

# Growing Nowhere

By  
Zeph Gordy, Fack Thomas, Cristo Damié and  
Will Carpenter

*"I've always wanted to be quoted at the beginning of a novel. It'd make me so happy to have me in italics, me hyphenated, me named. If none of this makes me immortal, if all fails, if all else dies... I just need to find something to say."*

- Fack Thomas, in Star Base, sometime in '01 or '02.

## **The Mysterious Foreword**

(Originally Found Written on a Post-it Note on Sleeping Zeph's Forehead)

By an Anonymous Acquaintance

This is a true story about a group of men who consider themselves boys. **They love life**, as much as little boys do and big men can. You probably wouldn't understand what I did to these boys; you probably wouldn't have done the same. Yet **this is a happy story**, and this you will understand. You won't know who I am and you won't know what I continue to do to these lovers of life. **They will try to explain.**

Enjoy.

## Welcoming Speech on 'Things'

By Zeph

Where I come from, everybody has to have a *thing*.

I used to think everybody has to have a *thing* – I was naïve but I couldn't have known any better. Everyone I knew had a *thing*, every character inside every book and film had a *thing*, every writer and actor outside of the books and films had a *thing*, every historical luminary had a *thing*, and God knows I had a *thing* or two.

Since that long period of naivety I've searched a few people extensively and realised – gosh! and alas! – that not everybody in the world has a *thing*; there is such a being as The Ordinary Man. It squashed my heart, it really did, for I thought 'what's a person without a *thing*?'

And by '*thing*' – I'm sorry – I mean some special personal quirk that makes the person even more *them* than they would otherwise be. It's perfectly accepted that such a *thing* may be embellished, exaggerated, even self-manufactured, forced and – to an extent – fake. Which all makes it even more of a *thing* really, when you think about it.

Recently, to be honest to unsquash my heart rather than open myself up to the truth, I decided I'm of the opinion that the guys I've grown up with unarguably have *things*, and I love them for it, whether they're *things* for *things*' sake or whatever, and I leave the rest of humanity in my blind-spot, where I guess it's unresolved whether they have *things* or not, but I don't bother myself with it. The majority of humanity stay neatly tucked away in everyone's blind-spots, so I don't think it's just me being ignorant or anything.

Seeing as you're most likely a member of the majority of humanity, who I have hitherto left in my blind spot, I'd just like to introduce you to a few of these *things*, the nature of which may be unfamiliar to you.

Friends are the first people I usually turn to with anything, so they're the first people I'll turn to now. Right, just to stress and explain something – I do have many friends. My life is riddled with friends. However, it sometimes seems like I only have a few because my central friendship group is quite insular and... well, like with most friendship groups I guess we've got an implicit agreement that we're all better than everybody else in the universe. Which may or may not be true. It has yet to be tested. Here I'm going to portray the core of the group, Zeph's group-

- also, by the way, my name is **Zeph Gordy**, hi –

- I'm not saying it's *my* group and I'm the leader, because I'm not.

Also, though it may *seem* as if I'm the leader of the storytelling (not least because I single-handedly structured and edited this book), everybody who I name in bold is of equal status as co-writer.

Onto such a bold-worthy hero, **Fack Thomas**, one of my best friends and fellow earthlings. And what a fucking name! I've only known Fack for just over three years (admittedly the longest years of my life), yet already he feels like a brother to me. I've never had a brother, so I can only imagine, but I imagine a brother to be someone who's so much like you in lots of ways he makes you think 'yeah, damnit, I *am* as super as I thought! Because I'm like *this* guy and he's virtually *me* and he's so darned cool!' I'm just going to throw Fack right into the deep-end, whether he likes it or not, and strike hard against one of his most embarrassing and pervasive *things*. He said I could, trust me, and you'd find out sooner or later anyway.

OK, when Fack gets agitated or anxious, he clutches onto his nipples. I mean *hard*. He clutches on almost for his life, as if he'll die of worrying if he doesn't hold onto his nipples. He's not a fat man and these aren't squidgy, wobbly, comforting, ripe, now-in-a-squeezeable-bottle nipples, oh no, they're standard issue. We think it's something with his head; we think he's nuts - so nuts that when, after he's been pressurising the hell out of his tit-ends and he releases them, sometimes he checks underneath his shirts to see if any blood is pouring out (once, apparently, only once). But blood should *never* come out of a man's nipples like that. Male nipples don't really serve much of a purpose but - dear God - if there is a purpose, that ain't it.

You'll be delighted to know that's just the tit of the iceberg. Now we'll move onto the balls and the shaft of the iceberg, which this iceberg definitely has. See, when my very good and loved friend Fack gets even more agitated, even more anxious and stressed out about something, apparently his nipples aren't enough anymore. It's like they've got a stress-relieving limit, and sometimes the situation just shoots over that, so he needs to find something else, and at some point in his youth he must have found his stress balls. And, you know, his stress wang. Which he embraces so severely, so vicelike, that his face turns red, as if he wasn't already embarrassed about whatever sparked off his panicking in the first place, and everyone around him is drawn to the entertaining fact that: this boy is holding onto his penis. For his life, it seems. It's terrifying - it cracks us all up, every time. He tries his best to turn away and hide his shame (either that, or get a stronger grip), but we guys know what he's doing. That's our Fack and we know what he's about.

I can't stop giggling, I'm sorry, but the first thing I've told you about one of my greatest friends is that he regularly crushes his cock. Regularly, yeah, certainly, at least once a month. I mean it seems to work, he's never all that bothered by stuff in the long run. But there's so much more to him than that, I like the way that your first impression of this boy is just as a ball, cock and tit crushing fraidy-cat who gets laughed at by his friends. I'm perfectly happy leaving you with that impression, for now, we'll clear up the mess of misrepresentation later.

Next up - and this guy's name has an *accent*, an *accent* - **Cristo Damié**. He's full of international flavours, he's a musician and so on, but I don't want to be unfair on Fack by exposing Cristo in a mellowed light, so I'll get straight to his *thing*, even though it isn't as enticing or shocking or explosive or libellous as Fack's.

A big one of Cristo Damié's *things* is that he can do pretty much anything that is pretty much useless. If there's a rare occasion where somebody is required to put five drawing pins through the soles of their bare feet without hurting themselves, it's Cristo who'll stick the pins in precisely the safest locations. That actually happened once. Or if you need to know how to change the transmission fluid, or the transmission spark, or whatever that niggly small thing was, he'll know without having to check any manual – without even being able to drive a car. He's the only person I know who could learn how to juggle in a click, no practice, and with batons, and with four balls, and act as if it was a God-given talent. 'It's all intuitive,' he always claims, as if the entirety of the workings of the world are intuitive, and everything's just there for him to get to grips with. He's a musician, he puts his skill to use, so it's all good. He's lazy as a pensioner, but he still manages to get away with it.

I put it down to his international experience, his spending way too much time on the Internet, and the truckloads of bonus innate knowledge he must have been born with. But he doesn't clench his fists around his genitalia, does he? I swear to you you'll remember that sordid *thing* ten times more vividly than Cristo's infinite ability *thing*.

Finally, the last of my gang of dearest brethren I'm going to probe with the *thing*-seeking stick, **Will Carpenter**. Ain't no way to make that name showbiz. I have to just pave the way to his *thing* with some background info on this chap, who I've known for most of my life, who has always lived on my lane, and who's totally fucking cool, like the rest of them. Will's a rich kid but he doesn't let it go to his head in any ways other than ridiculously overpriced haircuts and a blob or two of fake tan (though he's never owned up to it – either way his face looks like it's made out of gold).

He's also the genius of the bunch, or at least the *most* genius of the bunch, because I like to believe all of us – every human being, even – has a little bit of genius in them. We're all pretty sure, thanks to a month-long tally, that he reads more books than he has hot dinners, meaning his primary motivation in life, above sustaining it through nutrition, is to consume the contents of books. Which may be sad, but then I don't want you to get the wrong idea – he likes cold snacks.

He wants to be a poet or just a general, multipurpose ponce. This is the spick and spam front I want you to see he has. Because behind this he is, very self-assuredly, A Spirit of The Soul Wind. He's a member of this cult, The Spirits of the Soul Wind, which has precisely no more or less than one member. He is an ardent, dedicated spiritualist who could, and does, talk at considerable length about the wondrous beliefs and messages of a spirituality he arrived at one day while sleeping underneath a weeping willow, where he crashed out after a sugar high when he was eleven years old. It's all been fine-tuned and reinforced since then, but it really is all amazing to listen to and to try to comprehend. For one reason: it's just so obviously, frightfully bollocks. A whole wad of fanciful fudge – fucking tosh – that often leads strangers and acquaintances alike to brand him a lunatic. Saying all this, I have nothing against Will for having these beliefs, and as you will see he's actually the very best kind of spiritualist; he doesn't expect anybody else to take himself seriously, and he provides much comedy.

There you go, my three main friends – Fack, Cristo, and The Spirit of the Soul Wind.

Spotlight hovers over to my family. Where to begin?

I've got four dads. I've found it's best just to come out with it. I have four father figures (what I call 'dads'), none of whom are homosexual. None of whom are *heterosexual*. None of whom are in fact sexual *at all*. I'm aware that this needs some explaining.

My mother found out she had ovarian cancer, after giving birth to five girls and me. She coped with it better than anyone else I've ever seen cope with cancer (on TV, in books, in real life, whatever). It was still the most ludicrously evil way in which nature has ever manifested itself in my life. Thank God, or whatever else there is out there to thank, that she already had six kids, the greedy girly. Anyway, I'm trying to keep this short and snappy which is hard to do when dealing with cancer so bare with me. My mother, who we'll call The Mummy because she's been wrapped up in dads for a while, had what is called a 'total hysterectomy with bilateral –something– oophorectomy. She had her uterus and her ovaries taken from her, as they were diseased. Then the stay in hospital, then the convalescence, then the realisation of the hormonal dysfunction that she suffered as her whole endocrinal system seemed to be impaired and go haywire, rendering her absolutely without a sex drive at all. Then, she felt great. She said she had honestly rarely felt better in her life, and resisted having hormonal enhancement drugs. She was relatively young to have ovarian cancer, at 32/33 (I think), and she should have come out of the hysterectomy, in the end, having an active sex life again. It's a serious subject so I'm allowed to discuss my mum and sex without it being *eurgh!*

But she didn't have any sex. For one thing my biological father was dead, which I won't go into here at all, and I probably won't go into anywhere. Anyway, she described herself as sexless and fantastically celibate. I was 13, it was quite a thing to deal with at home, but her attitude to it made it so much easier. I was the eldest so I had to be the wisest and strongest, but she was strong enough for everyone - so strong she wanted to find people like her who had turned away from sex and welcomed a premature menopause. She kind of found what she wanted, in four grown men, all of whom were differing levels of sexless and celibate.

(Don't get me wrong. The chemotherapy and the intense pangs of pain that struck her down were tremendously, obviously upsetting. It just all seems to be over now though, and the surgery was so immediate it really did feel like an episode, which she's over now. I'm not going to focus on the unhappy times, I don't want you to get the wrong impression of my mother, who's not an unhappy person in the least. Also, my friends often call me a 'dweller' but even I don't dwell on this.)

Initially, after the episode, she was looking for fellow ovarian cancer survivors who felt the same way as her. But that wasn't for her. The way she saw it, people who had a broken leg didn't then just hang out with other people who'd also broken their legs. They'd just be prime mugger's prey - it'd probably be

awkward. I personally think she didn't want to let her whole life be tinged by the cancer as it was never a part of *her*.

So she wanted to meet any sexually defunct people who just wanted to enjoy life. Simple enough, I think. Nowadays she would have used the Internet and would have found a bunch of qualifying weirdoes in a few clicks. Back then, somehow, she used newspapers and made a few phone calls and met some strange names in cafés. All of whom turned out to be male, none of whom had ever had ovarian cancer. Yet they all had stories of their own.

Let me get to my mum's *thing*. She's a sort of hippy who's never worked as such in her life and still lives off my biological father's money, and, well, she's a living, breathing angel. That's her *thing*, I've always thought, though when I say it, it sounds kind of a jip. She's not a certified angel yet she touches other souls in such a way she can't be anything but.

This is why, I think, after a few months of my mother hanging around with these four strangers who shared sexual deficiency (sorry mum, 'alternative motivations'!), they ended up living in her house. We live in a very big house and it's big enough. Since I was 13 they've been living here as my mother's friends and as a kind of composite-fucking-mega-dad to me and my sisters. More to my sisters than me, because as lovely as all my dads are, come on, that's going to freak out any 13 year old a bit. I was raised in a predictably hippy way (my name's Zeph, that was your first clue) so I was freaked out less than most would have been. Bit odd nonetheless.

Let me communicate to you the beauty of the situation. Here were four men who couldn't, or who had abstained from, pleasures of the flesh, who had said to themselves, 'we're not gonna live for the fuck, we're gonna live for ourselves and for... Jesus... and for whoever else there is to live for!' or whatever, though not necessarily involving Jesus. They all desperately wanted fun/happy/loving relationships and fun/happy/loving children. That's exactly what they all got. You should see them, even today, chilling out together like fucking higher beings, perfectly content in their mutually bloomed comfort. No sex. It's just not on the menu – it was taken off because nobody ordered it. Going by my own individual experience, I can see why people say the whole world is about sex. Going by The Mummy and my dads, that's all the evidence I need. Humans are special. Humans aren't just sticky Lego.

Here's the breakdown on my quartet of dads. I'm going to call them by numbers as it's just easier that way. They do have names, once I even bothered to learn them, but it makes no beans to you. Let's make sure I get this right...

Dad 1 is a voluntary celibate. Never in his life has he felt any significant sexual desire. He's a 47-year old virgin (is that a *thing*?). He lives for people, for love, for ideas, for art, and specifically for such things as quail eggs and day trips to France.

Dad 2 can – and did – have sex but he "got over that" and thinks only of love, real Platonic. I don't know if Plato endorsed this kind of set-up. Knowing the Greeks, he probably would have invited a few horses and homosexuals, provided the humus and said 'get stuck in'.

Dad 3 has no testicles. He lost them in a lift. Once, young and naïve and damned stupid, I said 'but how can you lose something in a lift?' Looking back, the question was fair enough (you try playing Hide and Seek in a lift). My mum said there was an accident in the elevator shaft. I never asked any more questions. I never wanted to find out. I'd be happy to believe that one day, in a lift, he just tucked them too far into his belly (which I – at least – can do). He also, like my mum, opted out of hormone boosts and other such treatment, leaving him virtually sexless.

Dad 4 has always been paranoid of getting diseases, or making people pregnant, and stuff like that, so pledged never to have any more sexual motivation, and apparently it was as easy as that. He says he had bad experiences in his youth, which probably means something deserving grave concern, but I always translate it as: he was put off sex by having sex with mingers. Multiple mingers. Anyway.

They're the genuinely nicest men I've known, other than my biological father, who I won't say anything against, who was never really replaced. Everyone asks how on earth my mum has enough love to give them, since there's only one of her and a foursome of them after all. But it doesn't work like that. They all give each other love, one size fits all, and it wouldn't matter how many men or women were in the group, they'd all be good for each other. That's how they live.

As a side-note, and trying not to sound callous at all, my mum certainly had enough sex for a Mum anyway. The reports say she was rampant and insatiable. Let's leave that at that.

If, by the end of this piece, I haven't come up with a more satisfying *thing*, take the fact that I have four dads as my thing, if you'd be so kind.

I'll just swiftly sweep over my sisters, five of them. First there's a serious note. There are five of them, all females, all with ovaries. Their mother had ovarian cancer. Life isn't just a party.

I know it's not the same, but I have a heart that I *know* will at some point stop beating. I just think it'd be a damned ungrateful waste not to put it to good use. I think my sisters are like me in that way, and thank God, because I'm pretty super.

My four eldest sisters do all have impressive *things* but, I'm sorry, I don't feel I have time to do them all justice so I'll just say that they're all boring. They're not – not one of them – but for the purpose of brevity let's just say they're dull and not worth writing about. Jointly, they're 'boring', and that's that. They're 15, 13, 13 (that's twins), and 12, see, uninteresting.

My little sister, Babe, is 9 years old. All of the other sisters kind of group together, while there's a strong affinity between Babe and me. She likes all of my friends and makes us all cold drinks in the summer. It's great. Like a cute, precious little slave, for free!

Babe's *thing* is that she cannot, no matter how hard she tries, be wilfully dishonest. She cannot lie, will not deceive, and barely even understands such concepts. What's more, I don't think it's some pretty childhood skin that she'll



shed as she hardens to the world. I think that she's left like that, a speaker of the truth. It's a case where truth does equal beauty. She's a gem – I just hope the world doesn't scratch her surface, exploit her, destroy her. I'll protect her, don't worry.

In conclusion, I was blessed with an unusual upbringing. But this story-of-sorts is primarily about my friends, and me, so let's turn to the subject of I.

Where I come from, everybody has to have a *thing*. Even the fictional people I write about. It seems I started to write stories before I started to lay down long-term memories. I'll find scraps of horribly scrawled, comically spelt paragraph-long tales in cardboard boxes labelled with juicy black marker pen, 'SMALL ZEPH'. They nearly make me cry because in a way they're so stupid and plain rubbish, but there's always *something* to them. I'd love to have a conversation with a 5-year old me. It'd be so gwool. I know that'd make me cry – tears of joy because it'd be so gwool.

('Gwool' is our word. It is essentially identical in function to the word 'cool', but Fack started using it once and it amused us greatly, so we adopted it as our own. Throughout this book you could probably amuse yourself by trying to spot our favourite words from our clique-specific vocabulary. We leave them here, untranslated, in the name of cultural realism.)

Yet after so many years and stories based on fictional characters with fantabulous *things*, I've realised it's the real characters around me who are the really valuable and intriguing ones. So instead of writing again about my mental constructs, I decided to write about my friends and about myself.

I'm 'the writer' of the group and after our gap year (that's a year-long holiday, by the way), I pitched an idea to them. We all agreed that the gap year was eventful and that we were all gwool. We had a summer holiday to go before impending University. And although I often think my bizarre fictional friends are indistinguishable from the real oddballs in my life, my friends have more character than I could ever capture by myself. We are the characters of our life-story. Therefore we've all banded together and collaborated on this book about who we are, and our unexpected year-long adventure. You will read chapters written by all of us (plus a few cameos) and these chapters will hopefully fit together seamlessly, while allowing you to pick a favourite boy.

Some people will probably think we're writing this to cash-in on our slothfulness. Doubtful. Whatever lazy plans we had, they were ruined by genuine goings-on. Some people might think it's because we're scared it'll otherwise all be lost. That's nearer to the truth. I think it's a nice story we have here. At the end of the day, writing's a weird thing. People just want to do it.

All that follows is based on real us and real stuff. Fiction only fills in the gaps where memory fails.

To put any overactive minds to rest – don't expect some twist that I, Zeph Gordy, made all of these characters and *things* up. I mean it'd be a pretty cool, sneaky, early-morning-type twist if they weren't real and I was some messed up imaginative recluse, but it's cooler this way.

And there you go; I think I'm done with talking about the wannabe superpowers of everybody who features heavily in my life. Now, my friends call me Zeph, because it's my name, or Zee, because that's cool. Actually, my friends call me whatever the hell they want. It's not my decision. There, you're introduced, let's turn on the Fack machine and get this thing going...

## **New Car, No Friends**

By Fack

The engine didn't even growl. I kept turning the key and I expected the monster to wake up and get the car moving, but it didn't make a sound. It must have been on about the fifteenth attempt when I noticed something pretty important. How was I to know there was an immobiliser? I mean perhaps that's not fair because my parents had told me enough times, but how was I to remember? Nobody was going to steal an M-reg Skoda. Few people could even start it. I jammed the remobiliser stick in, yanked it out, and tried the key again. The engine wheezed. It always had to wheeze a few times first. It was an old, dying animal. I tried again and then it brrmed. I was away, still lost, still surrounded by farmland I didn't know, in a village that wasn't my home. I allowed myself a quick squeeze of a nipple, but it was OK – the sun was blazing and the windows were open. I noticed that when I got faster the breeze grew stronger and cooled me down more. I could take in all the new stuff quicker too. It was weird, because it was my new home.

The monster in the engine was growling for fresh meat. I realised I had to change gears. How was I to remember? I changed up to second, or maybe third, and that made the engine happier. I had to pay attention to the winding and narrowing of the country lane. I didn't know where it was taking me. To be honest I just wanted to be outside and be free, where I didn't have to go at 30 mph to feel the breeze.

I mean birds don't fly in aeroplanes, do they? I smiled to myself, missed fourth, put it in neutral, and the engine roared at me. Nobody else was around to hear it. There was no one there to care.

This was the first time I ever drove a car solo and, what's more, it was the first time I'd ever driven around Blindfield, where we'd just moved in, the summer holiday before I was to start sixth-form at my new school. Passing my test, first attempt on a fluke, was one of the last things I did in Dorset, which seems like a life ago. Back then in Blindfield, when I was driving without a top on, grappling with the gears, the driving test was still fresh in my memory and Dorset still felt close. Now, it's all somewhere back there, behind my head, so to speak, and I know if I turn around now I won't see it.

I thought it'd be cool if maybe I made a wrong turn and ended up stuck on a road back to Dorset. It was where all my friends were, where nearly all my memories were made, and where everybody talked like me. Kent had just been a name, really. Clark Kent, Kent the Garden of England, that sort of thing. None of the signs I saw said Kent, or Dorset, they said nonsense names that meant nothing to me. Everything was nicely fresh and waiting to be explored – all of the nonsense names, all of the side roads. I didn't know what to expect from this Kent thing. It didn't really feel like I'd lost everything, it just felt like everything was different. I didn't know what I had anymore. But I was in the driving seat for once and I knew I'd have to work a lot out for myself.

Because I'd earned my wheels I was allowed to drive the luxurious family car, an off-white Skoda that my parents had bought new, at around the turnover, between when Skoda was shit and when Skoda was alright. You could really see and feel how hard it'd worked for the Thomas's over the years. It was the pack horse, or mule. I've never particularly liked cars. In Dorset, I cycled or walked everywhere in my village. I knew every road for miles. I could find my way home when I was drunk from any party, I knew where to sleep in the woods, I knew the best place to jump into the lake, and I didn't need a car for any of it.

I didn't plan to use the Skoda much in Blindfield, it was just there in case I needed to go to bigger towns nearby, or back to Dorset. My parents still had to use it too, and my Dad was going to work in Dorrington and thought that needed a car.

I still thought it was worth getting used to. I had to get to know my new village too, so it was worth a drive.

I was coasting down a gentle hill with sunny fields stretched out before me. Everything seemed fine and then tractor. I just thought, tractor. Coming round the bend, straight for me. I panicked, of course, drove slightly into the hedge to my left, which grazed my wing mirror, slowed right down, looked for a wider stretch of road, couldn't see one, slowed down, and stalled. The tractor just drove past, having a great time, showing off its wheels. I took the key out. Why, I don't know, but I thought that was what I was meant to do. Then I put the handbrake on and thought I'd sweat it off, because there was no reason to get worked up over a tractor and it wasn't as if I had any plans for the next two months. So I stopped there in the middle of the road.

When I was ready again I put the key in. The engine didn't make a sound. I tried again, and no. Perhaps it'd got broken - did the tractor hit it? - I was thinking, which I always did, and always felt silly about. After a few more futile attempts, I realised again. That stupid immobiliser. I didn't let myself get annoyed, I was just on the learning curve. I remobilised and put the key in.

The car didn't need an immobiliser, nobody would steal it. Not unless they were going to take it for a joyride. Even then, I thought, it'd be a pain in the arse. I continued to battle with the engine and the gears, and talked to myself about how much fun a joyride would be, ignoring the consequences. I think though that if anything I went slower, just to keep myself in check.

At some point I must have got home. I told my mum I'd been lost and was bullied by a convoy of tractors. For a second I didn't even know my way to my own bedroom. It was a weird feeling.

## New Friends, On Car

By Fack (again)

I think I was strangled and my neck was thrust onto the bonnet of my car, my Skoda. Rain was battering everything, falling from the darkness of night and glittering with streetlight. My face was soaked and my tumble of greasy hair was soaked and my gut was being pummelled. I was thinking about my kidneys, not really worrying about them, and trying to resist, but not really worrying about it.

To my right, also on the bonnet, also naked apart from only a pair of boxers, also covered from head to toe in physical graffiti – not the music, mainly biro – and also numbed by cheap, horrible alcohol, was Zeph. He kept getting slapped on his hobo-beard and his legs were writhing against his attacker, a big shadow who hurt, but not much because we didn't really give a fuck.

The shadow above me, staring at me probably (I didn't know, I was paying attention to the moon because it looked orange), would jam his fist against the side of the car now and again and our Skody would rock from side to side. I knew it was wrong. He was beating up our Dawn French, our comedy minger who was good at its job, who'd been such a good pack-mule, who was covered in stickers we'd put on it, whose eyelids were diseased with dead flies we'd killed and collected, and who'd been our house, our home.

Surely they were just playing around with us! Smack. Was that what they called a dead leg?

- This was only a few weeks ago -

I looked again at Zeph. His eyes tried to stay open but they were getting pricked by rain, and mashed by that bastard of a shadow. His near-nude body looked spectacular with those tattoos we'd just given him that night. All down one of his arms it said 'Dickhead dreamer' in scribble. On his chest were boobs, in red, with big juicy blue nipples. 'I like little boys', that's what his abs said, with an exclamation mark dotting at the navel. Cows covered his neck. Spirals and zigzags were everywhere, filling the gaps, along with loads of other swear words, and in-jokes, and rubbish, and cows. I remembered I looked the same and looked down, 'Widow Wanky', what was that about? But my kidneys, I kept thinking about my kidneys.

On the floor, a way off, were Cristo and Will, lying together in a heap. They looked like farm animals, covered in mud and wriggling. Another shadow wanker looked over them, pushing them down now and again.

It wasn't even that we were *that* drunk, we were just useless.

I started to chuckle and then I full out laughed. Then I realised that it wasn't me laughing, it was Zeph, so I joined him, which the shadows didn't like, but they didn't like us anyway. That's why they were beating the shit out of us, laid out on our car, only two lanes away from my house. I vaguely remembered the details but everything was mixed up. There was thunder and there were punches, sometimes I mistook one for the other. Darkness and rain was coming down on everything though so it seemed unreal, as if we were just going to go to fade out, go to sleep and be washed away.

Cristo stood up, raised his arms, and got knocked down by a silhouette. He heard us laughing so he laughed with us and rolled himself into a ball, bearing the green-edged spine we drew on him, that had black cocks coming out all over the place. Black cocks are the biggest cocks, that's what we'd said.

I rolled over so that I had my lips to the Cream Skoda. I was lapping it up. I could actually taste the metal, or the paint, whichever makes more sense. I could see the four caricatures we'd stickered onto the front of the car – us four, driving out in front. There was me. Tree coming out of my hair. Syringe going through my brain. A lovely smile. I always hoped my smile was that good.

Wish I had my camera. But they couldn't smash or steal my memories.

Blood was somewhere. Don't get the car ruined! That's what I was yelling at myself, in my thoughts, as I laughed myself better. It's the best medicine, isn't it? It didn't clear up the blood.

The rain wasn't going to stop. The darkness wasn't going to clear. The shadows seemed to be enjoying themselves. None of us could stop laughing. I thought of something hilarious so I choked for a bit, and shouted across to Zeph, who was facing my way,

"This'll make a great chapter, won't it Zeph?"

"What?" he said, scrunching up his face.

"This'll make a great chapter in your book!"

"Yeah!..." he said, excited, because of my hilarious thought, "Yeah!... wait... what?" Because maybe he didn't actually understand me at all.

"This'll make a great chapter in your book!" I repeated, with the same enthusiasm. I was so happy for him, getting destroyed there on my car.

"Our book, idiot... we're writing this book together! This'd be somewhere near the end." He knew exactly what was going on, and he was right, we'd agreed to write this new book together. I cackled because we were actually so with-it, it was ridiculous.

"Yeah, exactly!" I shouted back, "or you could put it near the beginning, so everything else is a build-up!"

"I probably wouldn't do that... I'd probably put it at the end."

"It could go near the beginning!" I was sure!

"Then you write the fucking chapter, Fack!" he said. The shadows weren't doing much now, they were talking to each other, still evil. That's what I thought, at least.

"I will!"

"What? You write it!" He said it again.

"I will!" I screamed.

"What?"

And then I realised my face was against my tyre and I was screaming into the hubcap. I screamed right into it, "I will, Zeph! What a joke. What a fucking joke."

It must have been a good joke, because everybody laughed. I was covered in mud so I closed my eyes. I seriously wished for a tractor to come along and save us.

## When We Found a Dead Body and Laughed

By Cristo

They said, 'introduce Blindfield, Cristo,' they said, 'introduce yourself,' they said, 'spell everything correctly.' And then they said that it couldn't be done. (*'No we didn't, you twat, we said you **have** to do it because you haven't written anything yet'* – Zeph) Well here it is, chico, in real-time.

We're two months into sixth-form, we're Cristo and Will and Fack and Zeph, we're walking to school through the woods, we're wearing suits very loosely (like we don't give a fuck) and we're loving it. But we're late.

Zoom out – this is Blindfield. It's a shit 'n' titchy village off Dorrington, off Maidstone, off London. Trees are everywhere. Jesus, every boy sweating themselves to Channel 5 porn on private Friday soirees couldn't make this much wood. Some people (tree fuckers) fuck the trees we're walking past. They're nasty cults, but Blindfield's famous for it and everyone digs fame. Blindfield's really more of a forest than a field. It is our home – our banging hood.

The other thing Blindfield's famous for is whackos. A quarter of the kids in Blindfield are insane because half of them are inbred and they had crazy DNA! in the first place. But the fact that so many choose to bone home grown is surely testament to Blindfield's superiority. Pedigree.

But Blindfield's not just about incest and some people don't have one-hamlet ancestries. Look at Fack there, young, new to the group, and a simpleton in a suit. He moved over from Dorset (another tree-happy patch but with more national respect and crack addicts).

Then there's la moi – Cristo Damié – born smack in the middle of a vineyard in Bordeaux, France, then lived in San Fran, USA, then Barcelona, then some field-cum-forest in The Middle of Nowhere, Kent, UK. I'll start some ripples in the festering genetic pool – face like a horse but cock... like a horse.

We're talking about the local girls, who are as easy as fuck (but none of us have fucked anything). We're talking about Zoë Groundhappensomething.

In the future, Zoë will bat for us all but only I will get the homerun. She'll be our friend. She'll be une bonne amie with promotional opportunities d'amour.

The woods are standard – trees, dead leaves and stuff. I now reckon we're pretty near to be place I ran away to when I was three years old. See, I always used to be left to my own devices in the garden and I'd bumble around, thinking, 'what the fuck's there to do here?' One day I escaped through a locked gate (a work of toddler genius, I was a niño magico) and I found an ocean of trees and thought, 'this is a fucking never-ending forest,' and went for a rummage. The whole village had looked for me, fearing I'd been gotten to first by rabid badgers and deer and paedophiles. But Will's uncle found me a mile away from my house – around where we are now – most likely just kicking back and smoking a bowl.

Now we're at my Toilet Tree so I unzip and let it leak. Fack introduced us to the idea of 'Toilet Trees' a few weeks ago. He told us about how, in Dorset, they each chose a personal peeing tree, which they stayed faithful too. We did the same in Blindfield. I shout over to Fack,

“Why don’t the trees reek of piss, Fucky?”

And he’s like, “Nature’s pretty good at stuff like that,” and we just laugh at him, because we’re already allowed to do that.

In front of me I see, as I shake the Damié trunk about, Collyoak Primary School, on a road which leads off towards Dorrington. Dorrington’s the nearest ‘big town’, where most medium-sized kids go for cinema and shopping, and where most large and extra-large kids go in the evenings to satisfy/destroy their minds and souls with intoxicants and MUSIC!! Down that road, there’s the chance of everything from zero-to-sex, only one bus ride away. I’m zipping myself up and gazing over shitty old Collyoak Primary School.

Me, Will and Zee all went to Collyoak but we didn’t know each other there. Christ, we didn’t even know ourselves, for fuck’s sake. We just pissed ourselves all the time. Kids are jokes. Something must’ve gone on in that building, for seven years, but we can’t remember much but a blur. It’s as if whenever we entered the school gates we got doped off our heads.

Blindfield education is like a series of good trips. Like the 612 – it’ll pass by us in a few minutes. The 612 is world-famous for taking all of Blindfield’s finest – inbred and outbred – to our school, Dorrington Grammar. It’s a tiny, possibly illegally mingling jalopy wagon. Everyone remembers the race for a scrap of seat as their most traumatic Year 7 experience. It really makes you hate fat kids, more than ever, and makes a lot of children doubt whether smelly kids actually deserve educations.

Today, we smell like roses and love. That’s how kids should smell.

“There was so much flesh on the 612,” I remind Zeph, who I still didn’t know at the beginning of our bus journeys to Dorrington Grammar, “you could’ve taken a slurp.” Juicy porco. A good majority of the bumping and grinding going on inside the 612 wasn’t due to the suss suspension or the narrow country roads, but the intentional ‘accidents’ of the ‘innocent’ children. The fucks.

“It’s no surprise,” Will goes, “that in Blindfield puberty comes early.”

Blindfield’s a weird name BTW (‘By The Way’, by the way). There are lots of ancient legends about why Blindfield is so-named – involving blind monks, dark skies, horse training and blind prisoners. But state-of-the-art legend analysis has concluded that nobody knows why the fuck Blindfield’s called Blindfield. Fields *are*, in the main, blind, true story.

We’re walking again, and talking about girls again.

In the future, girls will be floating everywhere, throughout sixth-form. At this point in the woods, we could probably guess that, but we don’t know the details. We’re setting it all up.

In the future, Zeph will get off with Zoë and a few others but he won’t be able to find a girlfriend, boo-hoo. Will’ll fiddle with Zoë (who really is a nice girl and not a whore at all). He’ll also go out with a girl called Charlotte, who’ll be a waste of time. And he’ll go out with Trix, who’ll dump him and be a maniac, but be 100% doable. I’ll get off with a few mingers, and somehow bone a bunch of ‘em. Fuck’ll continue to be timid-frigid, bless his little innocent heart and ball sack. Most of these girls will be friends and not just meat, but whatever.



The 612 goes past, rattling along, kids screaming. It's always been like a sweaty musical-chairs-battle-royale in there. That's how this recognisable DG gang was filtered in The Early Years. It was Cristo Damié, a scrawny, mank-faced, lightly tanned kid ("is he different coloured like half a chocolate person?"), plus Will Carpenter, a polite boy who'd giggle about dirty things when nobody respectable was looking, plus Zeph Gordy, a quiet, confused-looking type with spaghetti-hippy hair, plus Danny Reece.

*Danny Reece*, who the fuck? That's what you should be saying. He was a loser, turned out. The Danny Reece Story: Danny Reece was part of our 612 posse and he'd always say something like, "'Gee," or equivalent, "I sure wish I could touch the sky." His *thing* - though I think it's awful lame to talk about *things* as if they're souped-down superpowers - was that he wanted to touch the sky. FFS ('For Fuck's Sake', by the Way), he was crushed to hear that there wasn't any big wall in the air labelled 'Sky' that he could take a chunk outta. So he went into denial, big time, and claimed people just, "hadn't gone high enough." So he tried to study Astronautology, the spank. And at first we laughed at him but he got so obsessed with his dream to touch the sky that we fell out with him.

He was just a boring dick, actually, that was the real reason. People forget that and blame it on the sky being too high for him, but really he was just a dick.

Danny Reece isn't here and he's not integral to the Blindfield experience so just forget about him. Blindfield's full of kids with ambitions and oddness - sueños locos

The morning cold is chilling my nipples off. Bloody 'ell.

But it's better out here. After a few years of Dorrington Grammar we got bored of the 612 and its mayhem and we started to walk, like common animals, to and from school. It's real Stand By Me ('*And we even had a Gordy*' - Will, '*Oh yeah*' - Zeph Gordy).

It used to be just the three of us before Fack came, and we'd talk and argue and do that crazy non-sexual flirting with each other than young boys do ('*Only, most grow out of it*' - Will). Danny had become the proverbial fat kid, remember.

At first Will and Zeph were a bit bumchummy together because they'd been friends right from the start, and talked about Terry Pratchett and Bottom and other things I didn't care for. I won Zee over by talking about Nintendo 64 games like Mario Kart and WCW vs. nWo - a wrestling game that was and is absolutely vinyl.

Young Cristo was a melange of different cultures and styles. And it would have helped if I weren't so damned ugly. They used to call me 'Wind Changed Direction Boy' (or maybe I said it first just so that they didn't, either way I'm not gonna cry about it because I make up for it in other ways).

BTW 'Wind Changing Direction While You're Making Faces Makes You Ugly' is an old Sioux myth. It's something a normal kid never really stops fearing and something an ugly kid never really stops blaming.

We're on a mound in the woods now, half way towards the world of school. You can see Will's ridiculously large house from here. Will's a rich kid with a gwool house ('*Thanks Cristo, I want that as my epitaph*' - Will). We used to hang out there a lot, playing videogames and listening to music we were proud to know of,

ranging from Ace of Base (Jesus!) to Aerosmith to NoFX. We drank squash from tumblers.

We still hang out there loads but we listen to the best songs on the planet and we drink absinthe from... tumblers.

I always had the shit-hot music tapes and me and Zee educated Will in the ways of the Nintendo 64. Danny didn't add much to the group, but he was getting invited less and less.

I go, "Danny Reece is still at school, right guys?"

Zeph shouts back, sincere as you like, "What are you talking about? Danny Reece is dead!" It's a joke, of sorts, because Danny Reece is not dead, but he's boring and we're laughing because we wouldn't even know or care if he were dead.

Fack Thomas, Danny Reece's replacement, came over at the end of Year 11, brought over from Dorset by Blindfield's magnetic pull. Fack was too quiet and too smiley and at first nobody knew what his game was (*'And you can write that one on my grave'* – Fack).

He melted into the group. There was no single point of realisation where we thought, 'hey, we've got a new good friend, this sprightly Fack,' and Fack thought we hated him.

But Fack's like the Danny we always wanted – not boring and not a dick and certainly not an astronaut.

Now he's here, bashing the shit out of bald branches with a stick. At this point in time we're kind of whacking our direction out in the world. As we're getting older our pastimes are getting darker – we're beginning to follow our moth-like instincts to scour the darkness of Dorrington for light, and alcohol, and sex. We try out dabs of everything these days, tasting the buzz, learning what we hunger for. We like to think of ourselves as being on the fringe – real fringers.

As fringe-geeks we play copious amounts of videogames and we appreciate our education even though it's forced on us by The Man.

As fringe-rockers I'm starting to play bass for various Dorrington bands, and Zee and Facko are starting to wank over rock and MTV2.

As fringe-losers we still do stoopid stuff for kicks.

As fringe-winners we're still so helplessly gwool.

We're never fringe-pikeys. There are a few in Dorrington, but Blindfield's safe (*'Ha!'* – Fack). Got to be careful who you call a pikey though. The people who we *et al* call 'pikeys' – nasty fuckers with baseball caps, sports clothes and bad souls, from the likes of Bromley – *they* would call gypsies 'pikeys'. As for gypsies, they're used to getting all the flak so they don't go bad-mouthing anyone else.

Cutting across the woods, all alone, we think we're pretty fringe, we're pretty free, and we're pretty hard. But loads of kids like to think they're on the fringe because it's always a certain shade of cool to defy categorisation. A lot of the time being on the fringe just means hanging out at Will's house and being wasters, while trying to bag chicks like Zoë Groundhappensomething.

Last year we still felt too young to do things like sex and drugs but old enough to talk about them and think about them all the time. It's all starting to become real now and we think it's doinker than doink, but we're still kiddies.

We like school, we don't rage against it like cocks.

A year after school (three years after this time in the woods) I'll miss school, because I'm a loser. I won't weep but I might drip a tear.

We'll be happy with who we are for the whole of the sixth-form. We'll always be more delighted than delinquent; more mischievous than miscreant; more learning than working; more bitching than anything.

Then after school it'll just get better (for a year at least, and who knows for anything after that?) and I'll probably become a God or something.

At this time in my life, walking through the wood with my shirt covered in grass stains and pretending to be a fucking Mohican or something, I really think I know who I am, as an individual and as a respectable part of the universe. I think I know what I want from life (and I don't just mean bitches and crack).

Blindfield's a big part of that. Blindfield has a certain *encanto*. That's a Spanish word and it's not as if it doesn't have a pretty much direct equivalent in English – charm – but it sounds cooler in Spanish. Blindfield has shitloads of *encanto* and it gets shitloads of respects from all of us.

But then everybody feels something for their home.

"WTF?" (WTF, BTW, means 'What the Fuck???) Fack shouts again, "WTF?" and he's standing still and I just think he's being some loser about something dumb, but, actually, he's reacting alright. Because he's staring at a dead body.

I'm just like, "Sweet chilli and Jesus, what's going on?"

There's a dead body – no *encanto* included – covered in blood and mud, in front of us. It's a guy, normal build, normal hair – everything's normal except that he's dead.

Zee doesn't like facing up to the reality of things like this, I can see, but I'm macho, so I look over the body.

"Don't go near, maybe he's not dead!" cries Zee, "Do you think it's that guy from the news? The rapist with the machete?"

I'm like, "What fucking rapist with a machete?"

"There's always a rapist with a machete on the news," is his answer, "maybe he's a rapist with a machete."

"He's dead, Zee."

"OK."

I start laughing because I see something.

"It's Danny Reece," I say, between laughs.

"What? No it's not, don't be ridiculous!" says an angry Will.

"May as well be. It's a doll, guys."

Because it is. It's just a doll. It's a fake dead guy – it's a prank.

In five minutes time we're all kicking the doll and laughing at ourselves for being so scared. But we have to go to school because we're late already.

Now Zeph's dads step out from behind a tree. Zeph's four bloody dads. FFS, he's got a dad for every season. They pranked us. They've got too much time on their hands.

It's just a shoddy doll and we have to admit to Zeph's dads they got us. Well done. No single dad would have gone to the effort, but they love the pranks we pull on each other and I think they couldn't help but get involved.

"You always said your walk to school was like Stand By Me," Zeph's Dad 3 says as he grins. He's a sick fuck, scaring his stepson with a fake dead dude, but let's be honest, Zeph can't get enough of it.

We go to school and Zeph's dads go home.

This is Blindfield, this is *encanto*, and this is where it all began. The things that happened last year are a bit more serious than this little prank, and nothing to do with it, but still, everyone loves stories with fake dead guys.

## Youth is Beauty, Beauty Youth

By Will

On the eve of our first departure for the road, where in a diminutive Skoda we'd breathe each other's breaths and think each other's thoughts, we decided to reveal our physical selves to the rest of the quartet and shed the awkward insecurity that'd been wrapped around us by society. With a little help, from a lot of vodka, we got naked. We exposed our most personal crevices and cocks, and casually inspected the rest of the team. The following four-course meal was cooked, enjoyed, and cleaned away by four coarse boys, savouring the novelty of lifelong nature. Ribs shuddered and faces contorted with amusement. We weren't all Chippendales but we were conceptually beautiful.

The excuse was it'd allow us to be free and easy in each other's company. We could insouciantly dangle anything before each other. We could sleep carefree in the buff. We could enjoy all the benefits of having our bare-naked privacy broken in.

Just under a year later, when we were detailing how we'd embark in translating a slice of the world into a few hundred pages of literature, with a little help from a lot of vodka, we came to a parallel agreement. That was, when writing something of this sort there should be no limits to what is said. Anything can be fished from a sea of boundless veracity, allowing us to be honest and open about everything and every one of us. We are allowed to type things never spoken of and hide behind this mutual no-holds-barred agreement. We are all naked to each other and at each other's mercy, in each other's trust. While we may seek to penetrate each other's personalities, there's the risk we'll denigrate our greatest friends; we feel that's a risk all proper friends should take. We will perhaps read each other's chapters agape and let frank thoughts further flow from our widening mouths, as we unfurl ourselves and our friends to our cores.

A word of evaluation – no person in any book will be honest about everything: every genital particular, every pleasurable rectal fumble, every sinister thought, every fear of dubious love, every metaphorical password to every metaphorical bank account, every undignified and substandard thought. So don't think you've got everything. The real truth often seeks refuge in omissions. No truth is ever anything more than selective honesty. You'll only ever see a few rays of sunshine, never the whole sun.

## **The Naked Truth**

By Cristo

I've gotta make use of this! Notes from our last supper, that naked feast:

Will's got a decent body but slightly saggy tits. His thing's of medium size and it comes with a lot of roughage. Could do with a crack wax, but who couldn't?

Zeph's pretty average all over, except his piece is pretty wonky and bends off to the right in a big way, which he swears gets ironed out, but there's no proof. His feet are pretty scabby too – something I already knew. Zeph was unfortunate enough to spill some salsa onto his fajita. I offered to clean it up but in the end he just used a napkin.

Fack's the most athletic and toned. If I was a girl I'd probably be most attracted to his body. His pubes are relatively straight and the lightest brown and he's circumcised so I couldn't really compare him to anyone else fairly, everything's a bit different. He's not Jewish, he must have just got a kick out of it.

I didn't like to look at anyone's balls because balls are fucking grim, I've always thought.

And as for myself, I confirmed the fact I win in the schlong department, floppy at least, and I think that matters at least at an aesthetic level. I've got the most chest hair too, sorry guys.

But we're all winners.

## Wednesday's Story

By Wednesday

*[Because everything that happens to us seems to happen on a Wednesday, we've let Wednesday himself present some sixth-form snapshots – Zeph]*

*November 2000, Some Wednesday*

The boys are relaxing on a bench that's made of wood but looks and feels like it's made of metal, halfway up a bulging hill facing a ripe and bulging horizon. Hedgerows and ploughed fields strain against a sky that's a white which God couldn't be bothered, or didn't need to, colour in. Pathetic rain spits from the modest canopy of cloud. Fack Thomas leans his face against the droplets, as if enjoying a hearty natural shower in slow motion. Zeph attends to the trees forming the seams of the hill and tells the guys that, in a way, all trees are frozen green fountains. In a way, Will agrees, in a way.

This is the bench of David Roberts (1967, a loving father and husband) but he's dead and on some Wednesdays he lends it to them from the afterlife. Wednesday afternoons at Dorrington Grammar are for 'Games', meaning anything. The guys sometimes sit on this lonely bench on the hill, back in Blindfield, looking down at the stately mansion house at the foot of the hill, because it's a home for senile war veterans, which they call The Nuts Bunker. It's been going on for a few weeks. The war veterans use the extensive grounds for walks, for sports, and for being insane. From their prime spectators' seat the boys interpret all the activity and discuss the characters they recognise. These are their peculiar 'Games'.

Today is the first day the barmy army granddaddies strike up the courage to trek to David Roberts' bench, to talk to the nice young chaps who seem to be interested in them. Visitors, most think. Spies! some think.

The boys notice who's coming over the slope of the hill towards them. They can't contain themselves – they never expected scouts from The Nuts Bunker. The truth is, the boys are old enough now to talk to strangers, and old enough to *be* strangers and not just boys. They spot three of their favourites, Colonel Toothinger, The Bombardier and Treacles.

The three veterans spot four of their favourite spectators – The Foreigner, Quieto, Ambassador Ellis, and Gentleman Jim.

The seven males now talk to each other without ever gleaning anyone's real names. They talk about the war, about school, about The Bombardier's delusions, about Zeph (Ambassador Ellis)'s fictions, about the weather and the winter and fields, about life and plans and death. The boys find out that this is the veterans' 'Recreation' time.

Treacles, a guy hardly as mad as they'd first thought, tells the boys they'd all gone straight into the army after school. Their first year free of the education system was full of travel and friendship, but also guns and blood. When asked what their plans are, the boys look at each other for help. In the end, Zeph answers for them all, the first time they ever really broach the subject,

"Maybe we'll do a gap year," he says.

"You idle hippopotamuses, we went straight into the army! We took life by the scruff of it's neck, and look at us now!" bellows Treacles. Zeph hesitates and then reiterates,

"Yeah, I think we'll probably do a gap year."

"Yeah, maybe," agrees Fack, who closes his eyes and feels the rain moistening his head in the darkness.

*27<sup>th</sup> December 2000, a Wednesday*

Zeph's room drifts in and out of sensation as he rides the waves of consciousness, swimming in half-sleep on his bed. The room is light because it's still day, and it's an especially colourful room, painted a tolerable orange and papered here and there with photo collages (friends, family, pets), posters (Homer, Mario, Liz Hurley, Aerosmith), and luminous memos. Zeph is the centrepiece of a general mess, fully dressed and sprawled across his bed, dribbling limply onto his pillow.

In his mind a dream grapples with normal thoughts – a happy dream involving volleyball on the coast, with George Michael and Zoë Groundhappenent. He's increasingly immersed in this volleyball world but still has fleeting memories of being exhausted by late Christmas and Boxing Day festivities, hard drinking and staying awake with friends, and the best food he's ever had. He's also vaguely aware that his phone keeps purring with the restlessness of silent texts. But the trickle of cold air coming through the broken window that won't shut properly is stroking him to sleep, encouraging the volleyball and whatever it signifies. He always enjoys this temporary, evanescent insanity. He's gripped by the power of imagination as it takes him to rest.

Yet suddenly the door elicits a greasy squeak and in barge people – it doesn't take him long to realise who, as he wakes up from his shallow slumber – Cristo, Will, Fack, Jamie and Rick X. To Zeph it's as if they're The Elements descending on his plain and tranquil world.

"Aarg," says Zeph, rubbing his face hard with his hands. Cristo switches on the TV and the N64, while Will smiles at Zeph,

"Wake up Zee, you can dream anytime!"

"But I wanna sleep all the time!" says Zeph, hiding under the duvet.

"You knew we were coming around," says Will in exculpation.

"And you knew I'd be asleep," says Zeph, who doesn't actually remember them saying they'd be paying a visit.

Jamie and Fack jump onto the bed and batter Zeph with his own pillows. Zeph is defenceless, still weak with sleep, and can only groan into the pillows as they slowly, slowly bludgeon him to full-power.

Now, the future is nowhere. GoldenEye 007 is on his TV and Zeph fumbles with a control.

*14<sup>th</sup> February 2001, a Wednesday*

On the other side of hill from David Roberts' bench and The Nuts Bunker is The Meadow, which the guys named as such as if it were the only meadow in the world, or at the least the only one that was theirs. Here they prepare to celebrate



Valentine's Day. It's a sunny yet crisp day, just taken out of its packet. Zeph and Fack have little to prepare so they practice their field acrobatics – their handstands, their combat rolls, their cartwheels, their chucking themselves against the ground and wailing. The grass is long and bears their falls well, but they still have a lot to learn, Zeph more than Fack.

Zoë Groundhappenest lies in Will's arms as he combs her hair with his fingers and tries to make himself the softest thing in the world. Zoë has black hair, a pale face, and grey eyes, but is colourful in character – if warmth, honesty, a good sense of humour and overactive emotional tendencies can be considered colours. She's been Will's girlfriend for just over three weeks and later he's taking her out to adore her over Dorrington's finest cuisine.

Cristo rests his head on the belly of a Jane Granger, who's mostly a forgotten person in a forgotten body. Later, he wishes to take things further with her. Later, he will fail and play Pantera very loudly in his room to make up for it.

It's a day of love and everything's very lovely. Zeph hums out Sweet Child o' Mine as he thrusts himself into more handstands and tries to balance himself the wrong way up. Cristo swears he once saw a programme about a man who stands on his hands – who lives forever on his hands – but nobody believes him. When he comes to the guitar solos, Zeph's very careful and thinks he's humming it all in perfect time and pitch. Then, he finishes off with the last four words of the song,

*"Sweeyee-eet chiayayayayaayayah!ayayah!aya-ild of myeeine."*

With that, he falls to the floor and lies there, without a girl in his arms to complete the set. Fack notices that everyone else is on the floor and imitates the couples by lying down on top Zeph, snuggling up to him, romantic and cosy like stuff animals. Zeph puts his arms around his friend, gives him a bear hug, and then tickles his stomach. Fack has to get up and go cartwheeling, while the two couples laugh at the guys' imitation of them.

They're laughing at love; they laugh with love.

*June 2001, some Wednesday*

It's Cristo's house and The Ataris and Jimmy Eat World are babysitting. There are about fifty adolescent babies milling around, making sure their blood's full of booze and smoke, making sure everyone's cheery, checking if anyone wants anything physical. A haze of dope smoke hovers around Cristo's bedroom, where Fack's the only one not smoking – never smokes – but everyone's talking about time.

"Your watch always knows exactly what the time is to the second, to the minute, and it's caught in the stopwatch! And, and," says Zeph, excited, "I barely know what the time is or what day it is! But who knows more about time, me or the watch? Huh? Knowledge isn't just... details... it's experience and feeling and it can be everywhere! Time... can be everywhere, I mean," he slurs, and stumbles out into the corridor.

The whole house is abuzz – on fire – with the fervour of youth, and Zeph feels it as people brush past him in the hallway. Cristo gets off his bed and goes past Zeph, to his bathroom.

This is the end of exams party. Special guests are Aerosmith, playing Big Ones on repeat. This is as hardcore as Blindfield goes, really.

"And time's just moved again," says Zeph, knowing full well he's talking moonshine, "it used to be over there! It keeps... hmmm." He realises he has to go to the toilet and walks in on Cristo, who's too stoned to do anything like lock a door.

They've only done drugs twice before, they still get quite affected, they still leave doors unlocked.

Zeph catches Cristo in the act of checking out his dirty Hispanic stubble, moles and all. It's his first foray into facial hair. Hey, must have worked, thinks Zeph, he's bagged Zoë. Later, Cristo hopes to shag Zoë Groundhappenest. Later, Cristo will succeed.

"Do you need to piss, Zeph, you absolute cock fish?"

"Yes, yes Cristo my good beard, yes I do."

"Then do it," he says while leaving, "but don't piss on my carpet."

"I'll sit down!" What a great idea. Everything's going well, there's nothing else to work for. I can piss while sitting down, thinks Zeph, what a great idea!

*September 2001, a Wednesday*

"Where are we going to go?" Zeph bellows across to Fack. They're on different sides of a mighty oak tree's trunk, poised on its two largest boughs that bulge with barky biceps. They're both searching for the next foothold and the quickest way to the toppest top. Cristo is below them, clinging onto a thin but sturdy branch like a sloth, occasionally letting go with his arms and making faces across to Will, who's reading *The Four Quartets* on a log. They're on the edge of The Meadow and the point of today is simply to climb trees.

"We're going to the top!" Fack shouts down, as by now he's higher than Zeph, swinging around branches with ease. His top's off and his chest and hands are grazed, but that's only wear and he knows it's good for him in the end.

"No, I mean University-wise!" said Zeph, not confident enough to get as high as Fack, happy for the moment to sit down on the branch he's quickly got attached to, where he reclines like a model for a photo shoot.

"To the top!" repeats Fack.

"I see," says Zeph, at normal volume, forgetting to bellow and maintain the illusion that they're doing something legendary.

"Now, let's see if we can make this a proper toilet tree," says Fack as he unzips his shorts and pulls his little Fack out, pointing away from Zeph and Cristo, but towards Will. Will doesn't notice anything until urine starts sprinkling a few metres in front of him, at which point he bolts up and runs to safety, where none of them can see him. He's too well dressed to climb scratchy, muddy trees.

So he moons them and reads out Eliot, "*You'll never get a chance to see my perfectly toned and tanned buttocks again!... Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth, which is already flesh, fur and faeces...*"

Fack doesn't care about Will and Will's best poetic delivery. He feels like he's one with nature even though really he's just on top of it.

Term starts tomorrow.

*Really, and he does feel it, he is nature.*

*October 2001, some Wednesday*

A Starbuck's basement has never looked so comfortable. A few retired, torn up sofas are together in a clearing in the middle of stock and machinery. On them, four boys are getting jigged up on caffeine and bloated on shop-soiled sandwiches. They relax here in capitalism's soft underbelly, conversing under the tender glow of a flickering 60-watt bulb.

This is somewhere below street level and below where Fack works, in Dorrington, and it's night-time so there are no customers. Sometimes the manager leaves Fack to lock up the basement so sometimes Fack and the guys just hang out for the whole night, for free, for fun..

"Did anyone bring any drink? I'd kill for a brewski," yearns Cristo.

"And a bit of vodskis," adds Zeph. But nobody has any drink and nobody can be bothered to get any. They have to make do with the mochas and hot chocolates that are left over from Fack's last batch.

"So, you done with all that UCAS shit, Will?"

"Absolutely. I have partaken of that particular faeces," says Will, "Now, it's up to Cambridge to see if I deserve a big red 'rejected' stamp or a chat with the fat cats of academia."

"I tried to fill out the easy bits today," Zeph admits, "but I kept spelling grammar wrong - wrong spelt r-o-n-g. Yeah, no, I mean first I spelt it gram-rr, and then on my next sheet I spelt it without any vowels at all. What's my subconscious trying to tell me?"

"That you shouldn't be at a fucking grammar school?" says Cristo. Zeph laughs out a groan and says, "I should be at a grr-mm-rr school."

The present's all sorted, but really it's the future that's still in question. They've all opted for a gap year and deferred entry, unlike nearly all of their eager and sorted classmates.

"Are you still going to try an American Uni, Cristo?"

"Fuck knows."

"Weren't you looking at MIT?"

"Yes, but it's a fairy-tale, and it'd be a bitch of a workload."

"Isn't it the best?"

"Yes, it's the best for things like engineering."

"Go for it, Toe."

"Yeah, go for gold," says Fack.

"Go fuck," says Cristo, ripping open another stale lemon chicken sandwich, "it's probably too late now anyway. And I still just want to be a Rock and Roll Legend, BA."

"Go for gold," says Fack.

They all want gold, they just don't know what it is. But, considering how long they stay there, they probably think they're going to work it out by sitting around in Starbuck's basement.

*2<sup>nd</sup> January 2002, a Wednesday*

"What grub are you dealing us tonight, Will?" Cristo asks quietly across the dinner table, wondering what superior yet unsatisfying foods he is to receive. As Will gets up to attend to the cooker he proudly lists what he's prepared, "For starters, grilled chicory, stilton and walnut salad. Then a main course of trout stuffed with cheesy herby thing, with new potatoes and baby carrots. A colossal multipronged desert of fruit salad, strawberry blancmange, chocolate cake, and treacly crispy rice squares. Followed by a variety of inexpensive alcohols, lashings of debauchery, pockets of depression and teen angst, amateur-philosophical conversations, vomit and, if you've still got space for it, sleep."

"As I suspected," says Cristo, "I made the only decent contribution – Rice Crispy squares. I'll baggy two."

Will's dining room is full of friends dressed in their finest garments, here tonight for this '(two days) Old Year's Party'. Occasionally they like to play the grown-up game, making sure they only follow *their* rules. That's why cheesy bits of walnut are allowed to be thrown over the table at each other, conversation topics can range from school memories to sixty-niners, and genuine pretension doesn't have to be respected.

This is what most adults want to have, but are too full of worry and pride, boredom and tradition.

After much red wine and champagne, and well into the liqueur phase, Will is a drunken host, unable to stop his friends rampaging his giant house, perfectly able to discuss his view of life. The worst his friends do is have sex in his parents' bed, smoke in the garden, play cards in his study, and plotz out on his floor. He's in his sitting room with a small audience finding amusement in his thoughts. It's not the drink speaking – the drink's only an excuse,

"What I'm attempting to get at and what I'm trying to communicate to you is that I believe that we only live *in the long-term per se*, if it benefits us in the short-term, in so far as it produces inside us happiness to care for ourselves in the long-term – for which we're indebted to the spirit of nature – and since we need to produce happiness in everything we pass through, we do live for consciousness and for our physical selves as people we have identity through. Because as we're passing constantly through infinite souls, from one to the other, moment by moment, our only need is to produce happiness in everything we're in, in the instant. As this wind takes us through these infinite souls that exist in everything, that's our will, that's our destiny, and that's why life has a beauty to it that nobody can really explain."

No wonder, really, if this is the new Church for this generation, that this is the new kind of spirituality. Confused, exotic, and up for discussion.

"Science is everybody's religion these days. But science isn't a religion and everyone's blind to who they really are."

A girl from school whispers into Will's ear whether he wants to show her who he really is upstairs. Gradually, taking a bottle of Cognac with him, he gets up.

My nights are alright. I guess I should feel bad for Thursday morning.

*March 2002, some Wednesday*

Some sixth-formers nearing the end of their school life stand round in a wobbly circle in the common room. It's morning break time, not yet 'Games' time, so everybody still has to be in suits and has to be around people they don't particularly like.

Outside, Zeph is walking down the corridor of the school he's gotten so used to. He trails his fingers against the walls and effortlessly kicks the doors open. He walks into his common room and sees his favourite friends standing around one of the social circles. On the fringe of it. He aims for them, avoiding the rest as best he can, and enjoying the breeze coming in through the window as he goes.

"Well that's the thing, Nottingham's meant to be better than Southampton for arts, but not for some sciences like engineering."

"I've never heard that before... but they say about forty percent of the people at Nottingham are Oxbridge rejects, which just shows what kind of people go there."

"I put down Nottingham, Durham, Bristol, Keele, Kings, and Edinburgh, but I've only been to Nottingham!"

Zeph is no great lover of this banal chatter. He doesn't really care that much about which X institution is better than which Y institution, what specific course all the people he'll probably never talk to again are doing, and where the honourable Oxbridge rejects are going. Their conversation progresses like a business mission being whacked out of a clunky typewriter that's jamming and stalling - awkward communication of details and only the sludge of emotions. Zeph's not exactly anti-it-all, he's just not into-it-all.

Cristo catches Zeph's eye, "How did you sleep, Zee-zee?"

"Brilliantly and for many hours, thank you."

"I wish I had such an easy hobby," says Cristo, who's also bored of the circle. Soon it's only the people in the circle talking again, and Zeph makes get-me-outta-here eyes to Cristo. Cristo in turn notices that Fack's staring moronically at something outside, and so slaps him on the back of the head.

This triggers a leap from Fack, which causes a punch from Cristo, which turns into a fight against the lockers that everybody in the circle is excited about and joins in with. Within seconds it's a full-scale bundle and Zeph's one of the only ones not getting stuck in, he's just standing and laughing. Sometimes he forgets it, but this is the school he loves.

English started two minutes ago, but everybody's always a little bit late.

*June 2002, some Wednesday*

The guys look down the hill to David Roberts' bench but don't want to go there, possibly ever again. Maybe The Nuts Bunker was never meant to be a spectator's sport. They've talked to Treacles, Colonel Toothinger, The Bombardier and others, all very friendly and quirky, but they feel they've squeezed the activity of all its goodness. It's become a tad depressing and that's not worth it, so now they go to the other side of the hill, to The Meadow, a place they know is always full of sleep.

Almost straight away they're all sedate and staring up at the sky. Fack suggests that – hey – maybe they should play the clouds game. They all agree, though Cristo makes sure to say it's lame-o before he starts tickling his cheap Spanish guitar that he calls *Encanto*.

The rules of the cloud game are simple. Somebody picks a cloud, another picks a bigger cloud, and so on for the other two, and the winner is the one whose cloud disappears into the heavens first.

"That one, that looks like a dragon."

"What one that looks like a dragon? That's a rabbit."

"It's both, it's one of those visual illusions."

"It's a rabbit."

They all pick a cloud and keep their eyes fixed on it, except for Cristo who only looks away from his guitar strings now and again. He's playing 'Under the Bridge', with feeling.

Zeph's mostly paralysed by the simple game but when he can't resist he whines out the lyrics of the song. It seems sporadic, but it's the result of complex song-entwined emotions.

"... *the city of angels...*"

He's also thinking about Zoë and how much he cares about her. She won't have him now though, will she? Not after the friendship and everything. He doesn't know but he can't ignore it, like the sun in the corner of his eyes and the heat on his cheeks.

"... *now that is a lie... take me to the place I luuuuuuv...*"

Will's making two twigs have sex with each other. He doesn't notice when his cloud disappears.

"I win!" says Fack.

"Wait, where's mine?" says Will, but he'll never find it again.

"My dragon's still got a way to go," says Zeph, still eager, "... *together we cry...*"

"What's everyone's bets on what we'll actually get up to on our gap year?"

"Dunno, slack," says Cristo. Nobody else has other suggestions. Fack has a different question,

"What's better – the sun or love?"

"Now that's something to consider," says Zeph, preparing an answer.

A bird flies over The Nuts Bunker and the hill, in the middle of the dark green borders of oaks and horse chestnuts, above four big boys playing with sticks and strings, between them and the clouds. The bird doesn't care but she can faintly hear something,

"...*I could not get enough...* I think I prefer... I don't know, I do love love but I do love sun..." and the bird's away.

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[And now for a completely different Wednesday...]

**"The Future Already Now! Or Maybe After Toilet."**

*- A future planned, imagined, and forgotten in a night, yet recovered in the morning -*  
By Will and Cristo

Me and Will. What a versus. The reason why I thought this'd be a bitching gimmick is because often people don't get how we two can handle each other, because it seems we're very different fish and we don't naturally swim in each other's waters. The truth is though that we're just as gay as the rest and we get on like backslapping pals. Plus, we're a good example of how we're not all just sickly perfect friends. I used to think he was a super geek. He used to think I was an ugly Spaniard. Now, we accept each other for who we are. We mix and we blend. Will's the word connoisseur but I'll just humbly try to sum it up - I think it's like this - we are each other's ironies. Yeah, Will seems laid back even though he's always getting excited about something in his head, and he's more likely to go off on one than any one of us. Whereas me, I seem like the big fat loud attention-seeking agro-dick while usually I'm pretty chilled out, and my thoughts are just fucking lazy. That's the irony of our friendship, I think, and that's how he is what I seem and I am what he... seems. We're jealous of each other, I think. That's the beauty behind the Will and Cristo show.

Thanks for highlighting the fundamental irony of us, Cristo. I never knew you cared; I naively reckoned you sincere when you pleaded for help writing this because you feared you'd 'royally fuck it up'. We shall see if we can overcome our fishlike differences in personality and perform a fine dual-narration spectacular.

OK Books, but I'm still Dave Gorman and you're Danny Wallace. I'm the butch and you're the little-

...It was our pre results day party, *July 2002, a Wednesday*, and we were only a few hours away from receiving the last presents Dorrington Grammar would bestow on us: letters that spelt out our worth. Somewhere within a colossal bout of apathy we'd agreed to spend the night as us four alone, and by chance and Fack we had access to one of our favourite venues, Starbuck's basement, for our private function.

It was my idea to just get in an outrageous fuckload of Absolut Vodka 50% (100% proof) and I had no idea that Will would bring a whole pyramid of Absinthe too. And nobody thought Fack would bring... his dog. He had this Labrador he called 'Dogmandu' who was a ten-year-old puppy, who he brought along for the party. The stupid mutt kept slobbering into our leg pits, because most of us were wearing shorts, and we had to keep flopping his ear back to normal because he just kept going crazy and had no idea how to keep his ears tidy.

As we settled into the scuffed satin sofas and gummy leather armchairs Dogmandu bounded around us like the energy of our youth, spirited in dog-form, unrefined, wild and frothing at the mouth. We were all like that once, feral and fun loving.

Willing to shit everywhere.

The light in that basement always had the dim, murky glow of a setting sun (more than ever on that night). Our warm amber faces were all trimmed with shadows that were new to my eyes.

At this point I wasn't noticing much because I was setting up the drinks and trying to remember the name of a game Zeph was thinking of. I worked it out -

'Chuck Rock'. I owed myself a double. We were mixing with economy range soft drinks which were nasty so we had to take a bit of pain to kick things off.

Initially the main conversation topics were A-level, University, and life predictions for mutual friends from school, criticising a fair few and lamenting how they were destined to live lacklustre lives. Then we reviewed the probability of lustre for our own destinies and gave in to the pressing point – what were we to do in our gap year?

At the beginning of this conversation I probably added something really helpful like, "let's just watch TV," or "get as much sex as we can," which come to think of it weren't stupid ideas. People made some 'sensible' suggestions, like signing up for one of those package gap year adventures involving charity work, building huts in Africa and that kind of thing. Nobody was keen at all, though it was a bit depressing at first because we weren't coming up with any other ideas. Then somebody, I think Zeph, said we'd probably end up just being slaves to cash. Like real slaves, but with real jobs. That didn't sit well either though and I think we all knew that'd be a heinous plan. So basically we turned to drink for an answer. We had plenty of it. I like my liquor, I think it's useful stuff. I've always seen life as a jumbo instrument you have to play well – something you use to please others. Drink just makes it a better show, it lets you play smoother and with more soul.

Cristo was spouting this kind of gumpf and succeeding in getting us all giddy. Too much so. Our commentary on our scholarly achievements was becoming more slurred and self-indulgent as we became severely intoxicated, severely rapidly.

Ca-ching.

We supplemented the ambrosial intoxicants with jelly Zeph had provided (Zeph harbours a jelly making fetish). After that, I can't recall anything we were saying verbatim. We were all metamorphosing into confused jelly ourselves. However, we did generate some ideas and ideals for our gap year. We agreed that it'd be one year where money, work, commitment, duty, and most of the elements of common life should be blissfully forgotten. We wanted to make sure it was special, unique: an experience to make everyone else envious, something that'd drive our future selves to design time machines in futile attempts to recapture our late-youth. That was always what we'd wanted to do in our gap year, we'd always felt it in our hearts, and now our hearts were speaking. That's what it was like.

That was pretty much what it was like. With more jelly and insane laughter and an insane dog.

We frantically wrote notes at that point (we should have made more later for comical completeness). We were becoming increasingly keen on our new ideas and on ourselves, feeling lofty and empowered. All of a sudden we were discoursing on what we wanted to do with the *whole* of our lives, mapping out entire perfect existences for ourselves, there in our lowly Starbuck's basement.

One of the last conversations I remember at all clearly was me telling everyone what I wanted to do with my life,

"I want to rule the world." – *what the hell are you talking about?* – "I want to rule the world, that's my aim!" – *what an aim! What a name! Cristo. Day-me-ay. Wait, what world?* – "The whole world!" – *what?* – "Always aim high! You'll always try



your best!" – *wait, WTF, guys, are we actually going to rule the world? Surely not... -*  
"Not with that stinking attitude!"

It was A-grade stuff, I'm still proud of myself. After that I was falling to pieces.

Consequently everybody revealed their genuine life ambitions. Cristo dumbled his down to desiring to be the best musician in the world, or at least to make it as a man of music.

Because music is the food of love and I'm fat with sex.

Zeph said he's always aspired to be a writer. He garbled something about wanting to communicate happy ideas to people, while downing the last of the jelly. It was entirely innocuous, non-alcoholic jelly. We were ourselves dripping with diaphanous dreams. Everybody was in obscure, contorted positions by now and I think I recall Zeph having his back on the floor and his feet raised up to the ceiling.

There he was, repeating how he wanted to be a famous writer.

Zee asked me if he could write music for me. I said it wasn't the same.

Fack appeared a little ill, and Cristo was trying to feed his dog Absinthe, but he still managed to tell us what he'd become, if hope worked. An artist. Beauty. He kept saying 'beauty'.

Every time he said beauty I gave Dogmundo, or whatever, another lick of Absinthe. He was loving it, lapping it up.

Don't worry, we barely gave him a spoonful. I was the last to tell the group what my paradisiacal life would involve. It came as a bit of a shock to me because I'd never heard my lips put into words the feelings my spirit knew so well.

I think what he said was,

"I aspire to aspire to aspire to be a... poet! But not a literary poet, I don't really care about words and describing London, I want to be a mystical poet, like the great Chinese like the Tzus. I'm not ready now but one day! One day! But this is the future now... the future already now! Or maybe after toilet."

Then he went to the toilet and when he came back he didn't pick up the thread, he just left it hanging, like we all did.

So by this time we were thoroughly convinced we were of an angelic breed, like some new Bloomsbury Group, and we'd all reach our magical destinies together. We felt unified and full of understanding. Dogmandu was elated too, he still hadn't settled down. Fack, eyes closed to shut off the spinning world, vowed we would care about each other until we die. Agreed! Zeph raised a query like: if I don't care about you do I have to kill you? Fack actually considered it, seriously, and then decided, no, it would mean something was wrong with the world.

I'm sure I was still shouting, "let's rule the fucking world!"

Then, somewhere, oblivion. It's been immensely difficult to piece together the scene and remember any details of the discussion that raged on after that, burning on acrid alcohol, disappearing in flames of insobriety, leaving only the darkest, richest ash in our memories. It was definitely incandescent and fantastic while it lasted.

We all thought we were having the best ideas and laying down the best plans, it was great.

We were gorging ourselves on dreams and confidence, visions and frenzy. We wanted to have the most sublime gap year ever, we wanted to reach over and above our potentials, and become more than we'd ever wanted to before. We were all gripped by a passion for ideals, with no sight of limits or practicality, or

anything else that could crumble under our fantasy charge. The gap year would be the first step. Then there was so much to live for and to take. All pinnacles were reachable. We could start a business and conquer markets, and do the same with the arts, and with education – it was all possible! We were all so clever and able and determined, we were sure we'd make it. Then we came up with plans for a new revival of culture, a rebirth of the power of the imagination, a spiritual revolution of our inception. We really believed we'd worked out how civilisation could progress to the next level and live joyfully, peacefully, beautifully together. We had all the details and the philosophy. I mean we did spend about one and a half hours discussing this fervidly, and I honestly don't think that if we looked back and assessed what we'd said we'd consider it all daft and embarrassing. We were rapt in our plans and this idyllic future – bathing ourselves ecstatically in this Hippocrenic fountain. It all made sense; we'd worked it out.

I swear we were stoned on alcohol.

It was to be a very short-lived precognition of perfection as almost straightaway it was forgotten. We fell asleep (even dreamers have to sleep). The conviction-loaded arguments behind our newfound aspirations faded away, returning to their origins: our dreams, never to be fully recovered. In our waking life only glimpses remained – glimpses of mirages that could only tempt and never satisfy. Stars that disappeared on direct sight. Were they ever actually there?

Will we ever know?

Only if we get that boozed up again. And Lord knows I've tried. OK so after we boozed we snoozed and we knew we had to wake up before 5:30 to make sure the manager didn't know about our secret bang, so when Fack's alarm went off we got up like corpses wanting to stay in our graves. The important thing is that while we cleared up the debris of the night we found a scrap of paper with a list of points on it, that some of us – mostly me – had written in super stupor. It was on the back of a Starbucks memo and was stained with a hundred juices, some unidentified. It was titled *What the Year Out's About*, with that inked out, re-titled *A Chunder Year*, again inked out, and finally, unashamedly, re-titled *Mission Brief for the Beatest, Bestest, most Brilliant and Spectacular Year Four Crazy Donkeys from the Ghetto could ever live in Their Lives*. Underneath that was the abridged title – *Plan*.

## Plan

By Four Irresponsibly Drunk Boys

We hereby promise ourselves in a moment of burned throat enlightenment that our ~~five~~ six objectives for the following year are:

1. To make at least 100 people significantly happier.
2. To at least try to change the ways of five authentic bad people.
3. ~~To do an exceptionally new thing every week.\*~~
4. To keep up healthy masturbation routines despite the closeness of the group.
5. To stay focused on our individual goals and, if given the opportunity, to touch the sky.
6. To be able to pass, by the end of the gap year, as boy *or* man, and *not* only one or the other.

*Bonus Mission:* To turn a friend gay.

\*Mission 3 is officially lame. Amended Mission 3 is:

3. To give the others all the help we can to reach their individual goals.

## Slack and Pranks

By Fack

For a few summery weeks after that The Plan sat alone on Zeph's desk and things were as if it had never existed. Slouching around Blindfield were four boys who wanted it all but didn't have the effort to work out where to begin. It was quite a coincidence that this was the time when two of our oldest friends, Slack and Pranks, came rolling into town.

Everybody felt tired and everybody was hot. This was when Slack always loved it and everybody loved Slack. We were sunbathing with the daisies and doing other things that casually kind of rhymed. Sitting with the leaves in the trees. Being loafers on the sofas. Plotzing eating Wotsits. We played at the arcade. Lazed with some babes. Some lazed with more babes than others. Others more than some. Some *and* others more than me. Slack was there so at least I had company.

Pranks made summer more fiery. We all know Pranks from way back, after Zeph introduced us to him. Zeph once sent a fake invoice or bill or something to Cristo for tons of musical equipment – enough guitars and amps to wake Blindfield up forever – and seeing as how Zeph used the name and logo of a shop Cristo went to in Dorrington it should have set Cristo alight. A £1,260 bill! But instead the prank petered out because Cristo wasn't bothered at all and calmly phoned up the company. Fail and a fail.

Still, Cristo prepared a gwool revenge prank by getting us lot to write made up stories as if Zeph had written them when he was 5. We put them all at the top of his cardboard box labelled 'Small Zeph'. There was one about a character called Steve the Pie, who was a man who was so tasty he was afraid his friends would eat him to death. Then there was a story about a bear called 'Bear'. That was a great story that involved someone eating honey, probably the bear called 'Bear'. And a pencil sharpener called 'Dongo' who had to save the world but, it turned out, wasn't made for the right sized pencil. We'd put these stories in Zeph's box and made sure Zeph naturally read them and remembered back, thinking 'ah, what a gemmy kid I've always been'. He loved the way he couldn't remember writing them. After an hour we told him. That's Pranks' favourite bits.

We'd all gotten to know Pranks pretty well. Nice guy, always making people laugh.

Last summer Pranks was around for two times I can remember. The first time the game was on Will. The important background information is that Will's parents are both TV executives for Channel 4 and earn silly, sexy money. While The Plan was still somewhere in our minds and we were trying not to feel guilty about being such layabouts, we thought it'd be real doink to play with it in some way. It was my idea, this one. I wrote out a mock letter from Will's Channel 4 boss, made out to Will's Mum, telling her about a show Channel 4 were going to do on real life gap years, saying they wanted to give first dibs to any in-house children. We all know who Will's Mum works for so we could make it sound chummy and convincing. But we didn't send it to Will's mum because the trick wasn't being played on her. I don't think she'd get it. She'd just think we were

annoying and zany. Anyway, instead we imitated Will's mum's handwriting and wrote on it 'Look Will! I'll see what I can do!' Then I craftily placed the letter on Will's desk when no eyes were peeking. He finds it and is instantly excited and loves it, using every superlative he knows to tell us how great it'd be if we were on TV and had the best year ever. The best year *ever*! Like it'd only really be the best year if it's on TV. We played along with him, acting as best we could, though we knew we had to break it to him. He felt a fool, like the friend who wasn't really a friend and was just there to be laughed at, though soon he realised we did it because it was fun for everybody in the long run. Fun in the long run. That's one of Prank's favourites.

Not that long after that – and not for the first time – the gimped was I. Now, the one single technical, computer-related, machiney thing I like and have any passion for is the camera. I love taking photos because I love keeping beauty for later. I like seeing things not everybody sees and then being able to show everyone else what I see. I have a strong bond with all my photos and I take good care of them. One humid day I had to go to Dorrington to collect a developed film of end-of-year photos I'd taken in school on the last day. It was my last physical memory of DG and I thought I'd taken photos that'd make me happy. When I actually picked up the photos and looked at them though, it was like an electric eel slithered around my legs, shocking me all over the place. Just badly taken pictures of the high street. It was definitely the film I'd given in, the guy assured me, and I even had a mini go at him. It was though, because I remember the blue-green case I put it in. I thought I must have mixed it up somewhere but I had no clue how, and I was so upset. A definite boo-hoo moment.

I hate it when one photo goes missing, never mind the whole lot. I kept looking back at the shitty photos I had of random shops in Dorrington high street, that looked like they were taken for a school project or something. The next bit I'm proud of. I've got quite a good eye for detail, and I realised that in every photo there was at least one shop sign visible and that there was an odd poster in the last one. I think it was on my third viewing when I noticed it – it said 'FIRST LETTERS OF PHOTOS!' Weird and what a clue. To cut a long story short, with a little bit of nudging from the guys I realised that the first letters visible on each photo spelt something out. I always keep my photos in good order – even ones I didn't take – so I was sure it did spell out something, very clearly. 'Back to the Future'. What the fuck was going on? At this point I knew it was a prank and I told the guys it but they just smirked and told me I had to work out the clue. Clue? I just thought 'Back to the Future' was a film... after puzzling over it on my bed for a while, looking at the time go by, I went for a long shot. Future – time. Back of time. Back of the clock? And bingo, there were my photos. They'd been switched – switched for a film the guys had taken around Dorrington, carefully prepared so they spelt out 'Back to the Future', and with that custom printed poster in the last one. I know what you're thinking, if you're clever – that's only 16 exposures, and films don't usually come like that. The last eight were all of a section of bathroom. Turns out it was tiling in Zeph's bathroom, and all the photos were of Polyfiller. They'd needed filler

That's how we spent about three and a half weeks of sunshine. Hanging out with Slack, Pranks, and their pesky sidekick Wank. Maybe it was because we knew we were getting ready for something. Maybe we just didn't have a clue what to do.

**But...**

By Zeph

At this point we didn't know we all were being set up. Maybe at this point we *weren't* all being set up.

## Let's Get This Skoda on the Road!

By Zeph

Most birds migrate because they have to. Yet one Namibian tribe as old as the earth still tells its children The Tale of the Jasjaj Crane, a single bird which, untold years ago, was observed leaving behind its family and flock of Blue Cranes to fly above thousands of miles of diverse African landscape entirely new to it, making a great gaping circle and returning to its homeland in Namibia just in time for the annual migration north. Messengers brought reports of the Jasjaj Crane from all over Africa, all with the same peculiar observation: that it looked as if the bird was just trying to have fun. It was just having an adventure. And when all of the Blue Cranes flew together you could always distinguish the Jasjaj even though they all looked near identical, because its useless circular journey had changed its ways. It had more shine in its eyes, as the tale goes.

The children of the tribe are always on the look out for the Jasjaj, hoping it will come and play with them. Which, I've always thought, is the wrong thing to do. They should all get off their arses and go on their own Jasjaj runs. If *you* don't ever get off your arse, *you*'ll never be in a tale. You'll just be another Blue Crane and your eyes will be dull.

This is pretty much exactly what we were thinking near the beginning of our gap year, after we'd been sitting on our arses for a good while. After three days of planning, phoning and pleading, we had a night of nudity, honesty, and Super Smash Brothers Melee (it's a videogame, play it), reported by Will above. Then, with a library of our favourite albums and custom compilations and the wheel of Fack's Skoda Favorit at our fingertips, we were ready to get it on da road. The plan, firmly built on the sand, was 10 days driving around the UK... etc. That's one of those 'exam etc.'s really. A plaster of confidence masking both the haven't-got-a-clue and the too-much-to-deal-with.

It was a cold and unseasonable morn. We were the cleanest of body, closest of shave, healthiest of mind, and slowest of pace we'd be for the next week and a bit. So with a super-sized shout in a hoarse American voice, we were on our way.

### *Road Trip!*

We ran out of petrol by Dorrington. We had to walk two roads and get a tupperware containerful of unleaded. Then we were set. Well inside both the demographic most likely to kill ourselves on the road and the demographic most likely to have the time of our lives.

We started off West, trying to follow as best we could the erratically meandering felt tip pen route we'd sketched onto a rough outline of the UK – so rough that Wales was in fact just a one-eyed whale, for example. First stop was to be Stone Henge, where we'd frequently fantasised about performing a particular homage if we were ever to travel the country. The fantasy and the execution were simple. We drove around the car park with the windows wound down and the Skoda's crippled, fuzzy bass speakers shrieking out 'Stone Henge' by Spinal Tap (we can't have been the first to have the idea). Kids and grannies and normal



aged people all looked up from their cars, probably just a fraction alarmed and confused, but enough to make us crack up. *Where the banshees live and they do live well!* Then we looked at the stones and threw each other's shoes over the *stay back!!* string. On our drive out we played the song again. *And the children dance to the pipes of pan.* Nobody understood; there wasn't much to understand.

It wasn't long before we were on some motorway, a little more chilled out, listening to Ben Folds, some of us singing along. Will was reading *The Four Quartets* again, saying how it read like a dictionary's dream. He asked us what the breasts of two lesbians would be called. I guessed it – *The Four Queer Tits*. That's how we often referred to ourselves for the next few years.

Whenever somebody in the back wanted to talk they'd usually shout to whomever was riding shotgun to lower the volume. Fack did this, a little meekly, and told us what he was thinking.

"You know I can sing much better in my head."

"What?" I said. I was driving and trying to get to grips with Fack's 'beast'.

"I don't really think I can sing very well out loud," he said, and nobody disagreed, "but I can sing beautifully in my head. The singing voice I have in my head is great but when I open my mouth it's always bad."

"Don't you just have the fucking singer's singing voice in your head? Like Ben Folds?" said Cristo, who was drumming his legs along to Emaline.

"It's different, it's mine," insisted Fack, "and you'll probably never hear it." Then Cristo, riding up front – that's shotgun – knew it was time to pump the volume back up and look out for mating cows.

We overdid the driving for the first long stint. Our legs were all rigid. Maybe we were always sitting on our arses after all. Anyway, we needed to stretch our legs so we stopped off at a small village not dissimilar to Blindfield, but totally foreign, and ran around in a pub car park like crazy birds. Swooping with our necks, flapping with our arms, running in arcs into and around each other, completely spontaneously. It would have been better with two more people but it still did the trick. We pissed in the bushes and got back into the car.

Fack tried to point out places he knew in Dorset but we were whizzing by too fast and he said it wasn't worth stopping.

At some point not too late we reached our destination, Torquay, which looked far more Mediterranean than I'd anticipated. We were practically in Spain. We haggled our way into a cheap-ish B&B (on a road called 'Daddy Hole'), claimed our beds on the bunks, and headed out to town. We couldn't resist crazy golf in the rain. I think I won. It reminded me of this story I wrote last year about Crazy Geoff, an old man who lived on a crazy golf course and was genuinely crazy and genuinely called Geoff.

We found some fish and chips, ate them in phone booths, soggy with grease and rainwater, and then hit the town. The best place to go to was obviously this place called Mojoes that did Karaoke. Free drinks for singing. Since we'd splashed out on our Daddy Hole B&B we agreed we'd try to wing it without losing any money in there. First we did 'Bad Medicine' by Bon Jovi – all of us together, even Fack and his real singing voice – and then we did 'Amazing' by Aerosmith, which sounded, I thought, moderately eponymous. Somehow by this time the Manager

had his eye on us and queered our little money-saving scheme by telling us we'd have to leave if we didn't actually buy any drinks. Well we had a few songs we desperately wanted to sing and, Cristo swears, fans who was asking for more, so we hatched a marvellous plan that involved wooing middle-aged women who'd buy us drinks. Thanks to chiselled-features Will and baby-faced Fack we snared a few hen-night chicks who were totally ours. We stayed with them just long enough for them to buy us all doubles, then we were back on stage, wailing 'Sweet Child o' Mine', getting down and dirty with our air guitars and charming our forty year old honeys. Where do we go now? Where do we go now? It was all too relevant. Fack didn't even know where to go in the song so he just sang in randomly escalating pitches, trying to part his lips from a mighty grin.

As we stumbled out of Mojoes we knew where to go, for the moment – back to the crazy golf to piss in the plastic pond on one of the holes. We were just night time yobos. Crazy Geoff would have killed us with his spiked putter.

We slept with so-far success in our beds.

In the morning I had to drink canned tomatoes. I remembered with some dismay that I'd promised to live on canned tomatoes for the trip. The others ate well. Yesterday's rain smelt of wet elephants, as it always does, and we were soon spraying it up on our way to Bristol.

At a petrol station en route we thought it'd please the gods if we left Cristo in the toilet while we drove away. We parked around a corner and waited for him. We could see him through a sieve of leaves but he couldn't see us. I've always hated those moments of desperation, where you don't know where everyone is and what you're to do. But Cristo just noted our absence, sat down on a pile of coal bags and got out his key ring harmonica to blow a tune through. He knew what was going on. We knew if we were to prank one of us it'd take more than that. So we picked him up and went.

The internal environment of the Skoda was already a mite unsavoury. Coke bottles, coke stains, tomato cans, tomato soup, years of crumbs, full working days of sweat. We were holding out though. I had become quite intimate with my bobbed Barcelona FC (1995) t-shirt, the classic. Cristo was there in his baggedy jeans and New York State Uni shirt, playing some Mario on Game Boy Advance and humming the letters of the notes the handheld was emitting as they came at him. G A C A C A C A C D E D E D A D D E D E D E A G A G E D E♥. Fack had his face pressed up against the glass, wetting it with his nose, like a dog, wearing his soft white t-shirt and khaki shorts. He was clean shaven, which was always nature's choice, not his. Will, checked shirt, women's trousers and budding stubble, was in the front seat with a duty to direct me and a craving for booty – "I could do with some fanny," he said. It sounded so innocent. I seem to remember best the times when I was driving and looking over my crew. They're the times when I felt like the daddy, I guess, and the times when I actually had to be awake for something.

Bristol sold us good sausage rolls. We also dared Will to politely inform a young lady that her arse was hanging out of her jeans – which it certainly was. For

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♥ Thanks to Cristo for the accurate reconstruction (and to Nintendo if it's legally necessary).

free. He told her, she pulled up her jeans awkwardly, and we three were ripped apart at the seams with giggles and gave Will five pounds each. We decided we needed a mascot for the trip so we went to the scurviest charity shop we could find. Fack fell in love with a cuddly vegetable/fruit of controversial species. I swore it was a tomato and that's why I agreed to buy it for the big fifty p it cost. Cristo thought it was a strawberry and Will discerned it to be an apple, the wankoes, but whatever it was I went to the till to purchase it. Some wibbly granny assistant howled at me straight away,

"When I saw you boys coming in I knew one of yas would want this!" I handed her the fifty pence piece. "Because you never know when you'll need one of these? Don'tcha? Don'tcha?" As if we were getting a cuddly tomato/strawberry/apple with eyes and feet sewn on backwards to put in our car boot, in case of emergencies.

Cristo bought two pairs of outrageous kiddy-go-80s sunglasses as well. On our way out another out-of-it octogenarian stopped me and pointed to our new mascot,

"Now you'll know who's been stealing your shoes!!" I named him Tom Arto and he really hit it off with the group.

Then Cardiff which was uneventful apart from hotdogs and a few arty photos taken by Fack.

We had planned to stay the night in one of Will's family's friends' houses in Ross on Wye. For free. Fortune had it that their eleven year old daughter was having a sleepover, and what seemed like hundreds of dollish brats were teeming from the living room, running amok and absolutely delighting in every sight they could get of us. We were big, cool, exciting boys. Always have been, always will be. They'd whisper into each other's ear and sprint away as if to purposefully wet themselves, and we played up, of course, by hiding behind cupboard doors and making ghoulish faces. We were unquestionably headlining the gig.

I needed to call it a night though. "Guys," I said, "I need some sleep."

"You mean you need another hit?" said Cristo.

"Yeah, another hit of dreams," I said, wholly truthfully, and then I passed up on some midnight tomatoes before sleeping on the top floor of a bunk bed, again. Because I did need another hit of dreams, because I was and still am a dream addict and I'm being completely serious. It's a *thing*. I'll tell you all about it later but for now it's enough to say that I need dreams and I ached for some subconscious playtime that night, while my good friends were entertaining good little girlies.

I woke up with Tom (Tom Arto) growing in my ear. Will's acquaintances, who we were gratefully mooching off, served us all doughnuts in bed for breakfast. But it wasn't long before we were eating up the sour dry tarmac of the road. Fack soon abandoned any plan we'd maybe had and simply said "head up, where north is," and that's what we did.

By this point I was occasionally going as mad as a tomato. I was surviving solely on this red as rage lunch fruit and it was pissing me off. I was amazed by the solidity checks I made on my poo. Where *did* the viscosity come from? I

imagined I had emergency stores of bran flakes somewhere behind my small intestine, just in case, right next to my emergency cuddly tomato. Although I was appreciating the economies of a tomato-based lifestyle, I had to admit I was destroying myself. On the road to Birmingham I started to sing a song that went on for quite some time,

Tomatoes are good

For me, for me

Tomatoes are good

For me, for me

Will shut me up with an important point, "I can't believe we were going to fuel this trip on semen." It was true that the original plan was to fund the trip by stopping off at every major sperm bank to sell them our renewable produce (cum). We were all fine with the prospect of being anonymous travel daddies, it was just the stupid practical side – the law halting our seed.

"Don't you ever jack off in my fuel tank," said Fack, who had before then been talking to himself quite harmlessly. I then came up with a sensational suggestion, "If anyone can jack off in the car without anyone else noticing though... we have to give them five pounds, each." In the end everybody agreed, we ironed out the details, and from then on we were all a bit more paranoid than before and, you know, looking out for any prime opportunity.

When we arrived at Birmingham we were full of energy and hope. The sun was everywhere, we had System of a Down ripping through the speakers, our comedy sunglasses were on, our hands were rhythmically whacking the car roof, and we were in a city none of us knew. But as to what the hell Birmingham actually had to offer we didn't know where to start. Hey, somebody shouted, a sign to Cadbury World! Let's just swing by that, we thought. So we drove, trying to follow the signs. We were paying far more attention to the preposterous gangbang of noise that was System of a Down, hanging our heads out of the window and shouting at the Birminghamese. We drove and drove, left and right, straight on and turning around, trying for no real reason to get back onto the scent of the chocolate factory. Our box of transport was entirely absorbed by music that only Cristo knew or liked, and we were all howling, *Pushing little children! With their fully automatics! They like to push the weak around!* Cars everywhere, pushing the weak around, pushing our lazy arses around. We never stepped down on Birmingham soil. We left after one and a half hours of hardcore Armenian metal, exhaust fumes, and light harassment of the general public.

Yet again we had another toll-free place for the night, yet again thanks to Will's connections. We were staying with Will's godmother who was female enough for us all to banter about in the ways mischievous boys do. There was at least a £20 stake for whoever could do her first.

By the end of the night the only thing I'd kissed was a cow, as part of a legal exit from my tomatoes-only contract. The guys said that I had to either go down in history as a lying loser, *or* get a triple twenty on a pub dartboard *and* kiss a cow. Now, I'm shit at darts. Really fucking shit. It's a health and safety issue. By the way, the real reason why I wanted to get out of eating only tomatoes wasn't because they were unpalatable, or my will was too weak. It was because I'd had

enough of being bullied at restaurants about what I could and couldn't have and I couldn't be having with that. I *could* have done it but it just wasn't worth it.

So there I was, my eye fixed on that red strip of triple twenty, my ticket out of tomatoes, with Cristo playing some funkyed-up Ben Folds on the pub piano, with Fack spinning around in excited circles, with Will whispering seductive slang into my ear to distract me, and I threw it. And I swear to God I did it. I swear to God and all the fucking angels that I hit that triple twenty. Everybody hugged me and everybody cheered.

Then I kissed my cow. And I went to bed early, desperate for dreams, curtailing our young-lad sleepover where we were mock-fantasising about Will's godmother and all the things we'd do with her for cash.

In the morning I found out the others had kept themselves up for hours by scaring themselves with a decrepit teddy bear that stared at their beds with its glassy glass eyes. It was nice of the bear not to kill them all in their sleep.

After a late start and a full English breakfast, for free, Fack drove us to Manchester, where we tried to avoid the Mancunian mank by going straight to the Trafford centre, which we heard was good.

We'd never heard that the girls were so boinkable though. Possibly the highest concentration of fit girls anywhere. This made us all horny and hyper, mainly just hyper, and we leaped between shops like seven year olds with balloons. Cristo kept jumping onto our shoulders – quite an exercise since Cristo is certainly on the fat side of good – and in the end it turned out we were too fun for Manchester. We were told to calm down by a security guard (a northerner),

“Do you wanna just sort it out, yeah? You bloody idiots.”

Pretty girls everywhere still. We were so engulfed in phit girls in fact that Will managed to bump into one, get lunch with her, and then suck the pleasure into her for the whole length of *Minority Report*, which we singletons were watching at the time. Never happens like that with me. He literally just bumped into her and said “I'm sorry, I'm not used to these parts,” and went on from there, the lucky fucker.

Our consolation prize was an intriguing movie though. On our way to picking up Will and trying to find our Favorit car, which we were all sure had been driven over to the other side of the shopping centre while we weren't looking, we discussed the paradoxical plot of *Minority Report*, basically consisting of lots of, “But if *that* man knew that then how did Tom Cruise go back and do it again if it wasn't already... wait...” and Fack ended it by summing up that “paradoxes are just clever lies, aren't they?” We were too exhausted to argue back. Usually I'll be the last to be exhausted.

Back to the wheels. Heading to the Lake District, Fack drove up to a green light and stopped. As soon as the light turned red he drove on. He couldn't stop laughing, oh his hilarious life-threatening ways. Later he admitted that it all started when he paid too much attention to a squirrel in a bin. (*Well what was a perfectly good squirrel doing in a bin?* – Fack)

We also realised that we were a fine example of when Aerosmith lyrics are taken too far, all of us singing *life's a journey, not a destination!*

Panic set in when we got to Kendal, where we had to find somewhere to sleep. The clouds were filling up the lakes and our shoes. We hungry and drenched, but still crazy and happy. In the end we managed to find a B&B that didn't rip us off too much and we just opened the windows and smoked some of the weed we'd brought along. We felt like such burnouts. Fack was abstaining as usual and gave his standard line, "that's your kind of fun and that's fine but it's not mine." I guess it's a pretty obvious, normal thing to say yet it always surprises me when one of my best friends doesn't like doing the same thing as me. The problem lies in assuming they're all me, basically.

We were all just pretty relaxed. Will started having flashbacks of that teddy bear though, which was worrying. We just reminded him of his Mancunian sweetie and he was fine. We all texted home saying we were fine and all our parents, including Fack's, asked us if we were OK because we sounded a bit weird, and we all said, yeah, everything's good.

Everything was good then. It was only in Edinburgh when everything changed. Even then everything was still good. Never take the good for granted. It's usually around you, somewhere.

We left Kendal as soon as we could see the sun in the morning. On the motorway we found a car full of us-aged kids listening to us-style rock. We played a weaving undertaking and overtaking game with them, to much mutual glee. Somehow I fell asleep in that tide of drive, already more north than I'd ever been before. I had some fantastic drift dreams that I couldn't ever describe. Tom Arto was my pillow and my nightlight was the sun. In my dozing logic I asked myself, why are my friends here? They're just here for the ride, Zeph. Just like you. Jasjaj birds living the dream.

## **The Simple Road**

By Will

In the backseat

Pairs of red eyes chase away

Coupled white eyes shooting by

On the flowing grey

And the sea-blue sky

Follow the grimy spine

Eat up the dotted bones

Shut view of the scene

Drift on the waves of the stereophone

Flash burns light my lids

Trees streaming, billowing past

Smiling at some signs

Saying goodbye very fast

## Paedophiles in our Car, Question Mark, Question Mark

By Cristo

Bonus, I get to write the sexy chapter. I do mean 'sexy' in a middle-aged man kind of way and not a porn kind of way so don't start rubbing yourself just yet. I think I'm the most dramatic, fire 'n' ice guy, so it's only fair that I get the dramatic chapter. After all, it's the flames that make the flames and it's the fire that steals your gaze. Hmm, they could be lyrics. I'll try to incorporate them into the song I'm writing at the moment, 'My Cock is a Bad Tap', the first song on my solo, autobiographical album, 'Barcelonan Bad Bitch', that's built around solid fucked-up-funk foundations.

And back to the drama...

We were speeding along, quick and slick, racing the hell out of the rival wagon that we'd befriended. Within no time we were at our self-determined finishing line, a fuck-off mountain. Which was off a zigzagging A-road, but anyway we didn't care because we were going so fast. So we just looked at the mountain and said,

"We'll have that," and skinny Fack probably said something useless like, "Climb and a climb," so we scaled the mother. Fack was holding a camera for all those epic pics, and telling us all about mountain rabbits, but he was still the fastest up because he's so damn spangly. Once Zeph had finished trying to get us to care about his god forsaken Pooh sticks he was up pretty fast too, with me bringing up the bronze, and Will being dainty and slow, making sure he didn't graze his silky face. It got pretty wild and dangerous when we were taking on inclines of over, what, 30 degrees, sheesh. Sweat was dripping off us, probably going straight into mineral water bottles sold all over the world, and we wouldn't give up because we knew we could stay the course. The second highest peak wasn't the highest peak and it wasn't good enough so we found our way to the top. Only to find we were beaten there by sheep. They must have airdropped those sheep in because there was no way they could have climbed that mountain. The sheep just stared at us and said, "Stop complaining you fucks and get off my mountain." After we'd felt like kings of the world enough to satisfy us we went down, which involved less power but more pain in the arse, because half the time we had to slide down to make sure we didn't get involved in some kind of 999 classic.

We don't know what the mountain was called because we never thought to ask, but I think it was Ben Nevis.

Quick after that we were quick again and lightninging up to Edinburgh.

In seconds we were there, telling all of the wee lassies 'och aye' and wishing we had legs as hairy as the lass's. For the first time in the trip we settled for a youth hostel, which was basically a pile of crap. We tried to freshen ourselves up so that we'd be fit to go out on the pull, for the first time, and Fack and Zeph the most because they were the most desperate and virginal. We required a truckload of sprucing up because our clothes and bodies were such a state but I think we pulled it off and I even managed to find a walking cane in a bin that was



completely serviceable and gave +5 to my charisma rating. It was made out of pure encanto. Excellent. As we left through the hostel reception area we thought we'd find out our bedtime but there was nobody at the desk. We saw a thin man with a fat bottom who we thought worked at the hostel. So we asked him how late we could stay out and he just showed us his hands. He was wearing sunglasses and was obviously nervous. In the end he said, "Anytime, I don't mind, I don't work here!" but it was an awkward line because of the time it'd taken him to say it. We didn't know what his problem was. "It says here we can come back at any point," said Will, who had read a poster on the wall. Outside we imagined what the thin man with the fat bottom and the sunglasses was up to, Zeph named him Thinfat (lame Zeph always gives lame names to everyone), and we exaggerated the bulk of his buttocks.

I'd been to Edinburgh before, because my parents are such international playboys the both of them, and I knew of this super OK theme pub called Frankenstein's so we went there. Boogie with a touch of horror. Danse dangereuse. We were all trying to find the answer to that famous question, 'are Scottish women attractive?' and we were conquering the dance floor while we were at it. I could perform a thousand tricks with my metal-edged walking cane and I was showing all of l'Ecosse cuties my 'come hither' grimace. The DJ was, as the initiated say, rinsing it up, and I guess we were doing the drying up... and giving everything a magical polish. I've never met a magical Polish. Which, coincidentally, was what Will was doing - meeting and pleasing a magical Polish girl. But apparently she was so magical that she had a bristly mouth and that wasn't cool.

Zeph and Fack were trying to give sweet eyes to pretty ladies, but I think they were mostly failing and neither got any action at all. I already had a dance partner - my cane - so I was taken and excused. Un soltero feliz con ojos. In an attempt to loosen Fack's shackles of shyness Zeph thought it'd be great to push him into a girl he liked the look of, on the sly, all subtle. So he just shoved Fack onto the sexiest slapper in the building, causing a mighty collision, spilling the slapper's drink all over both of them, and forcing Fack to flail against her boobos. She swore at Fack in both gesture and a Scot's attempt at English. Fack, ever the gentleman, offered to buy her a drink. But she already *hated* him. Funnily enough, Fack didn't get the fuck.

Then, bam, back to the drama, I saw our old friend, Thinfat, staring at us from the upper floor. He looked away and I told the guys, "Look who followed us." Will, now finished with the magical Pole, raised an eyebrow and muttered, "Thinfat, we meet again, badly proportioned adversary." We thought little more of it and danced impeccably until a certain Bon Jovi song started playing and I got a little too fresh, spinning with my cane and accidentally smashing a Scot's kneecaps. We were told to leave, so we leaved.

On the way back to the hostel we were, on average, a bit drunk and a bit scared. I was personally a lot drunk and a little scared because I live for the moment and for the thrills. We were making up stories about how and why Thinfat was on our tails. Zeph would stop and stand aghast and say, "Seriously guys, he's there again," and then we wouldn't look around and he'd give it up, but

one of us would always look around when Zeph wasn't paying attention, just in case. You can never be too sure with pear-shaped people in Scotland.

Then Fack was like, "He spoke English, didn't he?"

"Ohmigod," I said, "what a coincidence, so do we! What's your point?"

But Fack was still like, "Well we're in Scotland and he was English."

"He must be some kind of illegal immigrant," I guessed. Really I should have been joining in, trying to scare ourselves shitless.

"It's just another odd thing," went Fack, "other than his bottom."

"He's a madman, lock him up," I quarter-shrieked. Then I thought it'd be good to change the subject from Thinfat so I asked them to help me write a fucking good song about anything,

Though you don't know how  
I believe you can do it  
You bit off a lot  
But I know you can chew it

After singing that again and again we slept in our basically shit accommodation. In bed I blurted out, "Tomorrow I want to drive! Drive alive. Cristo Jive is a drive." I wrapped myself up like a mummy in trace paper sheeting and I don't think I heard anybody even faintly snore, so I must have won.

In the morning I still wanted to drive. You see I've always thought driving is one of the most obvious and easy things, out of all the things many people cry about. It really is all intuitive. However, I've never been arsed to learn. So while Will and Zeph were both insured on the Fack wagon, I was the one freeloader. In Edinburgh I thought I'd give it a shot. I've always thought that when I do drive I'll drive just like Kerouac's Dean Moriarty – wild and uncaring but in control of everything, like an angel soaring over the clouds of heaven.

I started off in the youth hostel car park. Small but practically empty. Fack was my 'instructor', though I didn't think I needed one.

I'd never get to actually take the car out of park.

Fack ordered me to check my seatbelt.

"Yes, mum sir," I said, clicking myself in, "Now, the pedals go clutch brake accelerate, CBA, ABC, and I press the A and lift the C and take down the handbrake and that's the business."

"That's the business," agreed Fack, "and remember to start with C down, in gear 1."

I just said coolly, "C down, gear one, this is just a bloody videogame." I sparked her up and felt like a real man.

"Check your mirrors before you go anywhere though, just to get into a good habit," said Fack.

Then I was like, "OK... wing mirrors... check... middle mirror... that's a mess." I must have been sitting in a different position to the other drivers because the rear-view mirror was wankily angled. It seemed pretty simple to adjust so I tried to sort it, and I did. Funny, I mused, it felt quite technical and fiddly behind

that mirror, when surely it's just a mirror. I'm sure my fingers felt wiring of some kind, and at first hydraulics came to mind. An hydraulic rear-view mirror, how queer and uncalled for. I had another feel and definitely felt wires, and loose parts and... I couldn't understand it so I tugged the mirror off the window, the sucker slurping as I did. I was going to find out what it was. Then I realised it was pretty obvious.

So I went, "Dudes... dudes, this is a microphone."

And Fack went, "What are you talking about? It's a mirror," because Fack's a wee bit winsome.

"Behind it, here," I pointed, "is a microphone... wait... it's a camera as well. No, no just a microphone. Why the fuck is there a microphone behind your mirror?"

Will was like, "Are you certain it's not just part of the mirror?"

Zeph was like, "What the fuck."

And I was like, "Well mirrors don't usually need to record sound to function, do they?" I was still inspecting the bugger. "And this is definitely a microphone... and I'd say that this little black box here is some kind of wireless transmitter, but I don't know. I'm going to be a mechanical engineer, not an electrical one, I'm going to build bridges, not microphones."

And Zeph was like, "What the fuck."

Grabby Will grabbed the thing and asked, "Mind if I have a look? It doesn't look like a microphone, you're right, but it doesn't look like it's expensive enough to be wireless."

"Surely they just save money on the wires," said Fack, knowing he couldn't really help because he was worse with technical stuff than any of us, and none of us were experts. Yet it was his car and he knew one thing.

"OK I didn't attach a microphone to my rear-view mirror with masking tape, guys," he confessed, "so who did?"

"What the fuck."

Will said he seriously doubted it was a working microphone, but he was just trying to calm everyone and everyone wanted to panic. Fack was already squeezing the hell out of his nipples.

I was like, "But if it is..." in my best Columbo voice, "then somebody can hear everything. Everything."

"What are you talking about?" went Zeph, "We've got nothing to say, we just say rubbish all the time, why would anybody want to hear what we say?" And shut up *you*, *you* know you want to hear what we say, that wasn't ironic.

I was like, "Whether someone wants to or not, Zeph, they can hear everything." It was spooky, hella spooky.

Of course Zeph was just like, "What the fuck."

Maybe I was a lot scared at that point. My leg felt like it exploded - it was exploding with a text. I got the bomb out of my 'baggedy jeans'. It was from an unknown number and I read it out loud. It looked something like this,

U R BEING SEEN AND HEARD.4 YOUR OWN	BENEFIT DO NOT LOOK 4, OR TAMPER WITH,	THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT, WHA TEVER THIS IS, IT	REQUIRES MYSTERY.SO THAT IS ALL.
---	--	--	--

ENJOY.

“WTF. Who’s ‘Enjoy’?” It was funny to us all but none of us laughed. For the conversation that followed I shall employ my brand new spectacular literary device, Cream of Consciousness. I churn up the turbulence and skim off the cream. And I’ll be damned if I can remember who said everything.

who the hell was that?  
is this a prank?  
are there any other microphones?  
this one’s easily small enough to be concealed anywhere  
video cameras could be anywhere too  
spy cams  
they’re not even that expensive these days  
could be optical fibres  
could they actually be here?  
they’re tiny  
but where could they be?  
wing mirrors, fans, dashboard, there could be wires in the lining  
under the seats  
inside the seatbelt boxes  
inside Tom Arto  
no because we bought him on the way  
oh  
you mean we were rigged up at Blindfield?  
yeah  
obviously  
so we’ve been recorded for the whole trip?  
duh  
we’ve got to search the car then  
but the text told us not to  
why should we listen to the fucking text?  
jeez  
is there any reason why people would want to record us?  
they’re obviously looking at us right now  
they have to be  
it’s obviously paedophiles, dudes  
well let’s have a look around  
it’s paedophiles on the web jacking off while looking at us  
we’ve got to look around  
but the text

!  
just take the wing mirrors off  
I'm not taking my wing mirrors off when they said not to  
who's they?  
Enjoy  
who is that?  
it's like it says enjoy and that's the name get it  
let's look in the bonnet  
there aren't any cameras here  
obviously we couldn't see them  
they'd be obvious  
no, they wouldn't be obvious, that's the fucking point  
well the microphone's obvious  
maybe it wasn't meant to be  
we didn't notice for over half a bloody week  
we've got to examine the car  
we can't and I don't want to, what if they'll harm us?  
let's just open the bonnet  
ok  
ok  
ok  
there's nothing there  
none of us know what all of this stuff is anyway  
there are plenty of places where surveillance equipment could go  
yeah, and burn and explode  
it's not that hot  
it's boiling hot, it's fucking hot  
not all over  
we're not technically minded people, we've got to ask someone  
this is our adventure, only ours  
text back Cristo  
what do I say, dudus?  
Enjoy said that's all  
don't you think it's paedophiles, Will?  
check everything Fack, I don't want to be involved in some sordid snuff movie  
what do you mean?  
well maybe people are going to watch us being killed  
shut up  
this is a fucking prank  
let's drive  
Cristo get out of the driving seat, let's just go to a lay by and calm down  
how can we be calm when we're being fucking paedophiled?  
maybe our sex is not the only motive for this  
why would anyone do this then?  
why would Enjoy do this?  
isn't it obvious?

no Fack, it's not, what are you talking about  
because we said it'd be great and everybody wants things that are great  
they can't have this, this isn't anyone's but ours  
not anymore, not since it started  
just pay attention to the driving, you're going too fast  
I'm thinking, should we leave the microphone on?  
you want to chuck it out of the window?  
let's just do nothing for now  
what about Thinfat?  
what of Thinfat?  
he was following us, we all knew he was suspicious  
he was just fat  
and thin  
let's go back and ask the guy at the desk  
agreed  
hey guy at desk, did you take a booking for a thin man and a fat bottom?  
no  
did you see him?  
yes  
do you know him?  
no  
let's go and get out of this city  
it feels like I'm being raped  
shut up  
he could be working for anybody  
who though?  
I don't know  
you know, I'm not that upset  
I don't think I am either  
I feel a bit raped  
we know  
what gwool windmills  
gwool windmills  
put on Eel's Daisies of the Galaxies and let's sing along  
who would do this?  
Enjoy and Thinfat  
they're just characters you've made up, Zeph  
well  
let's put up a tent  
Thinfat is so in on the game  
we'll probably never see him again  
this is insane  
this is a fucking road trip  
it certainly is  
we bit off more than we could chew  
but I believe we can do it

we need to focus on the tent instead of the cream of consciousness  
yes, we must  
wait, were we followed?  
there's nobody here  
but somewhere somebody can hear us and probably see us  
we're being watched  
let's get wasted  
that won't solve anything  
it will and we've got cheap tequila  
I can't believe this

We were pitching a joke of a tent on the mound of a lay-by. On one side of the mound was our steel steed, full of paedophiles and intrusion, and on the other side was the motorway, full of loud and unrapped cars. Will was being a panic puss and wasn't really helping to put up the tent. He was the only one of us who mentioned going to the police and leaving the car. I told him to kick back and be all that placid stuff he always talks about.

Because I had yet to channel the power of my soul, and because Cristo never betrays his intellect and compassion at the sake of maintaining his *cool as façade*.

I was totally being cool as. I saw it as a story to tell. Uno once opono Timo. Look at me, looks like I was right. Once Zee and I had finished putting up the tent we went over to Fack who was just gazing out over the Scottish pastures.

He went, "All the sheep are sideways and half of their legs are shorter than the other half". He was still beaming with a geeky smile he'd never contained. "And the sun makes the sky look like purple flesh. Flesh and the flesh." It sure was one of those crazy, wavy skies.

Zee put his arm on Fack's shoulder, and was like, "Right, now who wants to go for a wank in the woods?" Even the wind tried to be silent.

"But I'll shit with you," I said.

"We'll stroll with a toilet roll and we'll keep our distance," Zee said. We were staying off the car for the time being. By our first step we were stopped by Will because he was like, "Guys guys guys, why don't we consider speeding back tomorrow, straight down the M6 and the M1, as fast as possible, so we can be home and everyone can help us sort everything and we'll be in a less dangerous situation," or something.

But Fack was right when he said, "This shouldn't ruin it for us."

Zee was like, "well maybe we'll think about it."

"Yeah, let's shit on it," said I. We went to the woods, me and Zeph, and we squatted in the pine trees, a safe distance apart, and chewed the fat as we shat together.

"It's funny how we can see everybody in their cars from here," he was saying, because we certainly could, "but they don't know it. They think they're having private journeys, when really they're being spied on by two boys shitting in the woods."

“Spied on by two boys shitting like champs in the woods.” Once I was done with my once-only toilet tree I left Zee to it for his natural spank. Only, I didn’t really, I just did it myself fifty metres behind him, spanking like a champ.

Our sleep was put on hold while we argued over conspiracy theories and decisions to make. On cheap tequila, again. We were being tracked by the government for crimes we were going to commit in the future. Starring Cristo Damié and Tom Cruise. Our deaths were being betted on by snuff fetishists. We’d won a bitchin’ competition. We were part of the real-life sequel to The Truman Show (*“but the sequel would trick a whole fake island, a fake island!”* – Zeph). We were all going paranoianuts on dope and were experiencing joint delusions, even Fack, through passive smoking. We were on TV, live, in every room in every house in England. There were microphones in our blood. Video cameras in our hair.

Really, away from whatever the fuck was going on with the car, we were just boys in a tent. Funsters in a tent.

As we were getting to sleep Will sat up and asked, “Cristo, can you stop vibrating?” I said “no” and he thought I was just trying to be all superior, but really it’s because I can’t stop it. Will called it my ‘residual vibration’. I’m always just very slightly pulsing, living on the buzz. Blood energy vibrating through my freaking veins. In the end Will accepted that it actually helped him get to sleep. It’s my musician’s purr. 2 Vibros a second. I never even notice.

So we slept, in a lay-by off Edinburgh.



## A Will to Continue

By Will

All the time, eyes.

Our eight eyes, bleary with the adhesive of sleep, laboured to attach us to the misty windmill road back to Edinburgh. I was driving but my eyes were glazed, disengaged from the optic flow, so I was stuck inside a honeycomb on wheels. I needed to gulp down a few eye-stretching yawns to shake the lethargic disassociation with reality. Then we still had the surreal to deal with. Zeph in the front seat palmed his magnifying spectacles off his face- he alternates with lenses and likes wearing only air when he's weary - and forcefully blinked his moss-green eyes. The lines under them were weak; the eyes were undefeated by fatigue, surrounded by boy.

Whenever I could safely flick my sticky eyes from the road, I searched for cameras. It appeared the others were playing the same game. Zeph tucked an "I'm sorry" in between yawns and continued, "but there are actually just loads and loads of places where there could be microphones and cameras that we'd never know about." Cristo sighed out a great wind of imitation frustration and complained, "I thought we'd already established that, cock brain."

"Yeah," Zeph acknowledged, "but in the mirrors that could be one-way, in the fabric of the seat, in the headrests, in the hollow of the door, in that little slit that the fan switch slides along, on the front of the stereo, even in the sunglasses holder," or, I added, in the eye of the Skoda arrow-parrot hybrid in the steering wheel, or anywhere on the dashboard.

"Do you think there were cameras in the house we stayed at?" asked Fack, and my answer was that I didn't know. I'd already wrestled with that whale of a question myself. Fack released another whale I was already acquainted with, "do you think your friends were in on it, Will?" Again I did not know.

I could see Fack's eyes in the rear-view mirror. They were fiery brown autumn leaves floating down from a tree, unthinking, and taken by the wind.

We'd promised our souls we'd still 'Do Edinburgh' so we were jolly as jellybeans when we got there with Cristo singing a modified version of a Stereophonic's song, an ode to "the cockstrings and the arserings that your poor old granddad had to sweat to buy you." (He said he'd batter me if I didn't include that.) Rain doused any desire to leave the car and do anything so instead Cristo snuck into a gramophone and purchased the brand new Chili Peppers album, 'By the Way', which we listened to, appreciated and critically analysed in a city centre car park. It was incidentally one of the most grotesque car parks in the western world. Poster sheets drawn for elephants warned us, 'Danger! Asbestos!' on every wall. Every car was in danger of being broken into by the finest thieves in Scotland, but we were assured that 'Manguard is on watch,' and we all wished that 'manguard' was actually a robot.

As I foraged for mineral water at Zeph's feet my fingers happened upon a rigid piece of plastic, much like a dildo, which I picked up. Cristo said, "you know

what that is, don't you?" Before I even had a chance to consider it he said, "It's the fucking back of the rear-view mirror." Truth. It clipped back into place, concealing the microphone and protecting it from fingers. I deduced that, "we would never have known," and Zeph replied,

"Never? Do you actually think we'd never have seen the footage? I've been thinking that we'd be told once the holiday, or the year, was up, and then we'd be thanked and paid and praised and..." he trailed off, fantasising about a starlit world.

"If our children ever see this," began childlike Fack, "do you think they'll be proud of us? Will they think we were cool?" I checked that he was making the assumption that by the time we're parents we'll have changed significantly. Zeph saw a discussion opening up so reached for his pickaxe.

"Well, will we change?" considered Zeph, "I don't like that assumption. I never like to think I'll change because... if you change then who's you?" Cristo, not answering the question, exclaimed, "God, it isn't hard, yes my kids will think I was cool. Look at us. Live on MTV 2 in an asbestos car park." Cristo's eyes had their characteristic doglike black halos and that striving glint – they weren't just sensory, they were trying to make love to life, perhaps limply, but nevertheless. Cristo, relishing the moment, told us all that, "what we've got to do is make up damn good slang that future generations will use, that our kids will use, and won't believe we were so fucking top-of-the-world to make up. Like the person who made up the word 'fuck' – his children must have really loved him. Or the creator of 'dick-wad' or 'numb-nuts' or whatever. That's how we'll impress our kids. They'll hear their daddy's slang wherever they live – fucking Mecca-Birmingham and Giga-Liverpool or whatever."

Zeph gazed at the dilapidated wooden furniture waiting for nobody but inspiration in the adjacent car park space and just pronounced, as if speaking by Divine proxy, "Mahogany cheese wank." Cristo seconded this,

"Mahogany cheese wank," and everybody said it again, clearly for the cameras and for the product of our sperm. Cristo said, "you see that kiddo?" to his descendant of the future, "that's what your parents were like. You little..." he struggled but got a hold, "vicarious cock fascist." Again, repetitions all round.

"Vicarious cock fascist... Cristo, did I ever tell you, you're such a vicarious cock fascist?" Zeph bantered, "and what the cheese wank is one of those?"

Prior to our valedictory drive from Edinburgh we wrote a song together with excited, asbestos-drugged eyes full of bloodshot.

Asbestos mahogany cheese wank dreams  
Arses crashed and Red Hot streams  
Fifty-six cashpoints, a thousand and three chips  
Tradesman's entrance and orgasm dips  
The drive of wind and glucose drink  
Scurvy car park and drunken think  
Body warmth shared by fat friends  
Never chance to sleep break mend  
Bags at mud feet and tribute songs

Numerous slang references to mums and dongs  
Asbestos dreams and Tommy K  
Where to sleep?  
What day?  
Is this?

Try to root the allusions. Try to understand. Simple as the sun.

We decided we'd perpetuate our farcical Scottish episode by going to, as we southerners say, Glass Go. Yet Glass Go turned out to be a lesser Birmingham and I feared getting too chummy with System of a Down. Cristo bought a Teenage Mutant Hero/Ninja Turtles comic – an authentic souvenir – while I digested some Keats, and we argued sensually about the perfect ménage à trois, that was all. Zeph had committed himself towards drinking so we concocted him a ruthlessly efficient cocktail of Tequila and Lucozade (the glucose drink) – Bad Medicine. On our passage south from Glass Go he found his nemesis. 'Twas alcohol but Shuh: The Star of Benevolence.

Shuh is an eternal inhabitant of an amusing interactive arcade game, Fighting Mania: Fist of the North Star. Zeph fell in love brawling with this game, since it has a set of pads that advance towards you, which you must wallop back. It is, according to Zeph who does love his mechanical pleasures, "just hardcore mega fun." Obliterated by Bad Medicine, he fought wave after wave of ridiculously-translated-from-the-Japanese, computer-generated foe, until he reached Shuh: The Star of Benevolence, whose strength he could not match. Over £20 lost to the stars in a service station off Glass Go. Zeph denounced Shuh, "A mahogany cheese wank if ever I did know one."

When the day terminated we were in a nondescript youth hostel in Newcastle, planning to relax with a soporific smoke but falling to our snores before we got there. That's when I first noticed Tom Arto's eyes – shatteringly still, unblinking, with perfectly curled eyelashes, and so smooth to the touch. I'd never be able to probe a girl who had eyes that perfect.

On the leg to Leeds we thought we were being followed by a drab blue Mondeo, just one thigh hair of many that was rendering us wobbly at the knees. Fack saw it first and basically persuaded us; I still felt the most violated of us all. In response we found the nearest car park, parked up, and went to sit down in a park, which Fack called a 'park park' for convenience.

Fack appeared agitated, with something on his mind. "Who will actually have the power to do this?" He always unleashed the questions we were all wrestling with in private, though for once he had an answer too. "Because your parents work in TV, don't they Will?" That fact gripped me and brought back a vertiginous feeling I'd experienced before.

"Perhaps irrelevantly, yes they do," I replied, not too much on the defence. I've never known my parents all that well.

Fack reminded me of the prank the lads had all pulled on me, involving the fake letter about commissioning a programme of our gap year. "And your parents

knew about the prank, didn't they? They could have got ideas." I told him they certainly could have but it was still only a 'could'. Zeph enthused that this theory, "made so much sense," because, "they've got the power. They've got the motive - to make a good show - and they've got the power." Fack still looked troubled though,

"But how could they have prepared it in time?"

Zeph replied, in the tone of someone who'd worked it all out, "Come on, it wasn't as if we hadn't thought about it or talked about it before our three days of planning! And it could have been done for the whole year, from the beginning. We never would have found out."

"What if... I know it sounds stupid but," Fack hesitated, "well it'd be a lot easier to rig a car when you were making it, wouldn't it? Do you think it might just be a random thing? And my car's always been recorded?" Fack's semi-confidence was fully shot down by Cristo,

"That's stupid as hell, your Favorit's about ten years old, cameras were as big as cars back then. And nobody's going to watch a car for fifteen years just in case it turns into a prime time drama mobile." Fack remembered why he'd felt stupid and left it as, "It'd be a lot easier to rig, that was all." He recognised that there were plenty of times when the car could've been rigged behind his family's eyes.

"So," Zeph retook the thread, "we were saying it's likely Will's parents were involved. Gregory and Laura Carpenter, and Channel 4." I reminded him that it was just an inconclusive 'could'. I didn't especially want to believe my parents were deceiving me but in a way I felt strangely proud of them.

"They knew about it, they'd got the idea from the prank," said Zeph.

"Everybody we knew got the idea from the prank," I said, perfectly right, "all of our parents and all of our friends. Everybody knew we thought it'd be a great idea to record the highlights of our gap year. Even and especially your parents who, I may add, have the motive of being crazy and certifiably zany - far zanier than my parents. You have one mum and four dads with very little on their plates, and a lot of potential. What a project this would have been for them." Zeph bowed to my argument,

"That's an interesting idea. I hadn't thought about that. Maybe they're in league."

"There are many possibilities and we don't have enough leads," I said. Then I asked Cristo to show me the text again. "Let's just demand that the shadowed voyeurs reveal who they are." I did this. They didn't reply. We moved on, to less real and important subjects.

"But my favourite animal of all," Fack was saying, "is the Something Tamarin, I can't remember the name, but it makes sounds just like a Game Boy. It beeps just like that." He was climbing a Leeds tree and picking at its leaves. Cristo accused him of showing off to the cameras. Fack looked around.

"You're the only ones capturing anything here."

After Cristo forced us to listen to Linkin Park we crawled around the pubs of Leeds. We unintentionally slipped into a one-sided conversation with a barfly with wings made of gin who, unprovoked, shouted at us, "Don't just sit there! Do something!" Then he wanted me to gamble on the results of a game of darts between the other three. He was absolutely certain that Cristo would win because he could see raw talent on Cristo's face, and because his own face was full of gin. I remembered Zeph's triple-twenty and backed Zeph and Fack. If Cristo were to win I'd promised I'd buy the man three fried eggs. If Cristo didn't win, he'd buy me three fried eggs – no more no less, he was very clear about that.

Zeph won and – lo and behold – the professional drunkard didn't have any egg money. We drank the blackness of the night and Cristo taught us how to open all manner of bottles. "Your standard tetra pak flip, you open away from you so there's no risk it'll splash onto your clothes," he told us. "Always remember that one."

We invested in a large round of goat's cheese and fell asleep feasting on it, putrefying our breath and coaxing our nightmares.

We were woken up by Plato. Free of charge, Plato's words thundered through the B&B room radio at seven o'clock, waking us up with 'The Republic'. Zeph groaned that he had to read The Republic before he went to Warwick (English and Philosophy). He was the only one of us to have a nightmare, though he said it was only a nightmare because it was unavoidably juxtaposed with reality. He'd dreamt of a perfect, nubile girl who told him she "just wanted him". It was what he'd always hoped for. And then he'd woken up. "Thanks a lot, Plato," he said, shaking his head in dismay at the dead bluffer. For some reason the last guests at the B&B had tuned the radio into an obscure academic channel. The next broadcast was on the educational impact of Play'doh. From Plato to Play'doh, before eight o'clock. We thought it'd be an entertaining show, but it was dry, like burnt and useless Play'doh, so we left.

Zeph was busy dwelling. "I can really see myself getting even more addicted to dreams like that. She was just right and she really wanted me. The only reason why she came to the castle was to see me and it totally surprised me. Then we were just together. I want to fall asleep again, I really do," and Zeph seriously attempted to fall asleep, with Tom Arto serving as his pillow on the window, aided by the sinister lullabies of Muse.

"I still swear that you're not *really* addicted to dreams," said Fack.

"I don't think it's that damaging to my lifestyle, but I feel like I need them," Zeph said, his eyes closed. Zeph's eyes always seemed complete when closed. "It's like the opposite of what Nick once said to me – I prefer water to weed but I know which I feel I need. It feels I need other stuff more, but I have to say I often prefer dreams. Sometimes they're just pure happiness and nothing can be wrong with that."

"You can't become stoners," said Fack. I assured him we only ever dabbled.

"Don't you ever get the feeling," said Zeph, "when you're waking from a dream, that you don't want to wake, and you want the dream to go on?" Fack sort of nodded.

"Yeah well it's like that but taken to the next level, where it doesn't pass, and I want to be back there."

"You're a mess, Zeph," said Cristo, a fountain of solutions.

"It's the playground of the imagination and I'm a kid who just wants to play," Zeph continued, "but you learn to bring things in that you want to dream - see people, do things... you're not just watching a movie, you're taking part in a different, more colourful life."

"I do wish I could do it," said Fack, closing each eye alternately.

"Just do it then. To remember dreams and make them better you have to think about them. At times I've been on the edge of being obsessed with them. Talk about them, encourage them, get to know them. There's loads of stuff on the internet and in libraries about rituals to do - napping, sleeping for short periods during the day, depriving yourself of sleep, leaving music on, repeating the word 'dream' - but I guess I'm like a street addict, I got there by myself, working it out by myself."

"Addict," Cristo scorned.

"I've read loads about it though I wouldn't say I've taken much in. Look at photos and memory aids, concentrate on constants inside the dream, buy special pillows that enhance the effect, burn incense, record yourself sleep-talking... the stuff in the literature goes all paranormal, astral and psychic too. Me, I just drink lots of coke before I go to bed and that seems to work." He was still trying to get to sleep as he talked.

"I still can't imagine what it's like to like dreams like that," said Fack, wowed.

"It's like drugs... drugs are a sort of nonsense and imagination superimposed over reality, with reality always dominating, well, usually. With dreams it's the reverse, more imaginal-like, with the imagination dominating. Maybe your subconscious or whatever, I just like to think it's the imagination. I love dreamworlds." Zeph did fall asleep. He had a lot more to say about his dream addiction but for the time being he just dreamed.

We realised that, without talking about it, we were on the way to Norwich. Home of the legendary Alan. We glugged ourselves with Alan Partridge moments and sang along to 'Melting Pot'. At heart we were all curly black and kinky, mixed with yellow chinky. We still had a scrap of goat's cheese left, which we thrust into each other's faces, yelling 'smell my cheese!' There's a chance we were playing up to the cameras, but nobody mentioned them on that day.

We settled on staying the night in Cambridge, in a friendly inn named 'Trespasser's Safe House'. We all knew that the road trip was nearly over but the finishing line was going to be made of sugar, like the whole racetrack. It'd been our shared dream. We were smelly, exhausted and overloaded. Also, on show. We were nearly back at the start.

The first thing we did on the last day of our road trip was scream around the tourist-drenched streets of Cambridge, with Offspring's 'The Kids aren't Alright' pouring from the speakers and from our lungs. We parked as near as we could to Pembroke College, where I will spend the next three years of my life. I

tried to show them the sites, the enchanted gardens, the architecture, and the pretentious displays of tradition. All they wanted to do was barge into each other and jump on everything.

Zeph: "This is like a level in a first person shooter!"

Fack: "Everything's so amazingly perfect here, I want to take it home."

Cristo: "Let's take these rolls of cardboard and fight it out on the oldest bowling green in the world! Monster battle!"

Me: "We can't stay here for long, guys." Really, I was wondering whether or not Cambridge was going to be a better life and I was feeling dizzy.

Towards London it felt like we were racing for a prize. It wasn't surprising then that when Fack tried to overtake a silver Subaru and couldn't find enough power to make it past, this became a challenge. Fack sang a mournful tribute to his rival,

Oh look at you,  
You silver Subaru  
We'll overtake you,  
You stupid Subaru,  
What now you do?  
Who you try to fool?  
So long me Subaru.

We swam after the silver Subaru for over twenty miles and then it sparkled over the horizon. I could see Fack's eyes in the mirror. So undiluted, his autumn-leaf eyes, below his everywhere hair.

In all honesty, I've always wanted to see things like Fack does, without superfluities, disturbance and cheap grandeur. Even now I have yet to attain my mystical simplicity. I'm sure that what I want to write is pure poetry, free from pomp and irrelevance. I want Fack's way of seeing because I already believe I have the understanding and the theory, not on the page but inside me. Yet I have too many words; I know I only need few. I don't have his mind. I have a pedantic, academic mind, and I'm jealous. I hope Fack feels an emotional shiver when he reads this, because this is one of the greatest compliments I could ever give. I want to have his way. I'm unsure about whether I'll ever find it for myself, or whether I'll be always be chasing a chimera.

In London - the first city we really knew well - we got woefully lost. We quickly realised we could in no way afford to park the car so we tried to leave the labyrinthine network of one-way streets.

"What's that?" Zeph asked, pointing at the Tower of London. Once he'd been deservedly reproached by Cristo, I told him what it was. He, "didn't know it was a castle." Zeph was again perplexed and educated when we got to Tower Bridge - he, "thought it was London Bridge or something - is there a London Bridge?"

It wasn't long before we were back in our bizarrely familiar village, unsure of our feet back on dry land.

We had a lot to deal with. We'd been watched and we needed to know why. More pressingly, we had to rest our tired eyes. We had to say goodbye and be by ourselves again, free from the fabulous burden of adventure.



## Home and Away

By Fack

That night I sat up in bed, wondering what the crap was going on. Nobody had ever wanted to record *me* before. I don't even think I look good in photos, and I get embarrassed when I hear my own voice on tape. I had my favourite home comforts with me in my bed – my dog, Dogman, and a mug of vegetable soup with croutons. I was looking everywhere for clues. I asked Dogman for some help. He licked my face and looked out at the window. That's OK Dogman, it's open because it's hot, but nice try.

I hadn't actually felt uncomfortable with the cameras on me. The idea that someone was laughing at me made me a bit anxious, but we'd rumbled the game and there were times when *we* laughed at *them*. We never got angry, other than when we were wasted in Edinburgh. Usually, in films, people get angry at everybody when they're being spied on, but we were fine. The truth is, I think we all liked it. That's why we didn't all try to shout at each other like angry Americans trying to exercise our rights. We didn't have anything against each other, we were all in the same boat, convincingly disguised as a car. I was sure that whatever hi-tech cameras were in the car were worth more than the car itself because we bought it for little more than two acorns.

We'd still agreed to ask our parents about it the next day, if we were all still OK with that. There was the feeling that the mystery we'd become wrapped up in was ours and we didn't want to lose any of it to people who weren't involved.

Who was involved though? Who was behind it? My natural answer was always 'Sony' because the picture of a video camera I had in my head was made by Sony. I thought there was a lot going for the suggestion that Will's parents had a finger in the pie, because I always had my suspicions that they'd make money out of their son if they could. Zeph's parents were also pretty creative. But were they actually insane?

A secret between me and Dogmandu was that what I really wanted was for everything to be explained and for me to say 'ahhh'. I didn't think I'd work it out by myself and I didn't think that whoever was doing it would give any of us enough clues to work it out. I wanted to say, 'ahhh, that's why Thinfat was following us to Frankenstein's' and 'ahhh, I see why you organised such a *ridiculous* thing now.'

Just before I went to sleep I remembered that the road trip had been, the mystery included or not, one of the best ten days – at the least the best *successive* ten days – of my life. I reminded myself not to complain about the road trip, even if we didn't have a good time after that and were tragically killed in a snuff movie.

I slept peacefully into late morning and spent the whole afternoon in a low gear, happy to not have to rush anywhere or get up from the grass. Once I've laid myself down on the grass I'm usually fine to stay there until I have something to do.

The car was parked just down my lane. Thankfully my parents had bought a new car half a year ago, so they wouldn't try to drive it and find themselves in

the middle of some awkward conspiracy moments. It was Sunday, I think, so my parents were being lazy too. The whole Thomas family stretched out on the lawn. They asked me for all my stories and I told them as much as I could remember, leaving out such things as Will's enormous sexual charge, the drugs, and our new film roles. Just as I was fleshing out the good bits I got a text from Cristo, telling me to check my e-mail. I'd forgotten how we normally live inside each other's texts. I somehow managed to get the internet working and I saw lots of porn sitting in my inbox. Surely that wasn't what he meant. I investigated nonetheless. Then I realised that right on the top, where I hadn't looked, was an email from Zoë, our lovely young lady friend with that horrible surname, Groundhappenentst. She'd invited us to go up to Reading University to see her, the night before, because she said she knew we weren't up to anything. Little did she know. Funnily enough though, we weren't up to much, or at least nothing that was in our control. When I saw that she wanted us to stay with her that very night I felt like a snail in a mug of milk. I knew I could drink up another short road trip – to Reading, not very far – but I'd had so much, in a way it felt like it was killing me. It turned out that the others were all totally up for it and, since I was the one with the car, the rules of the game meant I had to be up for it too. I asked if they were sure if they wanted to go in my car still and they said yeah, of course, and called me names.

So I got off the lawn and went to pick up my fellow slackers, to get us back on the road. We were leaving interrogation of suspects for when we got back. It was just going to be one or two nights, hanging out at Reading University. What could go wrong?

The car still smelt of us and it felt like a second home. Terribly, we'd already gotten through our whole collection of CDs. We listened to Turin Brakes and The Flaming Lips on the way to Reading and we talked casually about how suspiciously, or not, our parents were acting. I also stopped off at Dorrington to give my films in to be developed. 5 films of fun. It seemed a little pointless, all considering, but we still weren't sure of anything.

We got there in good time. It was ten o'clock, which has always been one of my favourite o'clocks.

For some strange reason Zoë looked surprised to see us. She looked like she had been printed for a newspaper, as she always did, with her grey-scale features.

"How great to see you four here! You mean you're actually *doing* things in your slack year?"

"Not if we can help it," I said. She still didn't really seem like she knew what to do with us. We'd approached her at her hall of residence room and had all given her comfy hugs so we glanced at each other to make sure we weren't doing something wrong. To cut a medium-length story short, she timidly asked us a question,

"This is lovely but... why are you all here?"

"Because you sent us the email!" I said, jokily.

"What email? I didn't send an email. I'm not saying you're not welcome to visit me but--"

"What are you talking about, were you on anything last night?" Cristo said, still jokily. We hadn't realised what was obvious. "From your hotmail address."

"I don't have a hotmail address, Cristo," she said, and I think she nervously laughed because sometimes she's unsure of our high-spirited ways.

"Zoë-Groundhappenst-at-hotmail-dotty-commy."

"I don't use hotmail, Cristo. I never have done. I mean are you joking?"

"No, not right now... don't tell me something's fucked up."

"Not again – I don't believe it," whined Zeph, and then before he let anything out he said, "it's just we had some problems on the road trip with people... pranking us."

"Ah," was all she said. She saw that we didn't want to say any more. She's a very lovely lady.

In the end we just confused her and didn't know what to make of it ourselves, so we said we'd leave. As we all expected, she offered us floor space and rags to sleep in. One of us said, "Well, now that we're here..." and we all accepted an uninvited night with Zoë. We felt a bit bad crashing her second week at Uni, but it looked like she was liking us being there. It was good to see her anyway.

Uni seemed pretty gwool. We just hung out in Zoë's room, talking about life, people and the world, with her and some of her friends. I was asking lots of questions about Reading Uni because I'm doing Fine Art there in October. There's not much time left now. Everybody at Uni just seems to get drunk in each other's rooms, gossiping and being nice to each other. I was still glad we'd taken a year out. It's like we got a year from nowhere.

I think Will was after a girl named Debbie. Will's always after any sexy girl. Any sexy girl is usually after him too. She was going on about her ex boyfriend, who she said she hated but you could see she didn't. Will was being too nice. Will's a lovely guy but he's clever. It was obvious that Debbie was the kind of girl who played games with her men and I guess Will thought, 'bagsy the silver boot'. A pretty girl, but confused. She knew someone who was doing art who liked it so I was happy. Only problem was that in the first year they studied in a building that looked like a prisoner of war camp. I think I shrugged. We were drinking a lot of Schnapps and everything was cool.

Stuey was some kind of weirdo who was making jokes all the time and grinning at us, as if we were meant to laugh. We usually did. Zoë told us that he was weird at first but so sweet really. Whenever he left the room we all went into giggling fits and had to apologise to Zoë. But she loved it. Stuey wasn't one of her good friends.

We were all taking swigs of her didgeridoo too. She just had it as some kind of ornament, but Cristo was teaching us all how to play. You've got to spit with your lips, like you're a vibrating kissing machine. He showed off on her guitar as well. She had that look in her eyes that all learning guitarists have when they look at a pro. You're amazing, you're the best. Cristo laps it up, every time.

Debbie left in the end, still moaning about her ex, and I think Will realised he'd missed his shot. Stuey went and left us all in hysterics. It was just Zoë and us

for a while. Then we shared out the scratchy rags that Zoë had and were all ready for sleep. It must have been about half one. But then we weren't tired so somebody suggested we go on a walk around campus. It was a good idea. We were all so drunk. It always seems like we're getting drunk. I wouldn't say that we get drunk more than the average. Most people get very drunk, very much.

Zoë went to the toilet first. To be honest, when she returned we were all half asleep and we'd forgotten about the walking plan. Sleep is strong. But Zoë was obviously panicking about something and said that we needed to do something, *now!* We all tried our hardest to wake up. She said that her friend Debbie was at her ex-boyfriend's room and needed help. Debbie wanted us to 'cause a scene' somewhere between the union and this guy's hall. Zoë promised us that Debbie would explain why later. We were all straight into emergency mode, trying to think of the best plans and so on, but we were still in drunken mode, so our plans mostly sucked. How were we going to 'cause a scene' between the union and a hall? One thing was for sure – we were definitely going to do it.

Cristo said we'd "just sing a little song". What a scheme. We grabbed the guitar and the didgeridoo and ran out of the hall, completely off our faces, ready to sing a little song. We didn't understand what was going on, but we were getting used to that. At least it wasn't anything to do with the car and the road trip stuff. In the morning Zeph told me I kept saying, "such capers!" I didn't remember it but it was definitely something I'd say.

We kind of half-ran, half-crawled our way to the union. It was pumping and frisky and so were we. We had to 'cause a scene'. What a demand. Debbie's ex – John – lived in a hall on the opposite side of the campus, about 25 minutes walk away. We followed the path going from the union to the hall. Loads of lads and ladies were walking back, on their ways to their new homes. We'd nearly gotten home but now we were just wasted and in Reading. Zoë was worried about what was going on and we told her she could leave us and find out, and we'd cause a scene. It was no worries. We were in the mood. She left us there. By this time we were just ridiculously well up for making fools of ourselves. Will's usually the one who worries about these things but he was fine. He was the one who started singing. Then we all joined in. Soon it was musical mayhem.

Cristo was on guitar, playing catchy chords, rocking out. Zeph was kissing the didgeridoo, being rubbish. I was clapping. I like clapping – you can do a lot, rhythmically, with clapping. Will was singing and making up bullshit lyrics as he went along. Often he'd just sing out Shakespearean solos ('*soliloquies*' – Will) and muffle his voice so you couldn't really hear what he was saying. We all joined in if we could come up with anything. I know you're not meant to say it, but we really did just look retarded. We kept saying we were such spastics. It seems like a really immature thing when it's written down. I guess it is. But we were just trying to say we were being terrible even though we knew we were loving it.

Everyone else was loving it too! All of the students who walked past smiled, laughed, clapped, gave us 'nice one, mate's, pointed, tried to join in, some waited and watched, threw money at our feet. We were a random jolly band, busking for fun and providing some after-party entertainment. They just kept coming. It seemed like hundreds of people walking by. We were causing a scene.

We were famous! I swear we didn't really give a fuck about Debbie because we were just trying to make it as a band. We loved the attention and we loved the way we knew it was always going to be a good story to tell. Maybe that's how most good stories get lived. What a caper.

Then Zoë turned up. I fancied her so much, I wanted to kiss her in the bushes, but don't tell anyone. She looked shocked. We stopped. My hands were red raw with clapping. She asked us something about pranks.

OK I'm going to be honest with you. Whenever we use speech marks in this book we make nearly all of it up. It's all basically right but it'd be the biggest coincidence ever if it's all word for word. Maybe soon we can compare with the recordings.

"Take me to the bush and have your way with me!" Zoë cried! Not really. Really, she said,

"I don't understand. Debbie wasn't at John's. She never was. I just phoned her up."

"But she phoned you up before and told you we needed to cause a scene because she needed help," one of us said.

"No, she didn't phone me. I got a text. You know what you were saying about being pranked..." We all looked at each other and sighed. We said it'd been confusing and asked to see the text she'd got. It said it was from Debbie, and all of the details we knew.

"Is it the same number as Enjoy?" asked Zeph. Cristo said yes, of course it was. I was just wondering what the crap was going on, again.

"Eff eff ess," said Cristo. Then he got a text.

"I bet it's Enjoy," said Zeph. Of course it was. In a situation that didn't make any sense, *that* still made some sense.

"He says don't worry, it's nearly over, check your mirror."

"What's nearly over?" Zoë asked. We told her it was a big messy prank we'd tell her about, one day. She was accepting. Too accepting, come to think of it. We told her we had to check the car, by ourselves. She just wanted to sleep, she was fed up of us being so secretive.

There was no microphone in the mirror. We were sort of relieved.

"It's a gesture – they're saying that there aren't cameras in the car anymore," said Will. Cristo got another text.

"You'll understand when you're home', that's all it says." Will was being affected by the drink. He was groaning and rolling in his seat – we thought we'd sort stuff out in the car.

"They're manipulating us. They're actually controlling things. They're not just observing, they're changing our lives. They got us up here, they got us to make fools of ourselves. What if they're just lying and they're trying to get us to do something else? This is an atrocious mess," he said. Controlling our lives? I didn't like the sound of that. I just wanted to be home again. It did feel like there weren't cameras on us though. Surely it was all over and I'd get what I wanted – the 'ahh, that's what it was all about'.

Because I was still thinking, what the crap's going on? The next day I had a mega hangover and everything was explained. Kind of.

## Unscripted Lines

By Zeph

*The scruffy interior of a car. A large, fluffy faced tomato is on the dashboard. Half-empty coke bottles, scraps of notepaper and breadcrumbs litter the seats. Other such details. WILL is driving. He wears smart yet dishevelled clothes, and an attractive yet enervated face. Reclining in the seat to his side is CRISTO, who resembles a modern day pirate. FACK is stroking his hair in the backseat – a messy tumble of dull-brown hair, light and curly at the edges. ZEPH is halfway between looking thoughtful and thoughtfully looking out of the window. His hair is halfway between blonde and black, which you'd think was brown, but isn't. They are travelling at 88 mph.*

**CRISTO:** We were so fucking classic. Everyone was loving us.

**WILL:** Shame they were loving our inebriated idiocy and not any musical proficiency.

**FACK:** Surely they were loving us just because we were being nice.

**CRISTO:** Either way, that's hundreds of happy people, in the bag.

**WILL:** You'd consider yesterday as officially counting on the happiometer? As in contributing to our quota?

**CRISTO:** Of course. In the bag. I told you that plan was going to be a cinch.

**ZEPH:** How many people is that though? Made *significantly* happier?

**CRISTO:** Let's just guesstimate. 95. That leaves us a handful.

**FACK:** We did good.

**ZEPH:** So it was a successful night. Even though it was also kind of shit because we found out someone's messing with us.

**WILL:** We were drunken elephants dancing on an illusory ball.

**CRISTO:** At least we were probably on camera, starring in our music video debut.

**WILL:** I think they were using the time to take the cameras out of the car.

**ZEPH:** I think that was the idea. I don't know, I'm not bought by it.

**FACK:** I reckon that when we get home some guys in suits will just pull our trousers down and smack our bottoms.

**ZEPH:** Whyso?

**FACK:** It just feels like something random like that's going to happen. I dunno.

**ZEPH:** (*wistful, dwellful, ultimately Zephful*) I should've gone out with Zoë when I had the chance.

**CRISTO:** Don't beat yourself up.

**ZEPH:** I won't.

**CRISTO:** I've had better.

**ZEPH:** I haven't.

*The next scene is set in a colourfully painted dining room, covered in photos of little girls. There are only five different girls, at many different ages. There's also the odd photo of a boy – ZEPH minus two years. He's more plain than he is now. Above the piano is a sign painted in glitter by one of the girls at one of her ages, reading 'Dads'. Four men live in the glass. Nearby is a photo of a golden-haired lady looking up to the stars – it is The*

*Mummy, CIARA. She is also present in 3D in the room, standing with her hand on ZEPH's shoulders.*

**ZEPH:** Mum, this is going to sound immensely strange but I've got something to tell you.

**CIARA:** What is it my darling Zebedee? I think I can guess what it's going to be.

**ZEPH:** No, you can't, because it's really... fucked up, mum.

**CIARA:** How... *fucked up*, son?

**ZEPH:** It's not just an adolescence thing. This is going to seem like it's a movie mum, but it's real. I'm telling you mainly because I don't understand it all.

**CIARA:** I understand you Zeph, and I can see what it is by looking into your eyes. *(makes mystical expression)* You're actually a voyager from the 8<sup>th</sup> dimension, sent back in time to protect your world that we're going to destroy in the year-

**ZEPH:** *(frustrated)* Mum!

**CIARA:** I'm listening, Zeph.

**ZEPH:** On the road trip, somebody was watching us..

**CIARA:** Yes.

**ZEPH:** Somebody was watching us.

**CIARA:** Yes. And was that part of the frolics or-

**ZEPH:** Mum! There's a chance we might be in danger! Why aren't you listening to me?

**CIARA:** I am and everything's at peace. Go on.

**ZEPH:** Somebody was watching us for the *whole* trip. With cameras and microphones and cars chasing us – strangers, mum, we don't know who they are.

**CIARA:** I know, my Zebedee.

**ZEPH:** No mum, they're not from the 8<sup>th</sup> dimension or anything-

**CIARA:** *(soothingly)* I know, Zeph. *(Puts her other hand on his other shoulder.)* I know.

**ZEPH:** *(Perplexed)* What do you know? How do you know? Just tell me everything you know.

**CIARA:** There's a letter on your desk.

**ZEPH:** A letter?!

*(ZEPH makes to run up the stairs to his room but returns to CIARA.)*

**ZEPH:** Do you know what's in the letter?

**CIARA:** Yes.

**ZEPH:** Then you can tell me. I don't want to read it in a letter. There's something up that's important, isn't there? Isn't there? It wasn't just some stupid road trip prank, was it? *(The little immaterial ZEPH-LIKE GUY in ZEPH's brain twirls and rages in bewilderment)* We were right?

**CIARA:** Yes.

**ZEPH:** Was it Will's parents?

**CIARA:** *(leans towards him and looks into his eyes. Her eyes overflow with tranquillity.)* I can't say but I will explain.

**ZEPH:** Who's the letter from? It isn't you, is it?

**CIARA:** No. They just call themselves The Organisation, Zeph. That's all you'll get.

**ZEPH:** But-

**CIARA:** Darling, I always knew about it. I couldn't tell you because that was how we'd planned it.

**ZEPH:** *We?* It was you who planned it? With your fucking *manfriends*?

**CIARA:** Don't talk about your fathers like that. No, let me explain, it isn't that simple. I can't tell you who was *behind* it but we were all involved, yes. You know you can trust me. (*ZEPH had always trusted his mother. He liked trust. What happened to trust?*) I said they can do it. It's a company, this The Organisation. They're working with somebody whose idea it was to use you four (*use? ZEPH thinks, use?*) . Your group was chosen. The Organisation call this person The Organiser. The Organiser is somebody you know, or at least know *of*. They are absolutely trusted by me and all the other parents, and everybody involved. There are no problems...

**ZEPH:** What is this? What the hell is this? Jesus, I thought I'd be the one explaining things to you! Do the manfriends know?

**CIARA:** Yes my manfriends know. What it is is... they're making films Zeph. I don't know how they like to put it, but they're making films in controversial new ways.

**ZEPH:** Isn't that illegal? To steal our lives and profit from it? (*ZEPH rarely gets nightmares but he still knows what they feel like.*)

**CIARA:** They were never going to steal anything. You'll love it Zebedee, I know you will. They needed assurances from us that you'd be OK with it. If they actually wanted to use and sell any of the footage they have on you, they'd have to have your consent.

**ZEPH:** And we weren't supposed to know, right? It was meant to be a real film? Like The Truman Show? I always said it was like The Truman Show. What everyone forgets is that Truman would have actually gone mad.

**CIARA:** They call it 'Polished Realism', I think. That's the project name. Try to be calm Zebedee-

**ZEPH:** 'Polished Realism'... this is crazy! I guess you're allowed to tape people in programmes like 'Jackass' and dupe them and not pay them, but it's totally different! Polished Realism...

**CIARA:** I thought you'd make a good film star, my munchkin.

**ZEPH:** (*ZEPH takes a few deep breaths*) But it's all called off because we found them out?

**CIARA:** Because of the mechanical error.

**ZEPH:** Mechanical error! They left a whole bloody microphone dangling!

**CIARA:** The letter says the mirror was hit by somebody's cane. Accidentally.

**ZEPH:** Ahh, (*in awe*) Cristo's bin cane. No wonder. Yeah, because he found a cane and we got chucked out of the club because he was being a danger to society with it. This is all so frightening but in a way that sucks.

**CIARA:** What do you mean?



**ZEPH:** That it never got finished. That kinda sucks. I mean you're right, I would've probably loved it if after our gap year they showed us a film that actually worked that was just us, keeping it real.

**CIARA:** It's not necessarily over, Zeph.

**ZEPH:** What? What? Wha-

**CIARA:** You've got a decision to make. The project can still go ahead. You've got to read the letter.

**ZEPH:** I don't get it, how can they still film? How can they film after we know? I can't believe you did this to me, mum.

**CIARA:** Yes you can.

**ZEPH:** Yes I can.

**CIARA:** It's only a contingency plan but... they can still film. Polished Realism is in it's early stages and they're still trying stuff out. Any evaluation they can get from it will be worthwhile to them. Who knows, maybe they can still make a film out of it, using how you four coped became of the cameras and coped with being filmed and what you did once you knew you were.

**ZEPH:** Art imitates... no wait, art is life. Life is art. Can't you just tell me who it is, mum? I want to know who's behind this 'Polished Realism' - I want to know who's creeping behind our lives.

**CIARA:** No. The Organisation wants to be unknown so it can make other films in the future - and maybe still at the moment - and The Organiser's identity is kept a secret as a kind of first line of defence. They're the liaison between The Organisation and all the people who have been involved in giving information... the go ahead... research... ideas. It's been pretty exciting for us all! Your fathers have loved it. The thing is you can't have it both ways; you can't know who the Organs are and still continue it.

**ZEPH:** What about things like yesterday, where they used our friends and made us do stuff?

**CIARA:** They're just guiding you towards certain things. They're giving things a bit of direction. They're just helping chance along. How have your dreams been recently, by the way?

**ZEPH:** Dreamy. But mum, do you think we should let them film for the rest of the year? Is it safe? Is it worth it?

**CIARA:** They won't film constantly, just some of the time. And yes. I think it's safe. I think it makes a lot of *sense* if you know what I mean. Remember that I know some things that you don't.

**ZEPH:** I'm dreaming. This is fucked up. This is amazing.

**CIARA:** Isn't it? You Truman you.

**ZEPH:** This time, it'd actually be true.

**CIARA:** And I'm sure there'd be plenty of stuff for you to write a book about.

**ZEPH:** Thanks mum, thanks for not being a boring parent.

**CIARA:** I couldn't say no to this.

**ZEPH:** I doubt I can either.

*ZEPH runs upstairs and finds the letter on his desk. He reads it thrice through while standing up and hesitates momentarily before signing at the bottom of the page. He then takes out his phone and rings a number.*

**ZEPH:** This is unreal.... I know... they told you everything?... you just read the letter?... My mum had already told me everything... I felt betrayed by own mum but then I was mostly gwool with it, I think... I can't believe they could keep it a secret... Umm, I may kind of already have signed it, but I can scribble it out at any point... No, I don't think I will!... Precisely, what the hell else are we going to do in our gap year?... Godyes... Godyes!... I totally feel the same... I'm in...

## A Return to Form – Squandering Time and Money

By Will

We were all informed of The Organisation and The Organiser and the rest of the extravaganza in similar ways. We all agreed to prolong our predicament in similar ways. Then, like pans of water that had been brought to the boil and then left in the sink, we settled down, back to our natural states. After a few weeks of tepid adaptation to the new situation, now with the ever-possibility-of-camera-on-your-face, we were back. We were not only acting natural, but being natural. Hence when some rockers Cristo was trying to start a band with wanted to “feel the Gs” at Alton Towers on a whim, we gladly agreed to drive half the height of the country to go with them. Recorded or not, we were certainly going to enjoy childish magic i.e. doing everything our bodies didn’t want us to do by putting our lives in the hands of advanced gypsy technology.

We made use of two cars on the way up there. Cristo was with his three band mates and an old school friend, Randell Dang, in Randell Dang’s car; Zeph, Fack, another friend, Jon Wheatleigh, and myself were in Fack’s danger-car. We listened to R.E.M. singing to Cyclops and saw a five-lorry pileup on the M1 that made us temporarily re-evaluate our lives. Fack still drove hard and fast. Whoever coined the phrase, “live for the rush,” never intended for it to be understood in the way the near-everybody appears to. Live for the panic, the efficiency, the multi-tasking, the ten miles over the speed limit. I usually aim for my soul to transcend my despair but end up hoping, despairingly, that everybody could just transcend their craving for the rush, and be calm. The highlight of the trip was, for me, when Zeph confessed that his “favourite place of all in the world” is crunched up like a waster in the backseat of a cheap car, letting everything just rush by, thinking slowly if at all. Transcending, I thought, how enviable. Soon we were to artificially experience the rushes the phrase-coiner wanted us to live for, in the Towers of Alton.

Before we arrived we bought lunch in a nearby Sainsbury’s in the form of half-price, vacuum-packed smoked mackerel. Freakishly, all ten of us indulged so that when we got to the gates of Alton Towers we could have tenuously resembled a gang of mackerel, breaking into a theme park. Initially we rode all together, as a pack of ten. We remembered that pirate ships *always* swing to and fro when they’re not on one of the seven seas and Fack wailed like a baby for his “orgasm dips” – this is what we’d called the exhilarating, pseudo-genital sensations we felt as we drove over the oscillating roads around Scotland. The chances are you feel them too. Fack was loving his orgasm dips, as was Cristo, who shouted across the boat to us, “Yeah, I’ve really OD-ed on these orgasm dips!” We also went on a ride that served only to produce cries of, “what the hell is this?” and, “will somebody tell the machine to stop pummelling my ribs?”

At a point, Cristo and his musical mates went off together while we adventured with Jon and Randell. When Fack said that he wished, “life was just one big theme park,” Jon and Randell didn’t really know what to say. “You know,” Fack elaborated, “the magic never ending.”

"It won't end! We'll be old but the same," said Zeph defiantly.

"Of course, what with work and wives, nothing with change!" I said sarcastically.

"The magic will never end," said Zeph. Yet Zeph's the one who refers to University as 'going to The City,' growing up, growing hard and brittle. That's what none of us - what nobody decent in the world - actually wants. On the ride Oblivion, before and after tasting extreme gravity, I wondered whether or not I'd always get that rush if I kept going back for more; or whether it'd inevitably diminish. Nobody wants finite magic, but you won't find anything more in strobe lights and steel loop-the-loops. The soul is the sole source of magic. That may not mean much, but it's true.

Fack got himself a little too excited on a ride he named the "carnie creation", which unashamedly just span us around for five minutes - no gimmicks, no rush, no respect for our vestibular system. He was let out of the metal cage pale as off-milk, and we all knew he was to chunder. As he readied himself by a bin, Zeph ran up to and away from him frantically, laughing uncontrollably at the base hilarity of the situation, trying to catch a glimpse of his friend's chunky bio-syrup. Fack's treatment was another ride on Oblivion and frequent reminders that the magic had no plans to end.

I was in equally high spirits and I made a few statements which were, in retrospect, perhaps a little too unadulterated. The others, especially Jon and Randell who weren't so familiar with my stylistic angle, didn't seem to appreciate some of my comments about the wheelchair-bound. Sadly I do actually believe many people are just prim, proper and dull, but I just can't help being vulgar and, to quote, "horrible." However, I stand by my high-spirited self in saying it's a perfectly reasonable question to ask - if a wheelchair rider is showing off by wheeling it on his back wheels and he falls on his back, would you laugh? Would you allow yourself, morally? Fack asked me if I'd laugh if a chinaman fell off a bike like that, and of course I would, because I have a fundamental respect for equality. Also, it was Zeph who started pointing out people who were "Special but not Special enough" to skip to the front of the queue. You're lucky; this is the Will only my greatest friends get to see: at my nadir of depravity, simultaneously at my zenith of spontaneous self. Cambridge will see my starched cotton shirt and my attentive face, and that is all.

Parenthetically, because I think they're owed it, Jon and Randell are lovely people in their own rights. It would simply have been impossible for us to communicate to you the personalities of all our other friends; rest assured they are not merely names. Swiftly, Jon looks like a leopard and drinks cider daily (on special occasions he drinks out of a bin). And Randell has a penchant for Japanese pornography.

At 5:30 prompt the magic of Alton Towers ended. We were, as somebody succinctly put it, "All ton." Cristo's drummer was off to the relatively near University of Nottingham, Jon and Randell decided it'd be a laugh to visit some

friends there as well, and then the rest of Cristo's band jumped on the wagon too. This left us classic Four Queer Tits, in our Hollywood-imbued automobile.

Zeph set up some risky banter about Cristo hanging out with his, "new friends," which caused a lot of, "What," "the," and, "fuck," to come from Cristo. We had all been a bit drained by the magic so things turned a shade sour,

"Christ, we don't always have to hang around with each other like a bunch of wusses. We're not exclusive friends, Zeph, I'm sorry if I like hanging out with other people, Christ, we'd just get bored of each other if it was just us."

"I struck a nerve. It's just because I'm a jealous boyfriend," Zeph said conciliatorily. Whether or not Cristo was right about us possibly boring each other, there's certainly always been the hint of a problem, being inside a close/too-close circle of friends. Am I plumping up on junk friendship? Am I starving myself of more exotic dishes? Didn't I order the gourmet? Am I too *sad*?

It's too easy to be ungrateful.

Zeph continued with, "And I'm jealous that you're actually really talented and you're in a band, and everybody would like to be in a band."

"I'm not in a band yet, dudus, we're just a bunch of strangers trying to hit things in time." Was there something to be jealous of there?

Envy is a key aspect of strong friendship. One of my theories is that you'll always try to be friends with those you're most envious of. You hope that whatever they have, you'll learn from them, and incorporate into yourself. There's an inherent understanding that your perfumes will mingle and you'll arrive at the optimum scent. My personal examples are things like Fack's purity, Cristo's invincibility, and Zeph's grounded fantasy. Conversely, I believe that you want your true friends to be envious of you, or for them to be good people by virtue of some similarity they bear to you. It's not a negative envy at all, in fact it's more like an envious pride. I'd say we're all proud and envious of each other – that's how we help each other and why we enjoy being with each other. That's the theory nonetheless.

On our way back we stopped off at a 24 hour Tesco's to buy late supper. Zeph found an irresistible reduced-price chicken salad sandwich and took it to a checkout. The cashier told him the sandwich was five minutes out of date so it was illegal for them to sell it to him. Zeph pulled out a cheeky smile and said, "just throw it then, if you can't sell it," and gestured to the end of the checkout. The stress of the moral dilemma showed on the dull lady's face and then she just flung it, with an ounce of magic, to the end of the checkpoint. Zeph said his thank-yous and walked off with the sandwich.

He said it was a foul, soggy sandwich, but well worth the nothing.

On the rest of the way back we listened to an earnest fellow sing about flying in the ocean and swimming in the sky. I fell into an exultant reverie, imagining myriad souls, unrestrained and everywhere, flying and swimming and doing a thousand more things, inside all of the people on earth and all the matter of the universe. Happiness and love glowing everywhere.

I was quite sure that nobody was recording that.

## Working it out

By Zeph

I think Cristo summed it up best when he said,

“So far this has just been a shitty version of The Game, with Michael Douglas nowhere to be seen.” I never much liked The Game anyway – it was a farfetched abuse of fantasy and was pretty shitty in its own right.

“Precisely,” Cristo would say. “Precisely.”

I tried to explain to him that I thought it wasn’t meant to be like The Game, it was more like Sir David Attenborough was spying on us and making a filmumentary about our living habits, and occasionally needed to put the right bait in front of our noses, but generally speaking wasn’t going to hire thousands of actors to lead us to believe our lives were under threat. But that was just me being a mother, telling my children we didn’t need Christmas presents because that wasn’t the spirit of Christmas, when at heart I knew we all wanted presents more than Jesus. Because once you think you’re in a movie, you want special effects and Michael Douglas. I wished I could give Cristo the presents both he and I wanted, but it wasn’t up to me.

Meanwhile, we had to get on – with routine, the day-to-day, the coping with the present and the preparing for the future. None of us wanted to work solidly for our gap year, but we didn’t want to pass up on the high wages of the Christmas period, so we worked. We whored out our autumns and early winters to the men with the money.

Fack already had his easy Starbuck’s job. Cristo’s pimp found him a job filing at a bank – the pimp was his Dad, who’s a sort of trans-Atlantic banker. I managed to get in on the action and it ended up just being us two doing odd jobs around this office they were getting ready. When they didn’t need us anymore we moved onto a new job at – get this – The Nuts Bunker, our favourite home for doolally ex-servicemen. Me and Cristo were oddjob labour chimps for contractors who were furnishing a whole new wing (who would’ve thought the number of insane war veterans was on the increase?). So we were working like the working class, doing satisfying, sweaty manual labour.

In our lunch breaks we often bumped into our friends on the inside. There was Colonel Toothinger, who was nuts. Then there was The Bombardier, who was absolutely nuts. Then there was Treacles, who just talked a bit too loudly. On a few occasions when we were sitting and eating in the cafeteria, Colonel Toothinger would be gazing at the wall and would jump back, startled, and stare at the wall like how a dog looks at an electronic gerbil. Then he’d look in wonder around the room, baffled by it all, a stranger to the world. Then maybe The Bombardier would recount war stories of when he fought the fruit salad in the morning. Yet as senile and messed up as they were, they always stuck with each other and always seemed to be having a good time (*‘They were faking it, the cheeky fucks’* – Cristo). Treacles was fascinated by our gap year – the plan, the road trip anecdotes, the women Will had wooed, the ‘chap who’s a tomato, what’s his name, Thomas Arto?’. The Bombardier and The Colonel were also fascinated during their sporadic moments of attention. We even decided it’d be OK to tell them about The

Organs and the drama, because we knew they'd love it and we knew they'd forget it (*'Whatever, they knew what was going on, those wisest of merry slackers'* – Cristo).

At around this time Will was working for Mr. Volkswagen in Dorrington, shaking his booty with labour-type work as well. He moonlighted by doing scraps of work for his Mum, with Channel 4, too. He couldn't get close to anything to do with *us*, obviously, besides at that point we had nothing – nothing – on Channel 4.

So yeah, we weren't getting much good work experience doing things we loved, we were just exploiting ourselves really, for that soulless multipurpose liquid, money. Sometimes we think we're quite anarchist and anti-capitalist, and I'll always get called the hippy, but usually we're just can't-be-arsed, and sometimes we just go with the flow. In that period we were going with the cash flow, swimming in what we had very little passion for, but we were doing few hours and enjoying ourselves all the time. We're not the kind of people to let the trivial worries of work get on top of us. At the end of nearly every day we'd end up slouched around the condemned sofas of Starbuck's basement, doing the usual.

But the usual style of conversation was used to discuss the unusual. Things like - just what had been going on behind our lives since the road trip? Were we all still OK with it? What did we expect? Did we think they were filming now? Who was behind it? What was The Organisation? Who was The Organiser?

All of us reckoned they were giving filming a break. Obviously that would be what they wanted us to think because they'd gone to such efforts to keep hidden, yet we were confident – with no justification – that the basement was free from electronic spies. We could lead proper, non-immortalised lives.

We loved suspect hunting. It was all guesswork really, but occasionally we'd stumble on something and persuade ourselves.

Of course! It must be Zoë Groundhappenent!

That was the sort of theory we'd come out with. Surely it was Zoë – she was one of our best mutual friends so she knew where we hung out, what kinds of things we'd do, who we trusted, what our best sides were and how great we were. She was also involved in the Reading University distraction fiasco, while The Organisation were co-ordinating with our parents and so on. We thought it'd be amazing if it was one of our friends like that who was the creative driving force between our 'Polished Realism' film.

But what if!.. What if it was Danny Reece! Old Danny, the boy who wanted to touch the sky, who returned to our lives to haunt us with the latest in surveillance equipment, because we treated him so badly?

More likely Zoë. If it was going to be any friend, it was probably going to be her, though we knew a few other could-be classic culprits.

Could Zoë have been working with Will's parents? They surely had the resources to engineer such a project, if anybody did. Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter and Zoë Groundhappenent: prime suspects.

In retrospect, maybe we were closer than we thought.

So we were working, conjecturing, having fun. There were times in Starbuck's basement when we got carried away with our crisp fifty pound notes and candid camera hopes. I distinctly remember one thing that Fack said as we

were letting our ambitions and imaginations wank each other off (come on, you'd do it too, if you knew you were going to be a star in a cutting edge film). We were talking about how we wanted to make it big together. If we weren't knackered we would have done a good fists-together-and-huzzah! But then Fack just said,

"Can't we just make it *happy* together? Wouldn't that be enough?"

And he was right, definitely.

But we still felt we'd gotten caught up in so much and so much had been promised, relatively little delivered. When we called what was happening to us a 'shitty version of The Game', we were issuing a kind of challenge. We were saying to The Organisation and The Organiser (we abbreviated - The Organs): we want you to make this a good film. We want you to put us to the test and see us at our extremes. We want you to make this a *good* version of The Game, or at least a *good* version of something else. You've got to give us more.

We wanted more. We wanted something truly exceptional, something life changing, groundbreaking, and zupercool.

Well, it's always good to wipe a cringe off Cristo's face.

They must have been listening. They didn't change things straight away - maybe that was the plan all along - but the cameras would wake. And everything was going to change.



## **The Time I Squeezed my Cock Harder than Ever**

By Fack

You can climb trees when they're snowy. Not many people do, but you can. You've got to keep warm and you've got to make sure you've got nothing better to do, of course. I think I keep myself warm by being naturally fidgety. And there are no leaves on winter trees so you're more exposed and your route to the top is clearer.

This is what I said to get the guys to come tree climbing with me, in one of our usual spots by The Meadow, our meadow, around Christmas time. I was shivery and fidgety so I was basically boiling hot and I just rose up the trees, like heat rising, like a furry langur monkey rising. We were all hanging from the branches while it was lightly snowing. We were Christmas tree decorations. Nobody else was there and soon it was the black of night. It was eerie but it still had that Christmas heartiness and smiliness.

Once we were bored we got down and decided we'd start a bonfire, so we collected dead logs and dry twigs. I think it was the eve of Christmas eve. We didn't have to be back at our homes for any reason. Grabbing for firewood made us all fall over in the dark, but not too much because our eyes were in night vision and we knew those woods. Soon we were all sitting around a spitting, orangey fire that was keeping us from freezing, constantly tending to it and sharing our fire knowledge. Cristo knew how to store fire in a plastic Coke bottle, but he couldn't get it to work. We were talking about loads of things like regrets and non-regrets and places we'd wanked and other stuff that got us all laughing and asking for more.

Then the others all started smoking weed, and I never do that and that's always something we talk about, so we started talking about it. Haven't you ever just wanted to try it? That's what they usually say, and I say that no, not really, I haven't. Come on, bow to peer pressure, Fack, it's pretty, they tell me. I usually just shake my head and smile contentedly, as if I don't want or need it, because I don't. Zeph said that it's like dreaming, where the real and the unreal collide and you get cool ideas. I like cool ideas. Will said something over-my-head about it being less like escapism and more like compounded realism or something, because it's the same chemicals and the same reality but working in a different, kind of better way. Cristo said something about it not hurting me, or anyone, because it's not addictive at all, and as long as you don't destroy your brain with the stuff and become a stoner, there's nothing wrong to weed. I'd heard all this stuff before, they just wanted me to join in.

I told them they could never be sure about the dangers of drugs and also that my parents never drank or smoked much so it probably wasn't in my blood. Of course it wasn't in my blood! They were getting silly and giggly but I know better than to think that's just an act. I could smell it everywhere, I hate it. I've always been the token non-toker with them.

Have fun when you're young! Cristo said that when you're old you won't be able to be properly happy, ever again. When an old person's happy it's just tragic and that's all. I sort of agreed. I was also seeing how near I could get my

hands to the flames. I kept getting nearly burnt but went back for more, because I love toasting my fingers on wood fire.

My usual line is that I'm simply fine without drugs, so why take them?

Drugs are lovely, they say, and why wouldn't you want lovely things?

I never like it when people bring love into it, with drugs. I know 'lovely' is just a word that means good, but I hate it when people mean 'love'. It's nothing to do with love, it's just a trick really, isn't it? You're not falling in love with anyone, you're not being kind to anyone or making anyone's life better when you're just smoking. That's not proper love. All of the black rappers who sing about love and drugs, they've got it all wrong. When they link them at least. That's what I was saying and it's what I believe.

Zeph kept going on about how it gave him ideas he wouldn't otherwise get from just thinking normally. I've never liked that, either. I'm an artist, at least I try. You can come up with so many ideas that are beautiful, without drugs, and I swear that somebody like Zeph doesn't need any, because I've read short stories he wrote before he even knew of drugs, and they're inspired and imaginative. He gets enough ideas from his dreams anyway. I don't think it's good to rely on drugs for inspiration, or happiness, or anything, because it is just a trick in a way, that's the thing.

It doesn't hurt anyone. That's what they say. But nor does climbing trees (*'Apart from the tree climbers who fall and die, Fucky'* - Cristo), and I was telling them how much I preferred climbing trees, and when they looked at each other saying 'we prefer weed' with their eyes, I felt like shit. You don't want your friends to prefer some dirty plant to doing something with you that's just natural fun. I didn't feel seriously bad, it was more a fear that things could change.

Because that's the thing - I think there are better things in the world than weed. Like friends and love and family and art and nature and-

It's not an ultimate good. Zeph was saying that it's just a good, and it is natural, and it's not an ultimate good, just one for fun. I think it's weird natural, not proper, but I'm still in half minds about drugs really.

At around that point a plastic bag we were using for something flew off and we all shouted, don't litter!! and Cristo got up and sprinted after it. When he got it he just threw it into the fire, where it burnt into a horrible sticky smell. We always liked doing that, being masters of everything. I don't get upset when my friends are smoking, I don't really mind, so I was still having a good festive time and I was probably still fidgeting all over the place.

Will said that it didn't matter if I smoked, or they smoked, because it didn't make us who we were either way. I said cheers to that - I was drinking pure orange juice and pretending it was mulled wine.

It's always just a peripheral, is what Will said. Then he explained this theory he'd come up with. He calls it his 'Theory of the Complete.' He reckons us four all have happy families, able bodies and minds, good prospects, no real problems, so all our minor problems are just that - 'trivial and peripheral, unnecessary and superfluous'. We didn't have troubled childhoods, or leaning difficulties, or anything like that, and we're in this wonderful Western world

where everything's fine and we're Complete. Goths and pikeys and other social groups all have some lacking that they need to make up for somehow. We're just Complete, happy to just do silly little things and float on the surface of our conquered world. It might not be fair, but it's how it is. This is what Will was saying, that we, like many others, are The Complete.

That's *complete* bollocks, I said. Of all Will's theories, I thought that was one of the pantsest. Where the crap did he get that from? He was just assuming everything and that pissed me off. I don't like it when people assume that their friends are just like themselves. I was telling Will, what stops us from having real problems too? Huh? What keeps us from keeping them secret? And what about having to cope with everything? And getting a wife and a family in the end? I mean, I worry about that kind of stuff, and more importantly I'd say I've had troubles in my life. That's what I was really thinking off. But both me and Zeph have had problems getting girls, and things like that. We're not like Gods. I don't like it when Will gets carried away like that. We're not Gods and nobody's Complete. Nobody.

We're not the kind of tragic gimps who are always dealing with our 'life problems', was what Will was saying. None of our problems are real.

Bullshit. We're not living in Alex Mack country – we're not all perfect, waiting for a radiation spill to introduce drama to our lives. They liked my Alex Mack argument. I think Zeph and Cristo agreed with me *and* Will.

Will said something like, whatever, he'd go on doing drugs because it wasn't going to stop him from being a Complete. He didn't do much, it was true. That was it, the argument seemed to be over, so we tried to bring up other things.

But my mind was on fire. It had caught light, thanks to Will, and I really felt like the fire, glowing like the sun, full of energy and life that destroyed lesser things. The putrid weed smell, my cold ears, those drugged red eyes of my friends that didn't smile at me, that stupid ignorant theory, the giggling I wasn't enjoying, the way I couldn't ever actually touch the flame, the way they breathed smoke in my face – I loved them still, I wasn't going psycho against them or anything – but I was raged and burning like the sun, in that black and Christmas meadow. I stood up, dizzy, furious, whirling, smokey, fidgeting, awkward around my fantastic friends, tingling in my fingers, seeing just fire – I rarely get angry – but I had to tell them something and I needed to be on fire.

I had to spin around because I had to clutch my balls. It's just what I do when I get agitated, OK? I was clutching on and it was soothing me, but I don't like anyone seeing me like that. It looks like I'm fiddling with myself, for fuck's sake. It was easing the anger and I still needed to tell them something.

I prefer dealing with speech inside normal paragraphs so I'm going to keep doing that. I can't remember speech properly, especially *that* speech. I was clutching onto my balls and my cock, ready to tell my friends something big. Something that made me an Incomplete, something I'd run away from and I'd never stopped running.

*Because I was a fucking druggy, guys, I was a fucking heroin addict, they called me Smack Fack, and I know drugs, I've lived drugs, and the only reason I know any of you is because they were destroying me.*

It was revelation time. I tried desperately to get my hands off my genitals.

It all started when I was 14. Wait, no that wasn't the beginning of the time with my friends – who were just like you lot, and we hung out in woods like these, smoking, climbing trees, playing around, getting more lost than we do, but they were great like you lot – and 14 wasn't the beginning of drugs. All of us did it from 12 or 13, just smoking dope like you do. I know, me, Fack, the anti-drug.

Standing up, sweating and molesting myself by the bonfire, I was letting my heart beat control all the talking, thumping as it was, as Cristo played a few sinister chords on the guitar to lighten the mood.

It was my home, my little village, Tumpchester, and my friends were the nicest people in my little world. It was great. And I was into the drugs. Sure. Just lots of dope – *lots* of dope, considering we were still kiddies. Dope and the dope. More than you. Ecstasy wasn't really accepted because it was too much effort and it didn't chill people out. We drank loads, of course, cider by the bucket, it's just how we hung out and partied. You know. From then on, something was always wrong. I was 14 when the heroin began. I was there when everybody started using it for the first time, smoking it with weed – dusting the weed with the smack. Chasing the tiger. Everybody calls them A-bombs but we called them Shithots.

And what's heroin like?

I knew that's what they wanted to know, you know, as well as the tragedy of my life.

Pretty good. It slowed everything down so it felt like I was hardly breathing, like I was taken by the wind, like how Will's always going on about souls flying everywhere – floating on a breeze. With the wind. I'd dig my fingers into the earth and just be there, smiling as I flew through my own hair and hugged Mother Nature. I was in God's palm as he blew me through the sky like soft dandelion seeds. So, yeah, it was pretty good.

Now, I thought heroin was instantly, mega addictive.

Zeph asked, isn't it?

That's why I didn't really want to take it and my friends had to persuade me, because we were all doing it. Just like how you lot try to get me to smoke. They swore it wasn't and I didn't really believe them but I was wasted anyway. Try to imagine it. I was everywhere. So I did try it and it was pretty good. But I was a good boy, not a smack head, not an *addict*, I didn't want to become one.

Will said that I was A Complete. I said that, no, I wasn't, and that he wasn't understanding at all. I had my problems, not major problems, and I wasn't a Complete but I wasn't going to get addicted to heroin.

It's not instant mega addiction, at least it wasn't for me. It was hard, don't get me wrong. We'd been smoking Shithots twice or thrice a week, for a fair few weeks, and it was feeling so wrong. I got out before it was too late. I wish more people did. We were all using our savings to pay for the heroin. Nobody was

really turning to crime. Not then. Now, they are, but I don't keep in touch with them much.

My parents didn't find out. As I was bringing myself off the heroin I told them everything. I told them I was trying to stop, that it wasn't too hard, that it was going to work and I wanted to get away. They wanted to inform the parents of all my friends but I made sure they didn't, because they were still my friends. They're like you but they go to heaven four times a week and kill themselves more – they still do, I think. I never got past smoking, onto injecting it and chasing the dragon, but lots of them did, most. They're great but they're destroying themselves, not really physically, but socially, they're one-trick ponies, they're just doing drugs all the time, that's it. They've destroyed their personalities.

Getting over it was just like a massive hangover. It's called a 'cluck'. I was lucky. I'd never had that much, never injected. When I was doing it, it felt like I wasn't breathing because I was so calm and slow. I didn't want my baby to grow. That's what they all called it – my baby. I want a proper baby, not a heroin baby. Just another deck, just another deck... to share... and I'd say, no way. Come on, we'll get a zed, you'll feel great. I had to say no so many times. Things were just getting less fun and more drugs. It wasn't pure fun, it was *Pure* fun.

This girl, Jessy, who I really fancied, became a complete scag slag, she'd give herself to anyone for another hit. I was getting out by this point – moving to the other side of the country, to here, Blindfield, where we all hoped there wouldn't be so many drugs. I just hated the idea of my life turning terrible, turning into Trainspotting. I had to move away from all my friends, who I'd loved and was a part of, people like you.

I was telling them this so honestly, right from my heart. It's just, I said, I know it's not the same, but I don't want to lose more friends like that, that's why I don't join in and why I get worried when you're smoking. I know you'll all be fine but I can't lose everything again. I'd love to be A Complete, but I'm not.

You are, Fack, Will said. I still don't agree. Not with my history.

I don't want to lose everything again, I certainly don't want to lose myself like that. The week I left, they were injecting like it was part of a normal day. There was the routine of cleaning, burning, flicking, just sitting there like fucking statues. They all blamed the law for the harm that drugs caused, for forcing shit to be put into heroin, and raising its price, but it *had* them. They couldn't escape the wind and they lost themselves to that drug. They're just stoners now, I don't know them.

When I moved to Blindfield I was optimistic. Clean life seemed muted and I was always waiting for something that never really came, because the craving was still there somewhere and I was used to so many drugs. I think I just worried myself out of it, you know? I still liked things like animals, and making friends, and my art, but I wasn't part of this euphoric thing that took over me and loved me, you know? Heroin was bad and good, good and bad, never just one or the other, never anything but extreme. I still remember the sense that I understood the whole world and the whole world understood me.

When I say that drugs are just a trick, I'm bluffing, partly. It never felt like they were.

That's why I'm your friend, guys. Thank smack.

They were all shocked, duh, and had a hundred questions. They still didn't know how I could have afforded it, because I am quite poor, but I said, so what? That doesn't matter when you're staring at perfection, I spent hundreds from my savings on it. It felt so weird talking about my old friends, heroin included, with the new.

Zeph said that it'd make a good film and we all laughed, looking into the woods for the red light of a camera.

They all stopped smoking, out of respect, I think.

We decided we'd stay the night there, even though it was ready to snow again – probably *because* it was ready to snow again. It was good. I was all out of energy because I'd told them so much. I'd always wanted to tell them. We lay under the blankets and then I got up to piss the fire to sleep. It looked like I was pissing smoke, it was a gem. I realised that we all had black faces from the fire, covered in smoke. It was our black Christmas.

Before we even slept they were all taking the piss out of me, calling me a substance abuser, making sure I didn't need another hit before I went to sleep. It's the ghost of my past, not my present, so I was fine. We all stunk of smoke and weed. We all woke up with fresh, wet snow on our faces, ready for a snowball fight. None of us were Complete. They knew a fraction more of me. They knew me. We were all better than Complete.

## Me as an Incomplete

By Zeph + Young Zeph

Don't worry, we'll get to the point where the cameras woke and everything changed. Now, at around this point in time I certainly did have a squashed heart. I felt lonely and unloved because I'd never had a girlfriend, despite my ravishing good looks, my personality, my immense effort, my passion, my everything. I was plagued by it and it was the hardest thing I'd ever had to deal with – even harder than serious things like illness, death, and the futility of life. I think that the me of that time is best qualified to explain how I felt, so here's an authentic page I wrote back then... it was provisionally titled '*I have fallen in love but only ever fallen alone,*' and I never found a better title for it. So here, wallow with me for a while in the misery of my past...

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*I'd love to be the one  
To be there and to care  
Who makes you smile all the time  
So please exist, it's only fair*

That I've cared so much and never got a chance has always weighed heavy on my heart, sometimes, like now, unbearably so. It's terrible. It hurts so much because I love so much, and I'll take all the sad, but I just want to have one love, and that's all, and it'll be all happy [*I was possibly drunk, definitely crying*]. It'll be all fine and I'll be happy again, instead of a lonely, unloved mess like I am now. Cos I just want one girl to see me for who I am and let me be who I am and that's all. That's all. That's what I want more than anything.

Always positive, oh yeah always positive, but so sad. There are periods when I can ignore this, and periods where I dwell on every girl – Rebecca, Zoë, Kriss... every lost love of life and every nail-in-coffin rejection. My imagination is my only lover's birthplace and only tryst, but I can't live on fantasy. All I have are my ideals and my dreams and they just end up destroying me – this all destroys me. I've loved not wisely, but too well, no, too much. More than any girl could ever want. But no prospects and no past. I can't be me. It's an unrequited best thing ever. It's only goodie emotdions [sic.], I just want them to be wanted - me, wanted. There's nothing much worse than a love that can't be lovely, a want that isn't wanted.

*They say it's good to wake  
From silly, too sweet dreams  
But some dreams seem so good that we  
Hold on and cherish sleep*

*A man who cannot paint  
But who pictures the most beautiful scene  
Cannot do justice to his vision*

*All he can do is dream*

*I'd love to paint, I've tried in vain  
It's one thing I'd love to do  
And if I only could somehow  
I'd paint my dreams of you*



## Sex, Fucks, and Cock and Hole

By Cristo

Or, in other words, romance. The new year brought new boning opportunities for us all, and all the hot ladies who managed to ensnare us. I had the quickest episode of the lot, pulling off a nifty one-nighter with a club-bred brunette who, my Heineken assured me, looked pretty-ish. The others all had to put in a bit more effort. Girls take effort. They lap it up. But you've gotta give it because you've gotta get it – romance, I mean. Romance and cuddles.

There was a day when it was just me and Zeph doing nothing, bored and wanting to do something. Fack was in a cottage in Snowdonia and Will was in a bed in a fit-as-fuck girl's house. Me and Zeph decided to go to London, make a wacky adventure day of it, so we did. We got our greasy hands on some good daytrip action.

The station was crisp and cold and kinda dead, but it didn't put us off. We decided that, oh man! we were going to find us some lady love. We were full on booty watching and talking about how, sure girls look better in summer because they show you more for free, but the winter gives everything a sexy edge. It's gotta be the frost. We were eyeing up even the uglies, we sure were on heat, and we burned our way to London, our eyes melting all the hearts of every fifteen to thirty year old girl on the train. Hearts are behind breasts, you see, and that's where we licked with our flamey gaze. God, if good-ish girls looked at me the way I look at them... God.

Meanwhile, Will was probably in bed with some Hannah, a local Blindfield lass who he'd hooked up with by being such a *bastardo fortunato*. You know Will gets a lot of flesh, but you've got to give it to him he does it all the right way. He never lies to girls or leads them on – if he thinks/hopes it'll be just a fling thing, he'll say, if he wants a bigger piece – a few more fingers in the pie – he'll say. Hannah was one of his first serious, effort girlfriends. All of us thought she was the most delicious girl in the world, and nice too. Tasty red-brown hair, skin softer than teddy bears, a mouth made for kissing, eyes that you always wanted to look at but you *really* wanted to be looking at you – it was all going for her. On that London day, me and Zeph realised we liked over fifty different “personality components” of girls – back of lower leg, ear lobe, palms, pits, loads of different places on the arms, and obvious ones like tits and, you know, and the list went on. We pay lots of attention to detail. Real personality means more than all of those of course – Zeph said he only felt attracted to girls who “seem genuinely lovely.” Will was having a ball with the girl who had it all. I'm no vicarious cock fascist but I can't help but get excited by thinking about Will paying a visit to all of those 50+ locations, enjoying the local cuisine. God. He was actually living the dream, the glutton.

When we got to London we had some chilli pretzels and milkshakes and started to brainstorm plans for the day. London Eye was too expensive and dull – the slowest Ferris wheel in the god-damn world. Cinemas weren't really London,

they were big sofas. Most of outside was too cold, though I had my mittens so I was fine with anything. We settled on ice-skating, how dainty, so we went to wherever that round iceskating park is, where businessmen look down and laugh at you while they're eating their golden lobster.

We were shit but we weren't falling over. I'm usually better at these skill-based dancing sports, but I can never get the hang of ice. An ice floor must be my fatal floor. I guess. We started daring each other to do pretend falls, we were such jack asses™. We'd go out on solo missions and fall on our knees, our arses, both. Some delicate girls started smiling at us. Nothing came of that, but then we just kicked back on the wall, swinging our feet just above the ice, checking out the ice maidens. Zeph dared me to jack off right there and we investigated into how feasible that'd be, but no, it was too risky. You shouldn't really do danger wanks with friends anyway, it's nasty. At least, you should never tell them.

Will wasn't there to pay us to do it. He does that sort of thing, exploiting us and others with his cash, the sicko.

At around that point I set myself the day-deadlined aim of finding Zeph some loving, the charity case (*"easier than finding it for yourself"* – Zee).

While we were skating, and Will was fucking the fuckable, Fack was in Snowdonia, in a cottage in the winter rain and Welsh dreariness. It seemed like he'd drawn the short straw, bummed out, but maybe he didn't. I'll tell you now, he didn't. Fack's another shy relationship shitcase, like Zeph – more shy, but less of a shitcase – so it's good to hear when he gets some fun with a capital SEX. We were getting texts on the ice about how he'd found some girl who was "the most naturally beautiful girl in all of nature", so at least fit. She was called Siân, which you pronounce just like Sean, like Sean Bean, as far as I care. We were texting him telling him he should pounce her and make something of it. We were so up for everything ourselves. We thought he'd be too shy but turns out he wasn't and the very next day he pounced her. Then he was like officially with her for the whole of the next week, pouncing whenever he could, and they were the new sweet couple.

To us guys back home it was just like a fairy tale or a joke. We'd never known Fack to have a girlfriend so we weren't used to it, it was just like, WTF? Tragically we never got to see the gal because they decided to leave it as a two week relationship, ships passing n' all. She was going to America for some reason and Fack was busy with, well, us, cocking around. She's going to Reading Uni this October and so's Fack. He won't admit it but we know it's because he wants another chance to bone her. He's always a'reminiscin' about those two weeks and their walks through the sheep. The Sheep in the Mist. Real quiet girl, mysterious, weird – suited to our lil' Fack, this Sean. Good on him, it was a sweet bonus for him. He'll never say what he actually got up to, physically, with her, even though that was what we all wanted to know. He'd tell us about how he got to know her by drawing a picture of her when he was sketching the landscape, and how she had to get away from her parents to be with him, and they'd hold hands for ages, and all that. Boy did he fall in love with that Sean in two seconds. He hated how he couldn't see her more, when he got back he phoned her up in America for a few

weeks, but then it all plotzed and he's only started talking to her again recently, before uni, just in case. Stupid smack addict, I hope that girl jumps his bone.

Back in London, at a time before Fack'd pounced, we tubed it over to Regent's Park where we were sure to find something to do. We got some piss-taste hotdogs, smothered them in ketchup so they tasted great, and sat on the bench and simply watched sexy girls walk by. *Para manteneas calientes las salchichas*. We were whipping each other into going and asking girls for numbers and throwing lines at them. Zeph was too lame but I went up to one and asked for her number, but she said she lived in Kentucky, and I said, "so?" Then she gave me her Kentucky number, sure maybe because she was just scared, but it was still one nil, Cristo wins. Then we thought we'd show off by demonstrating our tree-climbing madskills outside the zoo. We were so high up that people felt special when they saw us up there. Yeah, because it takes real skill to look up, wankoids. We proved that we don't need Fack to climb trees, and we got the bonus of looking like escaped monkeys. Zeph got down first and I spat at him and I got him, the fat-necked bitch. He's got a disproportionately fat neck you see, makes for a good target.

Then we climbed a smaller tree and just posed like Topman models, winter collection, and counted how many girls checked us both out. Zeph won by miles but I never told him that – there you go Zeph, find yourself a fucking trophy.

I was still trying to get him to ask girls out, it would've been dandy, but he said it was all wrong, that wasn't how it was going to happen, but he was tempted. If he knew he would've succeeded, he would've done it. Wouldn't we all? We had to give up because it just wasn't going to happen, stopped at step one.

"Fuck it, let's just go to the Trocadero," I said. Zeph was with me. We knew we wouldn't find girls in the hypercoloured, Jap-filled geek pit of the Trocadero's arcade, but we'd find our electrical heaven and get our fix. It'd been a bitchin' day, we didn't want girls to ruin it for us. We wanted video games.

"And I'll play Fighting Mania and beat Shuh: The Star of Benevolence, and you can tend to the alfalfa and keep a rabbit and, and..." he was jabbering. He really did want another shot at his nemesis. We checked out all the girls on the way, that goes without saying. Zeph even nearly approached one as a last minute desperation thing, but she changed direction and left him talking to a lamppost. Then we got to the 'dero and started wasting our pounds on some air guitar simulator that involved a lot of Kwow!!, as we like to call it. I did it straightaway on expert, it was fine, and then I busted out a mean 'Dude Looks Like a Lady' and moved on. Gun games, skateboarding games, a fishing game, some doink game called Panic Park where we had to beat each other up, and we were wasting money like pros. It's not wasting, it's using – it's play money. Zeph nearly fell asleep in the Jurassic Park booth – we've played that game so much, he can't even remember when it made him shit his pants, guarantee. I told him to wake up because he wasn't leaving me alone in London, and he wasn't going to be left alone with fucking virtual raptors.

To finish it off obviously we had to fight The Level Boss... Shuh. It was Zeph's fight. He had a hard-on for that Star of Benevolence. He was all ready to

put on his boxing gloves and punch like a crazed fucker at the pads. I wanted to see him pull off those sweaty 60-punch combos. On the road trip he'd play that game till his knuckles bled, and add a girl.

We got to the Fighting Mania: Fist of the North Star booth but there was some fit girl playing it so we had to wait. We were both tired out of London and the effort involved, so we were lounging around, hoping she'd just finish. Zeph noticed and nudged me, and was like,

"She's fighting Shuh!"

"The Star of Benevolence?"

"No jokes, Cristo." And so she was. Shuh was shouting his pre-battle jizz and she was bouncing around, getting ready. She was pretty fit – small, boobs, nice face, tight clothes, brown hair highlighted with some kind of blonde, kinky bracelets. Zeph was on point and showed me some "I'd do her" looks. I knew what'd really impress him – what'd *really* make his blood go like jelly for sex. To beat Shuh, that's what she'd need to do. Guess what happens.

*Storm Sky Hurricane meets East Wind Dragon Punch!*

*Good! OK! Good! Bad! Good!*

*You won't be the one who looks the end of me!*

*I'll show you how to take me down!!*

*Good! Good! Bad! OK! Good! Good!*

*You win!*

A better brawler than Zeph, any day. He was in love. He'd probably fallen in love with about seventy girls that day, but her more than any. He whispered in my ear that she was "the most naturally fit girl in all of Fitsville." I told him to-

"Do it, don't lose it, Zee." I pushed him into her – she was jabbing at a new fighter – but he held back. Then he made to whisper something into my ear again, lingered as if he was about to kiss my ear, didn't say anything, and then yanked himself over to the side of Fighting Mania. He was pumped.

"Hey, I've never beaten Shuh before," he said loudly and clearly to her, trembling all the same. What a chat up line, the fuck.

"Yeah," she went, "you mean The Star of Benevolence, right?"

"Yeah." Bang, it was away, it was set. She kept fighting and talking to him – Shuh wasn't even that hard, only medium difficulty or something. It wasn't long before he was having a go, and she was talking to us – mainly Zeph – and giving tips on how to beat Shuh. And then, finally, he beat the benevolent gimp.

It wasn't long after that when they were walking around, fiddling behind the arcade cabinets, and getting married. Nah, they didn't kiss or anything but she showed us all her favourite arcade machines, probably because she took such a shine to Zeph, and Zeph took a shine to her, and I was Mr. Super Wheel the Third, but it was great because it seemed like Zeph was cashing in his luck, big time. Like those roles of tokens you get when you play the shit games. She was fit. We found out she was called Yvonne, she lived in London, and she was single.

I kept elbowing Zeph in the kidneys and bulging my eyes at him. We were walking around those game machines for so long, in the end I said to him something blatant like,

“Well, I guess I’ve got to leave, feed the dog.” He was fine with that, the *bastardo*. He spent the whole night with her. He texted me saying he was “the most naturally happy boy in all of nature.” Later he texted again saying, “everything’s perfect. She’s my chance. We’re drunk together. I want to love her now forever.”

## Return From Subplot

By Will

We barely had time to settle into our next casually etched out hiatus, when luck struck and ruined all of our poorly conceived plans. To root out our organised observers; to start up a business in the Heavenknowswhat industry; to pay proper attention to The (sacred) Plan – all was left for later, all because one letter arrived through my letter box, the Prime Mover in a world of disruption. It set things off, like some frolicsome imp pouring the contents of an unlabelled phial into a cauldron, or like the advert The Royal Mail wish they'd made.

The letter itself was physically unexceptional, yet the first line was a triumph of gratification. 'You have won a prize!' it informed me. Apparently I'd won third prize in the farmyard charity raffle I'd entered into at the winter dance. And to think I'd said goodbye to that pound as a sympathy donation! Since we'd all – the complete quartet – bought tickets jointly, I guessed that morally I was obliged to collect and share the prize with the guys.

We left from Fack's like fat vultures ready to descend on the meat of chance, with 'Walk of Life' chirping optimistically, not thwarted by the quality of Fack's speakers. We timed it impeccably – it's always a merrily accepted challenge to choose a track that's temporally identical to the journey.

When we reached Brooklane Farmyard we saw a tottering large-aged man strolling down the track, and he instantly recognised us as prize-winners, beckoning us to park and receive.

He checked our letter and let out a friendly oldman's gasp, "Oh yes, oh yes! You came keen! Third prize then, was it?" We hadn't met him at the dance, he was a venerable old oak of a man, all gnarled and coated in silvery moss. "Guess you're wondering why you're coming over 'ere to Brooklane 'stead of Wappits, where the dance was, but it's just due to us not wanting to lug all this cider around!" So that was the bounty. "The whole crate is yours!" he said as he carried a dozen cider bottles out of a ramshackle shed. "It's all cracking cider, best we do, and I know how you young ones glug it! Here, now take my number just in case you need any help, and it's been a pleasure exchanging benefits with you!" He handed me a scrap of paper with a telephone number on it and Zeph took the brunt of the cider, holding it tightly to his vintage Barcelona FC top. We were soon back in the car, vilifying the cider but giving rave reviews of the oaken old gentleman.

"It tastes of arse," was the consensus. "But he was well nice." We somehow managed to empty a whole bottle of that grim tonic, and as Cristo replaced the bottle of dregs he found a modestly sized package in the crate. It was a muddied, obviously well used envelope stuffed with a piece of paper and, it intrigued us, some sort of electronic device. Cristo shrugged it off as a "bonus" before conjecturing what it actually was. It was something, that was certain. As soon as the torn, worn piece of paper was unravelled it was obvious what it was. Fack, just for completeness, told us what it was we were looking at.

"It's a map!"

"No crapping us," said Cristo as he allowed himself the first investigation. It didn't take him a moment to link it with one of his stored schemas. However, as he told us where the map was of and where the map gave directions to, he obviously didn't have the faintest idea *what* the map gave directions to, or why we had it. It was a map of the area around Regan's Wood, which was connected to the forest of our meadow, but far away and on the other side of Blindfield. It was a simple case of an "X marks the spot," and a "Let's zoom," and we were automobiling along the late-winter lanes as fast as a fox on a hunt, but obviously on the more enviable side of the chase.

We parked the car by one of the large arrows on the map and delved straight into the mysterious treasure chest of woodland that was lined with dulled gold sunshine and opened with a waft of frosty anticipation. Luckily, Cristo always knows which way is north, as if he has a hair in his brain which stays concentrated on that compass point, so we weren't to become lost boys of the woods. Fack was in awe of natural phenomena such as, "you see, the trees are still alive but they look dead." Zeph wondered if one left a corpse for a sizeable length of time it may one day, "come alive again, like a tree does in spring, with new buds of consciousness." Cristo refuted such a hypothesis, "Fuck artists." Then Cristo asked me what he thought'd got us on this goose chase, "spontaneity or causality?" I held that spontaneity was a mere subcategory of causality, but before we could rigorously discuss the subject Cristo realised we were very near to the X. At that point I wondered whether or not to send a text to Hannah, my erstwhile girlfriend, just in case we found ourselves gobbled to death by a red herring, or a drug baron, or an alliance of the two. I decided against it and forced manly courage into my veins, unnecessary paranoia out.

We were there. *Where?* And the X marked *what?* Cristo was sure we were at the right place on the map. He proved it with much confidence and many hand gestures. He drew the black electronic gizmo from out of the package and pressed it around in all manner of ways. One way must have done something because, about thirty yards away, a bush started beeping at us. Either the gizmo was involved, or the bush was just saying a quaint binary hello. Cristo told us it was an "electronic finder thingy" and we all understood – it was directing us to the gregarious bush. We all moved with super-intrigue, of course, and soon it was a competition to see who could locate our bonus prize first. With a "huzzah!" I caught sight of a flashing L.E.D *behind* the bush, but the bush was too scratchy for my high-society hands to probe. Fack rammed his whole body in, disregarding the scrapes of red made to his flesh and coming out the other side.

"It goes back further! It's between those two bushes too, wait, there's something there..." The flashing and beeping stopped, so Cristo activated his technothingsy again and we all helped guide Fack. "There's a little shed down here! Guys, you've got to come here, the light is on the door. Just run through the bush, it won't hurt you – there's a secret shed down here!" A secret shed? We were all in, the funtabulous four. After a moment's pause, we opened the door. Well, it wasn't really a shed, but it was definitely the something we were after.

Our eyes were filled with things amazing and spectacular.

Obscenely naked ladies and naked men trapped in 2D on the wall; minimalist lingerie draped over the twigs and stumps serving as walls; chairs decorated with hearts; an innocent set of fine china on a table; cameras, obviously kinky; an open cabinet brimming with condoms it went on. Slowly, the sex seeped into us and I realised, dear God, we'd found some sordid secret sex haunt. The worst was yet to come.

"Bonus?" Cristo whimpered. Surely we weren't meant to be there. We'd accidentally found a subscription porn channel and then accidentally fallen into it. Maybe I should've told Hannah I was up to something random, to save me in case the red herring and the drug baron jumped out from a shadow (not that there were any) and coerced me into a sticky role as Lucky Pierre. Before I had time to work anything else out Zeph pointed at a piece of paper nailed to one of the branches of the wall. To be fair, the aesthetic clash of nature, raw sex, and superior furnishings worked well indeed. The piece of paper, that had thoroughly smacked Zeph's gob, showed a list of names, numbers, and some description of timetable. There were timetables and such things elsewhere, randomly inserted in the collage of salacious wallpaper.

"It's names and phone numbers."

"Sex club."

"There's no such party like a sex club party," said Zeph, not really believing what he was seeing. So this was a secret sex club's secluded rendezvous spot, where they arranged "meetings" and orgasms. I dreaded to think of what that curious smell was. I kept thinking, "what would Robin Hood think of this? What would he have to say?" Fack remarked how it was good they supplied condoms, and speculated some kind of membership charge. Did sex work like this? Was this normal? The worst was yet to come.

"You do realise," said Zeph, "that this does mean that our nice old cider man is a part of this." No! Not the venerable old oak of a man! But Zeph pointed out that his name, Arthur V., was on some of the lists.

"I thought people were too old to do it at that age," said Fack.

"They can still grow leaves, even if they do appear dead," I told him, disgusted at the thought of the oak making the beast with two backs. The worst was yet to come.

"Wait, I know some of these people! Shit, we went to school with a Lisa S who had a brother Jeremy S!" said Cristo, working out the awful truth. "They were both losers, but... wait..." and then it hit us. Lots of the timetabled sessions involved people with the same surname initial. Often with others thrown in. We realised that we were staring, not only at a club of sex, but the organisation of incest.

"There's no such party as a... fucked up incest party." Cristo was right. There really wasn't. Incest, orgies, role-plays, festivals, sex aids, contraceptives, cameras – a considerable sex cache. The cameras there weren't the kind we'd habituated to – invisible, undetectable, the emperor's latest.

"Is this illegal?" asked Fack.

"In at least five ways, I really hope," answered Zeph.



"Apart from the incest though, it's sort of gwool," tested Cristo, "it's pretty hardcore." I frowned furiously at him. Finally I'd actually found why Blindfield had such a reputation for bad-sex and incest, and how they kept the traditions alive. They weren't even attempting to hide anything there, it was all for show. It was certainly not a place to take your granny. Unless you're actually beyond empathy.

We heard voices, at least we thought we did and that was enough. We couldn't be caught, it would be a bit of a faux pas. So we hurried like foxes on the unenviable side of the hunt, out of the ad hoc shed door and around the bushes, ducking and scuttling along, then breaking out into a full sprint back to the car, not stopping once all the way, terrified. The red herring was the drug baron's brother and they'd unquestionably want us to be their four sisters. When we were panting and nervously laughing about it back at the car, we realised that one of us must've got a sheet of paper from the sex shed caught to a foot, or a jumper, or something, because a suspicious sheet was on the floor. It was definitely from the shed.

I nominated myself to read it out and I heard myself saying, "Group holiday, Isle of Wight, 23<sup>rd</sup> April to the 30<sup>th</sup> April." They'd got a villa and everybody was invited. Presumably it was a fairly no-holds barred affair. I coughed just before I read out a stunning line, "Climax on Wednesday the 30<sup>th</sup>, bring guests." Worryingly, it wasn't long before Cristo licked his lips and said, "Let's bust it," and we all checked our hollow schedules for the year and agreed. After all, it was a Wednesday, and everything happens on Wednesdays. I'd have to broach the subject in a jocular way with Hannah and say I surrendered to that unquenchable temptress: adventure. We were all wary but none of us had ever, as Fack put it, "crashed a climax," so it was a plan.

There's something that needs to be understood – something we all had to make sure we understood at the time. When we say "bust" the Isle of Wight sex party, we did *not* mean get involved. We meant we'd get sublimely excited by investigating into the sex party. I repeat, *not* getting involve. Also, our families were *not* to be invited. Ours souls were righteous and decent – we even discussed uncovering a major incest scene and doing rid of these foul animalistic hobbies. We were all exhilarated, our sympathetic nervous systems trying to keep up with our amazement. Yet our memories nudged their ways to the front and I raised the valid point of the whole debacle not being fit for broadcast (we were getting used to understanding our lives as films in the making. The Organs were unseen extras in our lives). Or had it even been recorded? Zeph's expert opinion was that it wasn't likely, "because there aren't sockets in the woods."

"There aren't many power sockets in a car either, Zenius," said Croesus, "but even if they'd recorded it, they couldn't use it because it'd be libellous." I was more concerned by the illegality of the scenes we'd witnessed but Cristo was keen to stress his idea, "You know, you don't want to see that your Dad's fucking your sister on some kind of futuristic Blair Witch Project starring nobodies."

"We are nobodies, aren't we? It doesn't feel like we're film stars," said Fack, "it feels like somebody's always behind us but it doesn't feel like we should be in front of loads of people. If you know... what I mean."

"Take the scandalous crap out and it'd make a perfect episode though," said Cristo between pants, "and throw in a bit of photographic manipulation and an artistic edit of the truth - and some stunt-double pornstars - and you've got four boys sitting around the bumfire."

"I can't believe we're going to the Isle of Wight," said Zeph, trying to control his broadening smile with his facial muscles and his hands.

Then, in true perfect episode style, my phone rang and everything turned critical.

"Will, pretend that you're talking to your friend Rick from school, and say that you can't talk right now. Do it." I complied. It was an authoritative, croaky, faintly familiar voice. "In a few minutes suggest you buy some more cider so you can replace the map, and ring the number I left with you. Now hang up. Now." I did it. My undergarments were on the verge of ruin. It was the oak of a man, speaking through a curiously different personality. I desperately wanted to tell the others that our favourite geriatric sex addict was making fearsome demands of me but I felt I couldn't, so I just did what the oak had said.

We turned into Brooklane Farmyard and they were all prepared for sneaky antics. Unbeknownst to them, the real sneak was the well nice man. The winter chill tried to warn us by snapping at our backs but it was no use. The wizened old oak looked just as amiable as he had before, but he confirmed everything when he peered into my eyes.

"You're back for some more cider are you? Follow me round the back of the shed and I'll find you a crate of the best!" We followed him around. It was Fack's job to cunningly place the map and the technothing somewhere - he's the most innocent and dextrous. We walked around to the other side of the shed, where an expanse of field presented itself to us. The old man span and said in an urgent hush,

"Don't bother with the map! I know you went there!" Terror struck. Nobody laughed. (*At this point I was thinking that we could totally have him' - Cristo*) Cristo appeared to be the most scared of the bunch. What had I let my friends into?

"Follow me," the oak creaked out. We obeyed, foxes on leashes. Zeph spoke out, for better or worse, "You know we can keep quiet about anything-"

"You'll keep quiet about *this*," the man said, "I don't care what you say about the woods." We were all confused but understanding would soon be reached.

"Now, I have to be quick. I know about the cameras because I'm an actor, I'm involved, and everything you've seen today has been a trick - a stage upon which you've been the naïve actors. They've used actors and hired your *friends* like Darren and Zoë to be actors, they've hired your *families*, to varying extents, to be actors, and they're writing you into a play, this film, this controversial film. They, The Organs, as you call them. Do you understand? I must be quick."

"Yes." (*At this point, I'm going to be honest, I didn't really understand, but I still thought we could totally have him' - Cristo*)

"Right, now it's not that there's a threat to you or that they'll hurt you. I'm warning you now - putting myself on the line - because I know what they've

planned to happen. This is like the opposite of a snuff movie. It's a case of it going *too* well, that's what you have to fear. All you can do now is play along. I can't explain everything, but I tell you now – either go away, by yourself, or stay together here. *Don't* be left alone in Blindfield. *Never* be the only one here. For the sake of your friendship. Do you understand? I *must* be quick."

"Yes." The field was being tickled all over by the ghostly wind.

"*Never* speak of this meeting. The cameras are everywhere, more than you think. Write silently on paper in pitch-blackness, if you must, but only ever that. Go to the Isle of Wight as suggested and there'll be an opportunity to get out of it there. Not yet, *God*, not yet. Stay together. You've got to think seriously about what you'd all do for fame. The sun could burn your skin. Don't look into her eyes. You understand? That is it."

"Yes."

"Then take this crate of cider and don't speak of this."

"Yes." I nearly rolled off a 'sir'. Cristo took the crate and we tried to get back to – and remember – normal ('*At this point I was thinking, Fuck Me*' - Cristo). We settled ourselves back into the car.

We opened a bottle of the cider and it still had that fine taste of arse. Fack drove as we tolerated the pungent bouquet, silenced our whinging pallets, and drank and drank and drank.

## The Room that Fack Built

By Will, Again

That night, we were individually undecided as to whether to trust the oaken man, and generally overcidered. We all ended up surrendering to the subtleties of the ambiguous caveats: we slept together. *Stay together, never be in Blindfield alone!* Without letting our newfound knowledge escape through our bated breaths and enter the ever-waiting, ever-present cameras, we shackled up at Fack's, ready to crash in giddy confusion. There was a moment of tension when poor Zeph asked me, didn't I have a girlfriend to tend to? No, I had to reply, when obviously I did. But then I wasn't too much out of character; I suppose I'm always one of the team.

Fack's house is one of those bizarre interior design anthologies that has different – though consistently slapdash – décors for every single room, yet is nevertheless more homely and welcoming than your own abode. Sometimes the patchwork beats the silk. (*'But silk patchwork – think of the glory!'* – Zeph)

We were being drunken dandies in the polka-dotted living room, writing stanzas in turn and creating some horrifically unintelligible “poem”. It was probably lost into a sweaty crevice of his pink leather sofa, best forgotten though a potential joy to find.

There was a noise in the (post-structuralist purple) kitchen. Something arose between a frozen strawberry cheesecake of Fack's and an intrepid hunger of Zeph's, culminating in Fack chasing Zeph into a previously undiscovered room. Zeph shouted for us all to follow him. With nothing better to do – and no cheesecake left – we did, abandoning our embarrassment of cooperative verse. We all entered a room we'd never even considered venturing into before – it was as if the door had only just then become visible to us.

We stepped inside.

Our eyes were filled with things amazing and spectacular. Once more.

It was that same thrill that we'd felt in the room in the woods. Less pornography, less sleaze, fewer stains, less shaking of my moral head.

It was instead a secret seam of beauty and wonder, a shooting star splattered over the walls for all to see, a domestic masterpiece, a once only, a smorgasbord for the soul. Fack calls it his Room of Beauty. I call it lovely, plain and simple.

Imagine a room somehow covered in *everything* and you probably aren't far off. I felt the sensory overload of a thousand lines by Keats as I was instantly drawn to all the innumerable focal points holding hands across the walls. I remember the life-size, caricatured painting of Dogmandu; the big bold sun made out of a mosaic of something – post-it notes! And glossy, enlarged photos collaged over winding vines of cloth; print-off plaques stuck everywhere; piles of spilling shoeboxes encroaching from the corners; glittering stars hanging from the ceiling – we were all taking closer looks. We realised that it was all art – not just Fack's art – competing for wall space, overflowing all together.

“Oh BTW I forgot to tell you,” played Fack, “I have this room you see...”

“What is this?” asked Cristo.

"It's just," answered Fack demurely, "stuff I like, like beautiful stuff." That was what I'd guessed. The post-it notes which formed the sun each had something scribbled on them. "They're all childhood memories." *Trying not to drown when swimming in the sink... Loving that boy who showed me how to push berries down the slide.* They reached out in rays all over the room. One caressed some sketches of female figures – girls with the most adorably happy eyes. Fack pointed at them as I looked from one to the other, labelling them as his "perfects." They were rough sketches but they each seemed like a real lover. "They're drawings of my perfects – they're not perfect drawings but the girls are... how I always wanted." I switched attention to a few newspaper clips. They were just adverts, one for Mitchum antiperspirant, one for BMW, a few other simple ads and newspaper clippings. His only explanation was, "I just collect everything I like." I'd seen Fack cut one of those adverts out before but had never expected them to be presented in such a motley museum.

Zeph cried out, "We're already famous!" and smiled over an assortment of photos from the road trip – Zeph sleeping on Tom Arto, us at Daddy-hole, Cristo with a beard of sheep hair by the landscape of the Edinburgh lay-by, us as angelic disgraces. We overlapped with Fack's old Dorset friends – strangers with faces I understood.

Zeph finished off the last of the cheesecake, vindicating himself with the line, "you've gotta love the cheese." I bumped into him and we both looked at a scraggly bordered drawing of an opium bud growing in a purple-enshaded woodland. Nothing seemed to be moving, all was perfectly still. "That's my woods, that is," said Fack, the addict escaper, "everything in here's been beautiful to me." Nothing was desperately symbolic, you knew it all had instant meaning and attraction, at least to him. The room was a proper cross-medium effort – pressed flowers, a face made out of dog hair, paper smeared with perfume, CDs, tape cassettes, inlays. I noticed the Aerosmith 'Big Ones' tape, the Ben Folds rare EP. Cristo caught sight of something and commented, "I didn't know you were into The Vandals." Fack said that he used to be, it was an old gang thing. Random old gang things which we couldn't fully appreciate were snacks amidst feasts of nostalgia.

Cristo was the first to realise that beauty *we'd* directly created was in there; he found the lyrics to one of the first songs he'd ever written, 'Poor Man's Loving', and Fack had to admit that they weren't all *conventionally* beautiful things. One of Zeph's dreams was handwritten on a piece of paper that smelt of banana. It was about Dolphins jumping over the walls of Nottingham. The story that we'd all fictionalised into his life as a glorious prank, that was there too. At first I couldn't find *my* input and I informed Fack of my dismay, but he directed me to my sketch of 'The Wind' wherein I'd hopelessly ("*Admirably*" – Fack) tried to portray an abstract something (many things). Then he gestured at a plastic sandwich bag and told me I'd given him my soul as a gift when I was "truly, truly fucked." He was perfectly right, it did appear to be my soul-in-a-bag.

"Does this mean you're a psycho?" asked Cristo.

"Oh no," said Fack, before showing us his collection of sketched hearts filled in with dried ketchup. "I loved ketchup."

"Well," said Zeph, grinning, "you've gotta love the tomatoes." When Fack's back was turned Zeph stuck the sex shed's Isle of Wight poster onto the wall and gasped, "What's all this about?" to Fack. "Jokes."

More and more, it went on and on: a dedicated shrine to life. Fack told us that he used to have a shoebox where he kept everything that was beautiful. That became a cupboard. "Now it's a room," he said proudly, "soon it'll be a whole horse."

"Or a house."

"Yeah, or one of those." We were still drunk, still scared.

We ended up sleeping in Fack's Room of Beauty, surrounded by more things than I could possibly describe here... poems, pasta paintings, Van Gogh's, Thomas'... as Fack said, the world will never be bored of beauty.

The day made me muse: does everyone have secret hideouts?

We snuggled up and let the cider-talk seep into the fine walls.

Our words faded gradually with our consciousnesses and in the beautiful dark we scrambled together a piece of paper and a pen. Fack had already nearly given the game away by yelping about what a "great episode" it'd been, cutting himself short as we glared him down.

So we wrote to each other in the dark, an unusual philosophical experience in itself. We couldn't see what each other was writing, we knew we couldn't read any of it in the morning, and we were hammered. You may ask, 'well how did you read it then?' We didn't – not till The Conclusion of The Ordeal. It was kept in my wallet until then.

We reached that point where everything we managed to heave out of our lungs was drivel and we dried up and slept. My thoughts are doing the same thing now, in this seat in my study, in front of my flat screen monitor. I can't think of an appropriate or enticing way to end this chapter, nor one that would do justice to Fack's heroic hoard, so I think I'll just nap.

I'll dry up and sleep.

It's not always that easy.

But sometimes...

## **Zeph's Girl**

By Zeph

There are millions upon millions of girls who are just shit. I mean, from the perspective of a potential mate (e.g. me) they're shit, whether they're caring, well-spoken, hearty creatures or not. There's a large proportion of the female population who will neither excite your brain nor your balls, they're not worth a second glance or a further thought – you get the impression there just cannot be any context where they're sparkling specimens of humanity who you'd want to befriend, never mind love and cherish and get busy with. They don't make you think happy thoughts, they don't lead you to wonder where they live or what they do for fun or how they react to blue cheese or how they feel or what's at their core, they're pretty useless, pretty ignorable, pretty shit. I think, anyway, and I don't feel harsh. The same applies to guys – from the perspective of both boys and girls – it's a universal outlook, equal opportunities for everyone, though seeing as this current chapter is on romance I'm focusing on girls. When you're a guy, it's hard not to. I definitely subscribe to the some-people-are-shit philosophy. It's a good philosophy because after you've got past feeling downhearted for having less respect for your fellow earthlings you can feel the joy of juxtaposition. Other boys are rubbish; you are not rubbish. Lots of girls are shit; a few are lovely.

Ahh, the girls who are lovely. When I call girls 'shit' I don't mean they're nasty or evil, or even bad, all I mean really is that they're not worth bothering with in terms of friendship or extra-friendship. It's just exaggerating for effect, really. When I call a girl 'lovely' I mean it in a very strong sense. I'm calling them something very special, something that demands to be bothered with, something that truly deserves the adjective of that most sought-after substance in the universe, love. Love's a drug that's administered in many ways – snorted as friends, smoked in a family, injected through that complimentary soul. It has side-effects, of course, but it's supreme. A lovely girl is a lovely thing/drug/person, who means so much to you, who's so unique and special and enchanting, they seem to be the best and most important thing in your life. I've known such lovely girls. None so lovely as Yvonne May, who I met in the Trocadero when I was scoping out Shuh: The Star of Benevolence, on that fateful girl-themed day.

Yvonne May was, and is, just lovely. If there were millions of her and millions of me life would surely be a lovelier affair. It'd also be a lot trovelier (to unlock the definition of this word please read on). She was superficially stunning, if not only because she was sweating with the strain of defeating my Japanlish nemesis. She had brown-black eyes that I always thought looked like the dots on a pair of exclamation marks, signifying the sentence you can skip to in a paragraph of vapid description. She'd stare through an otherwise awkward silence at you, with those exclam eyes, thriving on the undiluted, superdilated connection between two conscious spirits. She had a mane of marble-cake hair I knew I could grip onto and gallop on for a whole day – not just in an innuendo way, in a (semi)serious race-horsing way. And her smell – the smell of fire, not like smoke or cigarette ash, but the direct smell of fire. Her appearance had a certain honesty –

something shared by all the most beautiful pieces of art, a true sign of loveliness. At some point she told me her name was Yvonne. Somewhere along the line I called her Yvey (or YV or Whyvy, however you wish to spell it) and somewhere in-between I found out what she was like and realised I was very, very fond of her indeed.

Yvonne's *thing* (really, her over-arching *thing* that oversees all its minion *things*) is that she's a happy-to-be loner. One thing I quickly caught onto while talking to her on the phone and seeing her in London a few times after our first encounter was that she liked to be alone. She liked company, for sure, but she didn't have one group of friends who she always hung around with, she liked to meet new people and make decisions for herself. I thought that'd be weird, having yourself as the only constant personality in your life. I don't know, would you know yourself better or worse? Wouldn't you just get confused? As we met up more times and talked for longer on the phone in the evenings, I did start to wonder where my place was in a loner's life, whether I was an anomaly (a lovely one?) or one of a long line of discarded temp-friends. Of course, I was also thinking that I wanted to ask this girl out and every time I saw her I beat myself up for not making a move. I didn't want to miss out on a chance before I was thrown into the recycling bin. But then Yvey did have a lot of other *things*, most of which I promised I wouldn't discuss, naked truth n' all or not. I felt I was helping her with these things – some of which were kind of bad – and didn't want to leap in as a man with his cock in his hands, if you know what I mean.

It was going great though, we both enjoyed being with each other a lot of the time, it was only a matter of progress. We were destined to be together and I got off so much on being a prince charming storming her fortress of solitude. When she said that she was going on a coach trip around California and could get another ticket for cheap I grabbed at fortune with both hands and both feet. When you find someone lovely that's just what you have to do. There's no safety mat involved, that's the flavour of the thrill. I was so happy to leave my moping and grim times in the past.

So happy to land in California. It was my first time in the golden realm of the US of A. So many bands, so many films, so many phrases, so much of the modern machine – I wanted to see if it was all true with my own eyes and ears. First up I had to see Macdonald's and – classic – it was the third store I saw in the airport. The colours of blood and gold, rich warm-blooded beasts, and that eternal opportunity to Go Large. But, in America, I found I could Go Super. Yvonne had two happy meals – one to make up for airplane food she'd chundered out in an airplane toilet, and one just... for a positive. She gave an Alan Partridge shrug and tucked into her palmful of fishcake. She left her franchised merchandise on the table for some happy traveller kid.

Yvonne was on a gap year, like me, and though she didn't know what she was gapping *to* she had a good idea what she was gapping *from*. She hadn't particularly enjoyed her school, unlike me, and she didn't want to order herself more of the same. She's a naturally happy girl who doesn't have much time for things that stress her out or chain down her spirit. Perhaps too naively happy, if



there is such a thing, but it isn't just a front. There are times when she's even too happy and she can't understand why those around her aren't so. Like she wouldn't even've considered that the little boy who would pick up her crappy Happy Meal car could've been sad, even though a thousand things could've been bringing him down.

When I asked an American businessman how to get some stamps so I could send some letters back home he smiled at me and said, "You guys from Boston?" Yvey said that we'd lived in Boston all our lives and that we were coming over to live in San Francisco because the whole place was turning vegetarian and we were expert pig killers, and he said, "I can imagine, sure," and told us the way to the newsagents. Yvey always knew what to say to strangers because she was so used to them and knew no single stranger would ever get time to get used to her.

So we got on our coach and we had a couple of seats tucked away on the back row – Yvonne May and her non-stranger-friend me. Our first tourist stop was the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, one of Cristo's oft-mentioned hometowns. What Cristo always forgets to mention is that he didn't stay anywhere outside of Kent long enough, or at an age old enough, to remember anything at all.

On the way there we listened to my copy of Californication on her Walkman, listening through a single pair of headphones, one in ear each, marvelling at America in all its new real-world glory. I know I can look at the simple flowing of cars endlessly, I learnt Yvey could too. We kept looking at each other as well, us cuties, and I remember thinking how weird everything had turned out. I was staring at random Americans with the girl of my dreams next to me, her ear wired to mine, possibly a few secret microphones embedded into my skull.

The Golden Gate bridge was red, not golden. What a stupid name. We got out and hatched a plan to break into Alcatraz and turn it into a gay sushi-bar – I don't know why, I *really* don't know why.

Everything we'd seen in the movies was real. Even The-fucking-Terminator. Not only saving John Connor, but running for Governor too, and probably planning to fund a real-life Skynet in some ironic post-realist twist. We didn't get to see him but we saw his promo-posters all around... Coming to a Position of Serious Responsibility Soon. We loved it, Arnie's great and he has a hundred times more personality (and pecs) than most politicians (who are probably only politicians because they failed to make it in the movies).

In Hollywood we got invited to a film premier's after show party (the film was The Whistle, it was lame) and got trashed on free champagne. Yvey dared me to talk to the director so I did – she was the boss of me and I was the boss of her – and somehow the topic veered onto my writing, and the plays I've written (I called them 'screenplays' but they're not at all). He asked me to show them to him and funnily enough there was a computer nearby so I got a play off one of my email accounts and bam, he printed it off. That was my foot in the door. Then he threw my script on the floor and kept telling me and Yvey about how much vitamin C he liked to take, and how it was "just plain insanity" not to take at least 3,000 times

the RDA “in this fucking buzzing world”. What a minger. We got out of there and had this great moment on the top of an abandoned car. Its windscreen was full of those ‘we really will take this car away if you don’t claim it’... ‘we mean it’ notices, so we just leapt onto it and stared up at the stars (most probably actually airplane lights and UFOs). It was just like in Wayne’s World, without the close proximity to a jet engine, and she was my Garth. She was my foxy lady. She was my Schwing, my passionate one. I remember closing my eyes and letting my reflections on the holiday so far – we were about half way through – drop to the cool metal roof. I felt free, free in the land of opportunity, as free as this girl who could be around anyone yet never needed a friend.

We were both silent and I was spreading my weight over the roof. I went through every single thing about the trip that I could remember. It was usually me and her on that back row, listening to music together, her legs scrunched up on the seat towards the middle and her back resting against me. Or we’d be playing slapsies and I made her hands go red raw because I knew she’s hate it if I didn’t give my best, and she gurgled with each surprise whack. Or we’d be playing eye-spy with supposed personality traits of the people on the coach. “Meek?? He doesn’t look meek, he looks like a bloody dinosaur!” I knew that it’d only ever be minutes before I’d make her laugh and that would always make me smile and that in turn would make her quieten down to a grin and then she’d slowly close her eyes and look away. She’d always look away.

Sometimes I think that for everyone who says love is the best thing ever, we’ll always be too young to call our feelings love, we’ll never know if it’s the best we’ll get. Sometimes, I just thought I loved her.

When she was falling asleep and I blew gently on her face and she’d call me her ‘baby Zephyr’, that was it. That was what I’d always wanted. I realised I only remembered the American landmarks and events in the background, it was really just a portrait of my Yvey, me hanging around somewhere in the picture, or behind the camera, trying to get in. Our hairs were so colour co-ordinated, her with blonde-brown and me with my blonde-black. I never said it but I thought it so many times: I loved her.

So I had to ask her. My head felt like lead as I lifted it off the tinny car.

“Yvey, why aren’t we doing all the kissing and the touching and the being with each other and the being a boyfriend and a girlfriend and all of that stuff that’d be so lovely?”

“Is this your way of making a move?”

“It’s my roundabout way, yeah.” It was a terrible way, I never did have the luck or the guts. She set out her reply in a complicated roundabout way too. I’ll set it out in a simpler way.

“No.”

When she smiled properly she always closed her eyes and looked away.

Not again, I thought.

But it’s more right than ever, I knew.

(She’d be scrunched up on me in the backseat, her headphone in my ear, her hair smelling of fire itching at my nose.)

I had to ask why she'd invited me – did she think I wanted to be just friends? She said something like, "I like being around you, I thought I would... but I didn't." That moment, bloody hell. Try hearing that. For all the achievements and confidence you've built up over your whole lifetime... to feel like a pretty can of beans taken back to the shop for a refund. I said I understood; she looked so sorry. It was the first awkward moment of the holiday. There was silence and she just stared straight through it into my eyes. I remembered the night before when we'd gone crazy in a nightclub and had the dance floor to ourselves. Seeing the exhilaration in those exclamation mark eyes as I swung her around with all the lights making her shine... I'd do anything to live it again. I'd try anything, maybe I'd do it differently. I'd try everything. But even if it'd all gone the same way – from the moment I met her in the Trocadero, to that cold night where the little Zephyr got blown away in a storm – I knew I'd still do it again.

I had every good feeling a guy could possibly have for a girl, all unrequited. All unrequited? I wasn't sure, I'm still not sure.

We continued on our coach trips, her acting as if I'd never broached the subject, me acting as if it hadn't gone so terribly. I'm not lying when I say I was so happy anyway. I felt so comfortable daydreaming on her shoulder, the air-conditioning humming in one ear, Flea with his Parallel Universe in the other. I loved being with her even though I wasn't *with* her. I wanted nothing more than to be her boyfriend but couldn't bear the idea of being anything less than her cosy friend, always with her.

To sit by someone who's like that to you... jeez, I'm just shaking my head and sitting back in my seat. Some feelings you'll feel forever. Never perfectly, never enough. It's the echo of the past resounding in your heart. Or maybe it's the sound of your heart, echoing from the past. Either way. Damn, that girl. I wanted to love her now forever and I had her in my arms.

On paper we were perfect together. On any writing surface we were perfect together. If you looked at the stars you would've seen it because we were perfect together. Everybody would see it – everybody but her.

We saw snowy mountains, we had some hot tub action that was fun but nothing, we ate up more and more miles and more and more McDonalds. The Americans didn't seem like Kings of the World, they seemed like film extras and components of cars. All that really mattered to me was that I was with her. I was her little Zephyr. But *not* hers, not actually *hers*. Likewise she was my girl but she wasn't really my girl. She didn't actually qualify.

I'm used to being in weird too-close-for-normal-folk relationships with my good co-authors here, and it wasn't too weird being a reject friend at the beginning, for the whole holiday in fact.

When we got back from America I went on a bit of a tangent from the group, hanging out with her and not with the guys. Self-destructive, indulgent, an addiction, a stupid thing to do, I know. The guys were getting up to all kinds of japes and all I was doing was postponing the tragedy for as long as I could –

partially turning my back on my friends because such a large, unrelenting part of me still wanted to make it with her and the rest of me still loved being around her.

At some point in April it hit me as hard as a football in the face, breaking down my calm unworried. Even then I liked being with her, even when it was terrible for me. I'm still friends with Yvey, you'll see that this isn't over yet. It didn't feel right *at all* and I had to see about that.

BTW the moment of realisation for me was when it was her birthday and I had to get her a present. I wanted to give her everything she'd ever want but all I gave her was a Mr. Frosty (she likes coldness).

I've never had much physical experience with girls but I've felt passion. Not the passion of convenience, not the passion of lust, but the fiery passion that can burn through you or light up your world.

Now, when I called Yvonne May 'trovelly' I meant that she was tragically lovely – my love for her is forever tainted by tragedy. A million mes and a million hers would be trovelier than this, much trovelier.

See what I've found is that it's the lovely girls who turn out to be the ones who are well, well shit. Plain shit, nobody's muse girls might fail to electrify your brain and your balls, but at least they don't electrocute your heart. It's just how it is, it's not their fault at all. That's one of the most important criteria for being a lovely girl – that they're not nasty or lacking in any dimension. As long as they're lovely, as long as I'm ungrateful for forever friendship, they're always going to be the girls who make me feel shit.

Yeah, it's really just me who's shit, they're just being lovely girls. I try not to be a bitter boy and I know it's just it hasn't happened for me yet. Truth be told I've never loved my own love. I've had too many bad trips. But I'm still waiting for my walk-in wife, hoping that around every corner there's a girl who's perfect in every way, who sees a boy walking around the corner who's perfect for her. I know sometimes I dwell too much on Yvey but I still have the hope that around one corner is a lovely girl who isn't a trovelly girl, who isn't shit and doesn't make me shit.

I'm happy, I promise. I just wanted to share with you some of my love.

## Suspicious Shades of White

By Fack

"If you had to have sex with either your *mum* or your *dad*, which one would you choose?"

"I'd probably do one of them, regret it, so try the other. Then I'd finish off the rest of my dads just to make sure I hadn't missed out on anything. So I'd end up doing 'em all."

It was Will who asked the standard sleepover question and Zeph who gave the greedy answer. It was on topic because we were in my car, on the ferry in the calm of night, being taken to the Isle of Wight where we had plans to go to a scary incest party, for kicks. Sorry, a scary incest party that was really just an act. Because the very serious and scary cider blokey had told us it was an act and we were meant to be looking out for an opportunity to escape the cameras because it was all going to become too *good*. Weird and the weird.

The only problem we had with our cheap 2 a.m. ferry trip was staying awake. Bright as the stars Fack, I kept saying to myself, sharp and bright as the stars. Cristo had just aroused Zeph into wakeness and Cristo and Will were grilling him with essential questions like the mum/dad dilemma. They were on a night-air high and had been keeping me from falling asleep on the wheel by laughing and singing, joking and pinching each other's nipples. Cristo bragged he could arouse any mammal – male, female, human, horse or hyena – with one special tweak of the nipple (if they had nipples). They'd tried to get Zeph to wet dream cream himself but it'd all gone wrong. Zeph found himself with his eyes open and his nipple bare, wanting to go back to sleep.

"Come on, this isn't a *nap* year, you bastard," said Cristo.

"But you know how much I like to snooze..."

"It's when dreams drift and drip into your soul," muttered Will, "but we're talking about really fundamental life issues so you've got to wake up and keep Fack awake so we don't crash."

"We're parked on a boat."

"Without further ado: if you had to have sex with either..." and so that's how the conversation went.

I let Zeph drive to our bed & breakfast because he knew he couldn't get to sleep. I told him the tale of the man who wanted to sleep for ages – for longer than anybody had ever slept before – who slept for a hundred years, woke up, had the most alive and wonderful day in the whole world, went to sleep and died. The man was called Banaphacus.

Then I let the stress of driving ooze out of me as I semi-slept in the front seat of the car. I think I share Zeph's love for sleeping in minging cars like mine, but don't tell him. I remember being in that moment as we drove off the boat.

Stuck to my seat, I'm listening to a stranger shout words I can barely hear hear. They're lines I've never understood. Generally I think I get it. And this melody, it's faintly familiar, so I sing along in my own head, at least. A little gets let out. I prod the volume up, wailing to myself in a higher key, a different accent,

but I sound good to myself. I'm too stuck to the seat to look around. Too tired, too into it. The other guys are probably all doing it too, though hopefully not Zeph. Singing along and along. But I can't hear them because I'm here, I'm singing well, and none of us know how we're really singing. And my eyes melt into the music.

None of us had any problems getting to sleep at the B&B – the only one on the whole of the Isle who'd said they'd still be up at 3 in the morning. I slept next to Cristo and his harmless vibrating kept me warm.

We were woken up suddenly! The phone was one of those ones that shriek like they're metal trying to get out. The ends of all our dreams probably involved telephone-shaped monsters, shrieking from metal mouths. It was probably about ten o'clock but it couldn't have *felt* earlier. The phone was near Cristo so he picked it up and ended the trilling horror.

He said it was just his mother. As he'd later describe her, his 'motherfucking mother'. He kept saying he was fine and tried to get rid of her in the way every boy tries to get rid of their mum in front of friends, especially at 10 in the morning on the Isle of Wight. She kept saying stuff and we kept stuffing more and more pillow into our ears as we tried to scrape our sleep back. Once he'd done with her, he was wide awake and said he wanted to treat us to breakfast across the road (we'd only paid for the 'bed' because we hadn't expected to be up for the 'breakfast'). We all

thought he was joking but he wasn't, that crazy Damié.

"Toe. No." We all wanted to sleep.

"We need to be wide-eyed for the wild orgy tonight."

"Come on you lazy quangos, I'm buying, I'll never buy anything for any of you ever again if you deny me."

We ended up going in our pyjamas and our sleep-volumised hair. Nice café. Toe found us a booth and we sat down. Ahh, well presented menu, I was thinking. Then Toe leant forward with his face seized by something, and not the menu. It turned out that that hadn't been his motherfucking mother. It had been a middle-aged posh-speaking woman who'd told him what to say! I felt sorry for feeling bad things against Mrs. Big Toe. But it was serious. Toe told us what the real lady had told him.

You've got to think seriously about what you want to do, she'd said, as in whether or not you go to this "Climax" arranged by The Organisation. If you go, a sequence of events will be triggered that will change your lives forever. It won't matter if you know that the orgy isn't real – it will be real enough.

Then apparently the old blokey from the farm took the phone from her (while Toe was still "telling his mum" how fine he was) and said things with even more "urgency". I remember Toe's use of the word "urgency". I didn't even know it was a word. Toe tried to remember word for word what the serious cider man had said.

We have seen where the path will take you. Maybe you don't want your dreams to be realised. Maybe *they*, The Organs – the people behind this and all the actors and technicians involved – don't know what your dreams really *are*. Maybe nor do *you*.

"I can't remember the rest," said Cristo, with urgency, "I always think I know what's going on, and then all the crazy crap comes."

Something like, people's deepest dreams are dangerous because they're too magical, not meant for this world. You won't see that but you'll have to trust us. Gold can cut, wine can drown, clouds can suffocate, stars can blind.

Stuff like that.

We'll tell you how to get out of it later once we've come up with a plan. We're trying for you. Think about whether you want to go through with it. You can talk about this in the café across the road and on the adventure golf course by the pier, we're sure there aren't any cameras or microphones there. Don't go to Blackgang Chine, it's rigged. There might be actors anywhere so don't talk when you're near anyone.

We all checked 360 degrees around us in the café. The cider man sounded so serious, when our impression of him was as just a nice, relaxed farmer.

"So what are we going to do, slackgang?"

"What, that was it, Cristo?"

"Yeah what did you want? Isn't that enough?"

I said, really helpfully, "This is serious." It was my thought of the day. We really should have known that something like that was going to happen, we had been warned and we knew we were waiting for some escape route. I'd gotten so used to imagining cameras all around me but I'd never really put it together that there were people *inside*, or at least *behind* those cameras. And some of those people were on our side. But then...

"Whose side are most of them on?"

"What do you mean?" I quite often think to myself and then assume everyone's heard my thoughts. Or I'll just think aloud and talk to myself. I have a bit of trouble sorting one from the other.

"I mean, what are most of these stupid Organs in this for?"

"They're making a fucked up movie," said Cristo.

"I thought it was just going to be a fun real-life movie of our cool lives." So had we all. But everything seemed so important and confusing.

"We've got to decide whether or not we want to be in this movie, that's it," said Zeph.

"Though we have absolutely no idea what this movie is," said Will. We looked at each other to try to work out who was up for it and who wasn't. But I think the problem was none of us had actually decided.

"This is serious," I said.

"What the fuck?" said Zeph, who still hadn't found an answer.

At some point, after going over everything about the road trip, and our trip to see Zoë at Reading Uni, and what our families had said, and our contracts, and our treasure hunt in the woods, and all our suspicions and hopes, we left to play adventure golf on Sandown Pier.

Guess what we started to talk about once we'd gotten ourselves alone on the first hole. We desperately wanted to know what our inside friends' plan was. We were just following the rails otherwise. We didn't have any idea how to get

off. Looking back, maybe we should've thought of what *we* could've done for ourselves a little more. You write your own life movies n' all.

Will was winning the adventure golf and I think I pissed off Zeph by saying I thought his story about Crazy Geoff wasn't the best he'd ever written. Writers don't really seem to get that half of their stuff is the worst half. Hey, is this going to make me a writer? If my smackhead friends saw me now...

Toe got another ring from his Mum. She was telling him something about his Grandad. Toe's responses were gemmy.

"Yeah... that's good... at least he's better now... wait... you said there aren't any cameras here, why am I talking to my mother? You're not my mother. Tell me what the shit's going on. Or I want my mother."

Basically, Toe got given specific orders by the serious cider guy and we heard all about them as he repeated them quietly.

Meet you by the ice cream van in exactly half an hour, ahuh. You'll be there, ahuh. I'm meant to see you but you're not meant to see me, ahuh. So I'm not actually meeting you? OK. So I'm meant to get nervous and go giggling back to the others? What a lame episode. Ahuh, I get it. But you're going to pass a letter to the ice cream seller and he knows to give me that letter? Ahuh. If I order a double cone with chocolate sauce but no strawberry sauce. Yeah yeah, I get it, *no* strawberry sauce. Ahuh, the letter will be within the napkin. I'll take it out in the café toilet next to the adventure golf. Copy. I'll read it. I'll say I'm going to the toilet. OK. OK.

Cristo was about to hang up and then thought he needed to add something.

"Thanks..." he said, but the phone was dead, "...strange old accomplice man." Toe couldn't concentrate on the golf anymore because he was so pumped up for his special mission. We tried to keep quiet but we couldn't stop talking 'bout it. Who did we think was on our side? At least the cider man and the woman who'd been on the phone, maybe just them. What was going to be in the letter? It was the plan we were meant to follow to get out of it all, right? That's what we all thought. I thought that maybe it was going to be a spy movie and they were all still just being actors. Everyone had thought of that possibility, right?

But it did seem like they were saving us from a terror we didn't understand. That's surely what all that over-the-top gobbledygook the old cider man had said to us was getting at.

Will won the golf, Zeph cried about it, and then it was time. Cristo's mission. We all patted his back and headed for the shore side arcade. We weren't meant to see it. It was up to him. Cristo was on point. He had an ice cream van to approach.

"If I die, bathe in my ashes, amigos."

And it did go horribly wrong. We were all trying our luck at the classic claw-a-bear game, that's never fair because the machines are always set to dispense bears every 50 goes or something, near the entrance to the arcade. Then we heard Cristo shouting for us. It sounded like "Fackwillzee!!" We raced out, leaving our precious claw-a-bear credits in the machines, and saw Cristo looking



on in dismay at some commotion by the ice cream van. Our wrinkled cider accomplice was there, but to his right and left were two big guys in suits. Cristo saw us and shouted out, "Shit!" The men in suits – they looked like security workers, nothing else, no originality – looked at all four of us. They were getting our old friend into a car. No aggression was involved, but it was obvious that the old man really didn't want to go. He was petrified. I think that's why Cristo kept saying "shit", because suddenly it was all so real. Our weird friend was really, really petrified. He got into the car with the two men in suits and they drove off, leaving us.

Honestly, that pier seemed like a film set. But a *real* film. I'll never be able to explain it. It was the urgency of it, maybe.

We didn't know what to do so we ran to our car and I tried harder than ever to ignite the beast. Come on, come on, I kept saying. Everyone was breathing fast and Cristo was swearing in all the languages he knew and all the languages he's always pretended to know. Come on, come on, I kept encouraging my damn car. The immobiliser. Fuck, I thought I'd learnt that one.

We drove off. We didn't know where to drive to. I was trying to keep silent. I was confused. Was it all over? Nobody was saying anything, I think everybody was as confused as me. Cameras were certainly on us in that car. We were silent because we didn't want *them* to know we knew. We needed somewhere to talk about it. Somewhere random, somewhere random where they wouldn't expect us to go. Somewhere random... *what's a random place?* I thought, but, stupid me, I said it out loud. Everybody looked at me with quizzical faces and I just said "God," because I was going to say, "God, they know everything anyway!" but I didn't want to ruin it for sure.

In the end I found somewhere that I thought was quite 'random', a donkey sanctuary. Pretty random, eh?

We got out of the car and hid ourselves amongst the donkeys.

"We've got to go and tell the police," said somebody. It's always somebody. As another someone pointed out, our cider friend never said that The Organs would hurt us, he said it'd be the opposite, whatever that meant. Well... then...

"We've got to go to the Climax then," said somebody. Someone was still there to remind us we'd been warned against it. People had obviously put themselves on the line to warn us.

I was excited. I couldn't work out anymore whether I was happy for all that had happened, or whether it was beginning to scare me. I cuddled one of the donkeys. I always wish donkeys were softer than they are but I still love them. They seem to sorted.

The discussion ended up with us coming to a point. The Climax – the party for the extreme-sex lovers of Blindfield – was going to take place in four hours. Did we go or not? Questioning eyes only found questioning eyes. Cristo blinked and came to a decision.

"We go. We've got to make the most of this. We've got to be legends, not losers. We either go or confront them some other way, and to be honest another way would probably involve more effort. So we go." Toe was such a commander,

being a veteran – he'd been there, on the pier, with the ice-cream van. None of us were against it. We were really still just boys wanting to play.

"Do we go?"

"We go."

"Last chance."

"We go."

"...Are we all sure?"

"We go."

"Leave our donkeys behind?"

"We go."

"... Let's go."

I said goodbye to the donkeys, the donkeys said goodbye to me, and we said hello to the unknown as the donkeys mooched around.

Cue four hour long interlude of pizza, paddling, porn (because when boys are bored...) and panic.

Then we were in our car, trying to find the address we had for the Group Holiday Climax. We were going as the uninvited guests who everybody knew were coming. It was fun. It felt like the fun of leaning back on your seat. We knew we couldn't be there forever but we rode it out. I think that you've got to be fun with the serious. I think you're missing out if you can't be fun with the staged orgies.

As we turned the last corner and saw the door we'd have to enter I started to make wails like a whale, because of nerves. Then the other thing that happens with nerves happened and I tried to stop myself from clutching at my sproutlings.

I was teetering on the chair and suddenly it felt like we were perched on a cliff, no way back, a long way down. So we rode it out. We got out of the car and slowly, very slowly approached the door. I let myself be the last in the line.

It was a white door with weird creamy-white stains. They wouldn't have been weird if everything hadn't been weird. It was a big, wide door, cut slightly too small for the frame so that sneaky peeks of the floor and ceiling were visible.

*Brrring... brrring... brrring.* The doorbell reminded me of the phone that had put nails in my ears in the morning. There was a notice on the door, 'Note to milkman, a leak in our fridge destroyed all our milk,' blah. We were waiting for some granny nymph to open the door but nobody came.

Nobody came. No Emmanuelle. We were ready to abandon The Climax, or maybe to get in through the window.

Hey guys, I said in my head, before I could put it through my mouth, "Hey guys,' you read this letter to the milkman?" They were all reading it. It was weird and not just because everything was weird. *On top of everything else being weird.* Here's the 'blah'.

*'Note to milkman. A leak in our fridge fouled all our milk! It would be very much appreciated if we could have four pints of the same in the morning? And a few bottles of something absolutely different? Thanks. The word is on the street. NB Boys.'*

Weird huh? We all had our observations.

"NB Boys?" – Will.

"Something absolutely different... how different can dairy products get?" – Zeph.

"The word is on the street? What the mahogany cheese wank?" – Toe.

"This wasn't meant for a milkman." – Me. Because it wasn't. It would have scared any milkman. It wasn't for a milkman. I'd usually be the one to say "I'd like to be the milkman to read this," but I *got* it. *We* were the milkman. It was a letter for us. Everybody was impressed by me. I gave my supersoft jumper a hug and span around. The air was crisp and cloudy up high. Cristo pointed out that we still had to work out what it meant. Oh yeah. But come on, surely it's easy, I thought.

"NB Boys'... that's us. 'Something different' like... apple juice. And 'the word on the street' is, you know, this film thing."

"Fack," Will said, sharply, "Why would they pleasantly request apple juice from us? This is a riddle of metaphors."

"So we've got to work it out," said Cristo, "like 'milkman' equals us, OK. 'A leak in our fridge fouled our milk'. Leak. That one's easy as piss, it's *leak* as in the stinky cider merchant who leaked his plans to us and was kidnapped or something on the pier."

"Which has fouled their *milk*", said Will, continuing while I felt a bit useless again, "presumably their plans, their success, their *produce*. The Organs are telling us in their obscure way that they know about it all. 'Four more pints of the same in the morning'... they're not stopping?"

"They're thirsty?" said Zeph, "But yeah, I agree, it means they're not stopping. This is great, this is Sherlock Holmes. 'A few bottles of something absolutely different?'"

"Yes I think that's linked with 'tomorrow', i.e. the future," said whizzkid Will, "i.e. something's going to be the same... but something's also going to be drastically different."

"Ooooh," I oooohed. Something different in the future. My teetering chair was wobbling.

"That just leaves the obscurest elements," said Will, "the last two bits. 'The word is on the street. NB Boys'."

"Well, we *are* boys," I said, maybe that was there just in case we didn't get it the first time?

"Do we know anything else about boys? Anything particular happened with any set of boys, or any, like, ocean buoys or abbreviations or anything?" asked Zeph. "You know," he sidetracked, "it'd be great if this was just a letter for a milkman."

"How about 'word on the street'? Word on the street... word on the street... what *is* the word on the street?" asked Will, as if desperate to know the latest gossip.

We were stumped. We swayed backward and forward to the car, thinking, staring at the curtains of the house. Word on the street... word on the street.... All of us wanted to know. Will tapped at his brain, Zeph kept repeating it until it had

no meaning, Cristo meditated shallowly. I leaned against the car. It would've looked like I was humping it, if everything wasn't weird.

I saw the line of expensive terraced houses, the occasional tree, the ickle birds flittering their wings – robins and grey tits, and a majestic collared dove – and lots of hotels. I wasn't even thinking about the problem, I was just looking at the birds. It was definitely the right street, the road name was there in front of me, David Roberts Road. The words on the street. The dove was dancing...

*Wait.* The words on the street. That was a link, surely? Hey guys, "Hey guys! What about the street name?"

"What about it?"

"Word on the street?"

"Tenuous," said Will. I thought that meant good, so I was happy, and I went over to the road sign. "That means I doubt it," shouted Will. I was there so I thought I'd check. There's a letter, "stuffed down here, there's a letter!" and what'd'ya know? I held it in my hand.

*'From the boys to the boys.'* Not more riddles, I hoped.

"How the fuck were we supposed to get that?" asked Cristo.

"I did," I said.

"David Roberts Road... David Roberts... sounds familiar in a kind of way," said Zeph.

"Of course! It's his bloody bench!" Will looked happier than anybody. "It's the bloody bench near the Meadow, David Robert's bench! That posthumous bastard!" It was cool but I just wanted to open the letter. It felt fresh. Everything gathered round me and I opened it.

*'For all those Wednesday afternoons. Because we didn't want you to waste your year, or for anybody else to miss it either.'* Do you get it? I didn't. Pause a bit and see if you can. ....

"Oh my crazy fucking God," said Cristo, getting it, "You know where we used to hang out on Wednesday afternoons?" Yeah, on David Robert's bench. "Yeah, so who could this be? Think. I'm pretty sure I have a good idea." No, I thought, no way. Behind it all, the creative power behind The Organisation, the contacts, surely they weren't....

Those mad old fuckers. Colonel Toothinger. The Bombardier. Treacles. Our 'friends' from The Nuts Bunker. It couldn't have been. But it *could* have.

"NB Boys. Nuts Bunker Boys," said Will. There was some dispute about whether they knew we called their home that. Will reckoned we got it off *them*, I think we told them it at some point. They definitely knew.

All along. They had been living their youth through us, "And they bloody could have done it because everyone in that place was mad, rich, and knew everyone!" It made too much sense really. They had so much time on their hands, so much passion for the oddest things, OK they couldn't have done it all themselves but they could've organised it all, very easily, especially with their backgrounds in the army. Sometimes it takes mad people to do immensely cool things like that. It was all fitting into place.

"So our friends from The Nuts Bunker escaped and wanted to make sure we had a good gap year so travelled around in the boot... of our Skoda... videoing our lives...?" asked Zeph.

"No," said Will, "They masterminded one of the greatest media events ever." He looked around, searching every nook and cranny. "And we're still in it."

I realised that the letter had another side to it.

*'Don't blame us for setting the scene. And setting it alight. You couldn't do it for yourselves. You shall live the lives of dreams. You must. Don't tell your parents. You'll live to love this.'*

At some point we left for home – a late ferry to the mainland. We'd found some answers and we'd found ourselves frightened. We knew whose hands we were in and we weren't sure that they were safe hands.

"They're a bunch of ex-military vicarious cock fascists," said Cristo, "enjoying adventure through us, but they'll push adventure to the limits because they're practically dead. What does that mean for us?"

"It means I want to tell Mummy," said Zeph, on the evening ferry. We were outside, feeling sea sick and paranoid with the water sloshing right below us. There was no solid floor below us, just shaky wood and a liquid storm.

"We shouldn't tell our parents we know though," said Will, "we can work this out together."

"OK. I mean it's gotten pretty serious," said Zeph, "but we won't go running to Mummy then."

"This is more like it, you know," said Cristo, "this is more *picante*."

"But you know guys, our parents don't know that something *absolutely different* is coming," said Zeph. "Something that'll set us alight."

"Bang," said Cristo.

"We should go to the Bunker. We should find stuff out," said Zeph, "even though they they'll know we're doing it and will be able to see our every move. We're so vulnerable."

"But we all promise not to tell our parents, right?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah."

I knew, without planning it, that the first thing I wanted do after the ferry journey, after driving to Blindfield, after getting out of my car, out of opening my door, would be to run to my Mum and tell and ask her everything.

However, something came up when we got back. It was really just the beginning.

## The Big Ones Leaving

By Babe

Hello my name is Babe. I am nine years old and I am Zeph's little sister and I am the sister he plays with the most. He asked me to write a page about when him and the other big ones went to Europe for another holiday. Mummy said I could also give it to Mrs. Wosberg at school as my holiday story, so this is both homework and a special present for the book Zeph and his friends are writing. They got involved in all sorts this year, that's what Mummy says. They want to tell everyone about it because they think it will make them happy. My big sisters always say he's a silly Billy for playing around with his big, stupid, hairy friends, but I think they're wrong, and they are just jealous because they want to be married to his friend called Fack. Fack is handsome but I don't want to be married to him.

It all happened at the end of April. The big ones had gone to the Isle of Wight for a mini-golf tournament and they came third and came back very late, when I was asleep. I call them the big ones even though I know all their names now because when I was very young that's what I called them and they said they liked that and they wanted me to keep saying it. On the day after they came back I was at home because I was ill but I wasn't really ill. Mummy lets me stay at home when I'm not really ill because she doesn't fully like school and there is the way I learn from her friends, who are of sort of my Daddies.

Zeph told me that a mysterious stranger had put a ferry ticket for Europe on his pillow and he found it when he got back from the mini-golf tournament. He said someone had paid for him and the big ones to go to Europe for two weeks and he wouldn't say who. I think they all had girlfriends to go to see because that's what big boys go to see.

He had words with Mummy in the dining room and Daddy and Daddy and Daddy and Daddy went in and they were all laughing and then suddenly they were silent and Zeph came out looking stupid. Then the big ones came round with Fack's car and bags and stuff and they looked like tired and horrible old men, but I still had respect from them because I think they will always be cool. They are the only grown ups I know who play more than me. I made them all glasses of mixed fruit juice made from apple juice and orange juice and a few drops of lemon.

They let me help them when they made the car look pretty in the driveway. Our house is MASSIVE and so is our driveway so I stayed out with them and they took me for piggybacks. They put silver and red ribbons all the way down the car and they said the ribbons would make the car go faster. They must be expensive ribbons. Also they must have been put on with Pritt stick because they stuck tight to the car. Then the big ones made a scary shark out of ribbons on one side and made an arrow out of ribbons on the other side, and I helped with the drawing because I do art and I want to make dresses when I am old. They had to put a big sticker that said GB on it on the back of the car so that the car was not stolen by foreigners. In my opinion the car was still too dirty and noisy to be pretty but they

were laughing more than hyenas and they were happier than ever. Zeph said goodbye to the family and then came out and kissed me and told me to go to school the next day, which I did, and I told him I would make sure the faeries would look after him and they did. The big ones all threw me about and then they drove off in their funny car. I sat on the gravel and talked to the fairies and when Zeph got back in what seemed like a year he said that the fairies had been kind but he had a black eye and a disgusting beard.

## The Things of a Bitching Spring

By Cristo

If I were making this freak of a film, using all the gabillions of hours of raw footage, it'd be a gatrillion times better, I'd really capture the *encanto* of us big ones, I'd really make love to us with the edit.

Now, rewind Cristo's Cut to the spring that preceded our Isle of Wight incest fest catastrophe and our road trip to heaven, via Europe. Because that's what the European Road Trip Act would have had to end with, conveying the blissed out feeling that we thought we'd reached 'heaven' – that fucking perfect state of mind (forgive me for misinterpreting, holy namesake *Cristo*) you find yourself in when you've found God, or you've smoked enough weed, or you've just lived in a soppy state of euphoria. It may not be the hippest thing to think but, shit, to communicate that to someone and make them orgasm all over with emotional shivers, what a film that'd be. And sometimes, your life really is that good.

But rewind, back up to the spring, the chronology really isn't that confusing so you better not have a problem with it. I'd do the spring as an uplifting connector between the treasure hunt in the woods and the Isle of fucking anticlimax-climax Wight. Like the scene where some lumberjack builds a house, between the thrill ride of cutting the wood and the moment he finishes the house and has to defend it against red Indians.

Camera tracks Fack, old Fucky, as he goes back to primary school. You see him fiddling around with some scissors, fiddling with (*along* with) kids, and he's there for a week just to help out his mother who's a primary school assistant. A well-placed secret camera zooms in on Fack's eyes, and he's got the right eyes for the job, the sort kids like to gawk at. He's helping them draw pictures and one's hugging his leg. The kid's not humping his leg – it's not that kind of show. This is a rare uncrude moment. Fack's doing fine.

Flips to scene with Cristo, who's rocking out at Easy J's in London with his friend Coleman from UCL. Cristo and Coleman are rocking out and sexy ladies are piling around them. One of the feisty bitches stands out – perfect body, face, make-up, the lot. They're both checking her out as she walks off the dance floor, Coleman's convinced she's looking back at him, and Cristo's convinced she's looking back at *him*. But Cristo's too smooth for that move, so he lets Coleman follow her, but Coleman gets lost and goes to the toilet to plan his pull. And who's in there? The perfect girl, using the urinal. Big cock. True story. Turns out it was the "Easy gays" night at Easy J's. True story, they're all true stories.

Next scene shows it's not all going too badly for Cristo. He's playing bass in a smoky studio with some seriously into-the-music, seriously buff guys. They finish their song and talk about how well it's going, how the recordings are coming together, how they've got their first decent gig lined up. Cristo pulls off a few cheap mum jokes, just to keep the atmos light, and then they're back to the rock, thumping away.



The same beat's going on in Fack's car as we all go swimming together, we've all got our goggles on in the car except for Will, who's driving, and we're all squealing to The Pixies. I find a poem written by Will on the dashboard that's just two words: 'Be free.' I stare at him with my purple goggles, "I like this poem, sir. I want it. Name your price." He keeps his eyes on the road and says, deadpan,

"My price shall be named Derek." Unprovoked, Zeph whines off about how he's nearer to his goal of being OK to die at any moment, but more OK to keep on living.

"You've got to live for the better," says Fucky.

Because Zeph's doing fine too. Pan across the grin on Zeph's face as he looks at some magazine for big shots that's just published one of his short stories. It's about a man called Nam who always walks backwards and time-travels or something. I must yoinck a read of it one day. So he's fine with the fruits of spring. Other than that, he's still with this fucking weird non-girlfriend Yvonne who doesn't talk much to any of us. Camera pauses on her for a second. Enigma, sexy, hair flutters in the wind, tragic, beautiful, good, ok, bad, bad, you lose.

It's still mainly us four, all the way up to the Isle of Wight and back again. Then it's still us four on the way to Europe, because we don't have time to break into The Nuts Bunker, and we still don't really know what's going on but we do have ferry tickets.

On the ferry, that's where it sets off. The red Indian's been defeated but the hurricane hits the house. And Zeph accuses me of everything and everything that's to be found out gets found out. I know everyone's been banding around these "then everything changed" closing lines like they're as compulsory as fucking full stops, but I swear to *Jesus Cristo* I mean it as much as, if not more than ever before.

Film cuts to a ferry. Zeph's looking like he has something on his mind, and he's super solemn. You've got to make the audience hold their breath. Then he opens his mouth and you've got to catch that hesitation. Because, damn it, that's what it's all about. That's the route to heaven, slightly shaky but what a rush.

(If I could get the cold, salty sea water to smack against the cheeks of the viewer, that'd be perfect. Shit, I would have loved to edit this movie.)

## Let's Get This Skoda to Europa!

By Zeph

### 1. The Metamorphosis of All

The cold, salty sea water was smacking against our cheeks. But it wasn't a movie. It never was.

"Guys, you know how we all promised we wouldn't tell our parents that we've found out who's behind the filming?" I asked on the harsh, bedraggled Seacat, "and that the crazy commandos from The Nuts Bunker have been manipulating our lives more than they knew?" They all murmured yeses but I wasn't listening because I had something to say.

I mean I'd had something to say since I'd talked to my parents. Yeah, I know, that made me a promise breaker. But when you've got five parents, all of whom you trust, you want them on your side, like your secret counsel, or army, or backup friends. You, with your two or possibly three parents... you just wouldn't understand.

I'd managed to ignore the pivotal conversation I'd had with my parents for the trip to the Hoverspeed terminal in Dover. I'd forgotten all about it for the long stretch of motorway I drove down at (at least) 94 miles an hour in front of a police car (I thought it was a Chrysler, come on). I'd ignored the conversation as we – in an Offspring-triggered frenzy – screamed at a frail old couple to *get out of the road!* at the Western Docks of the hoverport. I'd been thinking of how to bring it up as we plotzed it at the checkout, before *some idiots* were called to move their Skoda Favorit onto the Seacat. We nearly missed out on the trip due to sheer seaside laziness – we ran out to find our car deserted, even by the seagulls, and we had to screech our way onto the departing boat-type vehicle (over a, er, ramp and a shark pit).

Once we were on and settled and outside and soaked, I had to bring it up.

I knew it'd shock them as much as it'd shocked me the night before, like a dream disturbed by alarm bells.

"Friends, this has just been some fucking prank. I talked to my parents. It was all a prank. There were never any cameras, there was never any organisation, there was never any 'Polished Realism', there was nothing that was ever going to make us famous or force us to live our dreams." Wind howled and faces kind of, you know, tried to hide. I wasn't *sad* as such, I was just communicating how everything had (once again/ ultimately/ maybe penultimately) changed. It was all in the perspective. Nothing had really changed. Not much, *really*, had happened.

"I know."

"Yeah."

"What, we all know?" We all knew. The blob of exclusive info yearning to burst out of me suddenly felt pretty embarrassed ('*Hey, why d'you get me all pumped up?*' – Blob). They all admitted that they'd all talked to their parents on the sly, that they all knew. (We'll get to *how* it was a prank and all of that 'Poirot reconstructs' stuff in good time – you're probably waiting to hear it if you didn't expect this. If you *did* expect this – The It Was All a Lie Ending – then well done,

you predicted better than any of us, and we offer our apologies for not presenting everything in an authentically convincing way. Anyway, more later, this is an ending that takes its sweet time).

We all laughed, as is so often the custom for so many things, and made laughing stocks out of the facts. We'd all been so taken along. We hadn't suspected a thing. We'd believed the ridiculous. We'd all actually got our hopes up. We'd spent a year living on lies. Son of a bitch, that'd been the supergwoolist (to compound some buzz) of pranks.

"And well done Cristo. It was the most elaborate and weird prank I've ever experienced. Well done and, more importantly: W. T. F.?" The finger had been pointed. It was up to **Cristo Damié**, The Prankster, to explain all.

"What?" asked Cristo. He was just joking.

I knew it was Cristo because my parents had told me he'd asked them very nicely to help him out with a harmless prank on me. He'd asked them in a letter that they'd received when we were all at Reading University with Zoë Groundhappenent. Of course, it was Cristo who'd invited us to Reading, so he could work on our parents, and Cristo who set up the impromptu band performance on the campus. My parents had loved it, the dads especially, and had emailed Cristo regularly to see how it was going on, getting updates for months. At some point they'd supposed it'd all dissipated and been forgotten about, but when I brought it up they were amazed I was still under the spell. They told me everything. I mean it'd been quite a thing to do to your son: lie to him for half a year. They thought it might be getting a bit out of hand. They told me everything and showed me the letter they'd received from Cristo. They didn't have any idea it'd become such a big thing. It's called 'a project' in the letter. It'd become a big part of our lives.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Cristo. Joking? I couldn't be sure. He seemed so genuine.

"Yeah, what on earth are you talking about Zeph?" asked Will, "don't keep this up, the game's reached its denouement, enough's enough." I didn't understand. Dissonance and rain, everywhere. "Reveal the machinations, Zeph, you owe us that you perfect bitch," ordered Will. What did that mean? "We all know it was you, Zeph," he said. Wait. What?

"Look you quangos, I mean we found out it's Fack, right?" said Cristo, "Hold on a fucking second... I'd guess that Fack is going to say that *he* knows that the man behind the pranks is no other than... Will."

"I'm confused. Yes, but I'm confused," confirmed Fack.

"Then we all think it's a different person," said Cristo.

"And," Will added, "we've all been had."

## 2. The Tale and The Entailed

Firstly, let me just say that this was definitely the nearest I've ever been to being in a movie-like scene. For real. On the big, hulking seafaring feline with my four favourite friends. Fack jumped up and down on the spot, his floppy, tufty hair hurled in all directions by the elements, and whined,

"I thought that was it, I thought it all made sense, and now it's all just a bin full of questions again! I thought it was so exciting that it'd been one of us who'd actually been crazy and had been changing our lives and could make us believe anything... but I only liked it *after* we'd worked it all out *for good*. I just wanted to hear the whats and the whys, but I was so happy." He clutched onto his sexual self and continued, "So happy because I thought Zeph, specifically, had tried really hard to make our year the best, happiest, most hysterical year ever. I loved that, so don't tell me we're left with a bunch of nothing again!"

Just at that opportune point, I got a text. I read it out because it seemed pretty crucial.

*'It was one of us. I swear on Steve Tyler's life.'* Fack didn't know whether to be happy or sad. He chose to keep jumping slowly in circles.

"So what, one of us just sent the text message?" It was perfectly possible, anyone could have pressed one button in a pocket. I looked around at my friends. Cristo/Toe/Mate, in his 80s duffel-coat, one of his few, rarely washed pairs of baggedy jeans, and soggy Vans, with his deep-set foreign eyes and his slight bassist's slouch. Will/Books/Pal, wearing a sensible Barbour jacket, and solid, shiny boots, with his modelish good looks sliming slightly under the rain. Fack/Fucky/Friend, wearing plain clothes and a plain face and jumping like a regular Fack-in-a-Box on the deck. I realized that they were all suspects, of a sort – not of a crime, but of the most impressive scheme I'd ever been involved in. What's more, I knew I was also a suspect to them.

Have you ever thought that maybe one of your closest friends is engineering your life?

Have you ever had the feeling that reality is slowly being taken away from under your feet?

Have you ever clutched onto your balls in a time of need?

I did. Somehow, it worked. Fack's defence mechanism seemed to work. Everything became a bit clearer. The idea that maybe our parents were still playing a trick on us? – no chance. Well, maybe the organization was just making the artifice more and more complex, ornate, metafantastic? – no. One of my friends had done it for *some* reason, was remaining anonymous for *some* reason and was standing right in front of me. That made sense. I looked over that text message again.

It was one of us.

It was from the same mobile number that'd sent us all our supposedly 'From the Organization' texts – starting with that first text in the car park in Edinburgh. One of my friends was 'Enjoy', was the Organisation, was the Organiser, was Pranks himself.

We talked about it for quite some time, going over all the details, reaching the same conclusions and leaving the same questions unanswered.

Who was it?

How had they done it?

Why were they doing it?

Were they *still* doing it?

And what were we supposed to do in le monde de l'Europe?

### 3. Too Much Perspective: Look to the Future

"So then, who did it?" asked Fack, in the nicest way humanly possible. I knew with a cheeky mix of sadness and joy that nobody was going to answer him.

"If that's the case," he said, "we've got to find out who did it. And I'm talking to the two who didn't do it. Let me see, if the two who didn't do it step forward then we'll know who did it. Unless the person who did it steps forward. In which case, the ones who definitely didn't do it should step back and-"

"Fucky, Fucky, Fucky," interrupted Cristo, tutting, "if only the police used your mastermind technique for catching murderers and rapists. If one of us isn't going to come forward, none of your devious logical mind tricks are going to get them to give themselves up."

"Then we've got to talk about it now and find out who it was."

"Why?" asked Cristo.

"Because."

"Why?"

"Because. The prank's got to end."

"Look Fack, we've got all the time in the world to work out who it was-"

"-Who it is-"

"So we'll look for clues and all that bollocks."

"Is that France?" I asked, pointing at a smudgy brown line.

"No, it's Jap-fucking-pan," cracked Cristo.

"How do I know? It doesn't look like France, it just looks like any old country. I don't know what France looks like. Maybe it is Japan."

"It's not Japan," decided Will.

"Maybe it is Japan and you're just pranking me."

"Shut up Zee," they said in unison, "or we'll throw you to the sharks."

They didn't say that last bit in unison (that would've been scary) but then they all punched my pectorals in perfect synchrony.

"Well," I said, changing subject from beat-me-up, "I'm glad I know that at least two of my friends aren't habitually deceiving me."

"Or do you?" asked Fack.

*Fin*

(Not really)

## A Foreign Reality

By Will

*I never planned for it to be taken this far. I just got a microphone out of a bin and sellotaped it to the mirror. You were such gullible tits, I love you.*

So went the introduction to the confessional vignette written in frowzy, anonymous capital letters on the back of an Indian takeaway menu, found underneath the Skoda's windscreen wipers. It was to be the first of many

Yet we searched for the real confession behind the eyes of our companions. Somewhere behind those slippery, seductive bulges a secretive soul was hiding, celebrating, calculating - feigning ignorance, and forging our futures.

"I want to take a photo of this moment," said Fack, as we sought out the possibility of McCroissants in Calais, "The usual guys, the unusual suspects." Cristo used his iffy French (*'Fluent and flamboyant'* - Cristo) to persuade a hobbling Frenchman to take a photo of us, for which we all pulled elegant porn shoot poses. As the camera was passed back to him and 'merci's were said, something occurred to Fack:

"But none of us are at all technical... how could we have fitted the car with state of the art recording equipment?"

"There were no cameras, Fack, idiot," said Zeph, as Cristo and I provided ample derision.

"Oh yeah. I get it. And there's irony in there, isn't there? Because if the car was actually recorded it would've been easy to tell who the gimp was."

"That's not irony."

"It is."

"Zut alors."

Considering we had no explicit guidance from the prankster, we aimed to reach Amsterdam on the first day, with soft core chemical kicks in mind. Fortunately France was as unappealing and abandonable as we'd expected, Belgium was small, flat and easily conquerable, and few foreigners hindered our progress.

On returning from an intensely hygienic and balmy lavatory experience at a Belgian service station we found a letter labelled '*For Fack*' on the backseat of the car. It was written in those same scrappy capitals and it outlined a mission for Fack that he could choose to accept.

It was a simple mission: to purchase his meal from the roadside café, 'L'hamburger Go!' in silence i.e. sans articulation. That was it. Fack would get a prize if he succeeded in ordering his pre-stated meal.

Fack accepted the challenge and considered possible strategies. He could just point, but could he trust a Belgian's interpretation of gesturing? Would he be seen as the Brit lost on the continent that he was and be taken behind the counter and turned into bifeck? He could write orders on a page and reveal them in a set order, starting with one saying something like '*Je suis anglais, je ne parle pas*

Francais,' but Fack's French GCSE showed its B-grade limitations and Cristo refused to help. (*'At first I didn't, I tried to get him to show the dude a big, fat 'Pourrais-je m'étouffer entre vos seins?' but he was a chicken'* - Cristo)

Fack decided to fall back on what he knew, and sat in the café with his pack of felt tips pens and scrap paper, sketching out the various components of his order. He then approached the desk, shaking his head in disbelief, and gestured to the cashier that his mouth was not operational before making his pictorial demands. The Belgian brusquely snapped at mute Fack and had to shout for a second Belgian (Belgian Deux), who was presumably more gifted in the universal language of visual representations. Belgian Deux translated Fack, appreciated the comedy that Belgian Un had missed, and threw in extra frites. Fack had succeeded, we ate our Go! burgers and left chuffed, puerile and sated.

And the prize? We had to wait for it to be craftily nudged into our lives. At some point during the journey to Amsterdam Cristo realised that Tom Arto (our oversized, backwards-legged, cuddly vegetable of a mascot) was sitting atop an envelope. It was, again, *'For Fack'*. He hurriedly opened the envelope and found his prize: a photo of none other than Tom Arto, in some strange location. We quickly recognised where it was – the incest hut in the woods. Tom Arto was working as stage management.

At this point I thought, wouldn't it be delightfully absurd if Tom Arto was the trickster? The cheeky blackguard. (*'But he's barely even a tomato, FFS'* – Cristo)

Fack said "Thanks," for the present. Nobody accepted his thanks, at first. Then all three of us did and we just kept on driving, Zeph at the wheel, like a confused batch of robots trying to follow their central objectives, without being able to compute exactly what they were.

Amsterdam was an experience. It was in fact four, possibly very different and contradictory experiences for four young boys with severely altered parameters of consciousness. For this we can thank Smokey's smoke and smoke-cakes, of the fragrant variety. We still have suspicions that what we consumed was spiked – by Tom Arto, by Enjoy, by the Dutch, who's to know?

"Just wait, it'll kick in," said Cristo, expecting the equivalent of a playful shoe to the thigh. Half an hour later, surrounded by open windows full of ladies for sale and closed windows full of marketed copulation, Zeph implored us to "just listen to those babies crying." There were no babies crying. It was kicking in – kicking all sense and reason out of us, like a leaden hoof to our minds. Zeph was definitely the first. He was stopped by an all-too-obvious street seller, muttering names of illicit substances by the canal. Zeph was wearing his deteriorated Barcelona FC top and was pulled in by the dark fellow's charisma,

"Barphelona, eh?" We all walked on, staring nonchalant at the selection of females on offer in the walls.

"What? Yeah! Barcelona!" Zeph responded. We tried to save him.

"Ecstasy?" the tradesman whispered seriously to Zeph.

"Yeah I bought it in Barcelona five years ago!"

"You like Barphelona, eh?"

"Yeah!"

"You like... *ecstasy*?"

"What?" Zeph, naïve and stoned, was trying to have a conversation with an amiable stranger about his vintage top.

"You like... *ecstasy*?" The penny dropped.

"Umm." And Zeph ran.

It's safe to say that it still hadn't kicked in for Zeph. It was when he suddenly stopped in the street, eyes full of wonder, bent over in half-pain and seized his head, whimpering softly, "I've actually got a halo," when it most probably kicked in.

Cristo followed – "I think... Jesus fucking... ahh... it's kicking... it's like I have a blanket of fire," and that was only *after* a five minute period where he wouldn't talk, would only smile inanely and stick his tongue out. Later he would explain, "it tasted of magic."

Fack was, of course, our dedicated drug-free driver. Therefore, there was only one more of us to bear the onset of temporary insanity. I. But I'd partaken of this stuff before, I knew I could weather it in a gentlemanly manner.

I crumbled to the floor in a fit of bliss. Every second was distorted, extended, deleted, created (*'everything was a Memento-esque coming-in-and-out-of-dreamscape'* – Zeph), while at the same time numbingly, ineffably pleasurable (*'Effinglly fucking pleasurable'* – Cristo). Time came and went in tides, swelling to conflagrating splashes. Time, self, the world: all were distended, demolished, dismally delightful.

Every real world event became part of a different conspiracy theory in my surreal understanding. For instance, an eloquent beggar who I who I thought looked like Tolkien's Gollum, who Cristo thought was a woman, became an actor in my imagination, working for an organisation that knew exactly what lines would elicit exactly what amount of money from tourists – an organisation that operated in every major city. I could distinguish the real from the imaginary, (*'It was just like the reverse of a dream, I swear,'* – Zeph), and I knew, as I kept repeating to Zeph, that if we were attacked we would be helpless. Fack tried to quieten us down as we gibbered away in our frenzied, pause-pocked manner, and Zeph kept losing the thread and saying, "So the plotz thickened! So the plotz thickened! So the plotz-"

Fack was looking after us all; we couldn't be left alone with time.

Apparently I ate a pizza that was instantly immemorial, and climbed into a taxi that barely existed. We had climbed into the vehicle because it had turned out – though I was oblivious to this – that we were absolutely lost. At around this point Zeph made a few texts to himself because he didn't want to forget how he felt. Here are the texts, raw and presented for all posterity:

*y. Fack no near car! Ddhydrated Woprst best. Hdroin? Mysel. Mum? Halo. Free. Lost. Fordst. Real! How.*

*Fucjing hell I bant describe d. Bon. Bin. Shared bond. Dream. Please stay. Fish mdmory. Myself. Oh yeah still. Huhhug.*

He was panicking about a dry mouth and a lack of water, demanding to phone the police or knock on someone's door. It was four in the morning. Zeph's



paranoia, added to our fatigue and disorientation, brought an end to our divine high. In the end we found the car, thank Fack.

I too craved water so much that before going to sleep I had to stumble into all the buildings that looked vaguely open, asking “You got water? You got toilet?” I was an ashamed shambles of a man, coming down from something scarily amazing.

We slept in the car. I can’t even imagine what kinds of dreams danced through our minds.

The morning was not such a happy story. We had to recover ourselves and reacclimatize to the standard passage of time, though the most pressing need was for more sleep. Fack drove us away from damn Amsterdam and stopped at the first services on the motorway where, thankfully, juxtaposed perfectly with the buzzing, stressful motorway, was a calm and vacant meadow. We rested in the shade of a tree, exhausted and still mentally peculiar, and I was in that state where even the pounding rush of the motorway traffic seemed like a gentle flow, and the warm breeze made the perfect blanket.

When we woke the shade had long since left us and we were baking in the open-air Dutch oven. The cruel storm of the channel crossing was literally and figuratively miles away. I was the first to sit up and I thought I would make myself useful by buying five litres of water for the parched saplings. We’d glugged an oceanic volume of water but our bodies demanded ever more. When I brought the bottles back to the three collapsed bodies I noticed there was a scrap of paper trembling underneath one of Zeph’s shoes. It was from *him* again.

*You know I’d never hurt you guys for the world. I won’t make any ugly changes or anything that ends the world. There’s not one wisp of worry, not one wisp. This is spectacular. The drugs, I mean. One day I wrote how I did it all. Here you go. It’s the small piece of pink paper with few words on it. I need some water, guys.*

I woke them all, showed them this, and shared the bottles of water around. Fack looked relieved and said he was glad he’d been cleared – he was the only sober person, he couldn’t possibly have written the note.

“You’re not actually stupid,” I told him, “and neither are we.” For imitation is easy.

We read the pink piece of paper. Finally, the details of the ruse. Mockingly, it was in bullet points:

- *Thought it was interesting that we thought someone was following us.*
- *Put microphone I found in bin through mirror when you were in hostel in Edinburgh.*
- *Sent text (from ‘Enjoy’) using Randell Dang’s old sim card that I had lying around my wallet.*
- *Didn’t expect it to go any further.*
- *Wrote letters to parents when came back (from different names).*
- *Wrote out hasty contracts.*

- *Removed the microphone from the car and said I'd removed all the surveillance equipment, in Reading.*
- *Got you all to sing songs on campus, in Reading.*
- *Made sure we all signed the contracts (not difficult).*
- *Took ideas from Zeph's parents – they loved it.*
- *Let stuff settle in the winter and considered stopping it.*
- *But was challenged by Cristo when he called it a 'shitty version of The Game'.*
- *Set up a sex den in the woods and got a family friend to act out a part (asked to be ridiculously dramatic).*
- *Followed it up on The Isle of Wight, where the family friend lives, and got his wife in on the action.*
- *Made you all think it was the guys at The Nuts Bunker (who can barely walk or think!)*
- *Little bits here and there. And probably other stuff since I wrote this note.*
- *And stuff I may never tell you.*
- *And that's all there was to it.*
- *The game goes on.*

It was one of the most unimpressive but shockingly ingenious scheme descriptions I'd ever encountered. We sat in the long grass, reviewing the incidences of the year in this new light, suggesting specifics for each set-up. All the while we knew we were discussing this with someone who knew the director's commentary perfectly: the director himself, one of us. We insulted ourselves profusely – it had been so flagrantly fabricated. It was not an illusory twist, it was the new obvious. I admit that at that point I greatly admired the skill of my meddlesome friend. You may think he was just a fool (what did that make us?). We knew he was a fool: a fantastic fool and a friend.

We made for Germany.

By sweet happenstance we knew a good friend from school who lived in Münster, so we employed all our collective map-reading skills to plan a route to his house in a town, or a district, or a road (we never did find out) called Kappendagger Dam. It was one of those things that we *could* well have found out, even now, but that we've chosen *not* to find out (similarly, we *could* have inspected each other's bags for evidence, or try to catch each other out, but none of us ever did).

Since he was the only one who could trust his brain, Fack drove. Meanwhile we shared out the tasks of navigation, sleep, and communicating with our German friend, Zob Rymek. We found ourselves as lost in Münster as we'd been in Amsterdam, though luckily with the advantages of a car and vaguely useful grips on reality. We tried to get our bearings at a car park, where Zeph took a fancy to the young, Arian assistant. He scavenged for excuses to ask her for information and when we left he hurled (what he thought was) the parking ticket and a few Euros at her, though the parking ticket was actually a flyer for Smokey's in Amsterdam. With that he shouted,

"Yeah I've got your ticket right here!" and we were away.

To be perfectly honest, we didn't have much faith in Zeph's visions of 'Cap and Dagger Dam', and we were all surprised when we eventually arrived at Das Haus von Rymek. Zob welcomed us with his impeccable, aristocratic English accent:

"Let me show you some of that famous German hostility," and we found his house furnished like a splendid pizzeria.

We felt abhorrently juvenile and irresponsible – the junkie wrecks we still were – so we felt bad (but accepting) when his parents offered us a meal at a plush Brötzwurst restaurant. There, we sampled and rejected seas of sauerkraut and Zeph took his second fancy of the day - to Zob's fünfzehn year old sister, Wiltrud. For the night we drank not from the chalice of poisonous weed but from the pleasures of the family Rymek. Zeph tried especially hard to practice his German with Wiltrud, who was all too happy to entertain a smiley, dishevelled English boy.

After a phenomenally refreshing sleep we had a hearty breakfast and witnessed a bizarre moment. While we four and Zob were at the dinner table, Wiltrud walked ever so carefully into the room with a delicate red rose in her hands and approached Zeph. How adorablich, I thought, she was offering a rose to desperate old Zeph. Wiltrud spoke, in an English that was harsh around the edges,

"Thank you zery much Zeph, I much liked this flower." Zeph didn't have any words – German or English – to reply with. He, of course, hadn't set a flower by her bedside, nor signed it from Zeph. We weren't living in that reality. It was the prankster, showing off his new tricks. Zeph could hardly explain this to the super cute German girl,

"Danke schön. Ja."

Without further ado we drove hundreds of miles across Germany.

None of us felt like telling the story of our year to Zob, not for any fear other than mere embarrassment. We'd been playing a very convoluted and sneakily masterminded game of silly buggers. It was hardly something we could put on our CVs.

On the Autobahn from Münster to Frankfurt we unleashed Rammstein at maximum volume and I defeated the Skoda's speedometer. I was awarded with a mildly disconcerting phut-phut noise from the engine, which brought me back down to a more British speed. We were safe and in control throughout. Zeph in the backseat felt especially protected; he would stroke his seatbelt and wistfully tell us it felt like 'his Yvey' was with him and had her arm around him. Travelling at 110 miles an hour in a rickety Skoda in a distant land, the only real dangers were saccharine nostalgia and the tragedies of romance.

Frankfurt greeted us with a colossal masturbating automaton. We found very little to do in Frankfurt except toy with the novelty of automatic escalators and paddle in a particular arrangement of deserted fountains.

From there we aimed for the nearest campsite where we set up our tent and – though we weren't sure if we were allowed to start one at midnight – a classic camping fire.

"You know, at the beginning of the year," said Zeph, face illuminated by burning, "I thought we'd get up to some right old shenanigans as we tried to live up to The Plan... but... we failed spectacularly. I foresaw us inviting guests to join us around campfires, and helping out unfortunate characters we rescued from the wayside, and I thought it'd be pretty doink." We then reviewed the year and gave ourselves damning self-assessments.

Had we 1) made at least 100 people happier? No. (*I started by trying to achieve things like that, for example pleasing people with the gift of music in Reading Uni campus, but it involved too much effort* – The One, who informed us of this later).

Had we 2) At least tried to change the ways of five authenticated bad people? Not a jot.

Had we 3) Done an exceptionally new thing every week? Again, a resounding failure.

Had we 4) kept up healthy masturbation routines? Possibly more of a success.

Had we 5) stayed focused on our individual goals and, if given the opportunity, touched the sky? We'd been more successful with this, though sadly we'd had no sky-touching opportunities. Zeph as a writer, Fack as an artist, Cristo as a musician, had all furthered themselves in some way and were still brimming with oneiric ambition. As a mystic poet I was still ambitious, if unproductive.

Could we 6) pass as boy *or* man, and *not* only one or the other? We were still happily riding the transition, so yes.

Had either of us completed the bonus mission of turning a friend gay? Not yet.

But of course, we remembered, objective 3 had been too lame so we'd replaced it with something else: to give the others all the help we could to reach their individual goals. We'd done well with this. One of us had done exceptionally well, to my mind.

I told them what I thought was a relevant fable of my own creation: the fable of the two ambitious men.

"Sam and Simon were trying to move a heavy chest from out a cave. By himself, Sam couldn't move the chest so he considered himself weak. Simon couldn't move the chest by himself either, so he cursed himself as a failure. When they pushed together they moved the chest and Simon was greatly impressed by Sam's technique and strength; Sam was himself filled with awe for the might of Simon. Voila."

Some time later around that fire, it became apparent that Fack wasn't too comfortable with the situation:

"It feels too freaky," he declared, "It doesn't feel like everything makes sense now." We talked over it for a while, he was obviously making a conscious effort to accept everything serenely, but it was impossible.

"One of you is being my guardian angel and I don't like it." There was no response. The guardian angel did not step forward. This didn't sit too well with Fack but then he continued,

"The thing is... I still trust you guys... that's the weird thing."

For the rest of the fiery German night we amused ourselves with young memories of Amsterdam, boy stories of girls, and man stories of women.

If you're expecting a whodunit crescendo, I apologise. For the best you'll get is the same as what we got: a Cristo-style apathetic lull. Thus it is to him that I pass the flame.

## All Chips on Sausage

By Cristo

We were in Frankfurt. Let me tell you something that you probably already know about frankfurters – they look like cocks. In the morning me and Fack devised a doink ‘game’ called ‘Cock or Sausage’ that went like this: you had to wake someone up by putting something floppy and roughly cylindrical against their face – we’re talking either a cock (real, no shit) or a sausage. They don’t really have much choice about playing the game or not. Then you ask them to guess whether they were woken up by a cock or a sausage. If they’re wrong, you call them lame, if they’re right you work out some more sophisticated way to call them lame. Either way, if it’s a cock they’re shamed. But there’s a risk, obviously, that you’ll be caught with your cock out. Seconds count. Go ahead, try this one at home. Change the nation’s waking rituals. Put the fear of cock into your most cherished friends.

Where were we? OK, we were in Frankfurt. Fack had to go for a swim in the outdoor pool because he had a hankering for it, and then we were off, probably in search of petrol because it kept feeling like we were the helicopter in the game Desert Strike (if you don’t play games, you won’t get that).

As soon as we were juiced up we were eating up the road all across Germany, and Austria, and Fack suggested we go to the Republic of Czechoslovakia because it’s the Skoda’s homeland and we wanted to get a taste of backwards-ish Eastern European life. So that’s where we headed. While we were listening to something odiously overplayed like Weezer, I said, “Jeez I’d like to get more classical music into my auditory diet.” Remember that – write it down. It’s important.

Anyway, Fack – poor old Fucky – was driving and was the worse for wear due to a bit of a deoderant mixup (*‘I need antiperspirant, otherwise I’m too natural’* – Fack), which we had to tell him about, but he couldn’t really sort it out straight away. So he was pit-staining it down the motorway – the whole thing was worsened by Fack’s nervous-nervous attitude to driving – and soon enough we got to the Czecho Repo. Basically the country’s stacked full of scurvy ‘Gentleman’s Clubs’ and Chineseey mobsters, at least from our experience. We didn’t want to stick around because we were scared of whatever crappy currency the Republicans were using, so we decided to leave, but Zeph wanted to haggle for a gnome before we left so we attempted – *attempted* – to stop in a car park. But there were these Chineseey mobsters in the space Fack was trying to park in, and they weren’t budging for us, and gave us shifty looks. Fack tried another spot, and what do you know? Chineseey mobsters. We realised that the whole goddamn car park was full of these mobster types who were freaking the bejeesus out of us (the other guys, at least. *I* know how to deal with these sorts, thanks to my street education). So we totally scadaddled, Fack whiffing away even more because of the stress, and we tried to leave the Republic ASAP. Luckily, the Czech border guards (as opposed to the German border guards who acted up to their stereotype as loser robots) were pretty lax and must have said something to us like “Do whatever the

fuck you want,” and that was that, we were out of a nasty Czech, bmm-tish. Les chiens de chasse etaient de nouveau sur la piste.

At some point on our drive to a camping site in Austria some absolute plonker like Fack brought up again how he was scared that his friend was creepily changing his life or whatever, and I was like ‘Give a shit, sort it out’. Yeah, we’d come to acknowledge that one of us had been operating behind the scenes of our lives for nearly a year, and was still giving us these mildly entertaining challenges and doing God knows what else. But was it harming anyone? No. Was it upsetting anyone for any half sensible reason? No. Was it destroying anything we loved or liked or gave a shit about? No. Was it a bonus, pure and simple? Yes. Darn it, yes. What’s wrong with screwing up each other’s lives in good ways? I can’t personally be arsed to hear what the council of philosophers has to say about it, it was a bonus level to an otherwise gwool game. The cheats were unlocked, that’s another way of looking at it. In non-videogame terms, it was like your friend was giving you presents behind your back. *Not* stabbing you in the back, *not* tickling your back, *not* taking advantage of your back, just slipping in a few presents.

Don’t get me wrong, it was as embarrassing as hell that we were such a close, gay group (pardon my French) that we pretty much invited and encouraged this kind of activity. But we’ve gotten used to that. And what a natural evolution of the fucking paradigmatic close friendship group. Secret legs up.

Also, I was sceptical about the details, sure. Like, is one of us really that good an actor? None of us, from what I know, ever had any acting experience. But then it’s not really acting, is it? It’s just deceiving, which isn’t the same, because you’re never kidding *yourself* about who you are, you know? Also, maybe one of was just fucking nuts and not working for the same team, but that would have just been catastrophic anyway and the chances were minimal so we didn’t really consider it.

I can’t remember what exactly it was that happened because little bits and pieces were being thrown into the mix by The Lone Fuckarounder all over the place, but after some incident Zeph sent back a text message asking,

*‘Can we get confirmation that that’s unreal?’* (we referred to things suspiciously brought into being as ‘unreal’) and then we got a reply later on in the day saying,

*‘This isn’t a Hollywood drama, numb nuts,’* and that was the end of that. He wasn’t going to ruin the game, was he? Give the guy a break anyway, he did pay for us all to go on this trip around Europe and we did have an official bitch of a time. The changes just made it more exciting and intriguing. The only thing we could’ve done that wasn’t going to be fucking loserish (like go home and cry to Mummy, or go sniffing round each other’s belongings) was kick back and enjoy ourselves. To the eXtreme. That was always the aim of, you know, everything, so what was wrong with that?

There are two types of people in the world: cocks and sausages. That’s what it boils down to, end of the day.

Do-be-do we got to Australia and set up our wigwam right next to an epic river in a place that was most probably called Lienz. We were getting used to the camper lifestyle – a luxury that you’ll see we lost over the course of the trip. We partook in a bit of night swimming while our tongues were swimming in Tequila, which was probably stupid, and definitely how Jeff Buckley got himself killed, but there you go, Tequila Mocking Bird, and it was a freezing cold but shit hot experience. We slept and in the morning the world was gorgeous – the mountains towering above us, the green fields making the ascent, the river cutting its way through, with apples bobbing along, nature’s snacks and supplies. So what did we do? We got in our fucking petrol-guzzling machine, waved goodbye and chugged away.

The Austrian roads were something special too. I pictured this awesome James Bond scene where James Bond had been told by some fit Austrian spy slut to meet her on the road – ‘I’ll be the one driving on the left’ – and they approached each other from two ends of a road in Aston Martins and Jaguars or whatever, and they both overtake these speedy evil henchmen so they’re each driving on the left, and they swish back into lanes in this perfect sequence, just in time, and go and bone in the pine woods. Yeah. I told you I should be a director.

We didn’t know where we were really going at this point so we just headed to go further away from home like the hardy homing pigeons we were, and that meant Italy. Which was fantastic. It was so bleeding ‘ot, Fack was stinking it up, and that’s a *fact*. It was May and it was too hot for all of us whitebred English (my worldliness doesn’t seem to help me against the heat).

Somehow we found ourselves delving deeper and deeper into this monstrous hybrid Austroitaly, where attractive girls used minging words. Unhealthy mix. We stayed in a campsite underneath a motorway, which was all a bit too future dystopia, and I was on toilet duty. I distinctly remember being on toilet duty but I can’t remember one shitting thing about what toilet duty actually involved. No matter. The guy in charge of this packed sub-autostrada campsite was a spangly, wiry, old bastard called The Boss, who went around on his bike and was obviously a bit of a loose cannon. Fortunately, *I* was on toilet duty so we didn’t get busted for any toilet-related misdemeanours.

We were gonna have a chilled out night but at 1:00 we felt the itch for some late night clubbing, even though we had no real hopes of finding anywhere open at that god forsaken hour, in that godforsaken crossbred town. Seeing as we were up for a walk anyway we went searching around the dead-looking town of Balzano for anywhere open. It felt fucking surreal when we came across a bar that was still pumping, and even more surreal when we realised it was a gay bar (gay bar!). Not letting that phase us, we danced our cocks off, and showed those mixed-up Austro-Italian-combination-packs how proper, cultured boys dance, and got so excited we took our tops off. Not everyone in there was gay, so it was legit. But - turned out - it wasn’t, because we were told by the manager to put our tops back on (*spiacente!*) and then we resumed our show of dance superiority. Fack Thomas found himself in a fight (with Ugly Fack Thomas) that was hilarious, and I punched Average-Looking Zeph Gordy in the tumult.



We slept and left early in case we were to be cock or sausaged by The Boss. Back on the Italian motorway, on form as ever. Tops off, mineral water sweat oozing into the seats, we travelled to Milan. Will was coasting down the motorway hills and we overtook a French car painfully slowly. The Frenchman driving it was having the time of his life, singing the crap out of a song and thumping his wheel with his hands. He was putting so much of his little French heart into it that I guessed what the song was – Jimmy Eat World, Bleed American – classic, and so we turned off whatever we were listening to and joined him. He saw us and laughed without ever stopping singing. Goddamnit, does everyone have the passion of a rockstar inside them? Is everyone too shy to let their Adkins or even their Cobains leap out of their mere mortal skins? The Frenchman was loving it, and he got to what was obviously his favourite bit in the song, which is my favourite bit too, and was wailing away as if he was lead guitar. I love it when people have favourite bits in songs and I love it when people sing guitars, and even more when bands replace guitar parts with vocals. When it comes down to music, humans are just well honed guitars and vice versa.

By blind chance we happened to pass Lake Garda ('Oh yeah,' I remembered, 'one of the best lakes in the world') so we got out and Fack insisted we go for a swim. It even beat the Austrian river swimming – we all did big Luigi-style jumps from off the rocks, into the clear, beautiful water, and it was only ruined by some foreign pervert who watched us all changing. What the hell was his game? I wish I could've woken him up with a fistful of cock and a faceful of sausage, the punk.

Milano was a joke. We couldn't get further in than the manky areas because not only were the signs speaking a different language, they were also just shit. I don't know, if I was driving, I probably could've done it. After a while we just had to give up and get out of there. But, what a cum-shot in the face, we *couldn't* get out of there. We listened to a whole Counting Crows album before we had to give up and go to an air-conditioned Macky D's to cool down and beef up. There we were, stuck in the dregs of Milano, ordering rounds and rounds of cheeseburgers. The three drivers were all up for the safe, zany option of staying in McDonalds till it closed, but I thought that plan sucked, *despite* the attraction of chain-eating cheeseburgers. Luckily, the Fuckarounder did actually agree with me, and we got another challenge through, written on a napkin by the sleighty old dog.

The challenge was to get to a Monte Carlo casino before the day was up (as in before going to sleep). Could we do it? FFS, we couldn't even get out of Milano's orbit...

We set off. And so began the best drive of our lives. Somehow we found the hidden exit out of Milano's urban sprawl and I planned the route to Monte Carlo, via Genoa. I'm ridiculously good at planning routes, even though my navigational skills can be pretty shoddy (see Milano). The motorway taking us from Milano to Genoa was magnifico, lined with encanto. Man I wanted to drive. The roads curved around the mountains so femininely and gracefully, yet also so boldly, like a continuous racetrack. What made it even better was that the oncoming traffic was often nowhere to be seen, and few people were driving anyway. When it got dark and the only things we could see were the things

captured by our headlights it felt like we were cutting our own perfect way through Italy. Christ, what a ride. The drivers were all battling over time at the wheel and each had their own strategies about apexes (when we were alone we could cut across the lanes) and about optimum speeds, about how and when to overtake. The moon just looked on and said to us, "You're catching on, friends, you're catching on."

So, who *was* in the real driving seat? Who-*did*-dunit? Dunno. The Cat's Mother?

Let's look at the suspects here. Will. I've always been 40% on Will. He's got money so could sort out all the bits here and pieces there, and pay for actors 'n' shit because, you know, money's fairly fucking useful. Then there are his parents who work in TV and would've given him ideas, especially since we pranked him into believing his parents were going to make a real-life documentary of our lives. Though everyone could've been influenced by that one. Will can charm the pants of people, literally, and he could have simply mesmerised all of us. Finally, he's into loads of weird beliefs and you can never trust people with weird beliefs.

But what about Zeph? Let's see. He started the whole pranks thing. He's a writer and he's got a damn excitable imagination. Jesus, apparently he doesn't even look at porn, he just thinks the girls up, and most people couldn't even manage that if they could be arsed (and why, in this web-wide world, would we bother?). I don't know. If he thinks he's writing our destinies, he's kidding himself. Cristo is still in control of Cristo's life. Sorry Zee. I wouldn't put much money on it being you anyway, you're too... zesty.

Fack. People don't give Fucky enough credit for what he can do. He doesn't mind looking stupid but that's mainly just because he likes to learn. He knows what's going on. And he has an artistic vision. I think he sees the beauty of this even if he appears scared. He's a camera nut too, and that could explain all the early stuff with the cameras in the car. Is he a schemer though? Dunno.

And what about me? What've you got on me? Zeph once famously accused me of being a fan of American conspiracy films and stories with twists. As if that was evidence. I'm clean. It wasn't me, I swear. But who knows, maybe I'm a motherfucker.

There was a point when I looked at everyone and I thought we all looked shifty – it was when we were crossing the bridge in Genoa. There are some motives that are common to the group. We've all been pranked so we all have that family favourite: revenge. It'd be taking prank one-upmanship a bit too far really though, wouldn't it? Another common motive? Love – friendly love for each other (a strange brand of it, I'll give you that). Combine that with another motive, the motive to do something spectacular, and I think that's probably on the right track.

The road from Genoa to Monaco was equally gwool. The invisible sea was going on and on to our left, and Europe and our homes were somewhere to our right. It was late – into the morning hours – and the spirit of the road was so warm that each of the few cars we were flying with earned themselves personalities. It was one of those, as Jimmy Eat says, 'sleepless roads where the sleepless go'.

Christ, we were members of an exclusive nighttime driving club, everyone on their way to Monte Carlo, ready to put up their stakes for a shot at the big time.

We were just drifting along, Gods on a roll.

The guy in front of us put his hazard lights on. In front of him there was another car with its hazards on, and then we saw a queue of cars blinking with the cautious orange, waking up to something, we didn't know what. We went depressingly slowly, champing at the bit and ready to get back to being speedy Gods.

And Zeph was just like, "WTF?"

Then we saw what had caused the slowdown and, what the fuck indeed, I've never seen anything like it in the whole of my real life. Metal was everywhere, cars had collided, people had died. Three lanes of carnage. No special effects, no computer graphics, it was real destruction of real people. That was real blood, that was a real face (God, was that a face?). We kept going at our funeral procession pace, we turned off our loud rock music, but we didn't have anything to say. Of all our Action!!GenerationN phrases, our extremo swear words, our hugely personal buzzwords... nothing was any good. We weren't equipped for it. It was shocking, saddening, sobering. It really put the brakes on everything. We were still in Italy. We later found out we'd seen the A10, San Remo, 1:30, fourteen car pileup that'd killed four people. It was shit.

"Don't get too cocky," said the moon.

How do you go on with your fucking great life? How do I write about living it up in Monte Carlo and real French girls who cried 'ooh la la'? People gradually move on, forget. Thank God. And let's not kid ourselves, it happens in hours. It's not anything to do with you, after all, it's just a film - a real film - that you store away.

By the time we'd completed our challenge by arriving in Monte Carlo we were fine, giggling little bitches who tried to get into the Monte Carlo Casino with our shorts. We were amazed to hear all we had to do to get into one of the lesser casinos, still on the main square, was change into trousers, which we did in the car park to cries of 'Oooh la la!' from real French girls. Our Skoda must've been the most lived in and loved car in the city, even though it was probably the worst (except those abandoned by gamblers who'd died at the roulette wheel). It was straight out of Sonic The Hedgehog's Casino Night Zone (yeah, I know the Sonic level didn't come first). It was all glitz, palm trees and sexy ladies.

Only Will and I made any bets. I knew how it all works and I started off winning big bucks, but then I got greedy and lost reams of that paper money. Will was betting like my mum, and made ten Euros or something worthless like that. Then we left and Will took us around the Grand Prix circuit before we went to find a lay-by to sleep in, which ended up being in France.

It was 4 in the morning by this point and, as Will so fantastically put it, we'd found ourselves in Hungary, as in we were starving. All we had on us was a can of canned fruit salad, and no tin opener, so a bit of primal smash-it-on-a-bin madness ensued. The sticky shit was off but still edible. I notified Fack that his

back had been raped by the sun – it was rouging away. Then we tried to get to sleep in the car – the horror, the horror, the horror.

The morning of day 7 was like those bits in a song where all the instruments seem to fall down a hole, all the music gets sucked away, and it's a disaster but it sounds good. Fack was in his own boot, his spine totally fucked, his feet dripping with oil, but he was still good. He was still breathing. Zeph was sleeping by the foot of a phone box in his skinny boy briefs (*'I still had decent dreams'* – Zeph). A French cleaner was sweeping at his feet.

We washed in a single sink. I don't know how Will maintained his clean-cut appearance but he did. Underneath his pretty features, he was just as dirty and worn as all of us.

At that lay-by we considered our options. We'd been told by Monsieur Sneaky Dick from the start that we'd have to be back in Calais within ten days, so at this juncture we had four days of driving left. We thought we'd make it and enjoy the ride if we left then, so we planned out the return stretch. Then we used these stickers we found in the kiddy's diary we were keeping to draw little versions of us on the bonnet of the Skoda. My face was a guitar (a Gibson, not a Fender, naturally), and my eyes were made out of wheels. Will was a cheeky fat bastard, just 'cos that was wrong and hilarious. Zeph had his head in the clouds and even longer, hippier hair. Fack had a tree growing out of his head and a heroin syringe spiking through his head like Frankenstein's nuts and bolts.

We tried to get the stickers off a few weeks ago but we couldn't get the bottom of the paper off (you know how it is) so looks like the engine heat liked our pictures.

We went back via Monte Carlo. All we did there was try to sunbathe in the main square, where they have statues of people (who, instinctively, we all pretended to bugger and be molested by in interesting ways).

Zeph ignored the signs telling him to get off the grass – all of their four languages - and sunbathed by the palm trees, absorbing that forbidden sunshine. Within minuets he was told off by The Man (Casino Zone Robotnik). The conversation went a little like this:

“You can't lie there!”

“I don't listen to fascists!”

“Put a top on!”

“You're trying to build a prison!”

“Sacris blue! Is that a Barcelona top?”

“Yeah, The Man, it's a pretty sweet top.”

“You like Barcelona? You like... ecstasy?”

So we left and before we knew it The Alps were looming in front of us. They were just big pebbles – no problemo.

## Old Car, Old Friends

By Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) (... Fack)

In life, everybody's keeping you alive. Your safety is in hundreds of people's hands and it's not as if you're ever aware of it or care. Don't think it's just the armed robber who points a shotgun at your head, or the taxi driver who drives scarily fast. It's also every baker who takes care not to let germs or poison into your bread. It's every builder who builds a house that keeps you up high, inside and alive. It's every animal that plays cutely and doesn't jump at your throat to suck for juice.

Will was driving us through the Italian-Swiss Alps, going at a maximum of about 30 mph because the car couldn't breathe at that altitude, while I looked at the walls of rock and the little things big distances away. I thought I'd try to estimate how many people's hands my life had been in on that trip. There was every person who had constructed every part – airbag, wheel, screw – in the car; everybody who had fed me (mostly McDonalds staff); every unknown driver in every car that had passed us only feet away (this one alone must have been many many). Then there was God holding up the mountain above us. Then there were my friends, like Will who was careful not to drive off the clifftop to our doom, and the other two for bunches of reasons. All in all, so many people making sure the world didn't collapse on me.

I panicked when I thought that one of my friends was taking even more responsibility for my life by changing stuff and lying to me and forcing me on dangerous motorway journeys. Even your friends make mistakes, and I was scared that one of mine was trying to be my guardian angel, because guardian angels have to be perfect, they can't mess it all up. Looking back, I was probably overreacting. If my life's already in so many people's hands, may as well be in my friends' hands, right? I don't know, it still scares me, sometimes and times.

In the mountains, Cristo upset a Swiss border guard by playing Sonic Youth so loud it sounded like a series of annoying sonic booms. Will upset the same border guard by stalling at his feet. We made that guard cry, then we broke free of the mountain and slept in the campsite wonderland of Bourg St. Pierre, which was hugged from all sides by gentle giant mountains. It's near Bourg St. Bernard, where the Beethoven dogs come from. Water came from taps in the ground but the clouds were near. The mountains were so huge and close that they barred the sun off before bedtime, blanketing us in shadow, and allowed us a lie-in.

In the morning we climbed one of these mountains, but the sun was so close that it was burningly hot, and the air was thin. We drank from mini waterfalls all the way up. It was a bigger mountain than the one we'd climbed in the Lake District in England. Maybe it was bigger than the Lake District. The top was ruled by cows who sang to each other with bells, who we chased but respected as the masters of the realm. It was a bitch of a climb. Even the scuttle back down was exhausting. But it was great because the world was ours.

Then we swam our sweat away in the local pool, which was chocka full of kids. All the kids and all of us were thrashing around in the underheated pool.

We were kicking, gurgling, jumping, hand standing, spinning, and they were copying us and we were copying them. Children of the wet.

While we were changing, two of the kids kept smiling at us inanely. Not like how the pervert did at Lake Garda. I think we probably blushed and waved at them a bit, and they were coy and young back at us. We left feeling happy.

We decided to lie down on the grass outside the pool, for a seventy seven second sleep in the sun. I was dozing off. I was just getting evaporated away. Then *splloosh*, there was water spllooshing on my face. Son-of-a. I sat up, soaked and blinded by the sun, as the little imps from the changing room jumped up and down. One of them had an empty glass in his hand and was obviously celebrating displacing it onto my body.

But I didn't even know him!

Will, Cristo and Zeph – all splash victims – sat up and glared at the kid. The kid was dancing with joy. He said to me, with a faint French accent,

“You look happy!”

And I couldn't argue with that, for I had most probably looked happy. We were all speechless. It had been an unprovoked attempt at drowning me. But he was so loveable! Then the boy, after turning to his friends for support, looked at us and said,

“You look like men but you play like boys.”

True enough. Weird though. It was weird how he said that, since we liked to call ourselves boymen – we just liked to be both. I guess we'd been right all along. Then the kid said his final words to us, before he walked off and left us, wet and confused on the grass,

“And you asked for it.”

Who had asked for it? It didn't feel real. Then it dawned on me – like a splash of water to the face – that maybe it wasn't, in fact, real. That was after all the new situation, right?

Had the encounter been natural real? Or had one of us bribed the kid to do it with sweeties – was it unreal?

At first it had been easy to tell what, out of all the things that had happened since that conversation on the ferry to France, had been brought into reality by the mysterious fiddler, and what had already been there. When something unreal happened it felt similar to when you just know that the world is wrong, like when a miracle seems to happen or a girl you love doesn't love you. But it got harder and harder to tell, and the line between stuff we knew was real and unreal got blurrier and blurrier. The feelings that the world was wrong were fainter and less sure. Was that how the world actually was? Did that happen by chance? Did it make sense? Did that kid really splash me with water because he just wanted to?

Of course, that makes me think: how much? How often? How long? And how the hell could one of them have got the kid to do it? It would've been practically impossible to bribe him, or even just talk to him, without us knowing.

So how come I still reckon it was probably unreal?

Life went on. To France! I accidentally got off the motorway and took us down a lonely French B-road, where Zeph asked us to stop for B-Road baguettes.

We kept driving in search of these B-road baguettes, with the sun behind us and the straight road in front of us, waving up and down like a snake on a hill. Cristo hung his head out of the window and nearly got blown away by the wind rushing off the fields of gold. "Champs d'or!" he roared, but we couldn't hear him properly because the wind took his words and scattered them over the land. He asked if he could drive and we thought, well, yeah, there's nobody else on the road, and we could see miles ahead.

We parked up and let Cristo drive. He had the right eyes but knew none of the skill. It made us all think of that lesson we gave him in the Edinburgh car park. One of us had ended that lesson early. This time, we just let him drive on, and I was in the front seat, looking after my car and our lives. It was illegal, of course, but laws are there to protect society and there was no society there, just us and the fields of gold. Cristo rustily changed up through the gears, swerving just a little bit when he had to pay attention to anything more than steering. He got all the way up to 40 mph – at which point Will practically pissed himself and ordered us to stop, but Cristo told him to relax, kick back and put his head out of the window. Will didn't do it. Then we saw a car approaching us about half a mile away, so we had to stop, right? But Cristo thought he could handle it. Fuck. I asked him to stop, but I asked really pathetically. I wanted to see him do it. I clutched onto my nipples but in a way I wanted to clutch onto my nipples, and I wanted to see Cristo complete his first successful pass. This was after all how old people used to learn how to drive. We came closer and closer – it was a space wagon. Jesus. It was a challenge from space. Cristo was still a bit swervy. Will ordered him to slow down.

"Which one's the brake again?" said Cristo, as he glided past the wagon and accelerated away, "Woo!" and down a slope, "At last I'm piloting an orgasm dip!" We all felt the internal rush swelling up. I realised I was still clutching onto my nipples and checked to see nobody was looking at me before I disengaged.

Cristo drove for about an hour, we passed hundreds of cars, and then we pushed acceptable idiocy one shove further. Zeph asked randomly about whether you could drive with the car doors open and there was some disagreement about it. Me and Zeph thought you could drive quite fast with the doors open (in case, you know, you had to for an emergency). Will and Cristo laughed at us. That sounded like a challenge. Cristo stopped and said it was simple, he'd test it. He sounded insane.

"Come on," he insisted, "it'll cool us down too." There were no cars in front of us. No cars behind us. Open road. In perfect timing we all shoved our doors open and like that, wings outstretched, Cristo started to move the beast. We were all laughing constantly at our fun risk. At about 25 mph, the doors all wavered, and by 35 they'd all banged close, and we were away. 30mph was middle ground – none of us won. And I noticed that I hadn't clutched my nipples.

Eventually we found our B-road baguettes. They were tasty, as was the Frenchman's moustache. When we got back into the car (Zeph took over from the newbie) we found a CD none of us knew in the player and thought we'd give it a go. It was one of those obvious actions of the manipulator – a present, really. It

was a CD of classical music – what Cristo had asked for. It was Mozart and he was Cristo's new buddy. Someone must've bought it at the one of the services. It was simple.

We got back onto the motorway, somewhere between Lyon and Dijon, and thought we'd stop off at Dijon with no reason but to 'try to find the mustard'. Once we got to Dijon we found that the French had prepared a special party for us. The second we got into the town, fireworks blazed everywhere and French revellers filled the streets. Anywhere we went in Dijon, we couldn't get away from happy Frenchards and their celebrations. There were so many happy Frenchards in fact that we got stuck in a traffic jam with them – one of the first we'd found in Europe. It was midnight and they must have thought that the party was ending, but we rekindled the French fire by playing No Doubt out of the car, while we turned the roof of the car into one big steel drum, and sang, and thrust the car from side to side with our sheer arse power. Everybody loved us. It was our after-party in a traffic jam. We had to say goodbye to our new French friends – 'au revoir, we must continue the adventure!'

We drove on, over more B-roads, in search of B-road bedding. It was too late for campsites. Fireworks still rejoiced our journey from all sides and we followed a boat that seemed to sail the road for a few miles, before we found a service station. There, we set up our sleeping bags on a patch of grass, in full sight of the services shop, and prepared to sleep off the excitement of the day. We ended up talking about crap for about an hour, before Zeph sat up, eyes bright with moonlight, and raised something serious.

"Guys, guys. I've been thinking. I want to leave everything behind. I want to live like this. I want to travel alone and just go wild. I don't want to have a house, I don't want to study English and Philosophy at Uni... even this road trip has been slightly too artificial and too cosy. I want to leave everything and see what I can find for myself. I don't know if I can arsed with the normal, structured, guided life. Guys, I'm seriously thinking about doing this instead of going to Uni. Maybe I'll go to America again, or Asia, or Iceland – *anywhere*, you know it doesn't even really matter where. So, yeah... yeah."

"You want to be the man who left everything behind? You haven't got many problems in your life, Zeph. You'd be running away from nothing," said Will.

"I know. OK this sounds really cheesy or whatever but... life isn't just something to endure, it's not just something to enjoy. It is everything. It is everything to embrace. I want to just live it. I don't want to be boxed away. I don't want to be forgotten. The decisions we make now... they're so important. All I want is—"

"Me too," I said, surprising myself. "I'll do it too." A thousand emotional shivers tickled down my spine and brought me to life. "I'm with you, Zeph. Unless you mean... unless you mean you want to do it alone."

"No, fuck no, if you want to give up everything too Fuck, we'll forget about giving up each other. We'll do it, we'll quit Uni and —"



"Comrades, comrades," said Will, "I'm going to Cambridge. It's an opportunity I don't think I can miss out on. So I don't know why I'm doing this, but I'll do it too. I'll give up on Cambridge, I'll join you on the road. This feels like a moment of life actualisation, dripping with unrefined human spirit."

"And it's fucking nuts," interrupted Cristo, "but I'm in." For a while we were silent. Cars came and went in the service station as we sat motionless in our island of sleeping bags. We'd changed our futures. All plans had been ripped apart (*'And the moon looked on and said "You stupid twats"'* - Cristo).

"But what'll it achieve?" asked Zeph. Zeph was still unsure - we all were but we didn't want to be. "Maybe it'd be the biggest mistake of our lives."

"Yeah but it'd be the biggest thrill," I said, "it'd make me feel strong."

"Maybe it'd be a waste of all our youthful energy instead of a show of it," said Cristo, "I mean OK it'd be something that'd make our grandparents shit themselves when we tell them, and that's cool, but it might just suck. Then we'd have nothing. We'd be the jokes of the world."

We kept discussing it and within five minutes we'd rejected the runaway plan. It probably was still best for us if we followed the guidelines, for now. We weren't going to leave everything behind.

Things were a little awkward then, because for those five minutes we'd been free (*'eternal Jasjaj birds on the wing'* - Zeph). Then we were just us again. That was fine, but we'd tasted something different. What the crap was everything about, after all?

As we tried to go to sleep Will whispered, "There's a soul in every cell that we'll never find," and then my thoughts went off.

They came back on again, to a morning service station full of commuters filling up on fuels.

"Guys, the car won't start."

"It's the immobiliser, you dick."

In two minutes I was in control of a ton of Skoda and friends travelling at 100 mph. We travelled to Nancy, where we had a McDonalds meal. While we sitting, eating it, Cristo played out a little scene with Will, who hadn't ordered anything.

"You know what they call a McDonalds meal in France?"

"No."

"Well I'll tell you. They call it a 'Best Of'."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And do you know why they call it that?"

"Because of the metric system?"

"No, nothing to do with it. It's because they can't speak the fucking language. And do you know what they call a large McDonalds Meal in France?"

"No."

"'Maxi Best Of.'"

"No goddamn shit, Cristo."

"I'm not shitting you, William. They're a bunch of loons, they've got no idea."

We enjoyed our maximum best ofs and left. In a few hours time we were in Luxembourg – our tenth country – and we were hungry for more fast food. After Zeph spent ages trying to buy a Gameboy Advance link cable for the new Zelda game we went to Quick!, where we were looked after by none other than Halte Aux Crapulos, the most loveable and terrifying restaurant mascot in Europe. Old Halte Aux, with his burger head and hair made out of chips, so happy to see us. We had to say goodbye, ‘goodbye Halte Aux Crapulos! The adventure must go on.’

The next step of the ‘adventure’ was setting up a tent at a Luxembourgian campsite. We played poolside mega-sized chess, ate yet another round of ‘amburgeurs, and watched sexy swimmers as they swam.

Then it was Day 10 – the day on which we had to get back to Calais by midnight (Secret Friend’s orders). We were on our way home – back to Blindfield, my Dogmandu, my parents, my house, my calm garden, my job at Starbuck’s, my plans to go to The University of Reading to study Art. One night ago, we’d given up on all of it (for at least five minutes). We’d been the boys who were going to give up everything. As we left Luxembourg, we were just four boys going home. One of us was a wildcard, yeah, but we were still just going home.

Zeph fell asleep in the car. As I drove, Will and Cristo sausaged him. He fell asleep again straight away. He was holding onto his seatbelt as if it was his girl. He was holding onto his dreams. He wanted to savour all the time he had left in Europe but he couldn’t give up on his dreamland. If he could’ve, he would’ve combined the two.

Maybe Zeph is the one doing these things.

I said to him, “Sleep on, dreamer”.

Then they sausaged him again.

I held Tom Arto at the wheel as he steered us all the way to Brussels. In Brussels we ate pastry outside a police station. It was a nice patch of lush grass that we had to ourselves where we could just lie and eat pastry. We were hot and road weary. To tell the truth, we were happy to be homeward bound. It was the kind of nice, humid grassland that smells of summer and fresh shit. The cops had nothing on us. We left their country. We did nothing else in Belgium

Europe was so gwool.

Zeph drove us to Dunkerque. I played with an ickle French ladybird for half the journey. I kept it in the empty Frankfurters jar (we had none left – if someone was woken up by a protrusion they knew what it was). I called the ladybird Four Eyes because it had four dots on its back. I’m sure Four Eyes was trying to talk to me with his wings, like in Morse code or something. When Konstantine by Something Corporate came on the stereo, we sang along together, but I wasn’t singing out loud. Four Eyes was singing his little wings off. It’s such an emotional song. I wondered if he had a ladybird ladyfriend. I hoped he could fly back to her if I’d taken him away.

Then Cristo laughed at me. He said, “We don’t have mushroom to live... you cocko, it’s ‘much room to live’.” I’d let my voice out again. I always sing

lyrics that don't make sense. We don't have mushroom to live. I let Four Eyes go, while we were parked by a tree. He didn't have much room to live in the Frankfurters jar. I tried my hardest not to sing to Konstantine but inside I had to sing, I loved it.

When we got to Dunkerque it was covered by grim grey clouds, but the sand was fine. We parked by a bar called Sharky's and practiced our madskills on the beach – flips, rolls, falls and that kind of stuff. We wrote our names and our favourite swear words in the sand – we owned the beach – and we showed off to anyone walking along the promenade.

Will didn't join in with the physical stuff, but he looked like he was 100% satisfied with everything. At that moment, I thought he was the one who was doing all the weird stuff. He was looking at us like we were his children, like he'd grown us up good and proper.

Then the heavens pissed on us and we were already freezing cold in our shorts and t-shirts so we ran back to our car near Sharky's. There, we stayed and tried to outlast the rain. It'd been stormy when we'd arrived on the French coast as well. We ate our last rations in the car as it steamed up with the water from off our skin. All we had left were two cans of Meated Goods. I thought that the meated goodness was great, but Cristo's stomach disagreed, and he had to run out in the rain to chunder down a drain. He came back in with ruined wet shoes and specks of regurgitated Meated Goods in his stubble.

"End as you mean to begin..." said Zeph, "with chunder and wet shoes."

We'd been told to be at the Hoverspeed port by midnight and we were there, in Calais, at 11:11. A text ordered us to sleep the night in the car park. We knew we'd be leaving on a ferry in the morning. After talking for an hour about our friends back home and what we wanted to do for the rest of the summer we all settled with sleeping arrangements. It was a grey car park below grey clouds. Will and Cristo slept in the car, while me and Zeph slept on the damp grass outside. I was wrapped up in my sleeping bag and my car seat blanket – because rags *are* riches if you have to sleep rough. Rags make me happier than riches. A grey car park was a great sleep.

Me and Zeph were woken up by rain falling on our cheeks. We ran with all our rags to the safety of the car. We had to wake up the other two, who were both snoring like bitches in my car.

"Anyone get any texts?" I asked. Nobody had.

"Guys, where's my wallet? Anyone seen my wallet?" asked Zeph. He ran back to where we'd slept but he couldn't find it there either. I'd left my own wallet in my other pair of trousers' pockets. It wasn't there.

"Total, absolute fuck," cried Will, "we've been robbed! Has everybody had their wallets stolen?" Everybody said yes.

"Money, debit cards, driving licences?" Everybody said yes. What a way to end it.

“No doubt it’s those channel tunnel immigrants,” said Will. But surely we hadn’t been robbed. Did that actually happen? At the end of a happy holiday? I didn’t want to believe it. At least we had the car keys. Right?

Alas we had no car keys. I’d left them in the glove box. They weren’t there. It was definitely a nipple squeezing juncture.

Soon we were all laughs and sighs. We were stranded in a cold foreign country, in a useless steel box with kitsch appeal. All we had were rags and it wasn’t enough.

Surely our guardian angel was going to save us...

**Note That Was Then Found**

From the Masked Manipulator

I have taken your car keys and debit cards. You will get them back on your arrival at The Magic Fountain in Barcelona, Spain. You are to get there by any means possible, without your car or your money to aid you.

This is the last European challenge.

Bon Voyage.

## **The Most Epic Quest the World Has Witnessed**

By Cristo

The Calais-Barcelona Connection was the zupergwoolist journey ever. Everywhere there were pitfalls... and glory. Fiends... and friends! Mountains to climb... and battles to win! To the homeland!

How did we get across France with no money? We grouted it. We winged it. We freestyled. We leapt from branch to branch, rolled from road to road, and slew all of the evil magical dragons who stood in our path to the stars.

And all that? That's another story. For another time.

If we told it here it'd be so breathtaking it'd suffocate you. And we don't want to waste your time. We know you want to tick this off your to-read list and get onto the next, albeit less glorious story.

## **The Whiney Walk to the Toilets**

By Will

Don't believe a word of this charmer's tale. The theft and the note were both unpalatable to our morning minds and though we tried to endear ourselves to the quirky challenge set we felt alone and longed for home.

We trekked to the car park toilets to spruce ourselves up and discuss our plans for getting to Barcelona. But our hearts were not in it. As Cristo decreed, it was a 'waste of time' challenge. It was like asking a man with a hangover to run a marathon. Fack didn't like the idea of being forced to travel to countries (although of course we'd just been through ten on the whim of whomever). Ultimately we whined to the toilets and whined our way back to the unlocked car.

It had gone too far.

## **Note That Was Then Found II**

From The Masked Manipulator

Only jokes.

Here are our tickets home.

## **Back to Blindfield**

From All Four of Us – A Cream of Consciousness Reported Word for Word from Yesterday Night During a Hearty Session of Reminiscing (Arranged by Cristo)

We went back to sleep in the car in the French Hoverspeed car park because we  
had two hours more sleep to take  
four hours  
it was three  
we dreamt  
you dreamt you motherfucking dick  
when Cristo wanked in the car and got five pounds because we'd promised that to  
anyone who would  
I wish  
yeah then blah-de-blah the Seacat meowed and Fack drove us on while he was still  
in his sleeping bag  
the bag and the bag  
shut up, your stupid things and the things, you make it seem as if we're always  
saying the same tired old lines in the same tired old way  
as if  
and then I puked everywhere again  
yes Cristo you did  
while Fack just kept singing bloody 'you've got the beard all puke coloured, puke  
coloured beard'  
I was just trying to help  
and you didn't even give me a sick bag, you just kept singing that I had my beard  
all puke coloured  
well you did  
anyway, then we got back to Dover and drove to Blindfield  
and the car was dying  
it felt like it was going to die  
it didn't die, that's just what my car does  
and we had a meal of canned tomatoes at a services, just for old times  
yeah, thanks Zeph, that was swell  
and I don't know about you but it felt so weird being back in Blindfield  
well one of us is now some kind of friends rapist, aren't we?  
aren't we just  
and we were, like, not wanting to go back home  
it was a fear of ending  
that's the one  
so we abated our fears by pulling over down Corn Lane and having one last stab  
at revelry  
so we got wasted about a mile from our houses  
by the roadside  
because we still had a few litres of cheap vodka from the hypermarket, didn't we?  
yeah  
so we got drunk and it was then when we drew all over each other and

we made ourselves all spectacles of physical graffiti  
yeah, and we had only our shorts on and were drawing all over our clammy flesh  
little doodles  
in-jokes  
yeah, basically in-jokes  
and the sun was setting  
the sun had already set, gimp  
no, I meant like metaphorically, and they weren't to know  
well it was about eleven o'clock by the time it happened  
I know! But metaphorically, you spastics!  
yeah but it was pitch black and we were drunker than we'd been all road trip and  
then suddenly this  
essentially a souped-up pikey mobile  
yeah, one of those pathetic as shit cars full of pikeys came bombing down the lane  
as they do, though rarely in Blindfield  
this team of degenerates must've seen us without our tops on, scribbling on each  
other by the side of the road, and found some problem with it  
so they just came and called us gay and because we laughed at them they started  
to beat us up  
horrifically so  
but we didn't care, remember  
yeah we were totally smashed  
we were anaesthetised by good Doctor Valashnikoff's bad medicine  
and we bled together  
did we bleed?  
I don't know, but OK we bruised together  
we physically bruised, we metaphorically bled  
and we were like, hey, we're not gay and even if we had been, you know, what  
about the EU and all?  
but they weren't negotiating  
and they went on for ages, just beating us up  
so after everything we'd been through, we were defeated by the commonest foe  
the common pikey  
but we were having all the last laughs because they weren't hurting us  
only destroying us  
and then we went home and our parents were terrified  
they thought we'd been involved in some kind of international war  
but we'd been beaten up down old Corn Lane  
and that was that  
home  
we still had stuff drawn all over us  
but it looked cool  
it did  
gwool!  
doink  
it was somewhere between classic and tragic



and then we thought we'd write a book  
etc  
and there you go  
voila  
end of?  
nearly  
just one more chapter about everything that has happened since  
oh yeah, all that jizz  
well bye from us three  
bye  
bye  
bye baby bye.

## Recent Meanderings and The Gushing Current

By Zeph

I've always believed that youth is the purest spring of hopes and dreams. And people piss on dreams. People tread over dreams. People ignore dreams. People choose to drink from dull taps that are safe and fully integrated into this transparent modern world.

Yet the dreams still seep through and flow strong. They trickle somewhere, to a sea of something, in the name of some reason.

As you know by now, I'm a great fan of dreams. The worst dreams are those you leave to sleep. Once, fully awake, I dreamed I'd write a book about two things close to my heart: dreams and friends. And yes, that book would be self-referential. And yes, that book would run the risk of being soppy (to offset the soppy we could always give the book a sharp, sexual edge. I mean, by constantly mentioning wanking. After all this is what we do in our non-literary lives, presumably for the same purpose.)

Well we've written the book. We are living the dream. Dreams imitate life imitates dreams. We couldn't have done it if we didn't have such bounteous friends and such freshwater dreams.

It's been two and a half months since we came back from the European road trip and got ourselves pugged up by pikeys. A lot has happened in that time – during which we've also been crafting this story onto the parchment you hold before you – so let me bring you up to speed.

After Europe, Fack worked more days per week at Starbucks, Cristo started to work there on Saturdays, while Will and I both did bits and bobs for Will's parents. So it might seem as if we were finally getting our arses into gear, sorting our finances out and getting some work experience. That was mere profitable deception. We were pissing around, making a pittance each, and we were really ending the gap year as we'd begun, as slackers grinding our days into exhausting funfests. I mean Cristo was down in the basement of Starbuck's ten times more than he was upstairs working, probably because the duties and attraction of friendship were ten times greater than those of work.

I say 'slack' but I don't label our creative endeavours as work, so sometimes I say that's 'slacking' too. Cristo's band was going from strength to strength. The other band members are mostly still the same guys who went to Alton Towers with us, but with a new drummer. They called themselves 'Jism' and got a two gigs in Dorrington, and I think they've got one planned in Maidstone, and one somewhere like Tunbridge Wells. Both gigs are tightly this side of Uni term. Cristo's writing more stuff for them – both lyrics and songs – and they're probably going to try to stay together when Cristo's at Nottingham.

Me, Fack and Will have been their groupies, naturally, so we always have to coke up and get fucked by Cristo's guitar and perform other sexual deviancies. That's fine, as long as we're part of the rock club. Jism rocks. They're just spurting with professionalism and cool. They've also sort of been approached by music company agents and other tools of the establishment who want to mine Jism's raw

encanto for any industry jewels. I think that Jism have decided on one record label to do business with. The 'doing business with' comprises of a mixture of bluffing and wishing.

Cristo's planning to do more serious, soulful, solo stuff too. Actually, he says 'serious' but he means 'stuff that isn't just about sexual innuendo'. Saying that, the musical composition of a song like 'Backdoor Daddy' is certainly 'serious'. I think Cristo agrees with me about what to be genuinely serious about, that is to never be serious for the sake of it. There are far too many things in life that you have to deal with seriously. Don't be serious if you have any choice. Cristo's new wave of songs aren't serious, they're meaningful and pretty. It's not as if something's either serious or a joke. I personally think that the best stuff comes in-between.

Fack is by all accounts lovin' it. He still has his insatiable lust for the outdoors and had his customary annual love affair with the summer. Sadly, Dogmandu had to be put down due to throat cancer, eleven years old and still a puppy. As Fack says, dogs don't know death, they might have a suspicion, but they don't know it, they haven't talked about it, they haven't read about it, they're not obsessed with it, so Dogmandu surely thought that the injecting needle was another toy. Fack is certain that Dogmandu never knew of a dog who died, but he knew pain, and in comparison forever sleep was better. Fack will do anything he can to have a dog when he's at Uni, which we all reckon is impossible, but it's never occurred to him that maybe he won't have a dog. He hangs onto the idea – all of us lot hang onto so much – and I'll go looking with him when he shops for a dog.

(As on the pulse and wild and free as we all like to think we are, I speak for the whole gang when I confess I move through time like a cautious tortoise, constantly checking the past to make sure I'm being faithful to it, constantly checking the future to make sure I'm on the right path.)

Fack's also found some success with his art. A few weeks after Europe, Fack got a letter from an art gallery spokeswoman who said she was impressed by Fack's piece, and would consider presenting it. Fack was delighted but mystified. He'd never sent any piece into any art gallery. Of course, our secret friend was still with us and obviously he was still active. Cristo denied it, Will denied it, I deny it, but come on, it was one of us. Fack found out what art piece it was that'd been submitted – his Room of Beauty. The spokeswoman had been excited by the photos and last week met Fack at his house to have a look at the full 'project' ('project!' – it was the product of his natural instinct, like a squirrel's collection of nuts). So, with a little help from Enjoy/ The Manipulator / His Silly Friend (we have never agreed on one title for this slippery magician), he's on his way to being a proper artist. He deserves it. He splashes his heart over the canvas, and everything's his canvas (*'He bleeds soul into art'* – Will).

We four do, as you may have already gathered, like to talk at length about things like this. Isn't it a possibility, as I asked in Pizza Hut one day, that Enjoy's been fiddling in more pies than we've known about? I mean, in light of Enjoy's role in Fack's accomplishment, who's to say he didn't help Cristo along the way too? Was it just luck or did Jism get a helping hand too, massaging it up to fame?

At first Cristo just laughed, a little upset I'd thought his band needed help, but mostly just completely unbelieving. After a lengthy discussion he admitted it was definitely a possibility, but he stressed the fact that talent was much more necessary. No matter how much free time any secret friend devoted to promoting his friend's band, the band would need to have genuine appeal in the first place. We allowed him that, yeah, and Jism is high quality. Fack's a good artist too, but he'd never have thought of sending photos of his Room of Beauty to an art gallery.

Going back to something Cristo wrote a few chapters above – does everybody have the spirit of a rockstar inside them? If so, they just need enough help getting it out.

To a greater or lesser extent, this Enjoy entity was helping us live our dreams. Not by faking potential – people would do that for themselves if they could – but by, well... there's nothing to confirm exactly how. After that meal in Pizza Hut we went back to chill at our Starbuck's basement, and I was trying to think of how one of my friends could've been giving me a leg-up to my dreams. It was there, in that basement, where we'd found the objective that'd replaced a lame one on the *Mission Brief for the Beatest, Bestest, most Brilliant and Spectacular Year Four Crazy Donkeys from the Ghetto could ever live in Their Lives*. To help each other reach our individual goals. My goal was to be a writer. I thought it was dazzlingly obvious how I'd been helped to reach that goal – I'd been given so much inspiration, so much experience, and co-authors to boot. But my friends had openly given me all that anyway. What I could thank Enjoy for was a plotline on a plate, and who knows what else? Who knows what will follow? Publishers' walls are high and mighty. That leg-up might come in useful.

I was telling the guys about this, and realising how Enjoy had already become a sort of mythical figure who probably didn't even need to persist in existing to maintain his unique status.

But I could tell from the faces of the others that they had a problem with something I'd said.

"Back up, back up, Zee," said Cristo confidently, "being a writer isn't your real dream. Zee, we all know that your *real* dream is to be loved." To be loved.

"To complete yourself," added Will. I didn't know if it was true. I wanted – I want – both things ultraimmensely. Which one was the headliner? In my adolescent nest I suddenly felt incongruously alone and scared. What was my dream? After a while I reassured myself it didn't matter, they were both things that meant a lot to me, and that was allowed. That was fine.

But I was paranoid and I wanted to see Yvey, my dream girl, because my beliefs had been shaken around by the new implications I considered. My embarrassing meeting with Yvey on the hill with David Roberts' bench, near our Meadow, was probably the last thing that qualified as a 'scene' in this loosely self-contained story. It was a bit of a shit day, I'll be honest.

We'd spent half the day together in Blindfield, just doing whatever. As I'm sure you know, you can always just do whatever with the best people in your life. At one point we were talking about eating disorders and playing that clouds game where we each chose a cloud and raced their vanishings. The clouds were drying

up fast, I'd won twice, and I wasn't really thinking about eating disorders. I had something on my chest, other than her head (she wasn't a flirt, she was a cosy friend). Remember, people, that I am not going out with Yvey, I have never kissed Yvey, and yet I've always felt she's so perfect for me. It'd never fitted properly together.

"Yvey did you do it? If you know what I'm talking about, then answer me seriously. I know that you might not know what I'm talking about, and that's fine, and then you might lie, and I don't know how to deal with that but--"

"What do you mean?" Her exclamation mark eyes were working overtime.

It was the worst confrontation ever.

"I'm not saying you did, I'm only entertaining the possibility, but if you did, how could you have?" We were talking in questions. I thought I deserved answers. If I threw a hundred questions at her, I had to get a few answers, right?

"And how - *if they did* - did they get you to do it? Are you an old friend of one of them? Did they pay you? They wouldn't have paid you. You don't have to tell me the name, I know you won't, but you've got to admit it. If it's true. What I'm saying, Yvey, and tell me if I've got it all wrong here, but I can't ignore this suspicion I have. Well it's not a suspicion, it's just an idea. Are you acting, Yvey? Were you acting all along? You've got to admit it if it's true."

"Acting? I don't get it Zeph." It killed me to see such a naturally happy face look as if it'd never felt a smile, so sad. "Are you OK Zeph? Are you alright? You've got to tell me what you're talking about. I don't think you've got it right at all, because I'm just confused."

I thought she was a prop. She'd been ingeniously injected into my life by Enjoy. Meeting a girl at your favourite arcade machine wasn't natural - it was a set up. Maybe. It was only ever maybe. But why had they done it? They knew that wouldn't be real love. That wouldn't have been my dream at all.

And every failed love grasps for an excuse.

"It's fine, Yvey, I was just thinking that maybe that's why you aren't with me. Maybe that's why you're not my girlfriend, even though you want to be. Because it'd be forced, wouldn't it? It would have been too artificial. There's no substance to acted love. I'm annoyed at you and for whoever got you to do this - *if I'm right* - but I'm telling you that I understand. I want you to reveal everything."

"There's nothing to reveal Zeph, you've got something very wrong."

"You know all the stuff I've told you about my friendship group, and this mysterious manipulator?"

"Yes I do, but I have nothing to do with him. I'm my own person, Zeph. How could you even think for a second I'm an actor?"

"I didn't, not really." I realised just how fucking rude I'd been. I sensed all the bad things on that hill. The wind was howling, even though it wasn't, the sun was incinerating me, even though it wasn't, and her eyes were destroying me. They were.

"I had to ask."

"You didn't."

"Then why don't you go out with me?"

"Because I don't fancy you."

Cue a thud of depression. It was the reverse of an orgasm, which is a thud of joy. It was a thud of sad.

"Don't worry, I haven't gone mad," I assured her.

"You've got to remember that 99% of your life happens naturally. Your friends didn't create it."

"I know. I believe you. I'm so sorry Yvey."

"That's OK my Zephyr. I'm annoyed but I understand. You're a funny little chap with an overactive imagination. That's why I'm special friends with you. You don't have to pay me for that. I mean you can pay me if you want but..."

She was making it easier for me to suffer the embarrassment and regret.

"I'll give you thruppence for your troubles. I believe you," I said. She looked deep into my eyes – she can look deeper than anyone else, but she can't keep looking when she smiles – and then she smiled. She looked away. "But you'll never definitely definitely definitely definitely believe me, will you Zeph?"

Moving on from the disastrous topic of me, Will's been studying prodigiously for Cambridge, in other words he's been reading a hell of a lot of poncy Victorian fiction, which is what he has done for the whole of his teenage years anyway. So that's still counted as slacking. He's currently seeing a girl who closely resembles Xena (Warrior Princess). I haven't met her but she's probably fantastic, and when Will told her about us and our gap year she said we sounded like "a posse of inbred loons".

Surely going out with Xena (Warrior Princess) is living some kind of, albeit moister, dream? As far as Will's life ambition to be a respected mystical poet is concerned, he hasn't signed any contracts yet. That's hardly surprising. I doubt he's written any mystical poems either. You can't rush these things. Wisdom needs time to brew.

Another way of looking at it is: he hasn't got anywhere, therefore nobody's helping him reach his goals, therefore he is helping everyone else reach their goals, therefore he is the vicarious dream crystalliser (if you will, the vicarious cock fascist). It sure is a flimsy theory.

One thing that Will's example shows up about the general case is that none of our dreams are for money or fame. They may both be lovely by-products, and they may be the objects of some people's desires, but not ours. Cristo likes to rock, but he'd love to be a communist rocker (*'sounds doink'* – Cristo). Will just wants to do justice to the eternal soul wind or something. Fack loves to capture stuff that looks beautiful. And I want to write stuff that makes people happy. Well, *apparently* what I really want more than anything is to be loved, and there's not much of a cash incentive in that. We all need money to live, but we need these dreams to make our lives worth living.

That's pretty much it. So, do you, the reader, ever find out which one of us was working behind the scenes? Nah. Do we, the real people involved, ever find out? Dunno. We'll have to wait and see. Friends are there to help each other live their dreams anyway; this was, as it's been frequently referred to above, just a

bonus. It's what you should be doing for your own friends, in your own world, in your own ways. That's the moral of the story, children.

To repeat a line that is now famous in my social circle: where I come from, everybody has to have a thing. To extend this, every particular close friendship group also has a thing, or multiple things. Really close friends can't get enough of them. We have many things. For example, we need to make up stupid labels and new words for everything. We obsess over life plans – our so-called 'dreams'. And we play Cock or Sausage.

This year we've cultivated an extraordinary joint thing – an emergent thing. We secretly help each other to live our lives. It has emerged from The Group and it's a part of it now – a bona fide 'thing' – that marks my group as different from yours and that makes us feel special. This is *our* thing, whether gwool or bad, scary or endearing.

This book has been largely about this thing, as well as being about our own individual things. It's also been about friends and dreams and journeys and Skodas and pikeys and tree climbing and the silly importance of Wednesday and lots of other stuff, all over the place. It's all crucially been about us, and if you close the book thinking 'so this is what this group of friends is *all* about – 'things' and covert manipulations, then you've got it all wrong, or we've done it all wrong. A 'thing' doesn't make a story, and it certainly doesn't make a person.

Now, I'd like to say thank you to the other characters in this book. This is the first story I have written where the characters speak and write for themselves. I couldn't have made up better idiots if I tried. We are all 19 – it feels wrong to say this is a happy ending, but it is.