

THE SEROTONIN GRAND PRIX



By Alex Jenson

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empowering people

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“There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own.”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*.

Author's note:

The Serotonin Grand Prix is a work of fiction, loosely based on the reality of my time in the UK mental health system - some years ago now.

It has elements of non-fiction, but it is essentially a psychodrama constructed from my experiences.

It contains coarse, uncompromising language which may not be to every reader's taste. I felt that to sanitise the narrative of all bad language would lessen the impact and convey an inaccurate sense of how life inside the mental health system can be.

The Serotonin Grand Prix deals with some unsavoury aspects of life, such as racism, which does exist on hospital wards, as it exists in other areas of society. I feel the best way to confront such behaviour is to paint a true picture, even if this may cause offence.

The book is just one perspective on mental illness. It hopefully offers some useful insights into the paranoid mind, but it does not pretend to be an exhaustive study.

It is written to offer hope to anyone who struggles with a mental health problem. You are not alone.

And you can survive, and ultimately win.

Problems are temporary. Solutions are permanent.

The deadly eye of authority stared through the round glass window of room 303 in the new annex of West Royd Community Mental Hospital. It surveyed Marko's bedroom, as if it was glimpsing through a porthole onto a nightmare ocean, frothed darkest bloody red by nature's callous predators.

Marko rolled around on the bed in mental agony. He peered over the edge of the bed sheet, his cold hands shaking. He saw the eye, but immediately squeezed his own eyes shut to avoid its gaze.

In Marko's ruptured world, for a heart-pounding, irrational moment, the eye was just that; an eye without a socket or a head.

The eye appeared to be free-floating in an anguished, Hellish corridor. There was no love in it, no empathy, no feeling. It was a passing globule of white and blue; orbital and sane; cold and clear; like a marble abandoned in a winter puddle.

Marko hated that eye, and he hated the voice. The only thing he hated more was his inability to respond.

The door clicked open. Marko sunk beneath the sheets. He waited for that soulless voice of authority.

"You can't stay in bed all day you know. Come on, up," the nurse said, coldly.

This was the third rude awakening in the past four days, and Marko had begun to grow hateful towards this man who had never formally introduced himself.

Who is this Nazi bastard? Marko wondered.

Where did he spring from? Some Fascist hole in the ground? A direct tunnel link from Auschwitz?

He's Mengele's cousin, Goebbel's mate...Goerring's sidekick...he's up to his neck in the mechanics of mass murder. He must have shunted a few thousand souls into the 'showers'.

Wait til I get him in the showers.

The possibilities streamed through Marko's rattled head.....a good, firm kicking; a fatal neck injury caused by a loose bar of *Cusson's Pearl*.

The things he could do to that little Nazi.

Both of the nurse's eyes were now sunk back into his bland, pink head. Marko stared at him and wondered how that lone eye in the window had found its way back into its socket. He

rubbed his own eyes, in an effort to clear his vision. He did not want to dwell on the fact that he had hallucinated again, so he engaged in a brief mental exchange with himself, to convince himself it had really happened.

Maybe he's a German illusionist...A Third Reich Houdini...Maybe he made the Berlin wall appear out of nowhere... walked through the solid bricks. Fascist bastard.

"Come on. This isn't a bed and breakfast," the nurse crowed.

No, but you look like a fry-up gone wrong.

Marko waved him away and rolled back under the bed sheets.

The nurse's cold, dark eyes narrowed in disgust. He glared at Marko for a long, cruel second, turned and marched away with a self-important swagger and slammed the door.

Marko imagined his goose-step march to the pill room, past the TV lounge and the exercise mats, up to the smoke room with the congealed blood on the carpet, where the 'paedophile' had been head butted into oblivion by the new patient.

Marko breathed heavily. His heart vibrated like a boulder lashed into the funnel of a tornado; a huge lump of earth suspended in a windy netherworld.

His mind was a winter solstice rank with poverty and hunger; only threadbare rags covered the naked flesh of mental instability....but his thoughts were laced with strong flashes of reality. He was not mad. No. He was not.

They all said he was, but he knew that he wasn't.

And he knew why he was really in that room, with a pounding heart, and that bleak winter mind.

It was them.

They had seen fit to create his Death Camp mentality.

But they were his friends.

No, they weren't. They were supposed to be his friends.

When the wickedness of the world is too difficult for the idealist to accept, his mind retreats into insanity. All responsive nodes are shut down to offset his awful realisation that men will seek recourse to evil, as casually as they lift a pint of frothy ale to their lips.

Marko's fragility, his naïve optimism, his previous inclination to see and encourage goodness....these elements of his nature had been burgled... his 'friends' had taken a dump

right in the centre of his consciousness. He could see it, he knew what it was, but he still wanted that shit to smell as sweet as *Eternity* by *Calvin Klein*.

His mind was not able to contemplate the awful alternative – that it was just shit. The other half of him wondered if he was mad, like they said. Some days the battle lines were clear, on other days it was six of one, half a dozen of the other. Whatever the reasons for his current residence in a room at West Royd, the suspicion was real, the distrust was real, and the nightmare was real.

The door clicked open again. Marko knew without looking, that it was the same nurse.

“Come on, get up. This isn’t a holiday camp. You’re wasting taxpayer money here.

This isn’t an isolation ward. Activity, that’s what we do and if you don’t like it, we can find someone else to sleep in that bed.”

Marko’s interior dialogue screamed in desperation.....

Fuck off you Bavarian cunt.

He wished he could find the courage to verbalise it, just once, and get that bacon-faced Hitler out of his life. But his will was weak and his appetite for existence was dulled like an afternoon at Lord’s, decimated by rain. He could taste the soggy flavour of every drop of rainwater, and he could smell that muggy-nettle aroma that wafts up off the sun-baked pavements when the rain drenches them after a blazing hot morning. He hated that smell. He hated his own mind for randomly thinking about it, at that moment, when the nurse was in full flow.

He felt defeated. He was alone and surrounded, like the British at Dunkirk, backed into a corner by the German war machine, drunk on its blitzkrieg, with windy acres of corpse-strewn fields in its wake.

“You’ve got five minutes to get yourself out of bed. Go have a shave as well, you look like a bloody vagrant.”

What have I done to deserve this?

It is a question that echoes through the human landscape for an eternal spin. It is neither original, nor pressing to be answered. It is asked and never satisfactorily resolved, and it lives

in the chrysalis of existence, unfolds its wings and flutters high above the pitiful crowds, who wonder what on Earth they did to warrant such appalling treatment at the hands of their own kind.

Marko closed his eyes and rolled back onto his side. He held no desire for people, for social interaction, for games, therapy, food, fresh air or anything.

The horror of the past and present was the only thing on his mind - the enemies ranged against him and how they were laughing real hard as he rolled around on that bed, breathing heavily, his heart palpitating like a rabbit in the experimentation room.

BANG

BANG

BANG

BANG

The thump on the door was loud and cruel. Marko knew the thump as well as he knew the person's voice, or the contours of his face. It was a unique signature.

"You coming for hot chocolate?"

You got any cigs man? Come on."

Marko lay still under the sheets. He had been dreading this moment since he awoke.

The door slammed shut with violent force.

Byron was possibly the ugliest, scariest-looking human being who ever crawled out of a womb. His granite-head was skinned with a loose covering of flesh. His smile was so wicked that it made the female nurses recoil with panic. His teeth were fucked up beyond dental repair; his lips tattered and scarred from some miscellaneous drug addiction. His eyes were dark slots of anger, bloody-red and black, and his complexion was so war-torn, it looked as though a thousand toy soldiers had waged a protracted campaign from strategic trenches, dug under each of his ears.

He was the sort of guy who needed to be kept away from the public, even when there was nothing wrong with him, because it looked like there was always something wrong with him. And now he was Marko's self-appointed 'new best friend'.

"Can I have this shirt in here? Just til mum comes with some new clothes?"

Marko peeked over the sheets at the monstrous man rummaging through his wardrobe. He tried to imagine him with a pleasant face, the sort that greets you in the foyer of a plush hotel. He knew it was a pointless mental exercise, because he would soon have to look him right in the eye.

"I been wearing the same t-shirt for two weeks, did you notice? I fucking stink. Come on, get out of bed and let's go for a shufti. Come on, you can't stay in here all day."

"You sound like that Nazi pig," Marko complained.

"He's been on his rounds. What is it with that bastard? Has he got a soul or what? Pen pushing hillbilly. All he does is sit down the corridor scribbling on his clipboard, in his shirt and tie."

"Who you on about?" Byron snarled. "That pussy with the Greenwoods ties? He runs the place... Touch him, you'll be in a secure cell for a month...til they decide where to move you...like that Carl, old cunt, left just before you arrived...walled a doctor up outside the laundry.... your mate were sat there watching, next thing, he's been injected and banged up. Don't touch that little fucker, whatever you do."

Marko studied the rank ugliness of Byron's mouth as the words spilt out like toxic vapours.

Despite his deep mental trauma, Marko found the situation amusing, in a sick and twisted way.

It was hard to take anything seriously when it emanated from that poor specimen of a head.

Marko imagined him in the *Newsnight* Studio, vainly trying to hold his own against Jeremy Paxman - his butchered gob spitting out solutions to the world's problems, but unable to do anything about its own war-torn state.

Byron sensed Marko's mental process.

"Did I say something?" He shouted.

"What? What's the problem?"

Marko shook his head quickly, defensively and shuffled towards the wardrobe.

"That's a nice shirt you've got on. Where did you get it?" Byron said, in a semi-hostile way.

Marko shrugged.

"Well, what about this one then? Can I have it?" Byron said, with an increasing menace.

As far as Mark was concerned it was a superfluous rag, purchased from a Charity Shop years ago – some lazy, random day when he had ducked inside to escape the bouncing rain. He looked into Byron's lunatic eyes. He truly did not care for the shirt, but he knew that Byron wanted it.

"Have it if you want. Take it. Might need a wash."

Byron smiled, as though he had forced his friend into giving it up against his will.

"I like that one as well," Byron said, gesturing at the shirt on Marko's back.

Marko stood quietly. He could not fathom the situation. He had given Byron one shirt, and now he wanted the one off his back too. He stood in silence. Byron stared at him with cold, determined eyes. Marko's heart rate increased.

"Erm, this shirt?" Marko replied.

Byron sensed his friend's weakness and smiled. "Yeah, can I have it?"

Marko cringed at the sight of his smile. Byron was oblivious to the social horror caused by that smile. Marko wondered if he had ever grinned at himself in the mirror.

The thought that Byron was unperturbed by his knackered mouth and teeth troubled him. He was even more troubled that Byron might think of himself as handsome or attractive in some way. Marko had never known him to be bothered by his appearance. In fact, he was quite certain the guy did not give a fuck about anything or anyone.

"Come on, let's go get some cigs. You got any money?" Byron said, loudly.

Marko shook his head. "No. Not until mum comes."

"Fuck me," Byron snapped. "Come on, smoke room. Let's see who's in there. I'll get that shirt off you later."

"Why are you in here? I can't work it out," Marko said, cautiously, relieved that he had managed to keep his shirt, for now.

Byron snorted through his nostrils and scratched his nose. His face creased into a hideous scrunched-up expression.

"Paranoia, so that doctor says, heroin, fuck knows...I can't keep count of all these tablets; it's like a sweet shop down there at five o'clock. There are more pills than that hippy festival."

Byron nudged into him. Marko was worried by his powerful physique. Up close, he felt awesomely strong. Byron breathed in Marko's face. His breath smelt appallingly bad and Marko instinctively turned away, but too obviously. Byron glared at him for a second but said nothing. Marko eased back. He was paralysed by that Rabbit Syndrome again...his heart throbbed like a bunny injected with a poisonous concoction of chemicals.

What does he want? Shirt off my fucking back.

Is he? No...he's safe...he was here before I arrived...maybe they put him in here waiting for me. Nah. Yes, they did, they must have. Nah. Fuck. Ah fuck.

"Come on," Byron snarled.

His face was a frightening cohesion of underclass intolerance, paranoid rage, brute ugliness and a minor hint of friendship. It was not a comforting face for anyone distrustful of the human species.

"Where we going?" Marko asked suspiciously.

He stood close by the thick wooden door and eyed the relative safety of his bed.

“Smoke room. Come on, for fuck sake. They’ll be serving biscuits in a bit, coffee and that.”

Marko hesitated in the face of the open space in front of him; the unknown, the other patients, their problems, his own problems. His heart thumped loud and clear.

His desperate sense of foreboding was doubled by Byron’s awful glare. It was a joyless venture to leave the relative safety of that bed, make no mistake. He shuffled forwards reluctantly as a solid wooden door sprung open to his left. A distressed couple eyed each other as their son raged and stomped next to his bed space. His eyes were pleading and desperate and his scream was unreasonably loud, like a toddler in full fright mode.

The kid clutched his head with both hands and flung himself towards the window, screaming and flailing, like a stallion startled by a rattlesnake. The terrible vibe from that cramped space jolted through Marko’s body. It deepened his distress and he wanted to comfort those strangers somehow, but he knew that he did not possess the social skills to pull it off. The boy’s parents glanced at him briefly and pulled the door shut, so only their heads were visible through the glass porthole.

The nurse was in his usual position, at a small table at the bottom of the corridor. It was an oddball location away from the nurses’ offices. He made a habit of sitting there, as if he was apart from the other staff and the patients. Marko watched him as he doodled away on his clipboard. Marko walked past silently with a look of contempt. The nurse wore an acidic little smile, chock full of smugness.

What does he think he’s doing? He thinks he’s the bomb. I bet he’s been sent there by a bigger, crueller Nazi fuck. Bet he’s writing out his punishment lines... ‘I must drag patients out of bed if they refuse to get up’...

Look at the snivelling little National Socialist. You haven’t got a clue. Arrogant bastard.

The nurse ignored him. There was not a wisp of acknowledgement.

Marko detested his petty charade - the way he had invaded his bedroom space, screaming like the high Fuhrer of mental health, free to act as he saw fit.

And only moments later, there he was, sitting triumphantly on his blue-cushioned throne, unwilling to interact with the people he had viciously woken up, acting as if he was a trillion times better than the rest of the world.

The nurse smugly doodled some more, oblivious to the human traffic in his midst.

Byron looked over his shoulder and urged Marko towards the smoke room. He smiled horrifically. Marko winced at the sight. The teeth and mouth were horrid, like some neglected horse left to rot in a field without a single visit from the vet. It made Marko feel sick.

He was unsure which was worse....a soulless bureaucrat hogging the corridor, or a deformed race horse beckoning him into the chaos of the smoke room.

He lingered in the corridor for a minute. His head spun with irrational bollocks that seemed stunningly logical...The Nazi, Byron, the other nurses, they were planning something horrid for him, and he could feel it.

He looked at his feet, awkwardly, at a loss with himself. The huge patch of dried blood was two feet away. It was a sign for sure; of his imminent execution. There was no doubt at all now. His 'friends' had paid their henchmen to infiltrate the hospital walls. The assault on the 'paedophile' was just an elaborate set-up to foreshadow his brutal demise.

Everyone was a potential assassin. His murder could happen at any moment. There was nowhere to run and nobody to turn to. He hoped it would be quick and painless.

He peeked through the round glass window into the smoke room. An addled collection of eyeballs glared at him, with fear, anxiety, distrust.

Byron pulled the door open and smiled.

"We're in luck. Spiderman's given us his cigs. Here. Superkings as well. Get your laughing gear around that."

Marko did not want the cigarette, but he did want to smoke. It was a terrible dilemma. The cigarette could have been dipped in cyanide, doused with LSD, soaked with arsenic and left to dry. The murderous possibilities were endless, and they seemed all the more real when he looked into Byron's frightening, knackered face, with the jet black eyes, drug-ravaged complexion and the whirling, distrustful mind, shot to pieces by God knows what, for God knows how long.

Byron sparked the cigarette. He sucked it dramatically and thrust it into Marko's hand. Marko was relieved. It could not have been poisoned, unless Byron was desperately suicidal.

Marko inhaled slowly; his heart bounced in his chest like a basketball slammed off the tarmac.

He glanced at the big white plastic clock on the wall. Every tick-tock was loud and clear.

Time was his enemy. Every torturous fraction of a second felt like a day of isolation.

In his mind's eye he could see a big Olympic Stadium screen, with its split-timing mechanism drawing out every millisecond into hours of exhausted life. His withered head flashed across the action-replay screen, panicked and hyperventilating. He was another hapless athlete in last place, catching his breath while the winners laughed themselves stupid on a triumphant lap of honour.

He didn't want to be there, in his body, in this life, in this world, any more than a condemned man wants to be huddled on a cold prison mattress reading a pile of old *Beano* annuals.

He looked at Byron's rancid, crooked smile and felt a powerful surge of despair.

The tick-tock of the clock echoed in his head.

Time was his enemy, and there was far too much of it to go around.

The new patient was a scary, heftily-built character. His expression was permanently hostile. It instantly repelled people, as if they had accidentally wandered into a war zone and come face to face with a Special Forces survivalist, down on his luck, hungry and primed for murder. He had minimalist lips that were barely noticeable in the cruel medley of his grape-sucking face.

He wore a ridiculous Techno rave hat that branched off into a multitude of spirally columns, drooping off every angle of his deranged head. The columns of the hat were various colours, from dark purple to green and pink stripes. They bounced up and down as he bobbed his head to the beats from the stereo. It was beatnik, hippy headgear which did not suit him at all, because he was clearly devoid of positive emotion.

Marko had seen his share of dodgy faces at techno raves, and had found their outward menace to be illusory. He had come to realise that people who look angry or aggressive or merely dodgy, can conceal an underlying love of humanity.

He clocked the new patient again. He was sure that he was not one of them. He was not concealing anything. His menace was as obvious as a dog in the middle of the road.

His cold, dead eyes contained more aggression than a thousand American generals boasting about a new military campaign.

♪♪Oh man did you fuck it, baby brother I took it! God made it easy.

God made it easy on me! ♪♪

The new patient kicked the small table away and rose up from his chair, with a nasty, venomous squint of his eyes. He had malevolence in his gait, in every aspect of his being. His intense stare compelled people to look away as fast as possible. He sat down again.

He shuffled his feet and rocked his chair around, clenched his teeth and slammed his fists onto the armrests with blatant overkill.

Marko tried to avoid eye contact with him. He sensed something awful in the man; he could smell it like a strong waft of winter gravy. Marko shivered uncontrollably, as though he was trapped in the ghostly ante-room of some Poltergeist-ridden mansion.

Teddy felt it too. He flinched slightly and shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, staring at the same white wall he had been staring at for the past three months.

He was an older fellow, pushing fifty and horribly red in the face from the consumption of too much whiskey. Ten years previously, his steady job in an engineering plant had enabled him to burn his money on the finest Scotch malts. His last tipple had been cheap *Morrison's* vodka, pilfered off the shelf of a scummy city centre branch. After his arrest for shoplifting, he broke down and was eventually referred to a psychiatrist, who sent him over to West Royd to dry out. The new patient eyeballed him callously. There was no threat of interaction between them. Teddy had spent most of his life in a state of dumbfounded drunkenness, barely able to communicate with the locals in his favoured drinking holes. There was no chance here, in a room full of demon-addled psychobillies.

The new patient smirked and averted his gaze towards Byron and Marko. Byron ignored him, not through fear or discourtesy, but because Byron ignored most people, as if they were phantoms in a winter fog. People only existed in his immediate area when they were good for something he wanted. He had already decided that the new patient had nothing to offer. Byron was a brutally disfigured ball of psychosis, but his intuition was keen. He knew who was, and who was not worth the effort. He would have clamped his mouth around a human nipple, if he thought it might quench his thirst.

The new patient bolted upright without warning and screamed, with both hands around his mouthpiece.

“Madchester in the area. One love! Come on you filthy paedo bastards. I’ll do you like I did that lass’s dog. I’ll kill the bastard lot of you.”

♪♪You’re twisting my melon man!

You’re twisting my melon! ♪♪

Most of the room flinched with fear. Byron let out a strong laugh and continued to ignore the new patient.

“I’m fucking starving. What time’s dinner?” He boomed.

Marko shrugged and shivered with fright. He tried desperately to avoid eye contact with the new patient. Everybody knew that he had announced his arrival the night before by head butting the Scottish lad all over the corridor, believing him to be a kiddie-fiddler of some description. It was unclear to most of the patients why he believed this, as nobody had suggested it to him. Nor had the Scottish lad said anything that might have implicated himself in anything that sordid.

The new patient reckoned he had done the ward a favour by destroying the 'paedophile's' central facial area, sending him over to the proper hospital for a bout of emergency surgery. No one had said a word about it since and because no one had seen it happen, the nurses had done nothing about it, although he had openly boasted about it afterwards.

Byron had no reason to believe the lad was a paedophile, but the deed had been done and everyone was more concerned about their own immediate difficulties.

The mentally-challenged are not good conversationalists on matters relating to the here-and-now – they are more concerned with the luckless state of their own heads and the demons that rampage around their skulls, inflicting the Death Camp mentality.

No one gave a flying fuck about the Scottish lad. Byron had never talked to him. Marko had only found him annoying as he stumbled around the ward singing 'Opical, Opical' – which he later learnt, was the kid's fucked-up Newspeak for the word 'Hospital'.

Marko was glad the kid had gone away. He was less happy that he had been replaced by his attacker – the whirling psycho with kaleidoscopic eyeballs and meaty fists that looked like they were designed for punching the Hell out of anything that moved.

"What you worried about you?" Byron sniggered, directing the question at Marko.

"Chill out. You had your tablets yet? What shit are you on? Same as me?" He continued.

"Chlorpromazine or something," Marko said, softly. "And lithium, reboxetine, beta-blockers, valium, every thing in the cupboard."

Byron laughed and grinned, which saddened Marko again. He wished he could conduct every conversation with Byron through a protective screen, so he would be spared exposure to his messed up mouth. It was a facial calamity zone, an epic human disaster that deserved days and days of rolling TV news coverage, endless re-runs, memorial services and wasted column inches in every newspaper on the planet.

Marko really wanted to say something about it, but fear held him in check. Byron was a force of nature in his own right. He had a dockyard street-fighter look about him – Marko imagined him in a *Popeye* cartoon, knocking out row upon row of weedy challengers to his crown. There was no way anyone was going to stand up and go verbal on Byron. He knew it too, which accounted for his half-arsed approach to humanity. He lived in a squalid dungeon, not too far from the madding crowd, but far enough to keep them at a good arm's length.

"Look at that T.P. He's at it again," Byron said, with a shake of the head.

Byron laughed. A young Asian lad pressed his back up against the wall and tried to push himself towards the ceiling, like an inverted Spiderman.

"Sit down will you. For fuck sake," Byron screamed.

Byron looked at Marko and laughed again. "He's a T.P him, eh?"

“Yeah,” Marko replied.

He did not know what ‘T.P’ meant, and he did not want or care to know what it meant.

The new patient looked on with contempt in his eyes. He was back into the swing of the stereo beat, his outburst almost forgotten, except for Marko, who could not forget it. He was super aware of the man’s face in the corner of his vision, but he deliberately avoided locking onto his demonic eyeballs. Marko tried to disguise the obviousness of this by occasionally looking in the man’s direction, without directly engaging his eyes. Marko reasoned if they never fixed on each other’s gaze, he was less likely to be killed, Hell, the guy might even think he did not exist.

“Do you want another cig? Here, go on,” Byron said, thrusting another one at Marko.

Marko’s hand trembled slightly. He was perplexed by Byron’s sudden burst of charity. It was out of character, and could only be explained by the fact that he had not paid for the cigarettes.

“You light it then,” Marko said, shaking.

“What you want me to light it for?” Byron snarled.

“Please, just light it for us, take a few drags, I don’t want it all.”

Byron looked at the cigarette.

“There’s nothing wrong with it you know. He’ll have bought it from his own corner shop though. Look at him. Sit down will you. Oi Patel Parker, sit down man, you’re making everyone nervous, you silly fucking webslinger.”

Byron laughed at his own poor racism. Marko did not like it, but he half-smiled out of deference to his ‘new best friend’.

Marko hated racism and violence, but he was in no position to call anybody out on their behaviour. He was more concerned with the elements necessary for his own survival. He was in no shape to help anyone. It was everyone for himself – like the outside world, only louder and more unreasonable, where transactions were conducted without fake smiles; where naked truths were hollered at every turn, and the only currency worth its salt, was the currency of anti-psychotic medication, to calm the mind malfunction and quell the common inclination to spark a riot.

Byron puffed away on the cigarette and involuntarily shook in his seat; his whole body in an uncontrollable, rhythmic spasm. He wore a pained look across his face, like the sole survivor of a horrendous train wreck sitting in the middle of the disaster zone.

His face creased up even more as he polished off the cigarette in a frenzy of successive puffs. Marko sat quietly and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine his mother’s cooking - a family scene from the past with some element of happiness - anything to take him away from this petty Hell.

It was a collapsible thought that disappeared in a flash.

The Asian lad wailed and snorted like a zoo beast injected with some awful antibody.

Marko's eyes startled open.

The great big clock tick-tocked away.

The new patient slammed his fists onto the armrests again. He leaned over and increased the volume on the stereo tape player....

♪♪God made it easy! God made it easy on me, God made it easy on me! ♪♪

"I'm starving, what time's dinner?" Byron said for the second time.

Marko shrugged. He was not hungry; he did not look forward to food.

He did not look forward to anything. There was only this bastard moment, clouded with fear and the sure-fire knowledge of his imminent murder. He fleetingly glanced towards the new patient, to check if he was looking in his direction. He wasn't, but that did nothing to quell the feeling that he had been sent in to carry out the killing. He was a hit man for sure; he had the granite complexion and the dead eyes. He had already demonstrated his bloodlust with the dry-run on the Scottish kid. It was only a matter of time.....tick tock, tick tock. The horrible white clock was louder.

Terry sat expressionless. He watched the Asian kid cry his way to the cold, tiled floor and rest his head on an armchair.

"I could eat a fucking horse," Byron bellowed.

You are a horse. You're a knackered old pit pony, used up down a mine shaft, tied to a coal cart and sent crashing into a wall. You Cannibal. Don't eat your own kind.

Byron smoked his cigarette down to the limits of the brown stub, so his last puff used up every molecule of tobacco. He flicked it onto the floor, reached into his pocket and pulled out another one. He sparked it up, absorbed in himself now, he never thought to offer Marko one.

There was something awful in Byron's eyes, he had quickly drifted away deep into the caverns of his own paranoia, shaking, throbbing. He looked distressed, vulnerable even, despite his hardness. His face creased up with the mental pain inside. He pressed the cigarette to his butchered lips and held it there. He sucked the smoke in, faster and faster, as though the tobacco gave him some relief from the sickness inside.

Marko watched him with a strange mixture of pity and contempt. He disliked him, but he felt sorry for him too. This brief wave of sympathy was quickly replaced by burning hatred, as the

whole room spun about on the axis of loneliness and ill-communication. The only dialogue was that of the eyeball, fleeting and fluttering around in its socket, every eye distrustful of the other. Like strangers gathered in a dark fog, they muttered and moaned, shook and rattled in their seats, waiting for some kind of sane comment to shine through in the blackness.

Marko's heart throbbed inside his ribcage again. He placed his hand over it, to check that it would not beat itself through his chest and fall onto the floor. He imagined what his heart might look like outside his own body, a bloody lump of red fat snaking across the cold tiles, desperately trying to escape the confines of the smoke room. He looked at the clock; it had barely moved in time, the torturous sound of each second echoed in his head.....Tick-tock, Tick-tock.

Although the music was loud, he could not hear it, he did not want to hear it. It was of no interest. Music was something he had always associated with joy and good times. He did not want to acknowledge its presence in this situation, as if doing so might taint all music for all time, depriving him of pleasure forever.

♪♪Holiday Holiday.

I'm here to harass you, I want your pills and your grass you

You don't look first class you

Let me look up your ass you

I smell dope, I smell dope, I smell dope, Fine smelling dope♪♪

Byron's face contorted. His whole body shook violently. He lit another cigarette and brought himself back into the present.

He tapped Marko on the knee. "What time's dinner?"

Marko shrugged again. The new patient snorted through his nose and clicked his fingers to the stereo beat. The Asian lad clung onto the chair and whimpered, but quietly, realising that nobody was going to pay him any attention, much less offer any help.

Marko sensed movement outside the room. His eyes were drawn towards the round, glass window. Another eye of authority peered in. It was a different one that looked even colder and more callous. It was a female nurse who was the sidekick to the man in the corridor – she had a look of Irma Grese, but uglier, taller, skinnier, with a face that was short on healing. She had the grey, disdainful sneer of a functional clerk, tired of life in a government building.

She glared at the gathering of wretched souls, as if they were processed meat past its sell-by-date, racked up on a Supermarket bargain table, when it should already be festering at the council landfill site.

Marko resented her for that ill-disguised look of contempt. It was too naked, too obvious, too unsettling for everyone. It compounded all their internal problems, magnified them, and made every troubled man feel a surge of unreasonable guilt for being there in the first place.

“Who’s Marko?” She asked, coldly, with some measure of resentment at her forced interaction with these people. It was plain from her rank expression that she hated her job, hated dealing with mentally defectives. Marko sensed it the first time he saw her swagger down the corridor, with a delusional whiff of superiority about her.

Condescending bitch.

“I’m Marko.”

“Your mum just called. She won’t be in today; she’s got to stay at work.”

She backed out of the door and left them to it. There was no reassurance, no further explanation, no smile or dignified interaction that might have eased the flow of the information. She was a witch messenger, cackling around the corridors on her Bavarian broomstick, shattering all oases of calm and ripping up the therapeutic landscape.

“I hate that bitch, who does she think she is?” Marko said, with unusual clarity of mind. “She thinks she owns the place.”

Byron puffed on another freshly lit cigarette and tried to calm the rattle of his knees, without success.

He looked at the glass window and grimaced. “Can you smell food yet? What they waiting for? Are you going to eat all yours?”

“What?” Marko replied.

His mind was still trying to process the information from the witch bitch nurse.

“Your dinner, if you don’t want it, I’ll have it,” Byron said, cunningly, with a half-smile, his demons somehow under control again.

If he sits across the table with that mouth open, I won’t be eating anything.

Byron grinned. “Come on, let’s go up to the other ward.”

“What other ward?”

“Female one. Got a lass up there, Vicky, come on.”

“Who?”

“Vicky summat. She’s all right, come on; we’ll get a hot chocolate, fuck this place.”

“What about dinner?” Marko replied.

“Oh yeah, well, fuck it, come on.”

Byron jumped up and shadow-boxed the air with his huge arms. Marko noticed that his hands were just as tatty as his teeth – unexplained lumps and scars, a weird red blotch between the thumb and index finger, his finger nails bitten to shreds from all the paranoid hyperactivity.

Marko’s mind raced with panic.

Which ward? Where? It’s another trap, a lure to some dusty, dark corner. There’s got to be a catch, must be someone hiding in the wings with a blade, or a machete...going to skin me to pieces for all the shit that’s gone on. Byron’s going to do it, him or that dog slayer, one of them, I can’t...don’t...ah fuck.

“What’s up with you, you paranoid cunt?” Byron sniggered. “You’re as bad as me.”

“What?” Marko replied. “I don’t know. Shit, aw fuck, what’s wrong with us? What’s it all about? I need my own cigs, no money now, who’s Vicky?”

Byron ushered Marko towards the door. Marko glanced back at the new patient. He was relieved to see that he was half-asleep, lost in the music, and paying no attention to him or Byron.

How many murderers have they sent? There’s one in every room? It’s like a game of Cluedo.

He whispered to himself. “It was Colonel Mustard in the pantry, with a carving knife.”

Byron heard him. “What?” He snapped.

He tossed his empty cigarette packet towards the feet of the crumpled Asian lad.

Marko’s heart raced. “Ah bollocks, sorry, it’s erm, ah fuck, what’s happening now?”

He looked at the big plastic clock again, it appeared to be stuck. He clocked Byron’s dangerous, dark eyes and felt a surge of despair. He felt a pang of dislike for Byron - the way that he insisted on ushering him from one potential assassination site to another, smiling grotesquely all the time, before slipping into uncomfortable, tense silence as his own demons ran riot inside his granite head.

When Byron was chatty and loud, Marko felt a little safer and the murderous possibilities seemed less severe, because he sensed some tiny spark of friendship, but it was never enough to compensate for the paranoid thinking and the unshakeable belief that his death was just around the corner. The paranoid snatches at every small moment of hope and his mind

does not always abandon all reason, but these brief flashes of hope are like microscopic pinpricks of light on a jet black horizon.

“Come on, we’ll get some cig money off Vicky.”

Marko hesitated. Byron guided him through the doorway with his tattered hands. The Nazi was still at his table, doodling on his clipboard. He glanced up quickly and returned to his doodling, unconcerned by the troubles of the little people.

Marko raised a middle finger to him. Byron sniggered.

“Wonder what’s for dinner?” Byron said for the umpteenth time.

“It’s jam and bread day,” Marko said, without realising he had attempted to be humorous. His sense of humour was not entirely dead, although it had been declared dead and resuscitated more than a few times since his arrival.

“Here, if they give me jam and bread, I’ll trash that fucking dining room. Come on,” Byron screamed.

He pulled Marko up the corridor, towards the locked double doors near the nurses’ station.

The female Nazi was busy on the computer. Another staff member sat idly at a desk, twiddling his thumbs. He was a short man, with a tragic black mullet. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and his hair receded slightly from his forehead, thinning out in places. His clothes were unspectacular, likely purchased from a standard high street chain store. His rich cotton shirt was tucked into his slacks. They were held up with a plain black belt. On his feet were a pair of dusty old black loafers, tassled and tattered.

He looked up with suspicion as Byron leaned over the window hatch.

“Let us out for ten minutes mate will you.”

The witch bitch nurse tapped away on her keyboard, oblivious to the conversation. The man rose from his seat.

“Go on then, is this lad allowed with you? What’s your name?”

“Marko.”

“Are you voluntary? Let me just check. Where you going?”

“Other ward,” Byron bellowed. “Might go for a game of ping pong as well. Is that all right?”

“That’s all locked up, you’ll have to wait until tomorrow, no, sorry, it’s Friday, games day. You can’t play today.”

Byron eyed the nurse as he talked. He was sure that he took some pleasure in pissing all over his plans.

“Fuck it then; we’re not that bothered, what you think we are, Chinese or summat?”

“Chinese? I don’t get you,” the nurse replied.

“They’re ping pong kings aren’t they? Ping-pong! Sounds Chinese to me. I could murder a Chinky; you know what’s for dinner? I’m starving. You can phone us a take away if you want. Couple of pizzas.”

The nurse scoffed at him. “Dream on Byron.”

“Dream on? What’s for tea then?”

“I’ve no idea; I’m a nurse, not a chef.”

He looked away from Byron, as though every moment of conversation had been a grand waste of his time. He looked at Marko and checked his little wall chart.

“Marko, Marko, oh right then, you can go, don’t be long though.”

“Yeah, just let us out will you,” Byron shouted.

The witch bitch nurse was annoyed by Byron’s tone of voice. She turned her head and tutted loudly. Byron pulled an errant face at her and raised his arm in defiance.

The short man idled his way into the corridor and fiddled with his huge stack of keys.

“What you got all them for?” Byron muttered.

The short man eyeballed him for a second and thought about ignoring the question. He paused. “Lots of doors Byron, to keep you lot locked away!”

Marko sensed the triteness of this comment. He did not like the contemptuous look of the short man. They had chatted briefly on Marko’s arrival, but the way he remembered it, the conversation had been a clinical affair, with the mulleted nurse spilling forth about codes of conduct and threats of police involvement in the event of any violence directed towards himself or the other staff. In Marko’s view, it had been a needless, over-the-top rant, devoid of human feeling and delivered in a fashion designed to instil fear and discipline – the last thing a kid with a head full of demons wanted to hear.

The short man fiddled with his keys and stuffed one into the lock. He turned it forcefully, with a self-important expression worn by many a gatekeeper in society. Byron could have cared less. He forced his way into the corridor. Marko hesitated again, reluctant to follow the blundering pit pony into another twilight zone of potential murder.

The short man stood impatiently and beckoned Marko out of the ward.

Marko gulped with fear. His heart rattled in its cage for the millionth time, like a wild animal in a zoo, resentful at its captivity.

Marko looked down the long corridor that led to the other ward; it was an eerie, empty tunnel. Byron turned around and smiled, exposing his gutted teeth; most of them looked like charred artefacts from a house fire. Only two or three on his upper rack had any white in them at all.

The corridor was cold. Marko felt vulnerable and alone.

Byron laughed. His hands shook violently.

“Come on you paranoid cunt.”

Byron rammed a wedge of bread into his Holocaust mouth. He munched and slurped with horrid urgency, reached across the table and nabbed a white crust from the side plate of another patient – a small, skinny white lad who had not spoken since his arrival, over three months previously. The lad showed no reaction, nor did he give the impression that he had even mentally objected to the theft of his bread.

“Ta. I’m starving,” Byron said, more in deference to his own hunger than to the lad himself.

He mopped up the gravy from his plate with ravenous joy; it was a feeding frenzy, a dining room attack by a large predator. The smaller creatures diverted away from danger, happy to let the knackered beast have his fix.

Byron chomped some more, snatching every chunk of food he could. He rammed it home and bared his sick mouth to the world. It was a freak show.

Marko toyed with his own morsels and tried to avert his eyes.

“Dunno where Vicky was,” Byron said, through a clump of chewed up food. “Might have tried to top herself again. She’s already had two goes this week.....smashed a vodka bottle on her wrists.”

Don’t talk with your mouth full. Seabiscuit.

“Dunno about the second time,” he continued. “Nurse told me she’d tried again. Hell, my head’s spinning. It’s a bastard innit? We’ll have to get some more cigs. I’ll tap that nurse up until tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Marko asked.

“Mum’s coming. I can’t get any more money until Monday, fucking about with my claim again. It’s that doctor’s fault, he didn’t fill out the right box on the form, useless cunt...if he pulls that stunt again I’ll sue this place.... take it to the cleaners. It needs cleaning, it’s a shithole. At least Butlins has a bit of Karaoke...all you get here is pills, wankers and ping pong. Ah, my head. Give us that piece of bread, I’m still hungry.”

Marko watched Byron stuff the last slice of bread into his beastly hole. The new patient burst into the room, his rave hat still on his head. He looked around with obvious dislike for his fellow man.

He put a roll-up in his mouth and sparked it up. He broke into a scary dance, his fingers outstretched, and his hands looping about his head. He whirled around the room, singing...

Here comes the Hot stepper! Murderer! I'm the lyrical gangster, murderer! Nah nah nah nah nah!

Byron paid no attention to him, but Marko's heart sank and then fluttered into an unsettling pattern of irregular beats, as if it had been ripped out of his chest and subjected to a crazed scientific experiment that let it beat ridiculously under its own steam.

The words echoed in his head...*Murderer, I'm the lyrical gangster.*

Murderer

Murderer

Murderer

Marko felt a surge of dread. He did not want to look at the new patient's face, but he could not escape the feeling that the man was aware of this avoidance tactic and would derive confidence from it, using it as confirmation that his intended victim was shit-scared and ripe for a good murdering.

Marko imagined what the man was thinking ...

I'm gonna git you sucka.

You're mine now.

Tick-tock. God made it easy on me. I'm the lyrical gangster, murderer.

"What's up you paranoid cunt?" Byron said mischievously. "Not paranoid again are you? Fuck me, there's no custard. Where's that chef? Better not be tinned fruit again, I hate that bastard syrup, gets everywhere. Where is the pudding? I can't see it, are you eating yours?"

You just said there aren't any you numb fuck.

Leave me alone, you one-trick pony.

Marko's eyes accidentally caught the direct gaze of the new patient. He was convinced that the man knew what he was thinking. Therefore, the man must know that Marko had been thinking about him, and what he was thinking about the imminent murdering. The man smiled and pumped his spare arm into the air. With his other hand he slotted a couple of chips into his mouth.

He's been sent in for me, must be. There's nothing wrong with him, he's not mentally ill. He's laughing...he must be a real psycho...good with a knife...slashed that lass's dog's throat. Fuck. Look away. He knows...he knows ...Can't look away, got to look away, can't look, don't look. Fuck. When's he going to try it? What's he waiting for?

The new patient sat on his own, with his back to Marko and Byron. Marko tried to figure out the meaning behind this....there had to be some meaning to it. For the paranoid mind there is a meaning behind everything that comes to its attention during the course of the day.

He will see a greater depth of meaning in the positioning of a matchbox on a mantelpiece. Its very existence means something in the scheme of his paranoid delusion - the angle of its placement, the appearance of the written words, and the number of matches in the box. Every object, every word, every look, every conscious moment, has some deeper significance, related to the malfunction of the paranoid mind. And it all relates back to him. The entire landscape of reality, every corner of the three dimensional world, is filled with people, objects, words, sounds and smells that reinforce the belief that they are out to do him harm for the wrongs he thinks he has committed, regardless of whether he has actually done wrong.

He believes there is a purposeful design to his mental torture and the people who populate his reality are part of the grand plan. The fact that the new patient had his back turned, had to mean something. It had to be a sign. It was a blatant snub, an insult. It was a message of intent.

He's not scared, but he won't even look at me. He doesn't care.

"No custard. For Christ sake," Byron howled. "Where's that chef?"

Rotten apples, Seabiscuit. Murder. Murder. It's fruit salad for you, made from yesterday's leftovers.

"There's no pudding at lunch time," the quiet lad said.

Byron looked at him oddly as if he had no right to speak.

"Shit. Fuck, dinner, got to wait until dinner. Are you eating yours tonight?"

"What?" Marko said.

His heart surged again. The new patient broke into a spontaneous chorus and threw his chips to the floor.

Nah nah nah nah nah!! Here comes the Hot stepper.....

Marko waited for the next, dreaded word. It never came.

Maybe he's changed his mind. Nah he can't have, he might...yeah, he might...nah nah nah nah nah. He wants me to say the word. He wants to hear me say it...murderer.

"I said are you eating your dinner tonight?" Byron continued. "Cos if you're not, I'll have it. I'll pay you back in cigs when I get my cheque, or I'll tap Spiderman up again. Where is he anyway? Patel Parker?"

Marko stood up. "I'm off to lie down. Don't feel right well. See you in a bit."

"You coming for a cig?" Byron replied.

You haven't got any. You psycho Hillbilly.

"I need to lie down. Got room spin," Marko said weakly.

"You going to chuck a white?" Byron boomed, with his mouth wide open, shreds of bread and chips hanging from his sick black teeth. "Go on, fuck off then. I'll see you later on. I'll come get you, go for a chocolate, find Vicky. Do something eh? You're me only fucking mate in here."

I wonder why eh?

Marko glanced at the new patient for more confirmation of the inevitable murder attempt. His back was still turned. Marko stumbled into the corridor, headed down towards the Nazi's doodle table, and turned his head to capture a quick look at the assassin's face through the dining room window.

Somewhere in the back of Marko's mind was a feeble hope that he might see something to dispel his fears, maybe a smile or some gesture that would quell the mental agony, and make the next few hours pass off peacefully. By looking, he achieved the opposite effect, and planted a fresh image of the man's face in his mind's eye – one that dripped with malevolence. He speeded up, past the Nazi's table. The exercise room pounded with high energy dance music. Through the glass panel in the door, Marko could see the High Fuhrer, sitting at a

different desk, making more doodles, as a small group of patients struggled through their fitness routine.

The instructor was a happy, smiley, thirty-something man, kitted out in bright Lycra garments. He exuded energy and confidence as the desperately unfit, soul-sapped patients pranced around in their undergarments. They were dressed down in various rags, ridiculous neon over tights and other affronts to the fashion-conscious eye.

The instructor's face was bright and keen as he uttered motivational instructions to his reluctant clients.

Only the odd one responded with any kind of enthusiasm.

As Marko paused to absorb the surreal scene, the wheezing face of a middle-aged man appeared at the door, pressed up close to the glass, positioned for an exercise that required him to push himself to and fro from a vertical surface. He pushed himself away and eased himself back.

His face appeared ridiculously close to the glass.

Marko was amused by his serious expression and smiled at him. The man responded with a disgusting howl that made his breath appear clouded up on the glass panel. The high energy music thumped even louder. Marko was even more amused, but the moment fizzled out as though it had never existed, obliterated in the mental maelstrom of Marko's instability, as he clocked the blood stain on the carpet, and the image of the new patient head butting the Scottish kid flashed through his mind. He crept past the stain, overwhelmed by a thousand horrific possibilities.

This is how quickly moments of normality and ordinary human behaviour evaporate under the weight of a psychological affliction, like a broken machine that temporarily sputters into life, yearning to be its functional self, only to conk out, reduced once more, to a defunct heap of uselessness.

Although Marko did not fully realise, this was a good sign. It indicated that he had yet to be completely relieved of ordinary elements of humanity that well-folk take for granted. But the smiles were short-lived, almost non-existent in their brevity. His moment of humour had occurred completely by accident. But it had occurred.

Marko lolled towards his bedroom door. The corridor was dull and moody, starved of light and hope. Anonymous refugees from the consumer society bumbled around in their pyjamas. Their faces were drained of life - cold and wrinkled like a cow's underbelly.

They shuffled aimlessly in complete silence. Marko had never spoken to them.

He did not know their names, ages, or anything about their lives. It was a twilight gathering of spectres - a sad overspill of human waste material. While society moved on apace outside, oblivious to their predicament, Marko was vaguely aware that there was in that corridor, a living commentary on the deficiencies of the system; the brutal coldness of its unforgiving forward march.

He observed this gathering of its lost, pulped souls, shorn of all purpose and reason and sensed his own future participation in the carnival of the damned.

The thought scared him senseless. He hurriedly fiddled with the keypad. He wanted some distance from that troubling reality. Nothing is worse than seeing at close quarters, what you may come to be. Although exposure to it also encourages inner fight and resistance, at that moment for Marko, he could sense nothing except the hopeless, terrible realisation of what he was sure to become.

He slammed the door and pressed himself up against it. He turned his head slightly, in order to view the corridor through the round glass window. He wanted to make sure the sad souls had shuffled away; that the assassin was not lurking nearby, ready to break in and cut his life to pieces.

He curled up on the bed, under a single white sheet. It was cold and clinical in the bedroom; the furniture was cheap, flat pack shit and the whole place reeked of pre-fabrication, like a school building fitted out for the start of a new year. There was a soulless, institutional whiff of distance and isolation. Marko's feeling of disconnection from life was reinforced by the nature of his surroundings.

He sunk beneath the sheet and tossed and turned on that bed, like a rickety fishing boat caught up in a dangerous sea-swell, the salty odours of the deep so close, the bubbly froth of the waves breaking about the stern. His mind was a tropical storm at full tilt, spinning about its centre, blustery rage and razor winds - restless, dangerous, and unpredictable. It seemed to him that society was nothing more than a cruel old sea-hag, wailing on a polluted beach, screaming murder at Mother Nature for the rush of the blackened tide, as if the natural world was responsible for all of man's transgressions.

He looked up towards the round glass window for any sign of the Nazi eye. There was nothing. As he drifted into a light, disturbed sleep pattern, his mind flashed with a series of images, quickly....The Nazi, his eye, the awful, evil grin of the new patient, the pain-filled look of the Asian lad, Byron's nasty, knackered mouth and the cold stare of the Nazi witch bitch nurse.

His eyes gently closed. As he moved into dream state Byron's face dominated his mental landscape.

It violently morphed into the elongated features of a racehorse, attached to a human body like some fantastical horror movie creation. The human-horse hybrid pounded out lumps of turf, whinnying, frothing and spitting, his mashed up teeth visible to the world. His chunky, hairy thighs pumped furiously. His ravaged equine head turned this way and that. The nostrils were flared up and moist and the eyes cold and dark, devoid of emotion.

Marko could see the face now, full-on from the front, as it approached the first jump at Aintree, its human arms rising and falling with the natural sprinting motion. As he successfully made the jump, the horror horse head grinned dementedly, exposing even more surface area of twisted, shitty enamel.

Whoa Seabiscuit.

You ugly cunt.

Take a fall. Break a leg. Go lame.

You horror show.

The demon horse face expanded to fill every corner of Marko's mind's eye. The teeth were extra large and extra close. He could see the strands of saliva spanning across the gaps between the top and bottom. The gums were blistered black with sickly pink dots.

Marko wanted to turn away and run, but he was trapped in the confines of his own dream state, unable to flee, tormented by awful imagery of the diseased horse-thing and the everyday people of that fucked up mental ward. His heart pumped harder and the beats quickened as Byron's face morphed back into view, laughing, smiling, and cockily blowing out a smoke ring from his butchered gob.

BANG

BANG

BANG

BANG

Marko's eyes startled open. He hyperventilated for a few seconds and rolled around on the bed. The sheet was damp with sweat from the intensity of the addled daydream. He peeped over the sheet towards the door. He had no idea how much time had passed. It might have been three minutes, or it might have been four hours. He had no means of telling the time.

When time is the enemy, its nemesis does not carry artefacts with him that will aid his own mental torture. He seeks to ignore all reference to time, as his conscious awareness of its progress only adds to his desperation.

Byron smiled through the round glass window. He lifted a packet of Super Kings up to the glass and smiled wickedly, his thumbs extended upwards in an affirmative, triumphant gesture. Marko's heart sank. It was a murderous face. He imagined the glass window as a porthole again, with Byron as a demented pirate, drunk out of his mind and ravaged with scurvy, bristling with terrible rage for his rum deal at the hands of Mother Nature. He must surely be concealing a dagger, a rusty blade, a gnarled old hook, something sharp to pierce Marko's belly and spill his life all over that cold and clinical room.

Ha ha! Ha ha!

Byron thumped on the glass again, urgently.

Marko reluctantly raised himself from the mattress and drifted towards the door. He knew that he should not, but he also knew there was little choice. If he could somehow placate him, it might stall the murder attempt; stop that horse from popping the window glass with his angry hoof. There was no other choice.

Marko pulled the door handle open with a large, fake smile that concealed a million troubled impulses in his brain.

This must be what Hell is – a recurring encounter with a selfish being that never sleeps.

I hate you Seabiscuit. God I hate you.

Marko's face creased up like he had swallowed a vat full of vinegar. It was the cigarette. The Superking tasted horrendous. He twisted the brown end between his thumb and forefinger and looked at the printed name on the bottom of the filter paper.

Richmond

He glanced at Byron.

Byron polished off his own cigarette with a foul grimace, as the paranoid thoughts clouded out the corridors of his drug-addled brain, like a hotel floor engulfed by fire. His eyes were redder and meaner than a whiskey-sozzled husband, trapped in a painful marriage.

"What's up with that cig?" He boomed at Marko.

Marko shrugged. He was tired. Tired of Byron, tired of duff cigarettes, tired of the ward, tired of being an assassin's plaything - the way a persecuted mouse gets tired of the incessant, furry paws of his tormentor, but can offer nothing but a chorus of squeaks as the feline playfully nips into its flesh, prolonging its agony.

He felt smaller than a rodent in a large animal enclosure. Every human beast was on the take, ready to screw over every aspect of his soul. Trust was a commodity so scarce, that any available rations would have provoked a deadly stampede. Every frantic, paranoid mammal ready to trample his peers to death, in pursuit of that one beautiful attribute.....to be able to trust, and be trusted, to look at others without the insane mechanisms of a faulty mind that skewered reality into a Hellhole of treacherous outcomes. Marko would have given his soul for just one minute of normality. He would have traded his dreams for a factory floor full of shattered ambitions, as long as it meant sanity, normality, even the most fragile kind of hope.

"Give it here, don't waste it. It'll burn out," Byron moaned, grabbing at the cigarette.

We're both a pair of burnouts.

You're a Grand National fatality...

An Epsom Derby casualty...a Blackpool donkey on the graveyard shift... one good ride away from a beach funeral.

"What time's mum coming?" Byron said, as he polished off the cigarette, down to the black ring on the filter.

With your apple money? Gonna make your own cider you cheap bastard? Stomp on those mouldy brown Bramleys with your overgrown hooves?

You smell like rancid White Lightning. Piss smells better than you.

“I don’t know. Soon I hope...so I can get some proper cigs,” Marko said, with a lick of desperation in his voice.

“That numb cunt’s on his rounds today.”

“Who?” Marko replied.

“Consultant, useless twat, don’t even know his name, same as every other cunt in here. What’s your name again?” Byron laughed.

Marko looked up at the white plastic clock. The second hand stuttered past the number ten...he was sure it had doubled-back on itself in a painful reversal of time. He half-expected Byron’s mouth to repeat what it had just said. Marko stared at it, sure as Hellfire that time had collapsed like a weakened grandmother.

“He better have some good news for us,” Byron said, nastily.

“Like what? Marko replied. “Come to tell us that it’s National no-mental-illness day?”

Byron frowned. “What the fuck are you on about?”

Marko sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

He realised a devastating thing...that he had tried to be funny, even though he did not find any amusement in life. He thought about Woody Allen’s film, *Annie Hall*. He once read that the New York neurotic had originally planned to call the film *Anhedonia*. The meaning of this word has something to do with ‘the inability to experience pleasure’.

The film title seemed appropriate to his present life condition.

He recognised his own ability to make jokes, to forge humour from the situation he was caught up in, but at the same time, he knew that any humour he might create was wasted on himself. He could not grasp the futility of this, however much he tried....to make jokes without enjoying them. In the end, he concluded that this was marginally better than being unable to create any humour at all, but not by much.

He don’t get it. He don’t get shit. I am shit. Horse shit. Fuck off you pantomime arse end.

Marko considered the possibility that his attempts at humour might actually be shit. That was definitely the worst case scenario – to attempt humour, knowing that you derive no pleasure from it, and realise that no one finds it funny anyway. That was the true definition of futility.

He looked at Byron’s knackered head and was certain he would have to test the idea on someone with an ounce more intelligence. It was obvious from the way Byron enjoyed cheap racist jokes that his sense of humour had not graduated from the primary school playground.

Marko hated anyone who got their kicks from hurling racial insults around. It made him feel sick to his belly. Byron was definitely not a good test subject for what Marko sometimes perceived as his more advanced, subtle humour.

Marko was now convinced that nobody would find amusement in anything he said. He viewed this as a bad omen. He had briefly thought that humour was the one thing that might save him from the assassin, although he was not sure that humour existed at all in the corridors of West Royd.

He thought about the joke he had made. He was perplexed by the conundrum of creating humour without enjoying it, which seemed like trying to score a goal, even though you detest the game of football. Why would you be on the pitch to begin with?

Nobody gives a fuck what comes out of my mouth. Tick tock. Hot stepper...murderer...I'm the lyrical Rasta, murderer.

"It's my turn with that barnet jockey," Byron roared. "Back in a bit."

Marko caught a face full of stinky Byron breath and felt like vomiting. The sight of that mouth in full flow was a rough deal; in combination with a strong blast of scum breath, it was enough to drive a battle-hardened dentist to the drinks cabinet. Marko turned away as slyly as possible and looked out of the window. It was a grim little vista; two lifeless, naked oak trees in a concrete courtyard, sitting on a small tuft of grass. There was barely enough space for a Yorkshire terrier to cock its leg.

The view was like a three dimensional rendering of the atmosphere found within the hospital walls; outside was inside, and inside out.

There was no relief from the brutal, clinical mood.

To offset that horrid little view, Marko closed his eyes and tried to visualise his first trip to the seaside. The image that popped into his mind unsettled him – it was the hefty shoulders of his father. He was sitting in the front seat of a battered old rover, his large body mass blocking out the horizon. He turned around triumphantly and described the beautiful coastal view that his own kids were unable to see.

"Don't go anywhere. I'll sort that cunt out and we'll go for a shuffy eh?" Byron shouted.

"What?" Marko replied.

He was barely listening. He hoped that mouth would just fuck off for a permanent repair job...down to the stables, the vet, the horse trainer...anywhere but there, guffing out its inane bollocks.

"Yeah, all right. Good luck."

I hope he sends you to Rampton, you four legged Hillbilly.

Byron tucked his new shirt in and tried to make his hair presentable, although it was a sham mess of a hairdo, overgrown and fluffy, like the unkempt belly moustache of a Soviet Warlord. Marko chortled at this half-arsed approach to grooming.

You'll never win the Grand National. You'll be lucky to get the Three Thousand Guineas, you racist bastard.

Byron tugged the door open and disappeared down the corridor. Marko was surprised to find himself alone in the smoke room. It was usually more crowded than a car boot sale. In fact, it was the first time he had been in there alone. He looked up at the big plastic clock. It was an evil mechanism, designed to aid the mental torture. He wanted to rive it of the wall and stamp it into oblivion.

Its tick-tocks grew louder with every second, piercing the silence and feeding into Marko's mental instability, driving his time-crazed mind into mini-frenzies of panic.

Where would his future be located?

At that moment, there was only one wretched answer to that worrisome thought....His future would be lived out in a tick-tock palace of insanity, populated only by Byron clones, their busted mouths blabbering hatred and desperate intolerance, feeding off a blinkered, narrow mindset that craved the smoky pleasures of the here and now....no greater goal beyond the cold white lights of a mental asylum.

It was no future, and there was no future, but there was no past, and the present was a constantly shifting conundrum of unsettled emotions. He thought about that old saying 'Live for the moment'. What did that one mean, here and now, in a murderous maelstrom with corridors ram-jammed with would-be-assassins? It was a ridiculous, empty concept.

The present was the past come to fruition, and the future rewound in a Hellish playback of predictable outcomes. The clock was just a pointless tick-tock device that confirmed the futility of all three concepts, as they merged into one, loud, torturous sound that echoed through Marko's head, like a Banshee wail repeated into infinity.

"Gis a cig man. Come on, please."

Marko flinched. The Asian lad had crept into the room unnoticed, stealth and surprise written across his face. His pyjamas were brown around the bottom from days and days of drag on the

unclean floors around West Royd. No one had thought to pull him up on this, not even the nurses.

His belt cord dangled down to his toes and the top of his pubic hair was clearly visible. His odour was powerful. Marko caught an instant blast of it and guessed that the kid must have missed a week of bathing. He wondered why nobody had commented on this during the periodic bullying of the poor, wretched soul.

Maybe I smell worse, maybe I smell like Calvin Klein compared to him....eau de bollocks. Ah bollocks. Maybe he makes everyone else smell good, but how does a bad stink create a good stink?

The truth was that all the patients had hygiene problems. When man fights for his sanity, grappling like Shirley Crabtree with the thirty stone demons of his addled head, his last thought is for the hygienic living that well-folk practice like day and night. Odours are the least of his worries. In fact, he may come to appreciate his own accumulation of sweat, because the further from normality he gets, the more comfortable he sometimes feels.

This is the great paradox of mental illness. Illness is an acknowledgment of his dissatisfaction with reality and with the ways of his society, so he will not always willingly go back to that reality, preferring large doses of his own body odour in the smoke room of a mental ward, where at least he does not have to stride through a life he finds dissatisfying, with a fake grin plastered across his face.

The Asian kid held his hand out in expectation of a cigarette. Marko was instantly reminded of refugees on the telly, and felt guilty for the thought, seeing how they lived in urban England, and the kid was obviously born here.

He looked into the kid's droopy, desperate eyes and felt no fear for his own safety, there was no imminent threat of murder from someone who appeared so meek and lost. Marko subconsciously scanned his whole profile for any danger sign that might feed into his own persecution complex. The paranoid does not like it when something refuses to fit into his scheme of thinking. The kid should have been another assassin, on the lookout for a killing angle....but try as he might, Marko could not integrate him into the delusion. So he decided that all assassins must be on a day off. Even killers have to rest.

No, no, they don't rest, he's, he's, it's the request. The cigarette, he wants it for something, there's time for this to happen...maybe he's too ...too...aw fuck it. Where's the other one.

Where's the real killer? Is this a wind-up? a sick joke...that's it, they're toying with us now, getting us off guard, messing about, diversion tactics, head fucks, stupid head fucks. Stupid horse! Where's the horse? Where's the horse?

The door burst open. The Asian lad backed off immediately towards his favourite spot on the wall, underneath the plastic clock.

"Got any of those Superkings left?" Byron shouted, with a cocky, hateful glint in his eyes.

The Asian lad grimaced with fright. He backed right up to the wall and shook his head softly.

"No?" Byron boomed. "Fucking hell...your dad gets them from the cash and carry doesn't he? He must have tonnes of 'em. How many sleeves you got in your room?"

The Asian lad shook his head. "No dad. No dad. No dad."

"No dad? You've got no dad? Everyone's got a dad. I were in Baghdad when you were in your dad's bag. Know what I mean? He's a T.P eh Marko? Proper basket case. He's got cigs, I know he has. He stocks 'em all up, then tries to blag 'em off everyone else...goes back to his room and smokes out the fucking window....he's been spotted. Haven't you?

We know your fucking game. Get your cigs out, come on."

Marko watched the interaction with disdain for the human species, its awful cunning and its black leather heart. It was a diseased moment, rank with all the things that the newspapers liked to think did not exist any more... naked and brutal racism, the kind that rears its head every week on the football terraces, before it is shouted down with another new anti-racism campaign.

Byron's knackered head glowed with obvious prejudice. The hatred brimmed in his twisted eyes. He was the incarnation of that old Anglo-Saxon heritage of ignorance - obnoxious arrogance of the white race, with his Neanderthal manners that seemed to him completely natural.

Marko observed the scene with despondency. He realised that human beings were not that far removed from the heather moor, close to their cave dwelling, grunting and bashing out a drum beat for their tinny God in the cruel and starry sky. He could picture Byron quite easily, draped in an animal hide, his head bruised from the relentless thump of his own palm, as he bashed it with frustration at his failure to master the crude, cold environment where he was fated to live.

Progress? What the fuck is it? It's when people write things for us to believe and toddle off to bed, far away from the places where they have never lived. They know fuck all.

Progress is time, and time just happens anyway. Got nothing to do with this horse. Killer horse. Hot stepper, murderer, I'm the lyrical Rasta.

Byron's face showed a level of demonic ugliness Marko had never dreamed possible.

It was the melting face of the Gestapo man in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* crossed with the most malevolent pose of Freddy Kruger, with a little dash of *The Elephant Man*, just to give the gross visual cocktail its whipped cream and cherry on top.

Byron pinned the Asian lad against the wall. No one had thought to ask his name. In fact, no one had discussed the fact that he had remained nameless. Nobody cared, not even Marko, who had only given it a passing thought. There were any number of wandering souls on the ward whose name escaped everybody, even the staff who were supposed to be looking after them.

"I haven't got any," the Asian lad wailed, foam bubbling up around his bottom lip, his eyes cocked sideways with fright.

"Yes you have. You've got tonnes of 'em," Byron retorted.

"I gave you my last ones yesterday, honest. Nurse!"

Byron's visage bruised up with instant red rage. He put his hand across the kid's mouth and forced his knee tight into his groin, a close contact of kneecap and testicle, without the application of too much force. The kid's face contorted into a heinous picture of helplessness. It reminded Marko of the death faces of German soldiers butchered in a Russian winter, their horrendous final moment freeze-framed in time.

"I don't think he's got any Byron," Marko said weakly, with an undisguised fear that was almost on a par with Byron's victim.

"So what if he hasn't, it's about time he stopped pretending to be Spiderman. You're not a Superhero you know.....T.P. What are you? T.P. That's what you are."

Byron flashed a cold stare at Marko, as though he were annoyed at his reluctance to join in the bullying. Marko interpreted the look differently. His paranoid sensors flashed loud and red, like a berserk siren in a Bond villain's underground lair, triggered by the sabotage of Fleming's unlikely creation.

It's gonna come back to me, this... It's staged. It's all fake. They're actors. It's coming back to me. It's gonna blow, my lid's gonna blow. His lid's already blown; he's flipped his pancakes all over the kitchen floor.

Feed the horse. Give it pancakes. Go lame, go lame, Seabiscuit.

I've flipped my pancakes, no, I'm all right. It's all staged. They're building up to something, I know they are.

Marko's heart sped up; he could feel the thump-thump and the increased blood flow into his face. He wanted to check himself in a mirror, make sure the blood vessels had not burst in his cheeks. His head felt like thirty pounds of Semtex, primed and ready to explode. He could see an Irish marching band, belting defiantly down a Belfast street, its assorted faces teeming with hatred and arrogance.

He could no longer bear to look at Byron's brutal face.

The tick-tock of the cheap plastic clock intensified as the expression on the kid's face worsened, scrunched and bunched in pathetic humiliation. Byron grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and roared with sick council estate laughter, like a cider-hag cackling at a failed comedian in some cheap black corner of a red brick pub.

Leave him alone you redneck bastard...Redneck, Red Rum, no, not that classy, you've never won a race in your life...They were probably gonna send you to the dog food factory when you failed your show-jumping exam. Who's the killer? Where's the killer? It's a thriller, killer night.

"What did the head doctor say?" Marko asked, in a blatantly oddball attempt to distract Byron from his assault on the Asian lad. Byron put his other hand onto the kid's neck and tightened his grip. He ignored the question for a second, and then answered, almost as an afterthought.

"He said he fucked up that form on purpose....no more cig money until that cunt from the social turns up next week. No money for fuck all. I'm getting my cigs from somewhere, don't you worry about that. Even if it is Super Kings."

That's all you smoke anyway. You charred donkey. Hypocrite. I can't....I can't bear this. Not knowing. Where's the raver? Why's he gone quiet? This is...this is Hell. Must be, I know.

The irrelevance of me, that's what Hell must be. The irrelevance of me and the relevance of everything I despise...a recurring encounter with a selfish being that never sleeps.

"You look tired Byron. Had much sleep lately?" Marko said, as Byron moved his face in closer and smiled his rotten smile.

"Do you sleep much at all?" Marko continued.

"Course I do. Neck two of those Zopiclones every night. Sleep like a bambino.

Sleep better when I've had a cig before bed, nice lump of blow helps eh? Few rizla, can't get any shit in here, you got any weed Patel?"

The kid could not speak for the terror.

Byron snarled at him and thrust him hard against the wall.

"Fuck this. I'm off up the other ward. Come on, leave this sackless shit here, Patel Parker....If I see you smoking out your bedroom window, I'm gonna come and eat your dinner."

Marko eyed the Asian lad, backed up on the wall, performing his inverted Spiderman routine again. His eyes were dead and gone. He was lost in a slum dwelling of mental illness.

Although Marko was poorly, his proximity to the deadly ill provided moments of perspective. When he looked at the frothy-mouthed child clambering up the wall, something in the back of his head briefly told him that they were there for a reason.

Although he knew he was in a mental hospital, sometimes he only fleetingly grasped the reality of his own mental wrongness. And he never recognised the paranoia, just his own depression and loss of Mojo - the sickly anhedonia that Woody Allen obsessed about, as he consoled himself by pumping his bank account to the rafters with the mighty Dollar.

The paranoid never recognises his own paranoia; every illogical circumstance, every crummy building block of reality interlocks to erect a Hightower of logical persecution. Even if they were really after him, he'd still be paranoid about it. While they were having a day off, he would be counting on their constant activity. Paranoia is only truly dead when the victim ceases to care any more. This may or may not occur only after the weight of the affliction has caused the sufferer to die a few times in the process, to the point where he neither wants to live, nor hopes to die, but finds himself in an intoxicating kind of limbo, where life and death have merged into a central stream of hopelessness, fused with the odd moment of pleasure.

Marko, at that moment, lacked any insight into his predicament. Byron pulled him out of the door, towards another certain encounter with the Grim Reaper; despite the fact that every previous encounter had amounted to nothing.

Marko never thought to compute the past into the probabilities of the future.

Nothing that had happened already had any bearing on the likelihood of a similar outcome.

The past collapsed into a concrete dust pile, washed down the storm drain and the future was just a Hammer House on the hill, lurking behind Byron's ravaged grin, certain to bring a calamitous, bloody end to Marko's troubled tenure on planet Earth.

"Fuck this place for a game of Khabaddi," Byron screamed. "Shithole innit? We'd be better off in a wheelie bin, eating turnip peelings...at least we'd be able to go for a drink somewhere. Could murder a pint."

Murder, murder, murder...where is the Hot stepper? Has he been bum-injected and sent to the proper secure unit? Maybe he's taken a hypodermic up the shitter.

"Where we going? I'm seeing the head quack soon, today, now I think," Marko said, lying. "I'll catch you later on."

"What you wasting your time with him for?" Byron moaned. "He's a useless twat; he's never sorted anyone's head out has he? Just likes his cosy rooms with the radiator turned up full blast....big pay cheque and free lunches every day. Fuck this for a game of Khabaddi. I'm off to find my bird, if she hasn't topped herself again. Come on."

How can you top yourself TWICE you brain-fried Kentucky Derby also-ran?

So you went to see the consultant, and I can't because it's a waste of time? You dork.

Mr Logic strikes again. Go roll in the hay, put yourself out to stud. Feed the horse. Need the horse, don't need the horse. Kill the horse.

"You coming or not?" Byron said.

"I'm seeing your mate," Marko replied.

"I'll give you a knock later on then," Byron continued, with zero interest in anything Marko had to say.

Don't leave any hoof marks on my door will you? Who said I wanted to see your ugly head through that window? I'd rather wake up next to Buddha. I hate you, I love you, I pity you, shitty you, shitty me, ah Seabiscuit, what's the point?

Marko lingered in the corridor. He had purposely lied to Byron about seeing the head quack, who was known by a variety of nicknames - the barnet jockey, the pill monkey and Sigmund Fraud. Marko did not feel comfortable with deceit, despite his belief that the whole world was out to deceive him, right into the arms of the Grim Reaper.

The paranoid can still function as others do, but he becomes more selfish, even if he is known to be a selfless person. This is a classic defence mechanism, to ward off the outside world – every single one of whom is a threat to his well-being. His distrust of the entire human species leaves him no alternative. He must become more selfish than they are, which elevates him to a unique position in the order of the universe, where basic survival against six billion perceived enemies gives him a heightened, intense experience, which despite being terrifying, is also profoundly life-affirming.

Even though he may profess to hate life, secretly, he loves it too much. This skewed logic stems from the eternal proposition that the man who possesses too much love can very quickly descend into hatred and self-hatred. If this occurs, he will construct his own nightmare world, very purposefully as a means of self-torture for what he sees as the futility of his love of life. Whether he will ever feel strong love again after this, heaven only knows.

“You all right there Marko? Do you want a chat?”

Marko flinched. He turned to meet Eleanor’s gaze. He felt a sudden rush of warmth and humanity which subsided at a greater velocity than it arrived. She was the only nurse he had talked to in private, and the only one who had offered to help him. It seemed like a while since their paths had crossed. In reality it was only five days. But five days of tick-tocking madness easily multiplied into calendar months of mental torment.

“Erm, yeah, yeah, what like talk now?” Marko muttered.

“In here, come on, it’s all right, just take a seat.”

Eleanor ushered him into a small orange room, bright with new furniture and that fresh carpet smell.

He locked onto Eleanor’s eyes. She was a small, neat woman, with short hair and a compassionate look about her, fused with a businesslike approach to life. She appeared extremely friendly, but there was a firmness about her that suggested some wealth of life experience. She looked like she knew exactly what she was doing. She settled into her seat and leaned forward with interest. Marko fidgeted with his hands. He knew she was not an assassin, although he doubted that she wanted to make him feel better.

She's just doing her job. That's all this is. She can't be...no...she's not. She isn't.

Who is and who isn't?

"How have you been then Marko? What's been happening with you?"

Marko sighed. "Can you get me some Valium please? Just a couple, I'm a bit hyper, stressed out, I can't relax."

Eleanor smiled. "I'll get you some, when we've finished, that OK?"

Marko nodded. He stared into her beautifully calm face. She seemed so in control, so at ease with the world. "What do you take?" he said, without really thinking.

"Excuse me?" she laughed. "What do I take?"

Marko realised his attempt at humour and felt embarrassed by it. Her reaction made him feel guilty, as if he had wasted her precious time.

"I don't take anything Marko. I'm a bit of a hippy you know? Natural living. I'm interested in natural living, fresh food, open air and walks on the beach. Bit of a sad old cow really. Have you ever walked in the sand dunes Marko?"

Marko was puzzled by this question.

Who's in the sand dunes? What's in the sand dunes? Why is she on about sand dunes?

Who's waiting in the sand dunes?

"I've seen dunes, but I never walked on them," he replied.

"You should," she said, with a half-smile. "There's something therapeutic about dunes, calming, relaxed."

Marko desperately wanted to believe her, to trust her fully with his life....but the only thing on his mental horizon was a long walk to certain death over the sand dunes on the back of a beach at God knows what resort, with the flickering spin of the Ferris lights tucked into the twilight scenery; the assassin hiding at the base of a sandy slope, waiting for darkness so he could dispose of Marko's freshly slain corpse.

"Why sand dunes?" He asked, hoping for some answer that would explain away the mystery and leave him feeling comfortable about this woman. After all, her face was kind and true, but no, it was impossible to believe anyone would come along with good intentions, no matter how pleasant they appeared. What a God awful thing, Marko realised, to doubt the whole world, to deny its sincerity. But that was the upshot of it, the harsh truth, and no one could be trusted, across the board, every man, woman and child, and that was that.

“Can I have some Valium please?” He asked again.

Eleanor’s face betrayed a brief sadness. Her clinical experience had thrust her into the company of addled men and minds; some whom she knew were lost forever down a white-walled corridor, desperately trying to escape the blackened walls of their daily reality.

Others she knew possessed an insight that permitted their future renewal - the causes of their psychosis were event-related and not necessarily a result of deep-rooted trauma embedded from early childhood. Marko was a curious case in her eyes: he was bright and sharp, but vulnerable, and he possessed no insight. She could feel the heavy presence of Marko’s paranoid rage, his anger and his desire for love and understanding. He was only young, a fact she hated above anything else. To see the vitality of youth twisted and sucked into a cloud of Hellish rain stones, battered senseless by brutal winds; it made her sick to think of the wasted talent and potential of young men pulled into that vortex. She knew full well where it can lead - to underachievement and regret so powerful, that it makes life completely unbearable.

She had listed Marko in the ‘Don’t know’ category of her mind. She was not able to determine his prospects, because of his intelligence, his youth and his extreme evasiveness.

“How are you finding things in general Marko? Any problems you want to talk about? Is everything all right here for you?”

Marko clasped his hands and placed them on his knees. His legs shook involuntarily. He could only think about the new patient, where he might be hiding. And Byron too. Maybe they were in on it together. Perhaps they would both lure him out to the sand dunes and do away with him. And Eleanor. Well, she was just the front woman...the lead singer of the deadly choir, like an angel siren hypnotising him onto the rocks, to bash his brains to purple pulp with a clammy sea stone covered in barnacles and beach weed.

“He’s a horse.”

“Sorry? Who’s a horse?” Eleanor said, softly.

“Doesn’t matter. Yeah, it’s all Okay. Nothing wrong really. I’ll be all right.”

“Has your girlfriend been to see you?”

“She’s coming soon, dunno when, she phoned up. I think she’s coming. I need some Valium. Can I have some please?”

“Have you tried the relaxation group Marko, it might help you know, just to spend some time relaxing. Do you want me to have a word with Pam? She’s running a session tomorrow. What do you think?”

Marko shrugged. “Yeah whatever. Sounds good. Can I have twenty milligrams?”

“Hang on there. I’ll get you some. Just ten for now. OK?”

Marko watched her rise from her chair. She was attractive, neat, with a lovely kind face...but she had to be pulling something off for the main men. She must be a honey trap - a clever sideshow to pull him away from mental safety, straight into the jaws of death.

Better follow her. Make sure the tablets are marked. Might try and slip me a dud one...cyanide special. Oh Eleanor, you're so sweet. Sick, evil.

"I'll come with you, OK?"

He followed her into the corridor and watched her every move closely. As she moved across towards the pill room, a slightly bald middle-aged man appeared from the door just past the smoke room. Marko sighed. It was Sigmund Fraud, the pill monkey, barnet jockey, Priory-reject on the down slope of his uneventful career in psychiatric medicine. He gestured weakly with his bony finger, beckoning Marko towards him. Marko pretended not to see him and pursued Eleanor into the tablet fortress, where all life's afflictions could be temporarily blotted out by a simple oral medication and a glug-glug of tap water.

Doctor Fozzard pulled a weak, curious face and ambled towards the pill room, sure that he had been ignored. He did not seem concerned by the snub. He did not seem to be concerned by much. He had the look of a man who is in a place he would rather not be in, but who can think of no better alternative. What's more, had he come to be in an alternative place, he would wear exactly the same apathetic expression, and be thinking of some other place instead of that one, sure as Hell that it would be no improvement, and thus a waste of time to even consider.

He was a slight man, of no great build or presence, with a crummy sense of dress that gave him the look of a menial office worker rather than chief consultant psychiatrist in a mental health facility. He exuded the authority of an off-duty traffic warden with his shirt unbuttoned, meandering towards the pub. He prodded the pill room door open and coughed weakly to announce his presence.

Marko flinched, as he shoved the ten milligrams of Valium down his glug-hole and washed it down. Fozzard had spoiled the relief of the moment, although relief was always a brutally fast, fleeting affair, soon swallowed up by the large tick-tock mechanisms on the wall. Marko liked Valium because it eased his agitation, slowed his heart beat and made everything seem less overwhelming, almost as if he had been hypnotised into a semi-dream state.

Fozzard smiled unconvincingly and stepped forward.

"I think we're scheduled for a meeting today Marko, do you want to come now, or shall we leave it?"

You fraud. You'd rather leave it wouldn't you? Piss off down the sand dunes with Byron and that other assassin.

Marko was not bothered either way, which created an unhealthy pause. Fozzard interpreted this exactly as it was...another snub.

"Let's erm, let's do it shall we," he replied.

Marko nodded. "OK. Yeah."

"Are you all right with that then Marko?" Eleanor said, almost oblivious to Fozzard's presence.

"Yeah, that's fine, thanks."

"Remember Marko, whenever you want to chat, OK?"

Marko nodded. Eleanor moved towards him and leaned in close to whisper. Marko froze to the spot.

"You're bright Marko, so remember this...Activity is the antidote to despair. You get me?"

Marko looked at her oddly.

What the fuck? Activity is the antidote to despair. Right. What's that, some code they use in the sand dunes? Horse talk? Pony and trap. Thanks, I'll try and remember.

Fozzard coughed into his hand. Marko moved forwards, expecting the pill monkey to about-turn and lead the charge to the interview room, for another meandering session of head-jockeying, pill-prescribing Sigmund Fraudulence.

Fozzard turned at the last second, realising the need for movement. Marko almost clattered into him. It was a stuttering, awkward moment. Marko felt annoyed at the man's weakness. He felt more annoyed when he clocked the little nurse doodling away at his usual table at the end of the corridor. He glanced up for a split second and looked aggrieved, as though his doodling was the only activity of any importance, anywhere on earth.

Where the fuck did he spring from? Arrogant doodling Herr wakey wakey. Bet you don't go into the horse's room and pull that shit you pull on me. He'd hoof your National Socialist head off. Get Byron on his case. Yeah, set the mustang loose, Mustang Sally. You're going to get a hoofing you little Reich Crispie.

Fozzard ushered Marko into another bright orange room, identical to the other one.

“Why does that man always sit down the corridor there?” Marko asked. “In the middle of it, I mean? What’s the deal?”

Fozzard look puzzled.

“Don’t you know him?” Marko continued. “What’s he do?”

“Who are we talking about?” Fozzard said, softly.

“The man who doodles at the table, wakes everyone up all the time....sits there scribbling a load of bollocks.”

Fozzard was not interested in matters outside his orbit. He was barely interested in his own orbit, which was obvious from his laboured speech. His eyes were drained of life and he had the forlorn look of a cider-weary hermit who lives out in the cold.

“How are you doing anyway? Let’s have a look. You’re on Reboxetine, Chlopromazine, beta-blockers, Diazepam, Lithium. How is this working?”

He just wants to fuck my head up even more, as many pills as possible. Soften me up for slaughter, confuse the issue...he’s a lackey for the masterminds...a button-pusher. Couldn’t organise an apple pie in an orchard.

“I can’t sleep properly. Byron’s on Zopiclone or something. Can I have some of those as well?”

Fozzard thumbed through his notes, pointlessly, without even reading any of them.

“Your nurse is a bit concerned about the amount of medication you’re taking.”

I’m concerned about it as well. One more won’t hurt will it? One that I choose. Not one of your cyanide Smarties. You fascist underling...the banality of evil... Jesus, you’re sub-banal, banality is an interesting concept compared to you...You make banality exciting. Why did you ignore my question about the Nazi?

“Zopiclone, I’m not familiar with that one,” Fozzard gasped.

He pulled out his BNF, The British National Formulary, which is the little gospel of mental health medicines and diagnoses. It maps out the landscape of mental infirmity, condenses it into one reference volume, making a clinician’s life a much simpler affair. He licked his bony thumbs and flicked through the pages, glad for some little task to make the meeting seem worthwhile.

“Ah, Zopiclone. Hmm. Well, that should be no problem...it doesn't seem to interfere with your other meds.”

Fozzard looked pleased and Marko had to wonder why.

What's so pleasing about racking up another prescription? If he needed to take it, he wouldn't be pleased...Got any horse tranquillisers for Byron? Ketamine please doc.

“So, you're not sleeping too well then?” Fozzard muttered.

“It's hard to nod off when there are killers on the loose.”

“Killers?”

“Assassins, yeah, murderers. It's like sleeping on the set of a Shakespeare play some nights....don't know if some bastard's going to sneak in and stuff a snake under the sheets do you? An asp or an adder.”

Fozzard nodded sagely, not fully understanding the basis for Marko's rant.

“It says here that you've been very depressed, but you've had highs as well? And some paranoid thoughts.”

Paranoid thoughts? It's real. They're real, not fake, like you, like this place, this Hell.

“Depression yeah, I suppose, it's a downer isn't it? I dunno why, well I do, but ah fuck it.”

Marko did not want to elaborate to a man who clearly did not care.

Marko could sense a wasteland at the heart of the man's soul...he was like a jungle clearing scorched and burnt into nothing, cleansed of all animal life. You could not hear one birdsong from the treetops of his life. There was a hideous distance to the man, as if he were backtracking away from humanity on some dirty hillside footpath – a lonely, nodding donkey plodding through the burnt and barren soil, resigned to nothingness.

He's not interested; he doesn't give a fuck does he? He couldn't care less if they were killing me or not...how the Hell is he a part of all that? He doesn't give a shit...maybe they paid him to be like this, to lull me into a false sense of safety...he's a good actor, I'll give him that. He's Oscar material; I may as well talk to myself.

“So, we’ll put you on these sleepers, see how that goes and I’ll meet with you again in two weeks.”

Fozzard scribbled furiously onto his notes, like a man possessed. He did this sometimes in a vain attempt to rekindle his enthusiasm for the job. It was his coup de grace, a moment of relief where he could enjoy the end of the session with an active flourish. It was out of place with his apathetic demeanour, but it briefly allowed him to believe that he had been a useful and productive human being, carrying out his job purposefully and to the best of his abilities. Really it was a manifestation of his unhappiness with the job. He felt trapped, and the fast scribbling was his way of speeding up the session so the ordeal would be over.

Marko noted this abnormal burst of hyper-activity and concluded that the man was suffering from his own brand of delusional behaviour....thinking that he was a competent and therapeutic practitioner, when in reality he was as useful to the mentally ill as a bag of rabbit shit.

Sigmund Fraud all right. Why pretend to give a shit, when you don't? Give a shit or don't. Do you want your Oscar now or later? I'll get you a Grammy as well, if you like. Go on, fuck off down to the sand dunes, you useless psychological charlatan. I could pretend to do your job better than you, and I'm the patient.

Hot stepper. Where is the Hot stepper? Haven't seen him for ages, he's due now, it's due. Fuck you Sigmund.

Give up the job; let someone who cares have a go at it.

“Right, well, I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“Yeah, all right. See you later.”

Fozzard crossed his legs and scribbled some more notes. He severed the moment of meaning, cut himself off and resolved to act as if Marko had already left the room. Marko looked at him with contempt; a contempt built on the accumulation of negative experiences with the staff on the ward – the doodling nurse, the witch bitch, the mulleted nurse and now Dr.Fozzard - a quartet of arrogant, inadequate wielders of power, with an alarming lack of human awareness, all pissing in the same direction, from inside the tent, all over the mentally-frazzled patients.

Sod them all. They should be working in a greasy spoon, serving cholesterol sandwiches to truckers, fuckers and painters. He doesn't even care if I exist. He probably doesn't care that he exists. Maybe none of us really exist...maybe this is death, maybe we've always been dead, and Life is just a dumb meal ticket they sell you, so you won't complain too much about the eternal corridors.

I can't, I won't, this is too much, it's worse than death.....how can anything be worse than something that it actually is? I mean, if this is death, if I died, or maybe I was never really born...then it's just pointless suffering.

“You can leave now,” Fozzard said, blankly, looking up from his notes. “We’re all done here. See you in two weeks.”

Marko scowled at the wet blanket of a man. “Whatever. Like you care. How much you on a year for this bullshit?”

Fozzard ignored him. He opened the door and ushered Marko into the corridor, where the nurse was still sat at his desk, doodling frantically, crunching numbers, or as Marko imagined him, writing to his superiors back in Munich....

Herr Flucker...

The patients are restless.....The Zyclon B you sent in the mail was past its sell-by-date and failed to extinguish the lives of these useless brain-blasted vermin. Please send a fresh tin of murderous crystals...the running costs here are getting beyond a joke. Already I have had to cancel my next luxury massage due to the arrival of a police meat wagon full of escaped patients...Dam unt blast!! Their fleeing made more resources available for good partying...now the malfunctioning bastards are eating into my budget with their Weetabix and Shredded Wheat...Let us hope this is the last influx for the foreseeable future...

Yours banally, Herr Wakey-Wakey

Marko was relieved to see the corridor empty, except for the doodling Nurse. Still, the joyless panic flared up again, as the effects of the Valium waned in his system. He despised his own awareness of the life cycle of such things. Sometimes he was reluctant to take the medication because he knew that its effects were temporary, and that he would be counting every second of its passage through his system...lamenting its slow ebb and decay, like a Venetian lover

abandoned on a Gondola, watching the slow swish of the water, with no idea about his present, past or future.

Bastard Valium. Where's the Hot stepper? The horse? The T.P? It's boring, frightening, and lonely.

Marko pressed himself against the wall and wore a look of sorry confusion. His delusional disorder, combined with his psychotic, angry depression, made him buzz with negative, conflicting thoughts...about the people who were trying to kill him. He both hated them and craved their company.

“Are you Marko?”

Marko's heart raced. He spun around.

It was the witch bitch nurse, out of her comfort zone, away from the nurse's station. Her hair was neatly cut and bobbed and she smelt of wild, spicy perfume. Its strong waft reached Marko's nose before her words penetrated his ear hole.

“Yeah, Marko. I'm Marko.”

She smells like a bad night at Ritzy's, where did you get the fake perfume? Off some cheap old girl in the bogs?

He looked at her with a contemptuous look that was stronger than hers.

She was at it again, unable to disguise her contempt for the human beings whose mental strife kept her in employment. Like a superior minded Job Centre official, she howled and scowled with a bastard flaunt of authority, painfully unaware of the great paradox of her working life....that without the jobless, she herself would be without a job. The same basic principal applied to this dark corner of the witch bitch's public municipality – without the mentally-accosted, the witch bitch nurse was nothing, her job was nothing. She did not have the brains to work this out for herself. Her only concern was to perform her role as hideously as possible, so she might go home and not adjust too much as she shovelled frozen food down her gullet and feasted on a smorgasbord of duff Australian soap operas.

“Your bird, erm, your girlfriend is here. She's waiting outside. I think she wants to take you for a walk.”

A walk? Where? Sand dunes? Down to the racetrack with Horse Head and Hot stepper? A murder on the final furlong...my head pounded into bloody beetroot by that horse's hooves...oh more Valium, no, it's no good, this death, this life...Life and death, and it's all the same...unless you're a horse faced bastard Nazi writing letters to his frauline.

Why does the rest of the world dance and sing, have a grand old time? That's what Hell is...everyone else is loving it to pieces...and you're torn to pieces.

It's a recurring encounter with a selfish being that never sleeps, and he's LOVING IT!!

She's loving it. Valium. Valium.

Tick tock, goddam clock. Where is the Hot stepper?

I'm the lyrical gangster.

"What do you want me to say?" She snarled.

"To who?"

"Your girlfriend. She's outside. Did you hear a word I just said? Flipping heck, may as well go talk to the frigging door. Are you coming to see her? Or shall I tell her you're busy.....doing whatever you're doing...nothing...standing around."

Paralysed, I'm paralysed...like a horse zapped with a cattle prod...can't go walkies outside, not now, with that Hot stepper loose, and Byron, the rest, the dunes, they're all waiting for me, are they? Come on, are they? Yes they are.

Course they are.

Think I'll...think I'll just wait, stand, that's it. Don't move.

The witch bitch nurse threw up her hands in despair and strode back towards the main door. Marko stayed tight to the wall, unable to move for fear of some horrid tool of murder lurking in his girlfriend's handbag – a deadly lipstick, shot through with razor blades; a hairbrush with needle points dripping with cyanide; a mini umbrella that doubles as a silenced firearm, loaded up with dum-dums, for extra large internal wounds. He could see her cackling face pumping on the lever handle, blasting him to bits down by the sand dunes...artificial sand dunes created by the witch bitch nurse for the sake of a good old homicide party...an after-killing knees up to celebrate his demise. They were all gathered there, in his mind's eye...his girlfriend and each and every member of the charcoal black ward of doom.

His heart thumped loudly. The Valium had ceased to have any effect – it was only a short-lived respite from the perpetual tub-thumps in his chest, a brief calm-o-rama that had now ended,

leaving his heavy head swelling with tidal furies. He glanced around. The ward was quiet. Most of the patients were up at the lake, in the supervised walking group. He looked towards the main door. Its round glass window was barely lit, coloured like a bruised sky in the doldrum weather of an anonymous hour.

Amy's face pressed up to the glass suddenly, as though she had always been there, lurking in the corridor. She looked panicked. The way it was framed in that glass porthole, it made Marko instantly think of stranded maidens on a sinking ship, glugging and gasping with fright, paralysed by inaction and the cold swill of a rising death wash; ice cold liquid streaming into their undergarments, robbing every skin cell of precious, vital warmth.

Have they got her? Why's she making that face? Is it death, like a horror film, when the woman is cornered by the zombies...is it Byron and the Hot stepper? Hope he hasn't slit her throat like he did to that woman's dog.

Maybe she's putting it on to get in...won't let her in...can't let her in...Sweet Jesus don't let me walk that way with her, to the artificial sand dunes...to the witch bitch's Nazi Paradise down at Solahutte...Solahutte...anywhere but there...that's where they want to take me...to the SS holiday camp at Auschwitz, where they go for a laugh and a song after a hard week's gassing...They want to drag me there, so I can hear the Nazi knees-up...their good time while we file off to certain death in the dunes. Witch bitch.

Hell is a face at the glass that you can't read for love or money.

What does she want? Who does she want? Why have they sent her now? I need to...need to sleep. Zopiclone...Zopiclone...my kingdom for a Zopiclone...fuck the horse...where is the horse? I NEED the horse.

Amy's face always appeared panicked, but it was misleading to the average eye. Inside she was effortless calm, like a holidaymaker floating on a lilo, her body bobbing up and down on a gentle sea.

"All right love, you all right? What you been doing? Sorry I couldn't get here quicker...our Silvia's been round, gabbing, she's a right gobshite...tell her you're on your way somewhere, she just ignores you and carries on talking. She's worn me out. Might have to slip her some tranquillisers next time, I'll get some off your doctor. Anyway, I've got you these, and a card."

Marko looked at the armful of gifts and the alarm bells inside his head clanked into action.

“Presents? Why?”

“Well if you don’t want them, bloody hell. Here, come on. Take this.”

Marko handled the bright orange bag with extreme caution, and examined it, as if it might explode at any second. He reluctantly peered inside.

“It’s not a bomb Marko, bloody Hell. Please. Sorry love, you know? Are you all right?”

Marko shrugged. “What is it then?”

Amy pulled the bag open and removed the *After Eight* mints. Marko’s heart rattled hard, his face washed over with a fierce red burn and he could feel his body shake. He longed for another session in the pill room – a lovely munch on some more downers, just to take the edge off this...this feeling...of unbridled doom.

After Eight...What’s After Eight? Where they going to take us? Something’s got to be happening after eight...what time is it now?

Maybe it’s already after eight...might be after nine...that’d mean...that’d mean...it’s still after eight, fucked either way, if it’s going to happen it doesn’t matter what time it is!

Amy sensed his racing mind, computing the possibilities of the moment, like an addled maths genius blunted by whiskey, trying to solve a centuries old puzzle.

“It’s okay Marko, you don’t have to eat them now. Just save them for later. Whatever. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

Marko nodded and inhaled a large, deep breath. He stared into his girlfriend’s dark green eyes. They were bright and strong, with a beautiful glint about them...but they were deceitful, shrewd and not to be trusted. No eyes were...especially not that evil Nazi eye that hung in midair, right outside his room, poring over his every waking moment like a Sci-fi spy.

At least her eyes stay in her head...not like him...the Reich mother fucker.

“What’s up love?” Amy said, half-despairing. “Where is everyone today? Byron, and erm, what’s his face?”

“Dunno. They’re not...well they can’t...ah doesn’t matter.”

“They being all right with you?”

The witch bitch nurse brushed past Amy’s shoulder in an unreasonably hard manner. Amy felt like she had been barged into on purpose. She recomposed herself.

“Excuse me. What’s up with her?”

Marko shrugged. "Bitch. She's not fit for this place. Not fit for anywhere. Not fit for life are they? Some of 'em."

"Come on, I'll take you for a walk, get some fresh air, you been outside today? I'll report that bitch."

"Outside? Why you want to go outside?" Marko said, clearly agitated.

That's it, after eight, down on the dunes with Red Rum and his murder squad, all singing Hot stepper and slamming their steins together ... What's my stein? What's in my stein?

Arsenic? Cyanide? Zyklon B cocktail with a cherry on top? You scheming Nazi bitch.

Is this what it's all come to...a sickly smile and a sweet word, then it's off to the showers for a big fat breath of death?

Death might be a release, but this could be death, life might never have happened, not once, anywhere.

It's a long, long con, this sickly joke, and now she's smiling...at least her teeth aren't knackered to bits like that Aintree reject...where is the horse? Waiting outside, chewing the grass, munching his after eights?...I can't do this. But, but, I need the horse.

"Come on love, fresh air, it'll be all right."

Amy took his arm and pulled him up the corridor. Although Marko felt a terrible badness rising; an awful prophesy of his own demise on the silver sharp blade of a Hot stepper knife, he was meek to the physical world. His inner voice screamed at him to stop the advance, but he was compliant to the whims of others, soft and suggestible, even though their agendas seemed loaded with fury. This was a terribly frustrating realisation for him, to understand the dangers that existed, but feel so dulled by Life, that he was unable to prevent his forays into the danger zones, lured like a bleating lamb, right into the silver teeth of a rabid death machine. This was a heavy dose of demoralisation. Powerlessness and inner rage felt like a torrid combination. There was nothing to do but pray and suffer, suffer and pray.

God make it easy on me. He hates me. Hates us all. I'm the lyrical Rasta.

The hospital grounds were cold and sludgy. Each footstep created an unwelcome squelch underfoot, as a monster-sized crow danced on top of a red oblong chimney, jarring the soundscape with its heinous caw-caw. Marko flinched at the sight and sound of the black feathered beast. Amy clasped his hand tighter and led him out over a small grassy hill, up towards a hedgerow that separated the grounds from a neat, yellow-bricked housing estate.

"Where are we going?" Marko said, shivering. "It's getting dark, I can't hardly see."

"Just for a walk, we won't leave the grounds," Amy replied.

"Hang on a minute," Marko said, softly.

He pulled Amy closer to him and hugged her tightly, shivering harder.

"It's all right Marko. Come on."

Marko scanned the environment intensely, searching for the assassin, the horse, Hot stepper, anything that might alert him to danger and help his escape.

Escape...escape...where to? From what? Escape from myself, from this skin-tight oblivion?

That's not possible...I'm stuck in this harsh bag of blood, no way out is there?

It'd be good to escape from me, be someone else...why do I crave survival, when survival means more of this? I want death, but I crave life...it's...it's...madness.

That's what madness is...to keep going when it's gone too far...like a lame horse jumping fences just for the fuck of it...splicing its own wounds open...at the back of the field being catcalled by a bunch of beer-sozzled losers...tears in its equine eyes... leaping higher and further despite the awful pain in its gammy leg.

"Is it after eight yet?" Marko asked.

"What love?"

"After eight, is it after eight?"

"It's only early yet, what's happening after eight?" Amy said, sensing some miscalculation in Marko's head.

"Ah, nowt, it's nothing. Have you ever been to the sand dunes Amy?"

"The what? Sand dunes? Which sand dunes? Where?"

"Any dunes. The nurse was on about them, walking there. Said it was good."

Amy was perplexed by the randomness of the question. She stuttered and tried to hide her obvious puzzlement. "Yeah, in Cornwall, I ran up some dunes, sat there for a bit. Why did she mention sand dunes?"

"She said they're good...she likes nature...walking...they're supposed to be peaceful. Tranquil."

“Oh, yeah, they’re peaceful are dunes.”

Amy could offer nothing more on the subject. She glanced into Marko’s vulnerable eyes, as the wind swirled around them, reddening his face.

“You won’t be in here much longer Marko will you? Amy asked. “It’s not doing you much good is it? Maybe you should go home, eh?”

Marko shrugged.

Home, Rome, Millennium dome...what does it matter? They’ll still get us, wherever we go. It’s a Fatwa...to the ends of the earth...could go to Antarctica and there will be some cunt dressed up as a Polar bear, trying to blast me off an iceberg. And you’d tell them wouldn’t you Amy? You’d let them know where I was going. You’d feed that ugly horse its thirty pieces of silver. Where is the horse? And the lyrical Rasta, murderer.

“Come on, we’ll go sit down Marko. Over here.”

Marko’s eyes zipped around the landscape again, analysing the potential for assassination. He felt vulnerable to sniper fire. Open, exposed positions were bad news, period - but the wind was up and swirling, which made the conditions difficult for long-range shooting. He knew this from his obsessive reading about the Kennedy assassination. High winds made long-distance shooting a very tricky enterprise. Even so, he preferred to be in cover. He noticed a wooden bench nestled in a semi-circular cluster of shrubbery. It was perfect cover, and would afford some temporary relief, although it certainly did not rule out a frontal-shot.

“What have you been up to then Amy? Been anywhere?”

“Just working love. With the geriatrics. Fun and games all round. We had an escape last night...some workmen left the front gate open; this old fella walked out and jumped on a bus. Ended up in Cleckheaton, in his bare feet. And guess who got the blame for it?”

Marko shrugged. “You?”

Amy shivered and nodded. “You want to see a text message someone sent me?”

Marko was immediately suspicious at the change of subject.

“Why you say that? Suddenly?”

“What you mean love? It’s just a text that’s all. From Marcus. He’s wrong in his head; he should be in here, not you. Something’s fallen off upstairs, you know what I mean?”

Marcus. Huh. My mate, one of ‘them’. You brought the enemy. He wants me dead, alive, life, death. I don’t know which is which.

Marko was silent. He did not like this, not one iota, and it was written large across his face, all the inner turmoil expressed vividly in one fleeting look of doom, rage, suspicion and fear.

“What’s it say?” Marko said, timidly, inviting the moment onwards, sucking it towards him the way a vacuum cleaner sucks the carpet dirt up its pipe. There was an awful inevitability about every single waking moment. For the paranoid, nothing good can possibly happen...everything builds like a horror movie, dripping with tense drama, just waiting for that awful tipping point, where it all starts to go drastically wrong.

Marko’s perception of reality was like the audience member at the late night horror show, expectant of disaster and primed for homicidal anarchy. But there was a part of him that desired the nastiness and craved the shadowy lunge in the dark, even though he was terrified of it. He was like the man who reads a masterpiece of horror fantasy at some ridiculous late hour, in order to frighten himself beyond belief, beyond reason, beyond horror.

Every unfolding event was loaded with negative meaning, and it always fed right into the central stream of his paranoid delusions...like the *After Eights* were surely some kind of message, the text was inevitably an even more obvious communication.

Amy fiddled around with her phone. The screen glowed up in the failing light.

She held it up and steered it into Marko’s vision.

“What’s it say?” Marko said, squinting. “I can’t read it.”

Amy fiddled with the phone again and thrust it closer, right into Marko’s face. Marko pulled back. He was distracted by movement in the distance. Two figures appeared under a street light, their black outlines tinged with a twilight orange glow. He could see their exhaled breath rise up through the shaft of artificial light. His heart thumped erratically, his body tightened as he watched the two figures move away from the spotlight. He instantly recognised one of them as Byron. He just knew, from the menacing, cocky lunge of his walk, the angle of his head and back, leaning forwards, ape-like, towards the floor. It was unmistakably Byron.

“Funny isn’t it?” Amy laughed.

“What is? Oh, yeah.”

Marko had completely forgotten about the text message. There was danger on the horizon, a horse on the loose. He looked at the phone screen in Amy’s hand and digested the words for a second.

It's a good job God loves you, cos everyone else hates your fucking guts.

They meant nothing, until he read them again, slowly, making sense of each word and its place in the sentence....

It's a good job God loves you, cos everyone else hates your fucking guts.

Marko jumped up from the bench, a panic-stricken look across his face.

Amy rose up and tried to grab his arm. He broke loose and headed off towards the front entrance of the hospital, his heart shaking and rattling at a million beats per second.

I knew it. I knew it. It's true. Every last one now, all of them, they're all at it. Tick-tocking Rastas. Murderers.

"Marko. What's up love? It's just a message for me, from Marcus, that's all. It doesn't mean anything," Amy shouted, as he ran and ran.

Amy did not understand the central principle of the paranoid mind, the one all-encompassing truth that gives lifeblood to the illness....Everything the paranoid sees, hears, reads, smells and touches, means something. It is a reinforcement of the delusional belief and he believes it one hundred percent, whether it's the writing on a box of chocolates, or someone else's text message, it is all designed to make his Hell that little bit more Hellish.

"Marko Love."

Love? What love? There isn't enough love in the world.

There isn't enough hate either.

I'm going now, can't hack this shit, why everyone? Why do they all want me so bad?

Got to...got to...go... Escape... Where to? Oh shit, where's it all leading? What if it's worse where I end up? It will be worse won't it? Will it? Yeah. But...got to...go.

I'm horse meat.

Marko ran into the foyer, through the automatic double doors, straight past Byron. A straw thin girl with blond hair and a ghostly-white complexion passed Byron a cigarette. He smiled wickedly and urged her to place it into his mouth. She hesitated for a second, and he pulled

her arm forwards. She placed it onto his lips. Her fragile hands shook with the coldness and her own constant fear.

“Here. What’s for dinner? You seen?” Byron shouted.

Marko raised his hand to his face to try and block the rancid vision of Byron’s mulled gub, with its broken clumps of blackened teeth.

“Dunno.”

“Where you going? Got any cigs? That wall-climbing fucker’s run out again. Here, have you heard about the disco? There’s going to be a disco, next week. Twisted Disco. That’s what I’m calling it. Ha ha. You coming? She’s coming aren’t you love? This is Vicky, you know, from the other ward.”

Marko barged through the double doors into the long, dim corridor that led back to the ward. Byron’s awful visage danced in his mind’s eye, and those words flashed up, in big, bright orange lettering... again and again. He could see the mobile phone screen, bright and bold, glowing with horrific messages of murder.

It’s a good job God loves you!

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t give a fuck. He hates my guts more than they do.

But they hate me too. Hate me. Hate me.

I hate me.

They must be right. They can’t all be wrong.

I’m in a minority of self hatred. That’s what Hell is...everyone else loves themselves, and I hate myself. It’s a recurring encounter with Byron...a face through a porthole...a horse that never sleeps...rotten apples and Hot steppers, self-satisfaction of the world, self-loathing of me. It’s Polar opposites and Polar bears, dressed up in white suits with guns and crossbows, ready to do the dirty deed on me... I’ve got to...got to...go.

Why would Marcus send her a message like that?

It was for me. Had to be. No, ah yes, fuck, Hot stepper.

Marko hurried down the long corridor, past the blood stain on the carpet. He did not look through the windows of the dining room, the TV room or the smoke room on his way towards the nurse, who was sat at his table, doodling efficiently, with a highly satisfied look on his face. He glanced up from his doodles and lowered his eyes immediately, as though Marko passing by was the most insignificant occurrence in the world.

Marko punched his key code in and barged the door open. He slammed it behind him and jumped onto the bed. He ran all his fingernails across the top of his head and grimaced with despair. Byron's cruel smile zapped through his mind's eye and Amy's words echoed around the tinny metal chambers of his paranoid brain....

*It's just a message for Amy, from Marcus, that's all. It doesn't mean anything
It's just a message for Amy, from Marcus, that's all. It doesn't mean anything.*

They're coming now. Be here soon. Got to go.

They're coming. They're coming. Hot stepper, murderer, he's the lyrical murderer.

God hates us all.

Marko climbed off the bed and moved towards the wardrobe. He pulled the door open and flicked through the meagre selection of shirts and trousers, searching for the strongest coat hanger he could find; one that would fit well around his neck and provide good leverage off the door handle. There was nothing appropriate for a suicide attempt. There were only green plastic hangers. They were fairly lightweight and definitely not strong enough to facilitate a clean neck break. He sighed and shrugged, determined nonetheless.

He squeezed the hanger out of shape and placed it over his head. He slowly let it flex back into its original position, but it was uncomfortably tight on the Adam's apple, like a strong, sustained finger jab from a bullying headmaster.

He squeezed it out of shape again and manoeuvred himself into position. He bent downwards and shuffled back towards the door handle. In his rattled head, he knew it was a piss-poor way to try and top himself and for a curious millisecond a smile rose up and vanished from his face, as if there was some microscopic trace of humour in the situation, although he knew that the powerful urge to kill oneself was supposed to be a barren feeling, devoid of any so-called humour. Perhaps it was the knowledge that his selected method of death was bound to fail. Perhaps it was some flicker of inner strength and hope. He was not sure why he had nearly laughed.

It's not funny...can't be ...humour...in this. No way. Anhedonia.

He paused to let the moment pass.

He placed the hook around the handle and let the hanger fall back into its natural shape, tight around his Adam's apple. He pulled his body downwards slightly to test the strength of the

hook. It flexed wildly. There was no swinging latitude from the ground; it was an impossible hanging scenario...possibly the most ill-thought-out suicide attempt in history. He yanked his head towards the floor. The green hook snapped off and he fell into a heap. He squeezed the hanger angrily and pulled it from around his neck. He rolled onto his side and lay motionless on the carpet, listening to the sound of every new breath, painfully tired of being a joyless breathing machine; a flesh and bones freak show with a lacklustre spirit and all the time in the world to wallow in nothingness. In the back of his mind, there was a sick titter of amusement, but it vanished as lightning fast as it had arrived.

They'll be here soon. No energy for this shit. No more. What's the point?

God made it easy, God made it easy on me. God hates us all.

There's not enough love in the world.

Here...comes...the...hot...stepper.

Ras...ta

nah nah nah nah nah

Marko fell asleep where he lay, hunched on the floor, with the broken green coat hanger by his side.

His eyes fluttered with the disturbed, deeply visual process he had come to know as sleep, although sleep was not a truly accurate description of the process, because it was a process robbed of all elements of 'rest'.

It was not a chance for recuperation and recharging of batteries, or a nice, comfy respite from the difficulties of daily life. It was an exaggerated visual extension of all the bad elements of his daily reality, and to make it more uncomfortable, it was heightened by the bizarre twists and turns that normal, everyday people expect from the surreal world of sleep.

The disturbed mind does not crave sleep, in some instances it dreads the thought, more than it dreads the horrors of its conscious experience. This dread comes from an accumulation of shocking dreams, where the sufferer comes to realise that his mind, when unconscious, is capable of the most vivid, haunting spectacles known to man. These fantastic nightmares are stunningly bright, but shockingly dark, beautifully vivid but alarming.

Even though he recognises that this intensity comes from within him, the freefall of his dream state is entirely beyond his control. He may eventually come to feel powerless and resentful of the workings of his inner-self, as though he is merely a spectator as a greater, more powerful

force randomly conjures up another visual horror show. What this force is or where it might come from, he has not the slightest idea. He only knows that he both fears and detests it.

Deep within that shimmering bastard of a dream vortex, Marko stumbled through the Arctic wasteland, horridly barefoot in the sub-zero ice fields, his toes swelling up purple. The shouts and screams of the polar bear assassins echoed through the windswept landscape. He glanced over his shoulder to check their distance. They were making good ground on him, their submachine guns glistening in the harsh white light. It was just a matter of time now...death...a bloody, snowy end. He would soon be left to ice over and rot on a crystal white killing field. There would be no help. His bullet-riddled body would never be discovered, left there to slowly disintegrate, the assassins long gone, their white bear suits dumped in a wheelie bin behind Burger King, while they munched on a hot double cheeseburger and laughed their asses off at another smooth assassination.

Marko tried to run faster, but the harder he tried, the slower he became; frantic, sharp movement of his limbs with no effect, as his breath clouded up in front of his face and the slushy stomp of the murderous Polar Bears grew louder in his frozen red ears.

He glanced over his shoulder again. The biggest of the three bears removed his fake white head. Byron's horrid, knackered grin beamed at him, grossly illuminated by the white glare. He gave a ridiculous thumbs-up and stuffed a hot cheeseburger into his rancid hole....munch...munch...munch....Marko felt sick.

He vainly tried to gather more speed to evade the three assassins.

Byron laughed loudly. He raised his machine gun in the air and took aim.

"That's for calling me Seabiscuit. You paranoid cunt. I know what you've been saying. You're off your head."

RAT-A-TAT-TAT

RAT-A-TAT-TAT

Marko dived to the frozen ground, scraping his purple toes on jagged lumps of ice. He screamed at the top of his voice.

"I never. I never. Where's the Hot stepper? The lyrical Rasta? Murderer."

Byron narrowed his aiming eye and pumped a volley of subsonic lead into Marko's back.

Marko jerked awake. He was back on the bed, under one white sheet. The room was deathly cold.

His heart thumped and pumped. He sat upright and tried to digest the awful vividness of the dream but was robbed of thinking time by the Nurse's eye peering in at the round glass window again.

The door clicked open.

Marko rolled back under the sheet.

"What's going on in here?" The nurse said, with a swirl of contempt.

Marko said nothing. He held no desire to interact with the bureaucrat, not now, not ever.

"Well it's time to get up anyway. Shave and a bath please. No staying in bed all day.

What's all this?"

The nurse examined the broken coat hanger. "If you break our property, you'll have to pay for it you know. Or someone will."

Marko ignored him.

Have you got a soul? You dark lord, this is not a business, this is my life, my death, is it life or death?

Maybe it's all the same.

Fuck off back to Treblinka.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, I hate that clock. Ten mils of Valium please to dull the pain.

Got to...go...away from here.

"This is doing me head in this," Byron snarled, as he fashioned a roll-up cigarette from the leftovers in the big glass ashtray. "No cigs nor fuck all. Wait til I see that pill monkey, what's his name again? Oi, what's his name? Marko... What do you call the slack knacker?"

Marko looked up with a blank expression. He was annoyed by the horse, but he was not keen to show it when he was in such a buckaroo of a mood, with the potential to hoof some poor bastard to death.

"Sigmund Fraud. That's his name."

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. They all know, they all know, about the coat hanger, the failure, the humiliation. It must be common knowledge by now. Hot stepper will be here soon, sniffing out the weakness, like a lion on the prairie, starving to death, rampant for a bit of gazelle.

He must know. It's spread like wildfire. I'm on fire. Man on fire. Interior inferno. God I need to go.

God hates us all.

God made it easy on me.

“Just one cigarette, for Christ. Is it that much to ask?” Byron shouted, with both his arms rigid on the wooden arms of the chair. The callous slots where his eyes lived narrowed even further and his complexion seemed to grow uglier by the millisecond. Marko was genuinely concerned now.

This is the plan. There's something brewing, like a bad cuppa, off the boil. It's planned, it's all by design. He's the lyrical assassin, the Zyklon B professor, the master of cyanide.

Nowhere to run to baby, can't hide from the horse. I need the horse. Feed the horse. Fuck the horse.

They know, they all know.

Marko trembled in his seat as Byron hotted up like the heart of a volcano, pumped up with magma, primed for catastrophic explosion, as though God himself was sitting there, busting to let off his hatred at the inadequacy of his bastard creations. Marko looked into those drastic, desperate eyeballs and sensed all the wrongness of the universe in one minute glance.

Byron is God. God hates himself. And us. He hates me, but he hates himself more for what we've put him through. The narcissistic bastard. God's just a personality disorder.

Byron is God, the horse is God...the Norse Horse.

Marko stood up slowly, casually, and crept towards the door.

“Where the fuck are you going man?” Byron said, with panic, his legs rattling uncontrollably, his horror mouth in a grimace, which elevated his ugliness to a whole new level.

“Fresh air, I need to...erm.”

“Sit down man, come on, sit back down will you, I'm fucking paranoid, worse than you, what's for tea tonight? I could eat a mattress.... A dirty brown one with stains on it, down an alleyway. Why am I always so hungry? Why has nobody got a cig? Is this a smoke room or a joke room? Where's Patel when you need him? He's flying round Gotham city eh? First black superhero, why aren't there any black superheroes? Funny that eh?”

Spiderman doesn't live in Gotham you racist bastard. Where does he live? Is it New York or just somewhere that looks like New York? Fuck knows.

It's Batman who lives in Gotham. Get him a cig, get him a cig.

"I'll go get you a cig Byron. I know where I can get one."

Byron's volcanic rage temporarily subsided, his eyes cooled slightly and the promise of tobacco reduced the intensity of his facial contortions. He looked Marko up and down for a good few seconds. Marko glanced at the plastic clock – tick-tock, tick-tock....the echoes of that awful timing mechanism surfed along the boiled neural highways of his punctured brain.

"You're not getting a cig are you? You're fucking off somewhere. Where you going? What's happening? Something's going on here. For fuck.....I mean, bastards. Sit down! No cunt's going anywhere, til I get a straight answer. Who's been talking about me today? Cos someone has, I know they have. What's everyone been saying? You traitors."

The horse has bolted, he's been volted...ten thousand volts of pure insanity. This is the plan...it's all been designed for right now, right here, this is the crescendo. I've got to...go...

Hot stepper, please. Let me out.

"I need the toilet, please," Marko pleaded, as he made another move towards the door.

Through the round glass window he could see a milling around of unfamiliar bodies in the corridor. Eyes closed in on the viewing pane; dark, angry eyes, one pair, then two, three. They crowded in on the glass, completely filling the round hole.

Byron jumped up and blocked the exit route, his hands shaking, his face desperate and confused, shot through with a volatile unpredictability. Even Byron did not know exactly what might happen. His whole life had been lived on the perimeters of normality, slave to the whims of his momentary needs, which even he was not always aware of, such was his disdain for himself, for life, for human values. It all meant nothing, it didn't matter and it never would, which created an awesome potential for everything to go haywire. Byron was against Byron, and Byron was against everyone else.

"No one's going nowhere until I find out who said what. I know something's been said, and I want to know what it is. Who said it?"

Marko fidgeted awkwardly and noticed that his heart rate had suddenly quadrupled. The tick-tock of the clock seemed faster, louder, with a greater echo. His heart jumped around, out of synch – devastating little palpitations that made his vision wobble. His karma imploded into Devilish levels of discomfort. He looked at Byron's knackered, angry head, raging with medieval intolerance...

I'm going to be hung, drawn and quartered...Run through with a big rusty sword...smothered and crushed by a big pile of rocks. The Hot stepper's coming in his black death mask...dressed for my death party... they'll take me out by the reservoir and chuck me in at the deepest, coldest end, let me drift slowly to the bottom, seeping purple blood.

Every horse will have its day.

Here comes the Norse gangster. Murderer. The spiritual Rasta.

Nah Nah Nah Nah Nah

Oh help me God. Hates me, God. Hates us all. But me especially. Why can't I just go for a piss?

Marko glanced at the round glass window. The angry eyeballs crowded in on the pane, filling it completely with grim intolerance. Marko did not recognise the eyes, but he could sense a widening danger. Byron's homicidal glint was bad enough, but now the bad vibes multiplied and echoed through his wounded soul with every new tick-tock of the plastic clock. The others sat rigid in their chairs, smoking their cigarettes, with their heads down. Teddy stared at his favourite white wall, his hands and feet shaking and rattling, as though he had absorbed all the evil in the northern hemisphere and knew that something grim was about to happen.

Who are the new eyeballs? I don't like this...there's eyes everywhere. The eyes have it.

"WHO SAID IT," Byron screamed, and it seemed that his mouth might fall away from the rest of his head, like some sick circus trick of the light...a genius illusion. But this was sickly real. Marko noticed Byron's fists. They were scarred up and horribly rouge. He clenched them tight as though he was primed for a fistic display, just waiting for the slightest excuse to find his punching range on some poor bastard's head.

Marko settled back away from the hitting zone and desperately tried to think of some remedy for the big purple rage. In his mind's eye, he could see a wild horse with Byron's head attached, tearing the paddock turf to pieces, hoofing dirty clumps of soil and grass around, willy-nilly - random rage of a psychopathic half-man, half-racehorse.

Marko's heart palpitated. He clenched his chest in panic and caught the full-on stare of those window eyeballs again.

"No one, erm...Byron," Marko said, weakly.

“What the fuck? Was it you? Was it you talking about me? What did you say? Was it something about my girlfriend burning herself? Or about me eh? What’s been said?”

“No one said anything Byron, honest, nothing at all. Please.”

Marko was surprised that the words escaped from his mouth. In that tiny instant Marko hoped a million times and more, that the words had registered, that Byron would believe him and sit down, quietly.

“You said what?” Byron screamed again.

Marko’s eyes flashed across to the door again. His heart thumped faster. In his mind, the half-man, half-racehorse tried to find its finishing legs in the big season handicap... its gallop increased, pounding out the turf, faster and louder, breath snorting mistily from Byron’s wet black nostrils. The victory line was in clear sight. Marko could see himself underneath the demented beast, being dragged to certain death as the paddocks filled with the sozzled, angry faces of a thousand losing punters, their thick winter coats brimming with raindrops and tears.

The door clicked open.

“Byron, I never said a word about you,” Marko pleaded.

Byron paused with a grim, uncertain look on his face. He looked like a caveman, perplexed by some new occurrence of nature...a rising cloud formation, a rainbow, the passing scurry of a wild animal unknown to him.

“Byron, honest, no one said shit. Not me, I didn’t...please.”

“Is he Byron?” the voice boomed.

Marko knew that voice. It was the voice of wellness and normality. But it was a dangerous low thud of a human voice, its first audible syllables hinted at danger before he had heard the whole sentence. He clocked the face of the Asian man. He was stocky, with a fat, low neck and a clean, bright shirt collar.

He was smartly casual and his cologne was strong and minty, immediately establishing his presence.

Byron grimaced. The Asian man’s friend was older and fatter, with scruffy hair that was neither trimmed nor overgrown. He wore a pot belly that was visible through his traditional Asian dress. He had a timid look about him, as though he had stumbled into a house party by mistake and discovered that the party-folk were bugged out on a range of anti-psychotic medications. His eyeballs flitted from face to face, absorbing the vibes of the unwell, sensing their damaged cognition, fearing for his own safety, but ultimately appalled by his exposure to this dark corner of the human landscape.

An even younger lad lingered in the back. He was about fourteen. He stood there, cockily chewing gum, kicking his heels. He looked neither interested nor uninterested. He was a typically enigmatic youth, tagging along with his seniors for some reason that was unclear to him.

“Is he Byron? Are you Byron?” The stocky man said again.

Byron grimaced and puffed his chest up fearlessly. His expression was obviously disdainful, as if no man had a right to question anything about him, good or bad.

“I’m fucking Byron yeah, who are you?”

Marko focussed on the Asian man’s wide brown eyes. They were moist and red with simmering rage.

This is not time for washing your dirty linen in public. Is this? Is this for me? What does he want? What did I do? God...Hot stepper...this is murder.

Think of the sand dunes. Calm. Blood. Death. Sandy suffocation. Jesus.

I haven’t done anything Seabiscuit.

Before Marko had finished thinking, Byron and the stocky lad traded strong blows. Marko stepped back with horror. The scene appeared to him like a sequence from a comic book, with strong whooshing lines behind Byron’s movement and hard close-ups on his ravaged head.

There was a strange silence of business, as the two duelled in the centre of the room. Byron landed with a sickening little flurry from his brick-cut fists. Marko’s face creased up with sickness. A horrid lump ruptured up above the eyebrow of the stocky lad. A few more sprung from nowhere, in the middle of his forehead. Byron’s speed was shocking to behold, given his stocky, clumpy, clumsy appearance.

The other Asian man offered nothing to the fight. He stepped back towards the door with the youth, where they observed the battle with a strange normality, as though they had paid their gate fee and were somehow expecting more than this. They looked at each other with deadpan eyes, as Byron sunk his knackered teeth into their friend’s face, right on the nip of his chin.

Marko cringed and looked away. The stocky lad shrieked awfully, like a woodland animal set upon by a domestic cat. The blood poured from his chin. Byron rose up with a frantic, dirty smile. The blood dribbled from his own lips, giving his mullered gob hole a gory red colour.

He admired his blood work and set about the lad again. He was paralysed now, hurt and shocked by the savagery of his attacker.

You savage donkey. Dirty pit pony.

It's me now eh? Is it my turn? Why don't you just do it?

I'm sick...sick and tired...Sick and tired of being sick and tired.

The defeated man's friends tried to bust out of the room.

"Where the fuck are you two going?" Byron shouted.

Byron rushed at the door and stacked a pile of chairs behind it.

"Stay there. Oi, Marko. Give us a hand."

Marko threw his hands up, a reluctant expression on his face, mixed with fear and alarm.

"Stay there you cunts," Byron screamed.

His victim curled into a protective ball on the floor and gave out a few loud moans to indicate that he was beaten and wanted no more punishment.

"What's all this about then?" Byron asked the other two, with his weighty fists cocked and raised.

The younger lad flinched. The pot-bellied man shook with fear, but stepped in front to protect the kid. He shrugged his shoulders half-heartedly.

Marko stared at Byron. He could see the mental calculations passing through his addled mind as he tried to figure out the meaning of the situation.

Marko wondered himself, but the answer came in a flash, as the tick-tock of the clock echoed through his poorly head.

Spiderman. Patel Parker. Where is he? Where's the Hot stepper? Murderer.

It's a distraction...must be...diversion tactics...smoke screen for the killers.

They're all in it together.

Spiderman's grassed us up. I didn't do anything. It was the horse...sick, twisted Red Rum...RED RUM. RED RUM.

"Sit down," Byron shouted. "And you, Marko, come here, hold that bastard down, sit on him."

"Do what?" Marko replied.

"Pin the cunt down. I know someone's been talking about me, is this what it's all about? You've gone for outside help to try and sort me out?"

What are you talking about? This is all about me, my death, you babbling trotbox.

“Kneel on him go on. Or I’ll fucking do you as well.”

Marko could do nothing but obey the orders of his psychotic best friend.

“We’ll have to tie them up. There might be more coming. Fuck knows. What about my tea? Bastards. I’m starving. Who’s got a mobile? We’ll phone some pizzas. Check their pockets.”

Marko pushed the younger lad to the floor, his knee tight in his back. He quietly apologised to the kid for the inconvenience, but felt a strong urge to obey Byron’s commands.

*This is the real Byron. I knew it was only a matter of time...tick-tock...fuck that clock
Jesus. God. Hates me, loathes me. They all do. No way out.*

“Have you checked his pockets?” Byron snarled.

A spot of blood flew from his angry mouth and landed on the cold tiled floor. Marko looked around to check on the victim. He was still curled up, motionless, bleeding from the bite hole Byron had fashioned on his chin. The smell of his aftershave was still minty and strong, but he looked like another Saturday night lager-casualty, waiting for his emergency ride to a hospital bed.

Marko rummaged through the kids’ pockets and felt like a cheap street hoodlum. Byron performed the same task on the pot-bellied man, with brutal efficiency born from experience. He smiled.

“Look at this, he’s fucking minted. Cash and carry is it? Must be a month’s takings here. What’s he got?”

Marko was disturbed by Byron’s sudden transformation from paranoid maniac into some kind of betting shop millionaire, high as a kite on his unexpected windfall, after a lifetime of penny defeats.

“What’s he got? Any cigs? Money’s no fucking good without a smoke.”

Marko felt the square cardboard object in the kids’ pockets, and he knew it was a pack of twenty.

He pulled it out, his hand shaking.

Byron snarled. “I knew it. B and H. Why did I know he’d have a packet of B and H? They’re all the same.”

Who is? What is? You show jumping piece of shit.

Where’s the Hot stepper? He’s coming ...I can feel it.

Byron grabbed the pot-bellied man by his chin and squeezed his face with an ugly, exaggerated aggression that made Marko hate him more than he had ever hated any single human being.

Byron pulled the man's head upwards. "Where's your cigs?"

"I don't smoke mate, I never have."

"Then what the fuck are you doing in the smoke room? Who sent you? What's been said? Is it this twat here, Marko, was it him? Eh? Or Sigmund Fraud, what about him? You mates with that useless barnet jockey? No smokes and you run a cash and carry I bet, where's all the money come from? Who sent you? EH??"

Byron loosened his grip on the man's chin and left a rash of horrible red marks where his fingers had been. The man looked overwhelmed by the bombardment. "Our kid's in here. It's our kid. All right?"

"Your kid? Who? Which kid?"

"Safraz."

"Who the fuck's Safraz? B and H. I knew it."

Byron moved over to his motionless victim and plunged his fat red hands into his trouser pocket.

"Nice. Ten Regal."

He thumbed the packet open with a look of violent glee. "Fuck me he's smoked 'em all."

He gave his victim a light kick in the lower leg and snorted back towards the door.

"Who's Safraz? You're not making sense. Marko, phone a pizza. Here. Use his phone. Is it contract or pay as you go?"

The pot-bellied man looked up wearily. "Contract. Orange."

"I don't give a shit about the network," Byron retorted. "Get me ham and pineapple, house special and some fucking chips. Three bags, and a bottle of pop, Tango or summat, not diet though. And tell the cunt to get forty cigs on his way round. If he complains, tell him we'll get him an extra tenner for going. You got all that?"

Marko had already forgotten the pizza flavours, but he was reluctant to ask Byron to repeat them.

He nodded. "What cigs do you want?"

"Richmond Superkings, what else? And tell him to get some *Monster Munch*. Different flavours, and some chocolate chews, *Reisen*."

Appropriate eh? Munch for a monster horse. Why don't you get some oats as well? Only oats you'll ever get, you big ugly bastard...your girlfriend's so depressed she can't be much fun in the sack can she? Hot stepper. There's no signal.

E.T Phone home.

I'm fucked now, fuckerooed by a buckaroo. God made it hard on us.

"Er, what's the pizza number Byron?" Marko asked quietly, hoping the phone would pick up a signal and spare the world any more of Byron's psychotic frenzy.

"Fuck. Who's Safraz? You know any pizza numbers? And who's Safraz? Who else is coming? Who's the paymaster for all this shit?"

The pot-bellied man did not know which question to answer first, for the good of his own health.

"Come on you must know a pizza number. Safraz, Safraz... who's Safraz?"

"Five-double nine-six-one-two. Safraz is my brother. Our brother. He's sick. Like you."

The pot-bellied man cursed himself. He had not meant to say 'Like you'...it was a miscalculation, an attempt to reach the furious beast in front of him, establish some empathy, but as soon as he said it, he knew it was the wrong comment.

Marko punched the number into the phone. Byron punched the man straight in the face, a three-quarter strength blow that instantly split his lip open.

"Cheeky bastard. I'm sick? Safraz, we don't even know a Safraz, there's no Safraz lives here. Marko, did you get that number? Phone the pizza place....they don't do kebabs as well do they? It better be a pizza shop and nothing else, I fucking hate those ones that try and do everything.

"Byron, I think Safraz is who-is-it, you know, what's his name?" Marko said.

"I'll have *Dr.Pepper*, I've changed my mind," Byron replied, oblivious to any attempts at reason.

"And get some garlic bread. My mouth's watering. I'm fucking starving."

Dribbling like a retarded donkey more like. How many pizzas? Shit, I can't, I don't want to think...thinking's killing me. Poisoned pizzas. That's it, that's it. You sly Filly.

Oh shit, ham and mushroom...chicken and pineapple, Hawaiian...Hawaii-Five-O... Tom Selleck...Higgins...Dobermans...That's Magnum you noob.

You were too young for Hawaii-Five-O. But why do I remember the theme tune?

Sand dunes, fuck me what have I done to deserve this?

"Are you phoning them or what?" Byron raged.

The pot-bellied man sighed and looked desperately at his injured brother. He tried to reassure the younger kid with a look and a nod. The kid betrayed no emotion, as Marko bore down on him and wondered what to do about the pizza order.

If I tell him I forgot, he might do us...can't do nothing...ah hell. Sweet mother of Desert Orchid. I want the toilet...

“What are you waiting for?” Byron screamed. “Give me that. Here. I’ll phone them myself.”

Marko watched anxiously as Byron punched the number into the telephone. His heart thumped and thumped, the clock tick-tocked and the faces of all four men whooshed with anguish and fear at their proximity to a living demon, hell-bent on having his booty for all the miserable failed years of his unnoticed, marginalised, demoralised existence.

Byron sensed that this was his big moment of paradise on earth...in a smoke room, in a mental hospital, with a fistful of crisp bank notes and a few hours to live the luxurious dream he had only experienced through the cracked screen of a knackered black and white telly. Pizza and *Dr.Pepper* seemed as good as any Royal banquet or anything Jamie Oliver might rustle up in his *Sainsbury’s* sponsored silver kitchen.

Marko prayed for the phone to ring. He dug his knee further into the young kid’s back.

The pot-bellied man was thinking hard, Marko could see his mind churn over, he could sense the man was about to speak. He looked at him with an anxious shake of the head in an effort to discourage him.

“Look, you can keep the money mate, just let us go eh? My brother’s hurt, he needs a doctor.”

Byron raised his fist and pulled a hideous face. He removed the phone from his ear and looked at the screen with serious disgust.

“What is this piece of shit? There’s no signal. Why didn’t you get a decent phone, proper network? Who’s Safraz? Safraz, Safraz...bollocks, check all their pockets again...this fucking thing’s not going to work.”

“At least get us a doctor eh? Please mate, he might be badly injured. We’ll get you some more money even, if you want.”

Byron’s eyes glimmered. “How much? How much you got? What business is it? Better not be dud twenties. I’ve had them before. Safraz, Safraz! Why doesn’t this phone work? I’m starving. I need a cigarette. Go get some Marko, no hang on, stay there a minute. Fucking hell. What’s it all about this? Who’s been slagging me off? Who was it?”

Marko glanced at the round glass window and his heart jumped with fright. The eye appeared, free-floating again, casting its authoritarian gaze around the room.

The Nazi's here...we'll get sent to Sobibor for this. Treblinka. You blinkered horse. What the hell?

This is it now...execution style...no trial...nothing.

Just a rusty bullet in the back of the head.

Well done. Where's the Hot stepper, murderer? I'm the lyrical panther.

We'll go to the gallows for this. I didn't do anything.

They don't care, God doesn't care, the horse doesn't give a fuck.

The eye whirled and whirled in the round glass window, a gleeful, bloodshot Halloween eyeball, dripping with callous authority. Byron jumped up and barricaded the door with more chairs. He dismissively tossed the phone at Marko and raised a crooked, dirty middle finger at the gathering melee of nurses, administrators and assorted lost souls, who had strayed from the hopeless corridors beyond the Nazi's doodle-table to satisfy their meagre sense of curiosity.

A couple of faces appeared and cast a quick, apathetic glance. It was a matter of very temporary interest to the terminally depressed, who are a torpid bunch, incapable of any display of inner feeling or excitement, so blunted are they by the perceived cruelty of the world. Byron scowled at them through the glass, wondering why they had bothered to look, if that's how they were going to feel about it all.

"Phone that pizza place again. Bollocks. This is your fault fatty, who sent you? What's it all about?"

Marko checked the phone for a signal. It flashed up briefly showing one bar and died again.

"No signal. Not a sausage. Byron, I need to go for a piss. Please."

Marko was alarmed by the volume of his own voice. He was aware that he usually spoke in a hushed fashion that people struggled to hear. Now, he could hear his voice projected across the room. It was an uncomfortable reversal of form. He liked to speak as though he did not really exist, because he did not want to exist...his communication was normally subdued because it frightened him to consider his sensory functions as a living, human being. He was not at all comfortable being human, thinking human, and attending to the business of Life.

They know. They know, they can feel my panic, the loudness, I don't...don't like it loud, I hate loud. He knows the desperation, they can sense it, I need to...go...melt...un-exist myself...it's rough being me, rough as arseholes. I need to drain it.

Come on Seabiscuit, it's mucking out time, slopping out, you big daft donkey.

Life's too loud, why don't they all shut the fuck up for one day? We should have been born like Zippy... zip it up for Christ. Lock your bleeding hole.

We're all gobshites, looking for a shite God, who doesn't give a shite.

The Nazi...We're in the shit now...Hell is thinking in negative circles and not wanting to breathe...Hell is a horse you can't tame, who wants all your apples...

Hell is horse piss masquerading as cider...

Hell is...this.

“Come on you paranoid cunt. Get us something to eat. What's up with you?”

Byron laughed. He was in a defensive state of mind, but he got a buzz from the occasion, unlike anything he had experienced since his arrival. The gathering crowd outside the door awakened a deeper Devil in his soul, fouler and redder than the animal he had known until now. There was a terrible, hateful glint in his eye, mixed with a wicked kind of pleasure, all backed up by an awesome rage at the state of his world.

His blitzkrieged head was testament to an intensity of life that was unknown to the casual wanderers of suburban streets. Every breath he had ever exhaled had steamed up his eyes with cold clouds of defeat. There was nothing down for him, there never had been and there never would be. In the bastard glint of his passionate, evil eyes, he knew this much himself. He knew that this was better than it should ever get, and that fortune of this kind was unlikely to rear its head again.

If every human secretly desires total freedom, no matter what the price to pay, Byron had bought himself a season ticket.

He smiled grimly at the faces at the window, as Marko's heart double-timed. The phone was dead. The injured lad was unconscious. His brother tried to reach across to him. Byron stepped in and planted a boot on the man's back.

“Just calm it,” Byron said, thinking. “We're getting some food, and none of them cunts are coming in here. We'll get them to go if we have to. And we're going to get to the bottom of what's been going on. Someone knows what's been said. Was it Safraz who said it? Who the fuck is Safraz? Shit, I can taste that pepperoni.”

Marko clocked Byron's gaping, awful food hole as it dribbled with slivery nodules of saliva, like a dog that has sniffed a meaty treat but cannot get its jaws around it.

“Who the hell is that?” Byron said, wiping the dribbles onto the cuffs of his borrowed shirt.

Marko could see the focus of Byron’s attention, towards the window.

He swivelled his head to get a good look. The face outside appeared briefly and ducked down from sight, knowing it had been seen. Byron made sure the door was well barricaded and slowly eased towards the window.

“Who is it? CID? What?”

The head slowly reappeared, purposefully, with a menace about its movement.

Marko looked at the phone again. It was still dead. The tick-tock of the clock echoed in his head, metallically, like a spoon rattle in biscuit tin, clanging, jarring.

Byron’s knackered, curious head was an awesome sight, completely addled with confusion and premature wear and tear, like a child’s doll still wrapped in its box that has already been torn to pieces.

The face at the window smiled, in a sullen fashion; a knowingly fake smile from a face tutored in hostility. Marko sensed something awry in it, but he was more concerned by its owner. He recognised that acidic grin, that Zyclon fever of the man who had tarnished the carpet with the Scottish lads’ blood.

Hot stepper.

Shit the pit, pony and trap.

Why does everything happen in twos and threes?

If it ain’t one thing it’s a mother fucking ‘nother.

This is it. Nazi Hot stepper, lyrical cyanide. Murderer.

What’s a horse to do? God made it hard on us Zippy. Put a sock in it, yes me, shut myself up.

Self-hatred, God-hatred, horse-tastic.

Hell is a Grand National run on tarmac, with a squad of Irish Navvies laughing their sozzled cocks off at us, pounding out black lumps of bitching bitumen.

Son of a bitumen.

God made it hard on us, Hot stepper, you furry Rasta.

Right on cue, here he comes, with a death smile and Byron for a partner, you knackered, ugly horse.

“Who is it? Byron said, moving right up to the window. “Sit on that fucker. Keep that door shut. I’m starving, I want my pizza! Who the fuck is it? Safraz? Have you been talking about me Marko? I want to know.”

“No Byron, I never, I never, it’s the Hot stepper, I mean, it’s who is it, what’s his name? I don’t know it.”

“Why’s he outside? He’s supposed to be locked up.”

Hot stepper’s face grinned with one hundred percent pure evil. He banged his head against the glass, once, twice, harder, harder. Marko glanced around the room, paralysed by fear...the Nazi and his crew, the Asian lads, Pony Byron and the Hot stepper. The whole world had closed right in, finally, he could see the walls visibly moving inwards, locking out the space, depleting the oxygen, as his heart thumped and vibrated like a botched-transplant job.

Sigmund Fraud appeared at the other window, a startled look about him, sweat visible on his tired yellow pate. He was frozen to the moment, like a voyeur who has seen much more than he bargained for. He retreated from view and a plethora of ghostly faces filled the round glass window, observing the human maelstrom.

Byron weighed up the risk and quickly abandoned the Hot stepper at the window.

“Fucking lunatic. Let him come in if he wants. Nobody’s going anywhere.”

No, don’t...don’t let him in. There’s murder afoot... gangrene toes and overgrown nails, sharpened up for NAH NAH NAH NAH NAH. Hell is a room full of bad brain cells, colliding in the drizzly red mist.

Hell is a cold tiled floor sprayed with bad blood, Hot stepper smiles lurking in a window, a Norse horse wanting a pizza he can’t ring for love nor fucking money.

Hell is a doctor, probing heads for sickness, but sick himself, sick of life and horrid problems of a broken machine, bad system, all shattered.

They’re coming now, got to be by design...this, horrid, death, looming.

God wants us dead...Sheriff Lord riding into town, his spangly gold star and Remington pistol.

Lord almighty gunslinger, measuring himself for his coffin, cos he hates himself for the bastards he created in his own image... he’s gonna do a Michael Ryan...God on a killing spree, creating and laying waste to creation, the selfish cunt.

Why did he bother in the first place?

God is the Hot stepper, the spiritual murderer.

NAH NAH NAH NAH NAH

Byron shook the mobile phone ferociously. He stomped on it with a heavy crash of his boot, shattering it into a bunch of black shards. He pulled the wad of notes from his pocket and kissed it, as a matter of consolation for the lack of pizza and *Dr.Pepper*. The outburst did not stem the flow of paranoid psychosis; he immediately scanned the terrain for a new target.

Marko's hands shook involuntary with fright. The room was cold, the outside light had faded drastically in the past few minutes - a winter sapping of the sun, which intensified the artificial light and bathed the place in a white clinical glow that forced him to blink rapidly. Hot stepper's face grinned madly in the background - a living, breathing Halloween mask. Marko closed his eyes and wished himself away, hoped that he might open them again to find the room cleansed of its madness.

As he sat there, heart bursting, tick-tock, tick-tock of the plastic clock bouncing off his brain walls, the Hot stepper pulled his head back and jabbed at the glass, breaking it with scientific precision, so it splintered into four large pieces, creating enough damage for him to gain access by lightly tapping the broken pieces to one side.

Marko heard the noise.

Commencing countdown to murder. Houston, we have a big problem...Houston I hate you, God hates you, God hates us all...you button pushing hillbillies.

Hell is a bad communication with a sozzled scientist, riding horseback down a black hole, on a wild white pony, screaming Stellar oblivion for this amoral universe...hoofed into infinity on the back of an imploding star, washed down a silver lane, swinging on a mane, nobody left to blame...for this murder, Hot stepper, coming at me on a spacewalk...a psychotic astronaut on a killing spree, choking his crew mates with moon dust, kicking them off the lifeline, sliced to pieces by a spinning halo on a bad planet.

Commencing countdown, Carol Vorderman, TV faces flooding my mind, happy days, gone and dead. God hates me now, my guess is God never loved me. Why should he? Why does he? Why do we do this?

No choice but to live.

Or die on a Hot stepper blade.

"What's for tea? I'm starving," Hot stepper said impatiently, rubbing his hands.

A small trickle of blood rolled down his forehead. Marko pulled the young lad right into the corner of the room and sat on him again. He tried to avoid eye contact with the Hot stepper, but he was right there, in everybody's face, making demands, asking questions, spitting and frothing with homicidal intent.

“Fuck all for tea. You came in the wrong window,” Byron laughed.

His laughter subsided when he realised the implications of his own words. There was no food. The corridor was jammed with nurses and patients, experts and gawkers, rubber-neckers and rednecks, brain-frozen punters and specialists in things that nobody else would ever be able to understand. Byron rubbed his stomach. He looked the Hot stepper up and down, with distant, apathetic eyes.

“Where the fuck did you spring from? Thought you were locked up.”

Stop the Smalltalk. Get it over with. Houston, we have a problem – mental torture, long, drawn-out murder. What’s with all the pre-amble? God make it easy on us.

Ground control. Melt me away from me, boost me into molten liquid, sprinkle me into a rising cloud...let me evaporate in the higher atmosphere, like a sunny blue horizon frozen to arctic temperatures, memories crushed into flaky ice and delivered back to God.

He hates me...or he’d kill me quick.

“Mushy peas. I want mushy peas,” Hot stepper said, randomly.

“On their own? With fish and chips be better. Fuck knows what’s on the menu,” Byron shouted.

“We can’t sit in here all night.”

Hot stepper looked at the prostrate Asian man, blood trickling from his facial wounds.

“What’s up with him?”

Byron shrugged, as if the wounded fellow was some flattened piece of road kill, nearly camouflaged by the repetitive force of a thousand car wheels. He had forgotten he existed. In Byron’s world people were just rogue flashes of inconvenience somewhere in his peripheral vision, like blips on a radar screen, impulses on a receiver. He felt nothing of their needs, emotions, and desires.

On the psychotic spectrum Hot stepper was not too far removed from Byron. He stepped over him and performed his menacing, bizarre rave dance, bobbing and weaving his hands around, curling up his lips, getting off on the surreal vibe.

Marko kept his head down and mentally prayed.

Make it quick. Death. Life. It’s all the same. Don’t send me there. No, go on. Ah. Balls. It might be worse. It might be better. Houston. Dallas. Texas.

“What’s with all the fucking chairs? I’m off for dinner,” Hot stepper said, winding down his freaky little dance.

“You can’t go that way. There’s shit needs sorting out yet. It’s fucked. Someone’s been mouthing off. This lot just turned up, trying to kick my head in. No one’s leaving here. We can’t can we? Coppers’ll be here in a minute.”

Hot stepper grinned manically. “They’ll be here anyway.”

Byron looked into the lunatic’s glacial eyeballs.

“What do you mean? Where the fuck did you come from? What you done?”

Hot stepper raised his head up cockily, revealing the full area under his chin.

“Planet Zog. I came from planet Zog. I got left didn’t I? You got a *Tomy Speak and Spell*? I gotta phone my mum and dad. Get ‘em to pick us up before I get sick and die in a drainage ditch. PHONE HOME. PHONE HOME.”

Byron glanced through the round glass window. There was a flash of black, white, yellow.

“They’re here,” he said, laughing.

“Who?” Hot stepper replied. “Fuzz?”

“I’m starving,” Byron moaned. “Fish and chips, fucking hell.”

“MUSHY PEAS. MUSHY PEAS. WITH MINT SAUCE.”

Hot stepper climbed onto the stack of chairs and established his presence at the round glass window.

Marko slumped against the wall and watched through squinted eyes, sure as Hellfire that his execution was a matter of seconds away... a feeling that had persisted for some time, and would definitely not be remedied by lengthy exposure to a hostage situation in the smoke room of a community mental hospital.

Hot stepper pressed his face up to the glass and pulled a succession of lunatic expressions at the assembled audience, which now included two neon-jacketed police officers – an ineffectively small woman, no taller than a long jar of coffee, and her colleague, who was twice her size and height, though this could have been an illusion caused by his proximity to the short-arsed lady.

Hot stepper turned around and growled at the Asian men on the floor, all of them silent and increasingly worried for their chances of living out the night, except for the unconscious man, who appeared to be breathing, but not in an obvious way that might have calmed his brother’s fears.

Hot stepper’s lips curled up. Marko cast a fleeting glance at him. He disliked the look of him – that sour, snidey, contemptuous expression he constantly wore, as if he was the self-appointed leader of mankind and was desperate to sacrifice every last soul, in order to appease his inner rage. The problem was, had he slaughtered the entire population, he would be left on his own, in his own appalling company – a thought which frightened him enough to restrain his strong

impulse to go on a killing spree. He hated them enough to show outright hostility, but he hated himself more than enough to dread the loss of human interaction.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Byron said. “What about the dining room? Are the food trolleys out? What’s for tea?”

Hot stepper shrugged. “Couple of fuzz muffins, load of gawkers. They look like a bunch of day trippers stuck in a flood.”

“Eh?” Byron said, with a grim, annoyed expression, failing to grasp the essence of Hot stepper’s crazed analysis.

Marko’s heart popped and rattled, bleated and barked, hopped, skipped and jumped in his chest like a wind-assisted Jonathan Edwards. Death was imminent.

In his mind’s eye, the tick-tock of the white plastic clock was accompanied by the drip-drop of his own blood, spilling onto the cold tiled floor. His addled mind flashed with a series of images, gathering pace, escalating, his consciousness in freefall, streaming wind jets of emotion and visual panic

Amy’s face smiled wickedly;

a text-screen flashed with a bizarre mixture of letters, symbols and numbers;

Hot stepper’s curled grin replaced it, followed quickly by the horse’s head;

barking mad Byron’s knackered grin;

the swirl of the white bed sheets;

the Nazi nurse’s horrid cunt face, cackling;

the ghostly corridor bustling with lost soul and grim contorted faces of old, angry men, shuffling uncomfortably to their graves;

the blood patch on the carpet;

Hot stepper’s cocked head, butting the Scottish lad into oblivion;

the gun-toting polar bears;

the kind nurse, laughing on a sand dune, bullets bouncing into the sand, polar bears laughing;

God’s angry red eyes, buried deep in a sad cloud, pouring scorn on the whole flashing mess of his mind;

Spiderman climbing the walls, cigarette in his mouth;

a big, floating white sleeping tablet, hovering in mid-air;

Sigmund Fraud, crying, laughing, crying, shrugging;

a speeded-up tick-tock, and more drip-drops of blood;

his angry father’s face from somewhere deep in childhood;

his mother’s enthusiastic smile;

Byron’s nasty, butchered pie hole.

The images flowed and flowed, uncontrollably, frightening, beckoning the moment of death....but still it would not come, and this tortured Marko into a bodily shiver, and a deep hatred for his tormentors, for prolonging the game.

He tightened his eyes shut and tried to slow his breathing, hoping that the *MTV* montage in his mind would calm itself down to a slow, seductive coffee advert from the 1980s. Still the images flashed at lightning speed....

the grim shadows of the mentally diseased, floating on a white wall;

the nasty, Bavarian eye of the Nazi nurse, hanging in the corridor, observing him through the porthole;

a thick wash of his own blood down a minted glacier, somewhere deep in the Arctic circle;

Polar bears dancing on ice, the rat-a-tat-tat of their automatic weapons;

Byron's knackered grin;

Amy's fake smile and another bright text screen, flashing with awful messages from an angry God – YOU MY BOY, ARE A CUNT OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. GOD HATES YOU ALL.

Marko's mind had never experienced such a rapid freefall. He shook his head, as if it might rattle his brain loose and stop the visual horrors dead.

He opened his eyes slowly and pulled his hands down his cheeks. Caught up in his own mad moment, he had drifted from the reality of the smoke room and closed his mind to the surroundings. When he snapped back into the grim present, his heart pirouetted with fright. Byron and Hot stepper rolled on the floor, locked together in a muscular war. Byron tried to pull Hot stepper's face off with his fingers, but he could not get a firm grip. His enemy rotated his head this way and that, to find some leverage to land one of his trademark head butts.

The eyes at the window were too numerous to count – all peering in with a mixture of concern and outright voyeurism. Sigmund Fraud dallied in the background, in a quiet dialogue with the two police officers. The tall one relayed a message on his radio.

Marko wondered how the mood had shifted so suddenly, that the two had now come to blows. There was no logical answer.

Madness does not bend to the whims of normality, it obeys no diplomatic human logic, and it acts on impulse, like a street child doing anything it can to survive, its default humanity swamped by moments of rage - fuelled by a righteous anger and grim understanding of its place in the world.

The fighting men tussled on the floor. Marko glanced around the room, his knee still pressed into the back of the Asian kid. He had almost forgotten him, even though he was directly

underneath, taking his body weight without complaint. He felt a sharp pang of guilt, but even though Byron and Hot stepper twisted and gnarled each other to pieces, he dare not step off the kid's back; for fear that Byron would come at him. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, and the stinking mass of grappling, unwashed flesh was only feet away, their faces burnt maroon with insanity and the violent urge to ransack the entire planet, like fallen Gods who have come home pissed to vent their frustrations on creation.

Marko cringed as Hot stepper connected with a crunching head butt.

Byron absorbed it with a sick kind of pleasure; his eyes illuminated and switched on to the sensory butchery. For Byron, battle was as good a pastime as anything. Pain was transitory, and in some situations, an enjoyable experience. The sum total of his spiritual and environmental depravation, his condemnation by society, practically from birth, ensured violence and pain was as normal as chips and gravy.

Hot stepper realised this. He knew that same feeling, although his life had been a proactive mission to hurt and destroy, because that is what he thought he should do, regardless of his place in the world.

What is it? Is it a smokescreen? Where's the knife? The Hot stepper blade? It's coming. Houston, you're a horse.

Lyrical Rasta, murderer.

Sigmund Fraud. Don't just stand there. I'm not a Roman gladiator. This is not sport.

Why do those who want to die, desperately want to live as well? Is that true Hell, or a blessing? Sorry kid, for being me. For the knee. Do you want to live or die? Or couldn't you give a toss either way? Do you know where you're going? Are you a thoroughbred or a one-trick pony? God I'm tired Lord. Take these blinkers off.

The window was chockfull of eyes now, a mass of globules floating, watching, hating. Marko clocked them. His heart went

BA-BOOM

BA-BOOM

BA-BOOM.

The police officer stared right at him, studying the situation with a cold, uncaring grimace. He gestured at Marko with a curious jolt of his face. From body language, Marko knew this was a reprimand - a harsh question without words. The copper pointed at the Asian lad underneath him and dramatically motioned his thumb upwards. Marko knew what this meant. He was in the shit now. The copper had him down for a hostage-taker.

Death by S.A.S

Smoke bombs. This is it baby.

Rope swings and submachine guns. Polar bears dressed in black. Her majesty's ordered the hit. The queen wants me dead. I'll be just another Iranian, hoisted down the street in a flimsy wooden box. The world doesn't give a fuck.

I'll be on ITN, BBC, and CNN. Just for a second. Then it's gone.

Hot stepper Rasta.

I didn't do anything. God tell him, I'm bad, I'm good. No, I'm bad, I'm good. Ah bollocks, tollocks.

Marko looked at the copper again. He smiled knowingly and wagged his finger. Marko stepped off the kid's back and made a conciliatory gesture with his hands. He realised that this was an admission of guilt. His life sense was shit poor, his tactics all gobbledy-gook. His brain sensors had been fried by hospital life and rendered him useless in the heave-ho of normal life. The copper smiled.

Byron clattered into Marko and pulled Hot stepper downwards. He planted a knee hard into his face. Marko could smell the horse, his pungent stable stench of piss mixed with hay - the accumulation of weeks of body odour. The disregard for hygiene made everyone's world even sicker and smellier, but Byron's face was up close, too close, and it was worse than any smell. Marko flinched and turned his head away from the brutal sight of that mutilated pie hole. It was like a box full of horror effects in movie studio, the grim work of a special effects master. For an insane second, Marko expected the movie to finish, for Byron to take his mask off and laugh out loud.

It's a chiller, killer, Thriller night.

The fight was scary now, both men bleeding badly, their faces scrunched up into portraits of pure evil. Hot stepper was stung by the blow, but he was sickeningly tough. He shrugged it off

and came back in with a smile, beckoning more violence, seeking it out. The flurries came hard and fast.

Marko jumped out of the way.

The pot-bellied man picked himself off the floor and scrambled for the chairs.

Marko glanced at the window again. There were more police officers now; a neon sea of hard activity, walkie-talkies, serious faces and cold, dark eyes.

Andy Mcnab's here. We're all terrorists. Kill him Byron. Kill the murderer. We're all gonna be killed.

You stupid horse. It's cold now. It's a cold, cold world. It's a bold, bold world. It's a bald world, God hates blonde bombshells. Bombs and shells.

Bravo-Two-Zero.

Peter Skellen. Desmond Llywellyn.

Leave that door you daft bastard, they're going to kill us all.

The pot-bellied man shifted the chairs with a huge expression of panic.

"No, don't," Marko shouted. "S.A.S are coming."

The man looked at him oddly. Marko could see the eyes in the window light up with pleasure.

I'm horse meat. Dog food. Just a Pedigree chump.

Hot stepper connected into Byron's gob with a short right. Byron spat out a lump of blood and lunged forwards, stuffed his head into Hot stepper's stomach and drove him towards the window.

Hot stepper pushed him back, both men equally powerful, equally psychotic and equally impervious to pain. Marko's heart did a mini Macarena. He covered his head and curled up in the corner, his mind flashing with a thousand angry eyes, as the weight of authority pressed through the door.

The scuffling pair crashed right onto Marko and knocked his head onto the wall. His vision spun with neon sickness, as the room flooded with police officers, truncheons flailing willy-nilly.

A police officer pulled Hot stepper away and cuffed him in a lightning fast move.

Byron elbowed another officer to one side and pulled at Marko's shirt – THE shirt, the one he wanted, and was now going to have. Byron relieved him of it. He craftily stuffed it into his trousers as the police bore down on him and fed him a cold hard meal of truncheon meat.

Marko's face creased up pathetically as he slipped into unconsciousness. The tick-tock of the clock slowed and slowed, like a child's toy stocked with inferior batteries, petering out in its vain attempt to make it across a cold, hard kitchen floor.

This is...it...game over now.

Where's the Nazi? Nah...nah...nah...nah...nah...

Here... comes... the...hot...stepper.....Rasta.

Marko struggled like a decked rugby league player, wriggling fish-like, as the coppers bundled him into the big blue meat wagon. The blow on the head had caused a small cut. The blood smudged up across his forehead, as he screamed and fought against his imagined killers.

In his semi-conscious panic he exerted a greater strength than he had ever known, but this only enraged the neon warriors into a truncheon-frenzy.

Marko reacted with a flurry of defensive punches. He banged one of the arresting officers flush on the jaw.

"Little bastard! Get him in there! Fucking lunatic."

"It was the Rasta. Hot stepper. Please. The horse made me do it. Don't. Don't. Don't stop, isn't it funny how you shine!"

The beanpole officer gave his colleague an odd stare that spoke a thousand words of intolerance towards Marko and his random uttering of lyrics from *The Stone Roses* debut album.

"What the fuck you been taking son? Eh? What's he on?"

Funny how I shine? What the bollocks?"

Marko eyeballed the smaller of the two. He was a clean-shaven kid, with a massive physique and an inexperienced look about him, which somehow didn't seem to matter. Two minutes of exposure to this had already stewed his juices, and he was game for anything the world might throw at him. He grabbed Marko by the scruff of the neck and shunted him forwards into the cage-off section of the fuzz mobile.

"Have a nice trip gonzo. We'll see you down the station. Help yourself to tea and coffee."

Marko grimaced. He stroked his battered head and licked a smudge of blood from his finger.

The meat seat was cold and wooden. There wasn't a kettle in sight. He raised a swift middle finger at the young officer. He winked at Marko with a street-attitude glint in his eyes, as though the uniform and the job was an afterthought – a cosmetic bunch of bollocks to wear over his thinly disguised love of the old strong-arm violence. He slammed the door shut and pulled a

grunting, aggressive face at Marko. The alarm bells clattered into life inside his mashed-up head.

A long, slow journey into the unknown.

This is it...It's starting now. It won't stop, don't stop, isn't it funny how you shine?

If you ask me, I'm an imbecile.

Tired now...so tired...hungry...thirsty...like a neglected horse.

Where's the horse? Will I ever see him again? I'll miss him. I hate him. God hates him. Fuck.

It's starting now, this Hell, won't finish, I'm finished.

It's just begun. It's just begun.

Marko watched his misty breath rise up towards the cold, metallic roof. He shivered with fright. His head throbbed like a freshly hammered toe in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon. The laughter of the officers in the front filtered through, feeding into his paranoia, causing more involuntary shivers. He could hear their muffled conversation, but not one single word of it was audible. He immediately fixed onto the idea that they must be talking about him.

The paranoid always tunes into every conversation in his orbit and instantly applies it to himself. Everyone he sees engaged in conversation must logically be talking about him. What's more, he is positive that they know him, and know everything he has ever done, or allegedly done. Though he has never seen them before, his first thought is that they know everything about his life, and will seek to spread the information as widely as possible.

This is the essence of paranoia.... the paranoid imagines himself at the centre of the universe and all its events. One day he will come to accept that the world does not care as much as he once thought. Until that time, Life for him, is about holding off on that realisation for as long as possible, because it is an uncomfortable discovery to find that nobody might ever have cared, one way or the other, about anything at all.... least of all him.

What they saying Rasta? They're on about the death machine down the station...big bright silver Nazi factory. They'll be queuing up to finish me off. Who's gonna know where I was? Be like I never existed. They might shave off all my pubes, pilfer my teeth for gold...use the skin off my butt cheeks to make a fancy lampshade.

Nazi pigs.

I'll be just another numberless shadow, haunting the corridors of a cramped Fascist basement.

Lord make it easier on us, you coked up Rasta.

Where's my shirt gone?

The mobile prison shifted into top gear, drowning out the laughter from the front.

What they laughing at? So funny, this death machine. It was the horse, dropped me in the shit, by a nose. Kempton mother fucker.

My head...it...aw shit, feel sick now, diseased, like cholera.

Fading, Seabiscuit. I'm fading.

Where's my shirt?

The bumpy passage along the potholed roads worsened Marko's head-state. The rising feeling of concussive sickness welled into a yellow frenzy. His vision spotted up with monster patches of swirling green blobs – virtual blindness. His head pulsed hard, like a horror movie soundtrack awash with exaggerated heartbeats. He tossed and turned in his seat, panicking, uncomfortable and desperate.

His face creased up into an ugly wince. He clasped both temples with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and slumped to the cold metal floor, the world quaking around him like the epicentre of a city earthquake. In his mind's eye, he could see a thousand clones of himself running for cover in a cascading crystal shower of office glass and furniture. Charlton Heston's anguished face flashed into view, sweat pouring off the lumpy ridges above his eyebrows.

My life's a disaster movie. A good disaster movie.

It's bad though. Fuck. Fading Seabiscuit, you mouth-torn, war-torn son of a show pony.

His mind slipped into freefall again...the images came and went with frightening speed; past memories flooded in, childhood moments, feelings and emotions from times long dead, all mixed up in the maelstrom of a mind out of synch with reality. The pain was sickly and intense. He rolled onto his side and grimaced. He flipped onto his back and felt like a dying man, the life seeping from him as the images clattered and collided into each other, eventually fading to black.

BA-BOOM BA-BOOM

BA-BOOM BA-BOOM

BA-BOOM BA-BOOM

BA-BOOM BA-BOOM

“Come on son. Calmed down now eh? All quiet on the western front?
It’s better if you don’t fight. You fractured Rico’s jaw you know. Anyway, we’re going to put you in this cell, while we sort your mates out, find out what’s happened here. It’s all right; you’ve got it all to yourself. Be like the Hilton won’t it? There are no chocolates under the pillow though. He he! There are no pillows either and you can forget about the fucking mini bar.
What you been taking? Must’ve been strong eh? Good shit? Who’s selling it? Can I get some? I’m serious like. It’s for the missus, ah bollocks, I can’t, I mean, why can’t you just be normal? What’s up with you all? Get in there for Christ sake. Fucked my night up and proper has this. Are you listening? What’s up with you?”

Marko stared at the copper’s intense, coffee-coloured eyeballs.

“Did I just die in that van? Felt like I died, my heart stopped, I know it did. Is this Hell now? Have you got a spare shirt? T-shirt, anything, it’s cold.”

The copper realised he was dealing with a raging abnormality, a freak occurrence on the human Richter scale. He was too tired, too tense, too jaded by the daily rough house doings of the scum monkeys, to give a fuck about some brain-fried punter from a mental ward, babbling insanity about death, the universe and nothing. He ushered Marko into his new cell, with a patronising arm hanging around his shoulder. He turned away and closed the door. His cold-coffee eyes were devoid of humanity.

“Go lie down kid. We’ll be back for you later,” he said, in a nasty drawl.

Marko tested his head wound for fresh blood; it dribbled onto his finger as the sick feeling rose up again, like a trawler shunted skywards by a freak wave. He climbed onto the hard stone bed space and settled onto the blue rubber mat that passed for a mattress.

Fred Flintstone lives better than this. When the cat hasn't slung him out.

I'm a pussy. A clawless tiger. Eye of the Tiger.

This must be the holding cell, the torture unit, the scum Nazi factory.

I can't...it hurts...let me out Seabiscuit. Hot stepper, come back.

I'm dead. Real dead.

Kill us twice you cunts.

Water! Water! Shit, my head. I'm dead. How can a dead head hurt so bad? Just a sip of H2O, please, aw Lord.

The swirl of the concussion made Marko's eyes spin in their sockets, like a motorbike daredevil shooting through a concourse onto a flame-filled loop-the-loop. His mind filled with images of police brutality, a sea of blue cotton sleeves stitched to perfection, the arms inside them swinging hard truncheons in the faces of rebellious youth. Marko shivered. The cell was barely warm, just a lukewarm blast every so often from a small vent in the corner. There were curious panels built into the wall, made out of glass. They were square-shaped and looked like the thick end of a jam jar. Marko instantly thought of Stig's house in *Stig of the Dump*.

Water! Water! I'm dehydrating, dying again. How many times have I died? Have I ever lived?

Will I ever live? What the fuck are we doing? Water!

Where are the Nazis? Give me a drink you Third Reich pieces of shit.

"Water. Please. Give me a drink."

Marko jolted up from the blue mat and pounded on the cold metal door like a bona fide lunatic, his teeth clenched, the blood vessels bursting out of his forehead. The constant feeling of being afraid had temporarily subsided. He screamed again.

"I need some water. Please. Just a glass. A doctor then. My head. Please.

Come on man."

He stood back, breathing heavily, all concept of time destroyed, he did not know if it was night or day. The date was a vague blurred visual of some old calendar pinned on his mother's

kitchen wall. It might have been October, November, December. He waited. He smacked his lips together and tried to gather all the moisture into the back of his mouth. It was drier than a blow-dried crew-cut.

He waited. Still there was no response from the blue aggro-jockeys across the corridor.

What the fuck are they doing? Baking their own doughnuts? Preparing the death machine? Oh shit, that thing. Strapped in like a doughnut, the blood squeezed out of me like a sticky jam filling.

Hot stepper.

Byron, save me Seabiscuit. Rescue me, you big ugly Black Beauty. Lead me to water and let me drink. I thought I was wearing a shirt? Byron's shirt. Fucker! Bet he's draped it on himself like a big thick horse blanket....a posh tartan quilt for a scruffy urban horse...the fucking cart horse, tethered to a gypsy chariot, loaded up with tellies that don't frigging work.

He waited and waited. Time was a real bastard, working against him, making seconds feel like minutes of tick-tocking madness. He could see the smoke room clock in his head and could hear its distant sound. He felt like he was at the end of a long-haul flight, three quarters of the way around the world, without the pleasures of in-flight food, drink or entertainment – just a lukewarm cell and a battered head, his body drained from a near-round-the-world journey, or so it felt that way.

He flopped back onto the meagre rubber mat. They weren't coming. Nothing. Not a sip of water, a lick of food or a quick once-over from a doctor. He began to feel a swell of anger. The fear returned, the feeling of impending assassination still loomed large, but now he was angry into the bargain. It was an awesome stew of emotions for one human head to deal with.

He kicked his trainers off, one at a time, pounding them across the cell. They bounced hard off the wall.

He poked his tongue out and felt the horrid rasp of a completely dry mouth. He was desperate now. His mind filled with watery thoughts. Cold springs burst upwards and he imagined himself laid on a grassy knoll, his mouth wide open, drinking down the cool jets of foamy water. He could see himself as a young man, sitting against the wall of a Turkish bath, pouring cold water over his perspiring head, taking the occasional sip. He thought about that moment when he awoke in a foreign bedroom, somewhere in Spain, the hot piss dribbling through his boxer

shorts, welling up a pool under his backside. In his holiday dream he had stopped to take a leak, moments later he awoke to find himself drenched in his own piss.

He jolted off the rubber mat and pounded on the door again, harder than before, so his knuckles showed instant redness. He paused briefly and pounded even harder, slicing the skin from two fingers on his right hand. He stepped back and was sure that they would come now. They had to.....He shouted again. "Water! Just a glass of water."

There was no reply. Nothing, not a sausage.

Scumbag Fascist wankers. This is how they want me to die. Not that I ever lived exactly the way I should have. Like the horse has, knackered and fucked, but he does it his way, and to bollocks with it.

Freedom to fuck it all up, give me that please, don't kill me like this.

I want to live, I don't, yes I do, God, what's the difference, life and death? If it's all the same, why can't we just float, float, float...on a boat...with water, water, give me a glass of water.

Evian. That's naïve spelt backwards, I must be a gullible cunt if I think they'll treat me to some of that. Naïve. Evian. Naïve.

I'll build you a canal, construct a global stream by hand, water for everyone, forever. I'll hand dig you a waterfall, move a few mountains and bring the source to your door...just give me a drink you mother fuckers.

Nothing, not a sausage. Not a peep, and so the agony grew, the anger and the hatred brewed up. Dark fears of imminent murder loomed larger than ever. Marko slumped to the floor by the door and winced with the head pain. He dabbed his head wound again. It was still wet with blood.

They should have got me an ambulance. A doctor. Not this shit.

The Jews got a better deal on the train to Auschwitz.

Lord no, they died, and I didn't. Or did I?

Fuck knows now.

Life, Death, they're just words. Who knows what death is, if none have ever survived it?

I need the toilet. Toilet. Water. Toilet water.

No. No. I'm an animal, Christ. I have to.

The toilet was not small. Marko had noted the cheap silver bowl stuck in the corner. Until now it hadn't occurred to him to slurp the water from it, as it does not cross the mind of the average toilet-user to fill his glass with toilet fluids - clean or unclean as it may be, never mind stick his face down the bowl and suck up a mouthful.

Only at this late stage, with his mouth drier than a shed full of peanuts, did it seem like a reasonable course of action, undignified as it was to drink water from a basin that had seated the butt cheeks of half the local criminal population.

He tried to blank out the disturbing image of an overweight murderer straining and gurning and blasting that basin to pieces, but the image crept in anyway, polluting his mind as most of the thoughts tended to do, acting independently of Marko, as though Mind and body were disconnected rather than one cohesive unit, working in tandem.

Marko had come to expect this now, and he had vaguely come to understand the meaning of the phrase 'out of your mind'...it essentially describes the process of being an observer of your thought and image patterns, without having any control over their flow through your consciousness.

He tried to fit his head inside the basin. It was clean and gave off a half-decent smell; the kind of smell you might find in the bathroom of a well-to-do suburban family – flowery and pungent. The basin was too small. He could not get his lips onto the surface of the water, so he had to comfort himself with small hand scoops, straight into his mouth, which was a frustrating, unsatisfying way to combat the effects of dehydration.

After a good twenty or thirty scoops, the nasty dryness of mouth had almost faded. He was soaked with water. His face was a flustered, contorted picture of uncontrolled anger.

A horse wouldn't stoop this low. He'd die first. Let them put him out of his misery. Come on you Nazis. I'm here. Kill me. Do it now. I'm here. Kill me.

They will. Yes they will. If Hot stepper doesn't get you first.

The lyrical Rasta. Your life's a good disaster movie, nothing better. Disaster sells. I am disaster.

What is disaster? It's misfortune with bells on, dressed up like a homo-erotic slag. A news item sexed up to pieces with all the gory details. News is disaster; it's all disaster, just a diet of disaster. Change the record. Change me. Swap me for someone else. Let someone else live in here, die in here, and ah fuck this.

Marko lay back on the rubber mat and punched the wall. The crack of his bone sounded awful, but the intensity of the rage quelled the pain, like a soldier in mid-battle who has sustained a wound but ploughs forward on a wave of violent adrenalin, hoping to hack the enemy to pieces for the price of his own blood loss. Marko looked at his busted knuckle and sucked hard on it. For a curious moment, he felt a powerful sting of clarity, as though all the bad thoughts and events of his recent existence had been flushed down that silver shit hole.

It was a fleeting feeling, and from his expression it was clear that he was only briefly aware of it, and a bit puzzled. The man who has been drenched in cold suffering cannot quickly acclimatise himself to a dreamy hot shower. But the potential was there; his reaction to the injustice of the situation, very briefly allowed him to show himself that there was a residue of resistance, even strength, inside. Although it vanished nearly as quickly as it had arrived, the spark of fight was alive. It had been nudged from its slumber.

He rolled onto his side and gave into the urge to rest. The relief of being rehydrated was greater than the sickly pain of the concussion. Sleep was the only option, but Marko was filled with dread at the prospect of unconsciousness, with its fucked up, nightmare dreamscape loaded with random splurges of fast-paced insanity. He hoped and prayed for a gentle, quiet sleep, without Byron and his horse head, the murderous polar bears and all the other crap that made his heart pound so violently that it sounded like a thousand African drums crashing out a war beat.

Sleep...biscuit...Fuck off Byron...Hell is toilet water when you need a tap; Hell is being alone, when loneliness kills. Hell is a bent copper, who got you under his wing.

Hell is the dread of waking up; Hell is the dread of going to sleep.

The silence was disconcerting. There were a million places where silence made sense. Marko reasoned that a city police station was not one of them.

They're creeping...crawling...my fucking head. I'm starving.

What's for tea Byron? Horse meat? Shergar and chips? Aldaniti salad? Seabiscuit soufflé?

Silence isn't golden. What they cooking up? Why's it so quiet? What they doing, leaving me here, abandoned, gonna let some maniacs loose, fuck, my head, the cunts.

More water. There's a riot brewing, there's a riot going on.

The anger swelled up again. Marko's eyeballs glowed psychotically, like a Sci-Fi creature in close-up. The calm followed immediately, as if he was scared by the depths of his own rage

and had no idea what to do with it. He took a deep breath and tried to wish away the silence, which grew more ominous by the second.

Silence is a dangerous foe for the paranoid – its barren wastes allow his thoughts to breed at a more exaggerated rate. Like the life cycle of a summer flower seen in time-lapse, its lifespan telescoped into the briefest process, the paranoid's thoughts escalate at the same giddy rate, especially when there is no sound or human activity. Being completely alone with the volume turned down, gives him a strong feeling that they are up to even more nastiness, and employing stealth and silence to achieve it.

To top it off, their wicked schemes are certain to blossom at any given second, destroying the silence they have so purposefully created, as though they are mocking time and space itself, fucking with every corner of the soundscape and encroaching on the paranoid's world like a demented theatrical villain waiting to jump out from behind a thick red curtain.

Marko watched his own breath rise up towards the ceiling. The air was colder, and he had no idea how much time had passed. It might have been half an hour; it might have been seven or eight hours. He hated time, the progress of time, all time-related concepts, so naturally all sense of time was abandoned in the vain effort to combat its relentless tick-tock.

When life has no purpose, when psychosis burns a nuclear fire through the centre of man's universe, melting all joy, meaning and rational thought, he separates himself from normal daily concepts that give life structure and routine. He severs all relationships with time, and becomes cut-off, stranded, free-floating in his own Hellish vortex, like an astronaut cut loose in a dark eclipse, rotating gracefully like an interstellar ballet dancer headed towards certain destruction.

The slow turn of the key shattered the silence, as though a bowling ball had clattered into a bunch of metal pins. When silence rules, the smallest sound amplifies itself beyond its own volume, the way a hushed stereo becomes progressively louder as the minutes tick past midnight, into the early morning.

Marko jumped up in panic and crawled towards the door. It creaked open, and his head filled with medieval images of torture and brutality, men shackled to walls with iron chains, black dungeons awash with stale straw and the stench of bodily fluids, leather masks and hideous, toothless grins that made Byron's mouth seem like a *Colgate* advert off the telly.

Marko froze to the spot, resigned to imminent death, but slightly less frantic inside, due to the anger caused by the toilet fiasco.

If I am really alive, they couldn't care less. If I died in that van, they're still responsible. Either way it's fucked. Death, life, it's all the same.

Is it possible to be alive and dead at the same time? A fusion, like jazz funk but a bit stinkier, more urgent and desperate?

Where do Zombies come from? They're dead and alive.

I might be a bona fide zombie, a night stalking, no-talking mother fucker - An extra from the Thriller video, an eternal blight on the landscape, a tragic corpse.

Ah balls, am I? What am I? I died, but I never lived.

But I'm still here.

What is here?

Is it always the clouds and the sky, larger than me, blotting me out? God I love my insignificance, my paltry place in this world that I never really lived in.

Maybe God has got bigger plans for me; maybe he's put me on hold, like a random telesales caller to a large corporation - just a little flashing light on God's speaker phone, a minor blip on the telecommunications network.

Maybe he's out to lunch, deciding my fate...God on the golf course, blasting balls up a fairway, scratching his zany beard over all the grief I've caused him.

Maybe God doesn't give a shite.

Maybe he loves me really, but he's showing me my place in the scheme of things.

Maybe he's berating his caddy for the conditions.

Maybe God's as vulnerable as me, as delicate a creation as man and beast.

Maybe he's crying for all this shit down here.

Maybe he's more concerned about his swing.

Maybe he's about to give in.

Maybe he's sick of all the maybes, all the questions.

Maybe, just maybe, he wants me to show more love, less hate, accept my fate, put my mind away to rest, up and at it, find some zest.

Maybe God just wants a better life for himself.

Maybe he went to Spain and abandoned all this, bought some white slacks, sun hat, bucks fizz, champagne super-being, knocking balls around at will.

God we've messed it up and proper. What we done to the poor old man?

Like a father we've abandoned him in time and piss, left him puddled in his own yellow stains.

Ah Lord if we could just come again.

Condemned me, he has, I know, but I want to say I'm sorry sir for all the grief, grant me some relief. Kill me too, if that's what you want. I'll write my will in champagne font and give it all back to you.

Just don't get hooked on golf, it's a shite game, really is, if you were a crappy God I'd grab your ball off the fairway and throw it back at you... run across the green and steal that mother fucker just as you're about to knock it in.

What if God wears a suit and counts his daily wads?

What if he sniffs in petrol fumes and feasts on vinegary cod?

What if God's as confused as us, even more so, chancing it, prancing it around, ah fuck, I need to go, go where?

What's so bad about here?

Everything, nothing, take me away, this fusion of love and hate, ying and yang, fizz and bang, it's a silver ball inside my head, accumulating millions of points on the pinball highway, but I know that mother fucker's going to leap down the hole, and I'm running out of fifty pence pieces.

God's the master of the credit crunch, the silver penny hunt, and he's running out of minted coins.

I'm the little bastard from his loins, that's me, I wish I didn't feel so stupid, sick and lame, I'm the antithesis of modern fame, tucked inside my own rage bubble, screaming bastard murder.

Maybe God's the chancellor.

Maybe he loves good Government.

Maybe, just maybe, God has invested in the futures Market and can't afford to take a chance on redeeming me, when there's so much bonds and Blue chip stock to consider.

Maybe God does wear braces.

Maybe he does blackout the energy network to ensure a retirement windfall.

Maybe God's just a glorified accountant, lining Heaven's corridors with new, improved plasterboard.

God doing D.I.Y.

Holy shit, maybe God's just a suburban hammer jockey, pounding his walls to fuck all Sunday, mowing his lawn, weeding and seeding, and reading garden centre brochures on the shitter.

What if God's a boring house husband, addicted to Ryvita and TV shopping channels?

God help us, can't help us, God's the enemy.

He enjoys Jeremy Kyle! We're fucked!

God's a straight shoe, playing it cautious. Pass me the sick bag.

God, forgive me, but stop reading that directory of local tradesmen, there's nothing wrong with your gutters.

God's a golfing redneck with a chequebook. Now I know...my head...fuck...room spin...I feel...dead...inside...God's gone to spec savers, Via Blockbuster, en route to Maplins, with a strong likelihood of stopping off at Aldi, Comet, PC World and Burger King.

God's just a bacon double cheeseburger drenched in fat and shite.

What would he say at the Drive-in speaker phone?

Hold the frigging Mayo! Go easy on the salsa; do you know where I can get some balsa?

What time does Wilko's shut? Fuck this; I'm off to pizza hut.

If God's not proud of fuck all, why should he care about me?

He's a forlorn father, but his shares are on the rise.

He's one smiling mother fucker.

The cold-coffee cop straddled the doorway and banged his key chain repeatedly onto his thigh. Marko looked up at his hard, dirty face. It resembled the brown frothy dregs of a long-abandoned cappuccino. The cop said nothing but his face brooded with all the bad aspects of the Island of his birth. Those sober brown eyeballs were rank with judgement, arrogance, intolerance, disdain, superiority and an unwillingness to understand anything beyond their own narrow orbit. If ever a look was loaded with all the negative sentiments of a cruel, impatient society, it was that face, in that doorway, as the jingle jangle of his keys grew louder with each new swish of his hands. He slapped the keys onto his thigh, harder and harder.....swish, jangle.

Marko stayed still. His mouth had become dry again; alarmingly dry, like a gerbil's cage in the baking sun, stuffed with wheat crackers. He felt vulnerable again, Godless and alone, at the mercy of souls unknown to him, who didn't care for him, or about him, and never would. They might kill him, they certainly wouldn't kiss him, and they would not entertain his presence outside of the perimeters of their blue fiefdoms, where the whirr of the plastic siren and the hard break of the truncheon was all that mattered.

Marko locked onto the cop's eyeballs. The anger swelled up again. The memory of the toilet water was still fresh but stale, sweet and sour. He could feel the bad karma all around the island, as the copper's rancid eyeballs bled out a horrible intolerance to his plight.

Where's Seabiscuit? I feel sick. Pig. Pig and a horse, Babe in the woods, trampling through a Shergar dung pile. Farmyard bastards, locked in, caged up, eating brown pellets...this old farm...ee aye, ee aye oh.

God's teeing off on me again. Kill me now. Give me a drink, the harsh blue stink of another bent copper. Where's the death machine? Have your eyes ever looked lovingly at anything? Did you ever love? Will I love again?

Is love just hatred with bells on? Too much love leads to hate, and too much hate leads to greater hatred. I think I used to love life, but then I realised that life doesn't love me. Irony of irony, sick and twisted, like a knackered set of horse teeth.

Ha. If you love life, what makes you think it's gonna love you back?

Dammit, God's scored a hole-in-one...he's in the nineteenth hole, bashing on a rigged fruit machine, looking for a nudge gamble.

He's got his winnings, he don't give a fuck.

What you looking at copper?

Marko tried to draw some moisture into his Saharan mouth.

The copper jangled his keys and yawned.

Marko half-smiled, with a sick reservation, and a swishing head full of awful paranoid thoughts. He gulped and felt the heavy heartbeat knocking through his chest. He looked up at his temporary jailer and glared at him with a terrible awareness of his rising hatred. He could see the remains of his love disappearing on the back of an ugly white horse. Off it galloped, long into the distance, pounding through the surf beyond those crooked sand dunes, where the Nazi nurses cooked up their summer sausages and laughed about the addled brains of the mentally diseased. Where the little doodling nurse danced and sung with clinical efficiency, over a fire stoked up with the embers of a hundred academic papers on the nature of the human mind - its malfunction, its power, its wickedness, its greatness, its strength.

Marko narrowed his eyes with blatant hostility, as the horse head sunk beneath the foamy white waves and the moonlight glowed milky white on the sea.

Marko's half-smile rose up again, for the briefest tick-tock. He glared at the cop and the words seeped out of his mouth in a stone-cold, slow-motion drawl.

"Thanks for the water, doctor, whatever."

Hot stepper

Marko raised his middle finger and scowled like a wizard's monkey on a strange brew.

The copper jangled his keys, nodded thoughtfully and backed out of the door. The slow metal clang made Marko more aware of his isolation in the world, his loneliness, his desperation. There were only that metal sound and angry faces, much confusion, imminent execution, bad karma, intolerance everywhere.

There was stigma, judgement and an army of civilised folks, unknown to him, who had already written him off, who were waiting to exult in his catastrophes of spirit, the wreckage of his life, whether he glued it together again or not, it would never matter to the three-score-and-ten brigade, whose fragile mortality granted them license to preach on the failings of people like Marko.

Fuck this one-chance saloon, this Serotonin Grand Prix. We've all got zapped out brain highways, loaded with surplus chemicals, revving it up on that hot starting grid, scorched by life, angry to win the garlands, kisses and champagne. Watch out for those stamped-on brain bits mashed to grey pulp by the daily streams of radio bullshit. Get into that bastard's slipstream; he wants to beat you to the chequered flag. What's the rush?

Fuck this bad judgement, holier than me, where's your humility? Is this it?

I'll find Marcus, I'll tear him apart. It's a good job God loves me? Shit. Hot stepper, murderer, me? Nah.

My head, it hurts, the pain, I'll get that bastard for this.

They think I'm weak. I am. No. I'm strong and weak, lion and fox. I'm coming Marcus, I'm coming. Escape artist. I'm coming Marcus, gonna get a turbo engine and some rocket fuel, cash in this knackered Capri for a bright silver monster...gonna enter the Serotonin Grand Prix, play the game, first class.

It ain't over til the slim lady pukes,

hang on to your zapper,

put up your dukes.

The rectangular panel in the door flipped open on the other side. Marko could see the cold blue eye of authority through the hole. He smiled at it and rolled over onto the floor. He rested on his flattened out palms and slowly pushed himself up and down.....

One.....Two.....Three.....Four.....Five.....

He pressed on in pain, until he could not move another inch. He slowly pulled himself up. With his back to the door, he heard the clank of the door panel as it closed. He did not turn to look at it. He fell to the floor and assumed a sit-up position.

One..... Two..... Three..... Four..... Five.....Six.....

He grimaced and collapsed again.

His face betrayed his feelings of futility, but he paused for a second and repeated the exercise, on and on and on, until his eyes gave way to sleep, and his mind rolled onwards into another riotous dream state.

In the land of nod, he jogged frantically around a great big city park. In amongst the wet piles of leaves and acres of muddy grass, the polar bear assassins came after him again. Their guns were cocked and pointed skywards, like a crack rescue squad on the perimeter of a besieged embassy. Marko turned to check their distance, knowing that every time he did so, he lost ground. He tried to make up for it with a little burst of pace. His muscles weakened with the effort. Byron laughed heinously at him from underneath an oak tree, where he lolled disgracefully. His horse head munched on a tuft of grass. He held a Superking in one hoof and a glass of cheap piss cider in the other. Marko consciously avoided looking at Byron's detestable mouth. Byron noted this and made a hostile face, encouraging the polar bears onwards as they lowered their weapons in anticipation of firing a murderous volley of lead in Marko's direction. Sigmund Fraud sat nervously on a park bench, chewing on a banana.

As Marko breezed past, he faked a left hook at the beleaguered head doctor. He panicked and the banana slipped out of his hand. Marko snatched it and rammed it into his own hole.

He turned and looked over his shoulder again, knowing that he should not.

The polar bear in the middle sparked up a cigarette as he fell behind the other two assassins.

Marko was surprised to find that he had inched ahead, well out of firing range. It was a good, strange feeling, but it vanished on site when he clocked a tight corner by the tennis court.

It was chock-a-block with the shuffling creatures from that bastard ward - the sorry old depressives, whose grey eyes and grey cheeks were like sorrowful Halloween masks, faded and jaded in the back room of a fancy dress shop. Marko ran straight into their midst. He was momentarily surrounded by pallid, miserable faces, with huge depressed eyes and chattering mouths that spewed out a hundred thousand tales of woe. There was not one smile between them. Marko tried to fight them off as the polar bears closed in for the kill. At the last second,

with a frantic swish of his elbows, he forged an escape hole and blasted up the muddy slope, out of range to safety.

The attic was freezing. Its polished wooden surfaces looked frosted white in the winter sunlight. It was a beautifully spacious room, higher than a hundred horses. This made it impossible to heat effectively and left it with a permanent wintry feel, like an exposed barn crafted in the centre of a windswept field. Marko looked at his bed, with its triple selection of duvets. He kicked off his shoes and dived under the covers. For a brief second he felt a twinge of happiness and relief.

Silence. Golden, syrupy silence.

Finally there was peace of sorts. There were no Horse head bandits or Nazi spies, witch bitches or Spiderman clones. No Fraudulent psychiatric spiel from overpaid pill monkeys. No doodling arrogance from Herr Wakey-Wakey, suited and booted number-crunching of a system-addict drilled in the anti-human ways of society's relentless, uncaring machine.

For a brief moment he almost felt human again, but the paranoia was still in place, laser etched onto his brain pathways, like a giant infectious ray of light, blasting through the spongy grey corridors of his thinking apparatus. The traffic noise and the far-off shouts of playground children reminded him of the relentless march of life and his insignificant place in its melee. The paranoid is also a depressive at heart, who struggles to maintain a strong sense of love, and despairs profoundly when he sees his love evaporate. Depression is inverted love and anger turned inwards. The paranoid depressive is an idealistic creature who has high expectations of the world. When its relentless, unfeeling rhythms collide with his loving sensibilities, invariably he will spiral into despondency. This is not an irreversible state of affairs, but Marko had felt for some time now that his future was bleaker than a Himalayan blizzard. He laid back and waited for his body heat to radiate through the duvets and create a pocket of warmth. But in the back of his head, there was a restless voice. It whispered softly to him.

Activity... Activity... is... the ... antidote... to... despair.

Get... busy...with...the...fizzy.

The coffee-eyed copper flashed into his head. Marko's heart raced and he felt the sickness flare up again as the memory of the police cell pecked away on his brain stem.

Soda Streams and water. Give me a glass of water.

No water here son. Sorry you're going to die from dehydration. We don't give a flying fuck about the likes of you. We are humanity and you are not invited. All right? Crystal clear my son? I mean, what the fuck did you think it was really all about? Beautiful sunsets and golden brown goddesses, blowjobs on a surfboard? Skydiving until dawn into wheat fields full of beautiful groupies? You're on the wrong planet my son. This is Planet Me, and me say we say you can go to fuck with all your Godly shite.

Eleanor. Eleanor. What did you mean? I think...I think...Activity is the antidote to despair.

Antidote to despair.

Antidote to despair.

Too tired to fight now. Got to sleep on this. Like a horse in hay. Pissy Byron hay.

Spare me a horse dream won't you? Please spare me a horse dream. Hot stepper. I hate the horse, I miss the horse. Kill the horse. The horse is dead. Long live the pony. My little pony. It's home to be nice...

"Fuck off you Nazi bitch. Witch bitch. Get a job in a chippy you useless fraud."

"Marko. Marko. It's me. Wake up love. It's me. Mum."

Marko rolled around under the warm triple duvet and rubbed his eyes.

"Doodling bastard, Sigmund. Get that horse away. Whoa bitch. Whoa girl."

"Marko it's your mum. You daft sod. Wake up. It's me. Marko."

"Mum. I'm, ah, what? Activity. Valium. Hot stepper, murderer. I don't want to... I need to go."

"Go where love? You're home, you don't need to go anywhere."

"It's you. It's you. Fuck."

"Who were you expecting?"

"Byron. Not Lord Byron, no, no, worse. Not a poet. Just a big Norse horse."

"Are you all right love? That policeman said you'd taken a bit of a crack on the head."

"Policeman? Where?"

"Down the station, when I came to get you. Don't you remember?"

"Remember? Erm, which bit. That cell, I remember that, the toilet. That's it. What happened?"

"Well you're all right, they won't be pressing any charges, and they know it was all a bit of a do about nothing. It wasn't your fault was it?"

"No, it was Byron and Hot stepper. I didn't do anything. I don't want to go back. Why did you bring me here?"

"Too much fuss on the ward. I said I'd take you home. Stay home for a bit. There's no rush is there?"

“Fuck that place. Sorry, I don’t want to, I can’t go back, don’t let them take me back. It’s all too complicated. I’ll be killed.”

“Don’t be daft! Killed? You’re just being silly, nobody wants to kill you.”

Oh yes they do. Oh no they don’t. Oh yes they do. Do I look like a pantomime horse? Big furry brown arse? Of course they want to kill me. They want to kill everyone.

“I’m making some fresh soup. Just relax. I’ll bring you some. Do you want a drink of anything?”

Marko half-smiled. “Just water.”

“Amy phoned you earlier; I told her you were asleep. She’s going to pop round in the morning.”

It’s a good job God loves me mum.

“What about God?” Marko said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to say at that moment.

“God? What you mean Marko? What’s God got to do with anything?”

“What hasn’t he got to do with it more like?”

“You need to be thinking about down here, not up there. Too much thinking, that’s your problem. Not enough doing. Let God worry about the bloody universe, you bloody worry about you.”

“Do you think if there is a God, he’s like, pissed off about everything? You think he might have a bad day at the office and then lash out at people, just for the sake of it?”

“Marko, if there is a God, he doesn’t work for the council. He doesn’t wear dungarees. And he doesn’t take a swipe at people for no reason. He might live up the road for all we know. You can’t run a bloody kingdom unless you live in it. You might be God, I might be God, and we might all take it in turns like they do with that Olympic torch. Who cares? Do you want granary or some of that Happy Bread?”

“When’s Amy coming? Have you seen my trainers? I think I’ll go for a jog, run, jog, whatever.”

“A run? Are you mad?”

“What? Clinically?”

“Look, you’re staying in bed and that’s that. Do you want me to bring the TV up?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Just take it easy Marko, please. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

No I've got to go back to the horse. I got to see that knackered head again. Just once. Hot stepper, I'll breeze in and out. They'll never see me. It's cold here. I miss the horse. Fuck the horse!

Just one look. That's it. He can't kill me now. They'll kill us. Not now. Soon. But he won't.

I'm angry God, you're angry, you hate me, love me, what? What's the deal? Is it damnation or what? Dirty Harry God, how many bullets you packing in that Remington?

I'm your lemming son, don't push me.

You don't have to.

Rambo, give up will you. Call it quits.

Where were Rambo's parents when he needed them?

Water. Lovely water. Billions of gallons of it and there's me and Africans dying of thirst.

What if I lived near the sea, Seabiscuit? Water for miles but nothing to drink, galloping into a hundred degree mist, with a throat like a bag of Weetabix.

You Blue Meanies. Go choke on your own truncheons.

Activity. Despair. Antidotes. Poisons. Choose one.

The morning mist was thick and cold, with a strange solidity about it, like lumpy porridge left to fester in a silver pan. Marko trod carefully on the frozen ground. The land was littered with broken bricks, small piles of rocky debris and withered, soggy food bags, discarded by local youths who loved to gather for a burger munch and leave their rubbish strewn around.

The sun was buried somewhere high in the atmosphere, its faint glow struggled to burn a presence in the harsh grey canopy, as the wind whipped about Marko's face, singing cruel songs that made him shudder for company and warmth, human smiles and creamy Sunday lunches in a hospitable climate.

He was faintly aware that this was another dream, the kind where self-awareness kicks in and places the dreamer in a conscious-unconsciousness moment of clarity, as though the dream itself is a lived experience, vivid and clear. This strong fusion of the conscious and unconscious mind is a rarity, and places the dreamer in temporary control of a landscape that is normally out of reach. Marko felt a strange joy at this revelation. He stopped dead on the country track and slapped himself in the face.

I am dreaming. This is real.

He could feel the sting of his hand. He did it again, and again, as the wind blew up into a frenzy.

He could sense the reddening of his skin.

“This way Marko, this way.”

“Who’s that? Fuck off out of my dream. This is my dream, it’s mine.”

“Too much anger Marko, too much hatred. It’s a heavy investment you’ve made, in anger, suffering. Why don’t you close your account?”

“Who the Hell? Seabiscuit? Hot Stepper? It was all going so....well, you know. Amy? You treacherous bitch. Is it you? Mum? I can’t see. Can’t think. If God lives near here, do you think he looks out for the community? Or is he just a bitter dog walker, up to his wellies in sheep stink? Hot and bothered in a country mist?”

“Anger Marko. Come this way.”

“I can’t see you. Eleanor? Is it you? Are these the sand dunes? Murderess. You female Rasta. Leading me into a mess aren’t you.”

“Marko. It’s all right. Keep coming; keep moving, like a great white fish, sleep is for babies, you see where I’m coming from? You’ve got to get busy, with the fizzy.”

“Now you’re talking shite, that’s my line, this is my dream, Fozzard. Where is that charlatan, did he send you? Part of the mind game?”

“There is no game.”

“I can’t see you. Wake me up. I know this is a dream, it’s a fraud. I want to see the horse. I hate that horse, but I pity him, too much pity me, is that a bad thing? Is it better to be full of pity or not? I don’t know. I want to feel...human...again.”

“Get your skates on Marko, this is not a game.”

“Eleanor, it’s you. The only one who cares, thank God. But...I can’t follow, not you, anyone. I’m a sheep to the slaughter, a grown up lamb who still needs a suckle. It’s hard isn’t it?”

“What’s meant to be easy? Living? Says who? And why should it?”

“Then why are you here? You just want me dead.”

“Bullshit Marko. Come on. Get your skates on. Move. Quick time. Explore the physical, you’re a physical being. You want to spend your life idling on a couch, phoning automated voices to re-order that piece that broke off your deluxe vacuum cleaner?”

“Now you are talking shite. What the Hell do you mean? Vacuums? This is a vacuum; my life’s a vacuum, a piss poor wheelie thing that can’t pick up dust for love nor money. Nature abhors a vacuum? If Nature abhors a vacuum, why does it let them exist to begin with? Why abhor things that exist, just let them exist, that’s what was intended wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Marko. Explore the physical. Was I put here for no reason? Is there meaningless in everything for you? Get busy with the fizzy, do something. Don’t just stand there, sit there, explore the physical, integrate the spiritual, and boost your

spirits, like a holy ghost at a New Year's party. Don't invest in anger, invest in sweat! Bleed perspiration for the cause; let all the rivers of the earth seep from your pores."

"What am I? A Chihuahua? Paws? I don't have any paws. I'm a biped, not a quadruped, how many two legged creatures do you know with paws?"

"Shut up Marko. Stop investing in anger. Start turning things outwards, raise a bodily stink. Activity."

"That's what the Nazi said. Activity. That's what we do here. Do you think I'm dancing to his tune?"

Eleanor's face appeared through the mist, a flushed red angel with a delicious smile that made Marko passionate for the human species, albeit temporarily, as the sand dunes rose up behind her and the Hot stepper's knife flashed in the sky, dripping with blood.

I love you. I hate you, all of you, thank you Eleanor, murderess with a heart. Big sweaty heart.

God I love it.

No I can't, ever love, it's hard isn't it, being so conflicted?

Thank you Eleanor, you might have saved my life, my death, this life and death, can't trust what they say can you?

I wish I could get a better vacuum, suck up all the detritus that lays its fine layer of misery across the land, but what's love without hate? Misery without joy? Is this real? No, it's a dream, but it's real isn't it, a fusion? Like a good jazz-funk number, a funky medley.

Seabiscuit where are you?

"Investment in anger Marko. There's too much money in that account."

"I want to believe in you, believe in something anyway. It's all words though, and it's only a dream, a stupid dream."

Eleanor smiled and drifted away into the morning mist. Marko could feel his feet rising from the ground, moving beyond his control, lifting him up. He felt his stomach surge with fear and his heart rattled in its cage as he soared gently towards the sun. He smiled for a brief second. His flight seemed stunningly real and alive, but he knew it was just a dream. He chased Eleanor towards the sand dunes, past the Hot stepper knife. The fear subsided for a glorious moment as she disappeared into the clouds. For the briefest moment, he trusted the world.

Then he woke up again. The sweat was stinky in his bed. The bedroom was cold. He breathed heavily and thought about the dream. There was something prophetic about it, something too real.

He thought about Eleanor and smiled. He thought about the cold hearted nurse and frowned. He thought about the nasty copper and the quaint taste of the toilet water. He thought about the future, Hotstepper, Seabiscuit, all his shattered dreams, prejudiced ramblings and passionate hatred at the injustice of life.

He sighed heavily and forced himself out of bed. He hit the hard wooden floor and assumed the press-up position.

One....two...three....four...five...six....seven.

Pain. Hurt. Agony. Love. Hate.

He walked to the standing wardrobe and rummaged in the pile of messy clothes scattered around the bottom rail. His trainers were hard from neglect. He slowly bent them into shape, put his tracksuit bottoms on and threw on a couple of T-shirts. He wiggled his feet into the trainers and headed down the attic stairs, past his mother's bedroom. He could hear her heavy breathing as he descended into the kitchen and made his way out into the cold morning.

Why am I doing this? What's the point? Must be some point. Motion. Eleanor. This is your fault. Not my fault is it?

It's cold! Let's go Seabiscuit, this is the one. Ah, it's a waste of time. Time wastes everyone's time. Tick Tock.

Just do it. Shut it. Fight and breath. Must be some good in it, somewhere. Back to bed, but bed's a killer. Could do without beds.

Broomsticks. You witch bitch, you'd like me in bed forever, sweating out the misery, wouldn't you? Marcus. Fozzard. Seabiscuit.

I'm going to be killed.

Marko jogged slowly along the empty pavements. They were cracked and icy. His breath steamed out into the sky like the cokey vapours of a locomotive rushing to an isolated frontier, devoid of human life, with its cargo of weary travellers. He was tremendously out of shape, although he had never been in shape, so his body cried murder for the revolutionary impetus of hard physical action, which it had never known or cared for.

The signals from his idle flesh told Marko that doing nothing was the correct state of man. Motion, activity, bodily stress – it was all so pointless to a species that no longer lived and died on its ability to chase down and murder its own lunch.

He continued slowly and turned onto a long stretch of road that arced upwards for more than a mile, so that you could not see the end junction that fed onto the main road. Marko knew where

the road led. In his visual mind map, he was aware how far it was to physically run to that junction. Inexperienced runners will always find a way to stop, and this is a classic technique for achieving it – take yourself firmly out of the present and shoot forwards along the route map in your head, sapping your mental strength by making yourself fully aware how far away the finishing line is. This demoralising knowledge caused Marko to slow right down, as he battled fiercely with the demons of inertia. They screamed at him to pack it in and give up the fight. His face creased up with the mental strain.

Hate this. Not stopping. Why not? I can't. Seabiscuit. Where are you?

Got to go...keep going...Always keep going. A.K.G mother fucker.

Stop dead. This is death. This won't make the sky go away, won't make the heavens evaporate, won't make the sun melt into yellow butter liquid, will it?

It won't solve the spinning of the planets; it won't fill the black holes with my sweat.

It won't douse the comet's tail, freeze the ocean streams or soothe the molten core of fire.

It won't sap the winter sun, halt the bodily decay, it won't stop the new day. Ah fuck. Keep going. Water. Bastard copper.

Keep me going...drown my humanity in pig sweat, let the doggies have their days, stinking mutts of the over world, ruling the land with blistered paws.

Lazy cunts.

Get busy with the fizzy. It hurts. Got to stop. Got to go.

Seabiscuit give me strength to win a handicap, give me power to walk with shattered limbs.

Cut the crap. No pity for me or you, not ever, but, ah fuck it.

The sweat trickled onto Marko's reddened cheeks. He puffed past the halfway point of the long, long road, but the incline was too much for a novice. He collapsed into the gutter groove and panted for breath. The mental war was under way, but the battle was lost.

What's going on? Why? Get off the streets. Murderers coming. Oh shit, I'm too far gone. It's good, it's ugly, and the world stinks of sweet pot pourri and factory fumes, a special blend of spice and lice. It's an Egyptian Goddess sulking on a lonely beach. It's a two-fanged beauty queen with no brain cells and piles of expired Gold Cards.

The world's an Oyster-less pearl. It stinks, it's good, no, can never be good, got to be bad too. I don't know. Fuck, now get off the streets. I'm going to be killed.

West Royd hospital looked sick in the grey morning. A few hunched ghost people trotted slowly through the sparse grounds, huddling together for bodily warmth, sucking hard on their cigarettes, their eyes weary and pleading, as though their spirits had been drained down to nothing by the relentless spin of the planets, the psychotic collisions of the universe. They were trapped in the shadow of the moon, tired, silent, and defeated.

Marko averted his eyes from them as quickly as he had met their gaze, in the same way that he avoided the cruel gaze of Hot stepper. He hated eye contact because he felt that his soul was too naked, his thoughts too obvious, his emotional state far too easy to read.

The paranoid is an exposed animal, who would like to have a thousand secrets. In reality his terrible self-consciousness and his rigid belief that every last soul knows everything about the finer points of his life – this makes his world a public freak show, with no corner to hide in for very long. Under these circumstances, eye contact is unbearable, for it only confirms to him what he has long suspected...that every living being harbours an infinite hostility towards him. With such a mindset, engagement with the eyes of others is an unpleasant happening, best avoided.

What we doing Seabiscuit? Danger. Murder.

Can't stop, don't stop, I can't go home. Can't go anywhere, somewhere, must be somewhere better than this.

Marko trudged up the grass bank, towards the hedgerow where Amy had pummelled his head with the text message. He could see his old bedroom from the top of the slope. The curtains were closed.

Which poor bastard's in there now? Waiting for his morning call from the Nazi fuck.

It's my room. Not yours Seabiscuit. I miss the pain and suffering.

Marko stared down at that small annex of West Royd. He wore a deeply conflicted expression – part of him longed for the awful routine of that ward, with its sickly rhythms and the unending apathy of its staff, save for Eleanor, who was like an island of humanity in a foul-scented estuary of human effluence.

Part of him hated the ward and was glad to be beyond its walls at last, although he had less than an idea how to build a life in the normal, real world, which was as frightening as being left to the mercy of the would-be assassins in the corridors of West Royd. It seemed that

engagement with reality was only as attractive as the bad aspects of that ward. The grass is never greener, on both sides of the fence it just fades to a sicker shade of yellow.

Where's the horse? Should go home. Why? What for? Stay, go, should I stay or should I go?

They're going to kill us wherever we go. Get off the streets.

Reet Petite! The finest girl you ever want to meet.

Nah Nah Nah Nah Nah.

Marko clasped his head in his hands. Hot stepper's wicked, dangerous head flashed through his mind, from nowhere, like a Kenyan runner blasting past his rival in the home straight.

He shivered with fear. Hot stepper lingered in his mind, with those sub-zero eyes, that nasty little grin and the swish-swish of his techno rave hat.

Marko walked briskly down the hill, towards the main entrance. He thought about the dream again, floating towards Eleanor through the lumpy mist, the Hot stepper's cruel blade dripping blood in the sky, trickling down the edges of the cloud formation, giving it a perfect red border.

Marko started to jog again, barely faster than walking pace. He stopped dead as a throng of patients and staff bustled through the automatic doors and greeted the cold morning air with a collective grimace.

"Great idea, walking in this weather."

Marko froze to the spot. He knew that Fascist voice. It was the witch bitch nurse, wrapped up to the nines in a fancy outdoor jacket, gloves and a thick red scarf. She stopped the group in its tracks. She glared at Marko for a brief second and beckoned the patients on towards the front gate.

Witch bitch. Fly away. Crash your mattress into the Town Hall.

Hubble bubble and squeak you green faced wart bag.

Fall in a cauldron and boil yourself to death, melt your face off.

Go piss up a rope.

Seabiscuit. You ugly bastard. Wait. Leave him, loathe him, love him. Ah you fucker. It's shitty, pity.

Where you going? To the three day eventing? Bit of dressage? A canter through the woods and a day of show-ponying? You show pony.

Where you going?

Byron's thick neck moved slowly at the back of the group. Marko was curious. Byron had never been on the walking group before. He had always professed to hate it.

Marko lagged behind them, cautiously. The witch bitch repeatedly looked around to check on her patients, with a long menthol Superking hanging out of her mouth. She tutted and shrieked intolerably, forcing her will onto the shattered bunch of rambles. Their fear was obvious as they shuffled in her wake, not daring to step past her, or even level with her.

"Right, everyone stay on the bloody pavement, whatever you do. No one goes in the road unless I say so, you got it? Where we going again?"

"The reservoir," the student nurse replied.

"Which way is it?" The witch bitch shrieked. "Oh it's all right, I remember. Come on then you lot, no messing about, let's go. Safraz, I'm watching you. Keep an eye on him, he jumped on a bus last time, took us three days to find him."

The student nurse nodded compliantly.

Marko wanted to see Byron's knackered head again, just one last time, though he hardly knew why, when he had directed so much hatred towards its intolerant mutterings. Perhaps it was his own loneliness, his desire for familiarity, no matter how coarse and unpleasant it was. When man is adrift in the brutal currents of life's Atlantic Drift, the ugliest piece of rotted timber will suffice for company.

Perhaps it was his pitying side. Perhaps it was his curiosity. Perhaps it was his difficulty in abandoning it all for the unpredictability of life in the outside world. Perhaps it was everything rolled into one. Perhaps he was just an addled lunatic, or perhaps he was as normal as normal can be... perhaps, perhaps, the whole world is a great blue ball of insanity, washed around under a starry sun, hot baked by God's ambivalent shafts of temper.

"Byron. Where you going? It's me. Byron. That's my shirt. My shirt."

Marko tapped him on the shoulder. Once. Twice. Byron shuffled forwards, slowly, lumbering, like a giant ape thing. Marko jogged ahead and turned back to face his 'best friend'. It was Byron all right. No man could ever remotely look like him. He was surely one of the few beings on this earth without a doppelganger. One Byron was a Byron too much for the world. Two Byron's stomping around was unthinkable. It would bust the space-time continuum in half, hurl everyone down a black hole, part the oceans through the middle and suck the remaining life into a bottomless trench.

One Byron was enough.

"You got any cigs? You got any cigs? You got any cigs? What's for dinner? What's for dinner? I need me methadone. Cigs. Got any custard?"

Marko briefly looked into Byron's dark angry eye slots and sensed a flicker of pain. There was a desperate, sad glint about his eyes, like some speared beast left to die in a snake-ridden valley, grimly aware of its final moments, but static, suffering and alone.

Safraz turned around and laughed dementedly. "They injected him up the shitter. Ha ha. He's been talking shit for days."

Marko glared at Safraz. He pitied the kid, but his outburst was spiteful, although he appeared to be only vaguely aware of what he had said, like a tranced out school kid, high on additives, on a hyper stream-of-consciousness. But it was unusual. Marko had never seen Safraz smile. It seemed perverse, unnatural, as if Byron's giddy essence had somehow transplanted itself into the kid's body, and Byron had been left in a semi-void of mumbling, stuttering impotence.

Byron idled past in the crowd, repeating the words again and again. Marko sensed that there was some recognition, but it was temporary and swiftly buried as the witch bitch nurse marshalled her addled flock down the street, towards the cold reservoir trail.

Marko watched Byron's thick neck disappear into the bunch of shuffling bodies. He felt a rising sadness, pity and a surge of hatred.

He's better off dead. He's a monster, he's not, it's just how he is, like where he's from, bloody animal. I wish I could put him to sleep for all the pain.

But he loved me didn't he? Really, he did, in his sick way, did he fuck!

I love him? No, can't hate, just can't hate forever. Everyone can profess hate, yeah, I hate this and I hate that, but they don't know real hate, I don't know real hate. But I hate this Hell. Seabiscuit, you took one up the shitter. Like your mate who walled that nurse up.

Hell. They had you, it might be temporary.

I'm temporary. Murderers. Murderers. They're coming. Better go, back.

Sorry Byron, you're not built to last. I'm weak mortar too, just a shanty town.

You're a slum, bum, what's the eternal sum of all our fears times the weight of the earth?

Who can really say what comes after birth. Shit.

I'm sorry Seabiscuit that you're out to pasture.

I'll see you at the next Horse fair. You ugly son of a bitch. Keep the fucking shirt, for all the good it'll do you.

Amy made a look that Marko had forgotten in his mental holocaust at West Royd. It was that pre-sexual eye parade - a sensual eyeball shimmering that had once raised a smile on his face, wider than the Amazon in its mightiest swell.

He looked at his girlfriend with paranoid eyes that were black and worn, like cooker rings burnt and neglected by a cook-happy tribe. He was tired from the exercise and could not help but wonder about the plight of Byron, his twisted horse 'friend' whose future seemed locked into those hospital walls so full of hatred and dysfunction.

The Nazi eye of authority flashed through his living memory again, as he looked deep into Amy's eyes and sensed a scheming mentality behind her immediate need for sexual intercourse. They were lusty, greedy eyes, wanting, demanding, up to no good. What had once made him smile, now made him sick inside, and he was sure that he was right about his intuition. She was not to be trusted, justifiably so. He wavered on this judgement as quickly as it had occurred to him as the memories of their previous good sex confused his mind – vivid pictures of wild sweat-happy festivals that had lingered into the morning sun. His facial expression betrayed his conflict and like a true paranoid he wanted desperately to trust a world that he distrusted to the core.

It is this paradox which fuels the molten core of the illness, like nothing else ever could. Though he is certain of the wickedness that propels the whole universe forwards, he clings fiercely to anything which might suggest otherwise. Without this, he would not survive. But he doubts its plausibility, although he consciously seeks it out to nullify his pain. He is aware of the paradox and this causes him more mental anguish, as he wonders why the Hell he clings to something which he is sure will never exist again. This is the epicentre of his mental illness – he is at war with himself, in the over-complicated corridors of his own mind. And secretly, he loves the battle, which explains his reluctance to give it up.

He is a brain fiend; a grey matter warrior who utilises every square inch of his brain highways, tapping into secret spongy rooms that others may never come to open inside their own grey thinking zone. But like Pandora's boxes, once opened, these rooms spew out dangerous toxins that overload his thinking instrument with a billion too many impulses. The paranoid cannot have it both ways – he knows how to use his brain for craftier, loftier experience, but his brain also knows exactly how to use him.

"Have you got any, you know?" Amy smiled.

"What?" Marko said, lost in his mad thinking.

He was only half turned-on. Amy stroked his hand, gently. "We need some don't we? You haven't got any have you? Why don't you nip to the pub? Sorry to rush you, if you're not ready just say, it's okay. Marko? Marko? Talk to me Marko, don't go all quiet. I'm glad you're home love."

Marko thought about the pub, who might be lurking, waiting, blade in hand, kung fu weaponry at the ready. Perhaps his head would be stoved in by a glass ashtray. They might drag him into the tap room, pin him to the dartboard and use his head for a bullseye.

The pub was not safe. Nowhere was safe. He looked up at the Velux window. It was half-open and the traffic noise poured into the room.

If someone goes on the roof that noise will drown them out. I won't hear them.

"I better shut that window."

"Marko, are you okay? I'll go if you want."

"Go where?"

"The pub."

"I don't want to drink. I'm not thirsty."

"We need. Ah it doesn't matter. Get into bed."

Marko had forgotten what she was talking about. He suddenly remembered, but the realisation did nothing to arouse him. His libido was weaker than the legs of cattle born in famine country.

"No, I'm going to the pub. I know what you want, what I want. I think. It's not safe though."

Amy sat up in bed. "We can both go. It's only two minutes. Do you want to, you know? Are you all right, I thought it might make you feel better, feel good, forget everything.

"Amy, I can't talk about anything with you, all that shit up there, with Byron and Fozzard, it's all fucked, my head I mean. It's a mess. It's dangerous for me, anywhere is dangerous."

"Don't be daft. What are you on about? It's just your illness talking, that's all, you do know you're ill don't you? Has anyone even said that to you?"

Marko shrugged. He took her words to be a part of the scam, just another building block in the elaborate tower he had constructed to burden himself with all the agonies of the earth. That was nothing new. They were only words. Mouths were more dangerous as part of the bigger human whole – connected to faces, on heads, attached to necks with other limbs that were capable of inflicting violence and death. He knew before that he could never trust Amy. He did not need any more confirmation at this point. Her words were redundant, like a jobless man pedalling up a frosty slope on a knackered old bike. She had once been his summer of love, now she was just his winter of discontent. Red horizons had collapsed into black dawn.

He did not want her any more.

"Let's go to the pub then," Amy said, smiling.

Marko thought about what she had said. That he was ill. She was right. Nobody had said that to him before. But it all seemed so real. She was wrong. He was not ill.

Marko struggled to close the Velux window. He heaved it shut and jumped back onto the wooden attic floor. He felt a small measure of relief. Hot stepper would never be able to get in that way. He eyed the comfort of the bed. The pub seemed like an unreasonable excursion, but he did not feel strong enough to tell her about his feelings. In his mind it was all over. He did not want sex. He wanted liberation from the world, from people he knew would always point the finger at him and waggle their tongues.

As ever, he felt the pull of others, leading him into the danger zones for the sake of their own needs, and he did not have the strength to resist, even though it opened him up to a barrage of potential horrors.

As he descended the attic stairs he smiled vaguely to himself, fully aware of the horror that lurked around every corner of his existence, although a part of him was excited by the danger, even if he was scared senseless by humanity and all its wicked, magical travails.

It's hard to face the world when the world wants your face for supper, but he was determined now - determined to keep them waiting until they had gorged themselves and fallen asleep by their contented fires. It was a strange new feeling - Devil-may-care, but tempered by fear. It represented progress, fucked up as it seemed...progress from a state of pure terror.

He had recently felt as paralysed as a spider's meal, conscious and ensnared in the middle of society's cruel and sticky web.

Since his ride in the police van and what seemed like death and dehydration, neglect and suffering, he had come to the devastating conclusion that reality might not be as clued-up as he once thought. Their failings, their false application of 'care', it was a sham. It occurred to him that perhaps nobody really cared. And if nobody really cared, why would they care enough to involve the whole world in a murderous conspiracy directed only at him?

But 'They' still existed, in spite of Marko's brave new thoughts. Paranoia never truly dies, it just goes to sleep in a private room of the mind, like the twisted ugly sister of The Sleeping Beauty, locked into a century of sleep, while the reconstructed mind fights for the years lost, for life deprived, for some semblance of normality and ordinary happiness in a light speed world where skulls are crushed to daily dust by the satellite rays of over complication.

The ill boy is not the only one who suffers in this world; it's just a fact that he makes more fuss over his suffering, as if its wrongness is a global travesty that must be righted.

When the Gods set a man on fire, that man may steal fire back from the Gods.

It burns inside him brightly and dangerously, overloading him with passions.

If he can live again, correctly and true, it will be his blessing.

If he fails to control the fires, they will incinerate his dreams and leave his future scattered like volcanic debris over a dusty black landscape – a landscape lonelier than the darkest, waterless fields of the moon.

As he made hard, dispassionate love to Amy in the toilets of The Blue Fountain Inn, Marko thought about Byron and was sad, but he was glad that the knackered old race horse had been put to sleep for good. The future did not seem appealing in the slightest, but it did not seem as hellish as it did up on the corridors of West Royd. There was terror still, but the flickers of anger seemed to cancel it out, like cold hard jets of water blasted onto a forest fire.

Marko felt intoxicated by the wind, as it swirled into his mouth high on the hills above his home, where the city was a stack of distant chimneys trapped between the fields and the moon.

He blasted across the muddy public footpath, dense with furrowed wedges of wet soil.

It had been five months since his liberation from the walls of West Royd and although every new day was a tense jangle of nerves, he somehow found the strength to rise up early and pound his way into a wholesome sweat.

Eleanor's words still echoed in his head, and he had become used to daily movement and activity in an effort to hush those red hot demons in the engine room of his soul.

As he slowed to navigate his way through puddles, the wind blew up in a fluster and scattered the remains of a local newspaper. He was forced to stop completely and pull himself along the dry stone wall. As he stepped across onto dry land, the wind whipped up a front page sheet of news that landed smack on the top of the wall. Marko glanced at it for the briefest second and his heart burst into a scattered rhythm, like a flock of sheep disrupted by some fierce unknown entity, all maddened and rushing for the nearest spot of nowhere.

Hot stepper's face glared from that front page. It was a curse of a moment, an omen most foul. He unfolded the sheet and surveyed that local rag.

The second photograph was familiar too. He stared at the face for a few seconds before he clocked it. The Scottish kid. It was him. For sure.

He knew that desperate face with those rabbit eyes. He was *Watership Down* in human form....a bad gathering of Nature's cold hard randomness.

MAN ADMITS KNIFE MURDER

When the 29 year old defendant from Aberdeen was asked why he had plunged the knife into Matthew Oram, 37, he proclaimed the following....'Because the bastard tried to rape my friends, falsely accused me of rape and tried to kill me, does that answer your question?'

Judge Morrison stated that he had no alternative but to impose a life sentence.

The defendant laughed again and shouted at the public gallery....

"I'd rather be in jail with the truth, than free to live under false suspicion. Life's not fair, but it can be made fairer. They mentally tortured me and tried to kill me and you think I give a shit about proving it to you?"

Life's not fair but it can be made fairer?

What the fuck?

This is fucking madness. Seabiscuit, I know. He killed the Hot stepper. Murderer.

I don't get it. This is a dream. How? Why?

The newspaper took flight again, lashed into the air by a fresh wind blast.

Marko watched those grim tidings float away over a barren field.

He held onto the wall and shook his head with disbelief. Had he really just read what he had read?

No, come on. It's a joke. A sick, sick joke, all twisted and shattered, like Seabiscuit's dirty teeth.

It can't be. Hot stepper? Ha!

Marko boosted on the gas and ploughed through the cold, wet terrain. The path stretched far into the distance.

A solitary figure idled along up ahead. It was too far away for him to determine whether it was a man or a woman.

He could see the big dog close to its owner. As he neared them both, the figure stopped dead and held the canine by the collar. Marko's feet were wet from mud and puddle splash. He paused briefly to rub them on a clump of grass close to the wall.

The dog owner was motionless still, with the mutt held in close.

Marko finally determined that it was a woman, of slight build, in a wax jacket and huge blue Wellingtons. The dog was a fierce attacking specimen he had seen on the TV. It might have

been a Rottweiler or something. It bared its teeth and snarled grimly, as though it might inflict casual death, given half a chance.

Marko spurted past uneasily, out of breath and fearful of the oversized hound of Hell.

The woman held it back with a sickly frown.

“Thank you!” she shouted, with a blatant lick of sarcasm.

Marko turned to clock her face. She tutted loudly and beckoned the dog onwards.

Marko was puzzled. The Hot stepper was dead. He was possibly a sex criminal of some ilk, even worse. He thought about the Scottish kid.

What the fuck drove him to such a desperate act? And what was that horrid ‘Thank you’ all about?

Thank you? Ah! Sarcastic bitch! She takes a dangerous dog for a walk on a public footpath without its lead, and expects me to say thank you for holding it back while I run past out of fucking breath. No. That’s fucked. Can’t be. She did. Hot stepper’s dead. He’s a nonce.

Thank you! Thanks for not letting your fucking guard dog tear me to pieces.

Thanks for not putting it on a lead, so you can stand there cursing the world like you’re doing it a monstrous favour every time you step out of the fucking door.

Thank you so much. I’m so grateful.

Marko was glad to see the country road ahead. The rocky, muddy terrain had played holy Hell with his feet.

He stumbled around the corner and pounded on towards the country lane.

Two horses peered over the wall as he sprinted for firmer ground. He cast a quick sideways glance at one of them and imagined Byron’s head in its place, sucking on a stolen Superking.

His mind was instantly unsettled by the image of that rancid gob.

As he approached the country lane he could hear the manic revving of a car engine.

He stopped at a safe distance from the road.

Two white *Subarus* raced past at a frightening Grand Prix pace. He felt a sting of annoyance as they bounced around the corner, like a video game simulation.

As the serotonin racers thundered into the distance, their vehicles spewed out a noxious cloud.

Marko turned and carried on running.

Byron’s horror horse head faded in his mind’s eye and those blackened teeth slowly dissolved to white.

Hot stepper was dead and Byron was just a ghost now.

The Scottish lad had drawn the shorter straw. Marko reasoned there was no consolation in the truth, if you were not free to savour it. He sighed heavily.

Life's not fair, but it can be made fairer.

Words to live by. Sorry mate. They must have fucked you and proper.

Nah nah nah nah nah!

What the fuck can I do about it?

Marko sprinted up the country lane, alive with sweat and sticky hope.

Although it was mixed with terrible doubt and all the fears that propel a young man through this universe - for a curious, glorious, intoxicating moment, he did not care about the past, the present or the future.