. It was wrong to compare their loveliness to the things the drunkards had forced on to him. They were not the same thing, Mungo reminded himself. They were not the same at all. They were not.

He thought only of James then. Did he still wear James's white-sugar kiss on his skin, is that what these men could smell? Could they see it, clear as a stain?

Mungo sat back and wiped his tears with the sleeve of James's jumper. He washed the tip of Hamish's shanking knife then stood up and swung his arm to throw it into the loch. Something occurred to him, a lesson he had learned about the unexpected visits of violence. He was still so far from home. He turned the knife in his hand and dropped it into his kangaroo pocket.

Gathering his things, he walked in the direction he thought they had originally come. He tiptoed through the nettles and wound his way amongst the pine and birch trees. He never saw the ram skull on the way back.

Eventually he came to a pitted access road, and for no better reason than to walk towards the slow summer sun, he turned right and followed the daylight. It was early in the afternoon, and between the trees, the clouds were white and moved quick in the sky. After two miles the road ended in a metal cattle grid and he turned again, trying to use the position of the sun to find true south. The road was empty, but every now and then a car would pass him and he would hold out his hand for either direction, unsure of where he was, or where he was headed.

After a few hours a car finally stopped. It was a green Land Rover Defender that was all mucky metal and set high up off the road. It stopped beyond him, a short way up the road, and he had to jog to reach it. As Mungo drew level the

man peered down at him and it seemed like he had stopped only to gawp at the dirty boy in the ripped cagoule.

“Boy, where are ye awa’ tae dressed like that?” He had the song of the countryside in his accent.

Mungo tugged his shorts down over the embarrassment of dirt on his legs. He wanted to say to the man, *I don’t know. Where should I go?* But instead he hung his head and told the stranger he was trying to get to Glasgow. The man ran his eyes the length of him. He said he was going only as far as the big town – some Gaelic sounding place that Mungo had never heard of – but that if Mungo came with him, he would surely find better connections to the south from there.

Mungo glanced up and down the empty road, unsure if he could trust this man. He considered the stranger, tallied his light-blue eyes and his soft jowly face against the way he tapped his hand impatiently on the steering wheel. His shirt was freshly laundered, a sharp crease ran down the sleeve, and Mungo took that as a sign that some woman cared for him, that he was worth something to someone. Mungo havered on the road. The man asked him if he was getting in, and in the end it was a strange thing that decided it for him: Mungo could see two dogs in the back seat, fat, cuddly, tail-thumping beasts.

The man was watching Mungo closely as he pulled the seatbelt across his chest. Despite the bright sun, the man reached forward and turned on the heat vents full blast. The two Labradors in the back seat – one the colour of toast, and the other the colour of tea – took turns to shove their heads into the front and sniff at the boy. They inhaled deeply, and snuffled his crotch as though they were fascinated by the stories he held there. Mungo must have looked uncomfortable because the man gripped their collars and pushed them into the back. “Sorry about that. This is Crystal and that one is Alexis. Never let your wife name your pets.”

The Defender lurched as the man threw it back into gear. They drove along pitted roads in silence and Mungo kept his gaze on the road ahead, grateful for every single fence post, every solitary sheep, they put between him and the loch. The man’s waxed jacket was slung over the back of Mungo’s seat. It smelled of damp places, foustie from waterproofing wax, and Mungo began to worry what he might smell like to this man. When he thought the man was not watching he scratched at his crotch and then slowly brought the fingers to his nose. If he stunk, the man said nothing. The dogs were already dozing on the back seat.

Saying he knew a shortcut, the man turned off the A-road and on to a narrow

B-road. The track curved around a denuded hillside and in the thinnest places it became a single lane. The man had to pull over occasionally to allow cars to pass in the opposite direction. Each time he did, he waved at the other driver as if he knew them. His hands were broad and strong, the backs were mottled with liver spots, but the fingernails were the scrubbed pink of a life of leisure. Mungo wondered if the man was retired.

"So, what are ye doing all the way oot here?"

"Nothing. Camping."

"What? By yourself?"

"Aye."

The man reached forward and angled all the air vents towards the boy. "Hope ye don't mind me saying, but ye don't half look like ye've been through the wars."

Mungo laid his hand over the worst of the scrapes on his leg. "I fell down a hillside."

"Aye? How many times?"

Mungo missed the smirk on the man's lips. He answered him earnestly. "Just the once. I slipped."

The man seemed like he would say no more about it. The toast-coloured dog was licking her forepaws, chewing the pads with frantic little nibbles. Then the man said, "Ye know, I have four sons of my own. Guid boys. I've learned that they never get hurt when they're by themselves. It's when they're together that they get awful clumsy. Together they trip, they fall through the skylight into the lambing shed, they dare one another to ride their bikes into dykes, they chuck themselves into bonfires for laughs. Funny that." The man opened his glove compartment and took out a roll of fruit pastilles. He offered them to Mungo. Mungo politely took one and his mouth flooded with saliva. The man protested and pushed the whole packet on him. The dogs sat forward at the sign of food, before the man elbowed them away. Mungo was glad of how the sugar rinsed the taste of loch water from his mouth. He sucked the first sweetie and tried not to wolf it down. He felt the man's eyes linger on the side of his face as he considered the bruises and the matted hair. "So who was it that shoved you down that hill, then?"

"Nobody."

"Really?" The man was holding the wheel steady as they bumped through the puddles in the road. "Since the minute I picked ye up, ye've been sitting pressed

up against that door like some mongrel."

Mungo looked down at himself, and he was indeed perched on the edge of the seat, as far away from the man as he could be. His hand had been worrying the door handle. "Sorry." Mungo eased the seat belt. He relaxed into the centre.

"Look, no need to be sorry. I'm Calum, by the way. I should have said that earlier."

"David," said Mungo.

"Well, nice to meet you, David." The man saluted him with his left hand. His wedding ring glistened in the sunlight. It seemed like it was embedded in to his finger, like a brace slipped around a young sapling that was now stuck, as though the tree had grown up around it. "So, ye heading home?"

It was a simple question but it gave Mungo pause. All weekend he had dreamt of the East End. The image of the tenements lay before him, but "home" didn't feel like the right word anymore. "I suppose so."

"Brave of ye to be oot here on your lonesome. Not sure I'd let any of my boys do that."

"It's awright."

Calum pulled over to allow a camper van full of hippies to ease on by. He drummed his hands on the steering wheel. "Where's yon tent then?"

"My what?"

"Tent." The man nodded at his small backpack. "If you were camping, then where's your tent?"

Mungo swallowed the pastille. "Oh. I must have lost it."

The man slid into first gear and laughed again. "Aye. My boys would like you. They're simple country boys but they think that they're slick. Ye would make them look like masters of espionage." There was no cruelty in his laughter. He had an easy way about himself. Calum seemed like the type of person that enjoyed talking to his neighbours. But also like the type of person who didn't get to talk to his neighbours very often, and so when he did, he could spin talk out of nothing. Clumps of mindless sheep grazed along the verge, they started to thicken and block the road ahead. Calum slowed the Defender again, he pumped the horn to scatter them. "We're a long way from the toon, David. But if you won't tell me your stories then that's all right. I won't pry." He raised his hands in defeat.

After that they drove on in silence for fourteen minutes; Mungo sucked on his pastilles and kept his eyes on the clock. The vents had brought the warmth back

to his skin but it couldn't quite penetrate to his bones. He considered telling Calum about the loch side, about his mother and the bargain she had made with the men. He wondered if he told him about it, would he feel lighter, would the pain draw out of his gut like a clog from a drain. As he sat worrying about the dead Glaswegians, he became aware of the man glancing at his face. It jolted him from his thoughts when Calum said, "The roads are a terrible state. Are ye carsick? An awful white face ye've got there, David."

Mungo put his hand over his tic. "Do I? No, I'm fine. I'm sorry."

Calum leaned in and said, "Don't tell anybody, but Alexis there likes to eat the spew whenever any one of my boys gets carsick." He reached back and tickled the brown dog under her chin.

"That's horrible."

Calum agreed with a chuckle as he turned them back on to a two-lane road. The hills stretched in every direction, Mungo could not see a single tree. "Did I tell ye about our youngest boy, our Gregor?"

Mungo had been so numbed by his own thoughts that he wasn't sure if the man had told him about Gregor or not. "Sorry. I don't think so."

"Am I boring you?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, yon Gregor's the one who always gets carsick. He's an awful traveller yet he's my son that's destined to see the world. What a cruel irony, eh?"

Mungo didn't know what irony meant. "How do you know he'll see the world?"

"A father can tell. Gregor's a good lad. A bright, fresh-air mind. Always helps his mother around the house without being asked, but he's a wee bit …" The man paused as though he couldn't find the correct word. "Artistic. *T'chut.* Do ye know what I mean by that?"

Mungo gave a small nod. He wasn't sure if what the man meant, and what he understood, were the same thing.

"Forgive me if I've read you wrong, David. But would I be right in thinking ye are a wee bit artistic yourself?" Calum didn't wait for an answer. "See, I know lots of men would be bothered by that. But I have no problem with ye if you are. I'm just saying … Och, well, I dunno. I say the wrong thing sometimes." The sunlight was strobing through the clouds and on to the windscreen. Mungo took the opportunity to look at the man. He had a kindly face, it was handsome underneath the weathering, it had been strong before the sagging. His eyes were

a clear, bother-free blue and his hair was a neat crown of curls, white and tight as lambs' fleece. "Our Gregor never shuts up, he's like his mother in that respect, but I don't mind. Sometimes I have to sit back and marvel at the nonsense that flies out of his mouth. What an imagination this boy has. I honestly don't know where he gets it from."

Mungo rolled another sweetie around in his mouth. He had thought it was strawberry, but now he wondered if it was blackcurrant.

"If he can get his hands on a length of old curtain and a couple of table lamps, then you are getting a three-act play and an extra matinee for free. He just stands in front of the fireplace and makes it up. Songs, jokes, big heart-breaking dramas – utter nonsense, you understand, but thoroughly entertaining." Calum laughed again but Mungo could tell that he was forcing it. He turned to Mungo to see if he was laughing along with him. He was not.

Mungo didn't know why the man was telling him about his son. Why tell him about this one particular son out of the four sons he said he had? The pastille was sticking to his splintered molar.

"Gregor's almost fourteen. I'd like him to find some work around here, but the wife says he's going to leave us one day. She says he has to go off in search of people that like the same things as him." Calum gestured at the empty hillside. "I suppose there's no life for him here."

Mungo turned his face as though he was considering the empty hillside, but he was looking in the wing mirror, staring at his own reflection and wondering again what it was that people could identify in him.

The man was running along with his own thoughts now. Not really asking for Mungo's conversation but speaking aloud whatever crossed his mind. "Do you think he could be happy? In the city?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have many arty friends?"

Mungo thought of James. He shook his head. "I don't have any."

Calum worked his jaw left and right. "Well. I just want him to know that I'm proud of him. No matter what. Ye know?"

"I think so."

"Your own father must be proud of you," Calum said. "But I hope you don't get in bother for that lost tent."

Mungo turned his face away again. The wing mirror was cracked and affixed to the body with electrical tape.

“Ye’re a guid lad, David. I’ve chewed your ear enough.” The man patted Mungo’s knee. It was a heavy hand, possessive, and accustomed to being in control. Mungo flinched at the touch but the man’s hand didn’t linger. It didn’t ask for more. Mungo watched it return to the steering wheel. “Ye get a wee sleep if ye want to. I’ll wake ye when we get to town.”

Mungo could smell the freshness of him now; the aftershave that smelled like every single nice thing the boy had ever inhaled, but crushed together all at once. Mungo laid his head against the headrest, and half-closed his eyes. Through the canopy of his lashes he considered the man’s fingernails again, pink and broad and healthy. There was a peek of pale unblemished skin where his shirt met his wrist. These were not hands that worked the land in all weather. They spoke of days sat reading books in the sun. If you could tell things about a person from only a hand, then Mungo would have to admit he was a little jealous. This man was worth more than a hundred-hundred of him. Life looked good and easy. Mungo could imagine that his sons loved him. And that he loved them in return.

TWENTY-EIGHT

It was the end of a long, muggy dusk by the time he reached Glasgow. It took eight hours of faithfully getting into cars and aboard buses he didn't quite know the destination of, but he wasn't afraid any longer.

On two occasions the bus driver wouldn't let him aboard; he had almost no money, plus he was filthy. But there were three occasions when they did, when the driver took pity on him, punched a ticket that didn't exist and waved him on for free.

Mungo was in a daze as he walked slowly home from Buchanan Street station. The city air was hot and close. It stayed light until late this time of year, and carousing louts still had their shirts off, scalded pink from the long weekend, drunk on the last of their holiday wages and not yet willing to go home. He walked past the new Strathclyde University campus, the old Rottenrow hospital, and climbed up and out towards the East End.

All roads to home took him in front of the oppressive Royal Infirmary and the dirt island with the rusted snack bar. Mo-Maw was already at her serving hatch. She was chatting with some ambulance drivers. Even from this distance, he could tell by the artificial width of her smile that she had taken a good drink. He considered passing on by without even saying hello, when he noticed Jodie and Hamish were there, sitting at the skelfy picnic table. They had a poached look about them, as though they had been waiting a long time.

They drew their eyes the length of him as he crossed the dirt. Their reaction was typical of each of them. Mo-Maw fell to melodrama; her cries flew out to him, but her voice was calling, *look at me, look at me.* Hamish set his jaw in a lock; Mungo could see him narrow his eyes behind his thick lenses, determined to let the women show their hands before he played his. He peered past Mungo and seemed disappointed the two alcoholic men were not with his brother.

Only Jodie seemed truly pleased to see him. She wiped her face on her jumper sleeve and folded her arms around his middle. Mungo could feel the heat from her crown where she had sat in the sun the whole bank holiday Monday, just waiting to see her brother again. His arms hung limp at his sides. He found he could not hug her back.

Mungo wanted nothing more than to share his pain with them. To make them feel the slow terrifying hours he had felt. But Gallowgate was right, he could never share the hurt, because it would cloud their eyes and some part of them would wonder what he had done to deserve it. There were tears in his eyes, but he held them there and steadied his lip. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of pity. He wasn't their baby anymore.

"What happened?" screeched Mo-Maw as she pulled Jodie off of him. "Ah haven't had a minute's peace since ye phoned us."

"Nothing." He shrugged like she had asked him what he'd had for school lunch.

He had worried her on the telephone, or perhaps she sobered up and realized she didn't know where her youngest son was, or who he was with, but now Mo-Maw was concerned in a way she rarely was for others. Mo-Maw's eyes were wild about his face. She turned his hands in hers and ran a finger along the pale boundary where his hair had protected his skin from the sun. She found the saint's finger marks on his neck and licked her thumb, tried to scrub them away with her spit. They would not lift. "Your face. What the fuck happened to it?"

Mungo nodded at his brother. "He happened to it. It was like this when I left."

"Was it? It looks worse."

"You're imagining it." He picked at his scabby chin. "I fell a couple of times. It was slippy on the hillside. Maybe I banged it again."

Mo-Maw peered along the road. "Well, where are they, then?"

"Who?"

"Ye know, whatshisface and the lanky one."

"Away." Then he added casually, "They said they would see you at the AA meeting on Thursday."

"Are you really all right, Mungo?" Jodie handed him a cup of flat Coke and he drank it in messy gulps.

"Aye, I'm brand new. How are you?"

Mo-Maw was clutching his face too tightly. She seemed annoyed at him now, for intruding on her peaceful weekend. "Why the fuck did ye phone and worry

us like that then?”

Mungo shook his face free from her greasy fingers. “What do you care?”

Mo-Maw rested her weight on one leg and put both her hands on the same hip. The Nike trainers had been through the washing machine, their stitching was separating and the fancy logo had rubbed off; they were fake. “Don’t think ye can go on one fishing trip and come over all cheeky bastard on me now.” She was raving to herself, turning on the dirt island, talking to any strange driver who would nod sympathy at her plight. “One weekend away doesnae make you a man. Ye’re not too big to go over my knee.”

Mungo stared right through her. First, he had not been man enough; now he was too much.

He turned to his sister and handed Jodie a pile of skimming stones from the lochside.

She pressed her forehead against his and whispered. “You’ll tell me how it was. Won’t you? In the airing cupboard?”

“I saw a roe buck and a dead sheep. It rained. That’s about it.”

Jodie reached her hand out to push his hair away and he stepped away from her. He could look at Jodie, but he wouldn’t let her touch him again. If Jodie, of all people, could not love him, all of him, perhaps he could not be loved.

Mo-Maw was chanting to herself. “All better, all better. See, he’s fine. He’s back now. *He’s fine.*” She was flapping and turning on the dirt. Mungo could see she was relieved. But the relief was for herself.

The infighting had started on Saturday morning when Jodie had asked her mother where Mungo was, and Mo-Maw had answered vaguely, *fishing.* It had dawned on them too late. It had occurred to them that Mo-Maw had never known the men she had sent her son away with. But Mo-Maw had become defensive and she insisted there was safety in the company of men; what safer place was there for a young boy to be? What harm could come of it: a few fish, some fresh air, a hot bonfire. It was only Scotland. The bad things that happened here happened on the very streets she had sent him away from.

Hamish crossed the dirt towards them. He grabbed the lip of Mungo’s cagoule pocket and, tugging on it possessively, he peered inside. “Whut? Nothin’ for us?” Mungo had thought it would be impossible to look at Hamish but he found that he could. In fact, he found he could look at him without blinking. Mungo bored his eyes into the bridge of his nose until Hamish stepped back. He let go of his little brother.

“Haw! Any chance of service here?”

It was that, this single sentence, that let him know it was over. Full stop. The taxi driver, with his gut hanging over his money belt, said he needed his black pudding roll, and that he was pure gasping for a small tea with two teabags. Mo-Maw scuttled back to her serving hatch. The bank holiday weekend was over. He was home. It would be a thing they would never talk about again. Like the never-was baby, or James, the boy who Mungo had loved.

Mungo watched as his siblings gathered up their belongings. He saw them with an unusual clarity. It was already over for them. It would never be over for him. He just had no one to tell.

Mo-Maw was gone from him, he knew that now. She was Jocky’s burden, and if not Jocky’s, then some other mug’s, someone who thought he could handle her. He should have been relieved, but he hated that he felt abandoned.

Jodie would leave forever. It would be gradual at first, but then she would finish university and her absences would stretch. Hamish had been right all along. She would round out her vowels and suppress her glottal stop. She would like her bread to be brown and her films to be foreign. Perhaps she would meet someone at uni who she could quietly love, but she would never bring them home at Christmas. She would have a house full of stray puppies if anyone let her. Mungo could imagine her adopting ex-police dogs, so many dogs that her small flat would smell of incontinent Alsatians.

Hamish winked at him. And Mungo knew then that he would not leave.

He would be dragged behind Hamish into all the idle violence they could manage. He would need to find a girl, he would need to get her pregnant quickly, he would try his best to love her. He would work when he could, and he would steal what he could, and on Thursdays and Saturdays he would sell ten-pound eccies to university students outside the Sub Club and the Arches. He would fight the Bhoyston until he got too old and then he would go to Old Firm games and get into rammies outside the Louden Tavern and sing his supremacist songs every twelfth of July. He would need to become the man that Hamish expected him to be.

“Do you want a bath?” Jodie was heaving her satchel on to her shoulder.

But Mungo wasn’t listening.

Across the road, outside the monstrous infirmary, was a figure. Mungo had not noticed him at first. The buses to the East End were idling in the holiday traffic and the figure kept dropping out of view. The young man was waiting

patiently, like he was about to cross the road, but the opportunity came, and he stayed where he was. He would never cross that road.

Around his feet were a pile of mismatched bags, lumpy and bloated, stuffed with soft clothes, full of his life. He wore two heavy coats despite the summer heat. There were black stitches on his pale chin and both his eye sockets were dark blue where his nose had been broken. His ruined fingers were splinted and bound with pink gauze that was already grimy with dirt.

He was watching, and he was waiting, and he was leaving all at the same time.

They stood and regarded each other over the four lanes of traffic. It felt like an eternity. Every time a white van would block his view, Mungo's stomach lurched and he held his breath until it moved again and he was sure the boy was still there, with his packed bags, still watching and waiting. There he was, James-Guid-and-True.

James raised his broken hand in a half-greeting. It was discreet, tentative, like they were only strangers. But it was only for Mungo. It was for no one else.

Mungo smiled something small and timid. James returned it, and they let their grins widen slowly, slowly, until Mungo knew what he was going to do, where he was going to go. The only place he would ever want to be.

Jodie had gone to see James when Mungo had telephoned Mo-Maw from the lochside. She had pressed his buzzer, but he would not answer, would not let her in. Jodie had hammered all the buzzers on the panel. She had waited until a neighbour admitted her and then stormed the stairs. On her knees at his letter box she told James the story of what had happened – or told it to the empty hallway, since James hid in the shadows.

His face was pummelled, and he would not open the door to any Hamilton. He stood frozen in the hallway and looked at the ripped-out phone jack. "Mungo hasnae phoned," James lisped from the darkness. "He couldnae phone us, even if he wanted to." Jodie let go of the flap. From what she glimpsed through the letter box she could tell she had interrupted his packing.

Mungo put one hand on the traffic barrier and prepared to vault it. He turned to say goodbye to Jodie. As he did so, a navy car emerged from the bank holiday traffic. It bumped up on to the waste ground and kicked up some gravel as it settled. Two polis got out of it. They wore no uniforms, but by the arrogant way

they carried themselves, Mungo could tell that they stank of pork. He looked around for his brother to confirm it. Hamish was already sliding towards the shadowed side of the snack bar.

“Don’t worry!” Mo-Maw squealed, as though she had planned a grand party. “It’s for me. It’s for me.”

She wiped her hands on her pinny and rushed to greet them. She pushed at her frizzy hair and rebuttoned the top shank on her denims over the soft fat of her belly. Jodie tutted at her vanity. They were not good-looking fellas, but they were ages with her, and they had better-paying jobs than Jocky. “Not to worry officers, ma boy, ma wee darlin’ boy is back.”

After Mungo had telephoned her, she had taken a good soaking. She had called the polis and reported him missing. Back in their police car, the responding officers had looked at each other in bewilderment. Who gives their wee boy away to strange men? Now they were here for the third time this weekend. The first time they had been curious. The second time they had let their disgust show through. Now they looked sick at the sight of her.

“Everything’s fine,” she said again. Her arms were flung wide like she was going to hug them, then show them the door and marshal them off her dirt island.

“Aye? Glad to hear it, Mrs Hamilton.”

“It’s Buchanan,” she said. “Ah never marriet their father, ah never got the chance. So it’s *Ms.* Ms Buchanan, thank-ye-very-much.” Mo-Maw usually went by the name Hamilton, it took less explaining, and it gave everyone a sense of belonging. The only time Mungo heard his mother issue this correction was when she was talking to men.

The officers were unsmiling. They looked down on this small woman and would not be corralled. The stockiest of the two had a ratty mullet, better suited to a radio disc jockey.

The polis were scowling at the three young Hamiltons, a pack of strays who were now spread far across the waste ground. They discounted Jodie almost immediately and focused instead on Hamish and Mungo. They had a stony-faced way of staring, but Mungo knew they were observing him closely and cataloguing every little detail. He could feel their eyes travel across his scuffed knees and up across his sore face. He worried that they could see all the things he didn’t want them to.

The polis had a deliberate way of holding their silence for too long, well past the point of it becoming uncomfortable. It made Mungo want to rush in and fill

the void. Hamish had taught him how to wait it out; how to start at the letter A and list all the animals he knew in his head, and when he was done with animals, to begin again and this time list all the fruit. Hamish said that to think of vegetables and dogs' names and countries was the best way to keep your expression inscrutable.

Mungo was thinking of koala bears when one of the polis finally spoke. The mulleted officer shook his head grimly. "There's been some bother, see. The body of a man was found today in a loch. Somebody had stabbed him and then tried to sink him. Based on what you telt us, Mrs Hamil –, sorry, Ms Buchanan, we wanted to see what …" The polis looked at his pad. "*Mun-go?"* He shook his head in pity at a name destined to get belted in any playground. "… what young Mungo might know about it?"

"Bodies don't sink, not for long," said the other policeman. He was losing his hair, but he had been brave and cropped it close. He was gruffer than the first.

"Decomposition," said Jodie dryly. "Rotting fat turns to gas. Everybody knows *that.*" Mungo didn't. He was irritated by the fact that even in this moment, Jodie couldn't help but show off.

The detective nodded in admiration. He pouted in open surprise that Mo-Maw could have a child this bright. "Aye, right enough. Smart wee lassie ye've got there, Ms Buchanan."

"Aye. She's a real pleasure. A talking bicyclopedia. Do ye want to borrow her?"

The gruff man frowned. "Ye keep givin' yer weans away. Are ye planning on opening a lending library?"

Jodie shifted in embarrassment. The sarcasm of it was lost on Mo-Maw.

The detective explained how Strathclyde Police had phoned Balmaha, Balquhidder, Loch Lomond, and Inveraray to ask if there were any sightings of Mo-Maw's missing boy. The Inveraray police had said no, however, they had just found a drowned body which was not suspicious in itself, but the body had been stabbed and was wearing a designer outfit of Italian denim, which was very unusual. The fishing warden had been patrolling for licence violations and had found the body partially submerged, its pockets filled with dozens of small stones. The body should not have risen so quickly; Gallowgate was not a fat man and the water was cold. He would have stayed submerged for weeks if he had been weighted properly.

When the police had hauled the body to the small village and called the

mortician to come collect it, it had caused the stir of the century. The postmistress had instantly recognized Gallowgate and said he had a quiet boy with him. She said they both had thick, uncultured Glaswegian accents, that the boy was surrounded by a sadness, and that they had stolen chocolate bars and owed her a pound fifty.

"Ah'm glad Mungo came home. Yer lucky that everything worked out. But we do need to talk to the boy." The mulleted detective turned his head from one brother to the other. "So, which one of youse is the bold Mungo Hamilton?"

Jodie and Mo-Maw did something strange then. They turned not to Mungo but to Hamish. In pure instinct, they looked to Hamish because he would know what to do. He was the man of the house. Their eyes seemed to implore, *Handle it, Hamish.*

The first detective kicked the ground like he had lost a bet. It was not the brother he had thought it would be. Hamish was certainly the shorter of the two, but this boy was slightly too old to fit the description. But the mouth of the balding detective pulled tight in a knowing grimace. As soon as he had clocked Hamish, he had thought him capable of violence.

Hamish stepped forward almost immediately. He didn't blink, he barely nodded. "I am. I am Mungo."

Gallus eejit. The officers would not play daft for long.

It could be the last time he ever saw James. Mungo knew it now. He turned because he wanted to look on him for as long as he possibly could, to remember the smile that made everything better, the mouth full of happy gappy teeth. He wanted to see if his cheeks had turned their usual bluish-pinkish tartan in fresh air.

James's broken hand was raised in a frozen greeting. In his many coats he again resembled the statue of St Mungo at Kelvingrove, reaching out, welcoming followers.

James was biting his split lip. The rushing traffic blew his tawny hair over his eyes, the wheat and the barley, the sticky pulled sugar of it caught and ate the last of the sinking sun.

The broken hand swivelled then. He turned his bandaged knuckles towards Mungo and the splinted fingers that had caressed the soft down at the bottom of his spine twitched faintly, discreetly. The swaddling made the gesture crude, inarticulate, but Mungo understood.

He beckoned him only once. Once was enough.

Come, it said. *Come away.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so grateful to my family, the gallus Glaswegians that I was blessed with, and the wonderful friends that are lumped with me. I wouldn’t be here without you.

I am indebted to my editor, Peter Blackstock, and to the Grove Atlantic team: Morgan Entrekin, Judy Hottensen, Deb Seager, John Mark Boling, and Emily Burns. Thank you to my fellow ugly duckling (his words) Ravi Mirchandani, and to Camilla Elworthy, Jeremy Trevathan, Stu Wilson, Gillian McKay, and the talented folk at Picador. Love and thanks to Anna Stein, Claire Nozieres, and Lucy Luck for taking such good care of Mungo, and to Grace Robinson, Julie Flanagan, and Will Watkins for all their support. Thank you to Mungo’s friends from o’er yonder, Cathrine Bakke Bolin, Daniel Sandström, Susanne Van Leeuwen, Lina Muzur, and Valentine Gay.

I survive on the encouragement of my early readers, so many beers are owed to Patricia McNulty, Clive Smith, Valentina Castellani, Margaret Ann MacLeod, Tanya Carey, and Tina Pohlman for the loan of their hearts and minds.

Thank you, above all, to Michael Cary, who has always believed.



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