

# Whitethorn

## Graham Mort

The horse danced. It pirouetted in the road, a blur of hooves and hide, a vortex of mane, tail, foam-flecked teeth. A chestnut horse, not quite fully grown. A stallion or gelding, its white blaze flickering, its head jerking. A line of traffic slowed up opposite Pablo's car. Steam drifted from under its bonnet and dissipated lazily. The sun was brazing a seam along the ridge above the valley. His wrist was numb. He unclipped his seatbelt, pushed the door open with a knee and shoulder.

The chestnut horse was still metamorphosing, rising from the churned verge, coiled from rope or turned from clay. Its hooves skittered, struck sparks from the road. Pablo reached back in the car to switch off the engine, one hand on the roof. A stink of petrol, horse shit, ammonia. The spores of dandelions floated by and stuck to him, making a fine mist in the air. A man in a white shirt had got out of his Volvo, leaving the engine running.

Then that braying sound. The sound of iron ingots dragged across concrete. The horse span on its shattered leg, still trying to rise, splattering the road with blood and dung. Then it fell in slow motion, its breath mingling with steam from the radiator; its hay-sweet smell mixed with the tang of antifreeze that ran green in the road. The horse coughed, then snorted in astonishment, clearing an airway. Dark blood from a punctured vein gushed from its nostrils.

The blood from its leg was brightest, the femoral artery torn open. A loop of bluish intestine hung inside its flank. The road was littered with glossy turds. The horse staggered and sank and the road steamed. The brass fittings on its bridle glinted. Its head tilted against its neck and its eyes rolled backwards into white. The morning air was still crisp. Pablo watched and felt nothing. Everything seemed intense and slow. The hills were blazing now and there were deepening shadows. He was going to be late.

A woman with copper hair and white jodhpurs was running behind the hedge. She appeared and disappeared through the foliage. When she dragged the gate open and saw everything her face was pale and tight with shock. The man in the white shirt inspected

the backs of his hands. He took off his spectacles and cleaned them on the lap of his shirt. When he put them on again, they were smeared and dim. Then he was reaching for the mobile phone he wore in a pouch at his waist.

Pablo's ankle gave way. He leaned against the dented wing of his car. Now the horse was straining upwards, fighting the terrific force that tried to drag it from the light. And it knew. Somehow it knew about death and fought it there. Those who watched saw the horse crumple. They saw it drawn to the edge of the light to drink the dark, saw it dragging itself back from that terror on some attenuated thread. Its mouth was lost in foam and blood.

When the woman reached the horse it had sunk to its knees, sprawled on its butchered leg. She knelt in the road, cradling its head in her arms. Pablo was fumbling at his phone. But other people were already calling for help. His call wouldn't matter now, though he'd have to ring his father. Other things would have to happen first, he knew that.

The woman with copper hair was crying, pounding her thigh where the jodhpurs pulled tight. Ghostly spores floated, jerking in air currents. More people got out of their cars, mesmerized. A woman in a yellow tee shirt was being sick. No one came to help Pablo. They were too stunned, too inward. They had remembered a distant fact: how some things happen in a moment, then everything is changed. A clegg landed on Pablo's arm and stung him. He snatched it away, watching the horse being dragged down towards the centre of the earth.

A hot air balloon was being launched from meadows near the river. The balloon was cobalt blue, an orb of canvas inflated by a spear of flame. It gave out a hoarse exhalation as it rose, tilting slightly then drifting westwards. From the wicker basket suspended below the burner its passengers saw the slate roofs of the village, the hall set into parkland, cars glinting on roads that made their way through patched fields. Beyond the village, the moors were deep brown, furrowed where streams began, scarred by peat diggings that had slumped under rain and frost.

The balloon passed over the village: a river, a church and pub, houses and outlying farms. They saw the chestnut horse lying awkwardly on the verge, cars slewed in the road, tiny figures standing by, the blue lights of police cars and an ambulance. Then they were too high and too far to see much: just the grey cube of a power station squatting at the horizon, the chain of grey stone villages that followed the river to the sea.

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Pablo's day had started early, after the gig at JoJo's. That morning he'd been on the first flight from Schiphol to Manchester. His father called him on his mobile as he was boarding the plane. It was dawn and he was tired, light-headed from lack of sleep. His throat felt rough from the gig and a couple of late drinks with the band. The sun was beginning to crawl from the horizon, so the light was soft, peach coloured. His father's voice was thin, the signal breaking up. His father. That pang of familiarity, of guilt. Pablo's surprise that he'd mastered the new number. *I don't feel so good, son. Can you get over?* That's all he'd managed to say.

Pablo climbed the steps from the runway with his jacket slung over his arm. His knees felt stiff. Dawn light was tinged with red now, the air still cold, a faint scent of aviation fuel. A heron, its grey plumage fluffed out, was frozen at the edge of the runway.

It could have been there for centuries, its eye needling the surface of a dyke. When he paused to look again, the heron was gone. He thought he glimpsed it beyond the airport terminal, sailing with slow wing beats towards the sun as if it had flown out of pre-history, conjured from all the other herons he'd watched taking off from the beck, steering down the valley.

He must have dozed off, his head resting against the plastic window. When he woke his mouth tasted sour. He pushed himself upright to squint through the porthole. Almost home. The Trafford centre tilted as the plane banked over Manchester. Then a glimpse of green as hills turned under the plane's wing.

Pablo leaned back into the leather upholstery, rubbing at his stubbled cheeks. The woman next to him was reading a broadsheet. Huge and determined, she'd spread it out across her knees. She leaned against him, spilling over the armrest, pressing him back towards the window. Her pink suit made him feel faintly nauseous. He wondered whether she was Dutch or English. She didn't speak, staring at the newsprint, licking her fingers to turn a page.

He was tired from the gig, from another late night, from busking the set list. He'd been depping for Nat Copeland whose wife was ill. An old mate, Sol, had given Pablo a bell. *It's an easy one, Pab, it'd be good to see you.* He'd used Nat's Mesa Boogie, so gear wasn't an issue. It was an old Mark II with a sweet sustain. Everything was set up in the club, and the soundman was good, so that had been hassle free. But he was tired of travel and black coffee and other people. The undercarriage thudded. The woman started. Pablo needed a shower. He needed to get off the plane and on the move. The wheels touched down, juddered, slowed. Pablo was pressed back into his seat. He waited for the woman to gather up her things; then reached into the overhead locker for his holdall.

On the way to baggage reclaim, he had a quick wash in the Gents, splashing cold water on his face. A dark haired man with a three-day stubble stared at him from the mirror. He'd got grey strands in his hair now. The bags under his eyes were blue and his eyes were bloodshot. His skin looked sallow and papery. He was fucked and the day was just starting.

Pablo set his watch to UK time then walked to the baggage carousel. He waited for the flight case to appear, avoiding the woman in the pink suit. A couple of kids shot past him and were dragged back by their mother, scolding them in a foreign language. They looked Indonesian, dark-skinned and slim. Beautiful kids. The mother was plump and slow moving. She wore a gold nose stud and couldn't have been more than thirty.

There was some problem with luggage blocking the carousel. A woman in an orange robe was tugging at a huge suitcase watched by three sleepy little boys. Her husband was trying to drag a metal box onto a trolley. One of the girls turned to watch Pablo, her eyes large and dark. Pablo winked at her and she turned away. The next moment she was staring at him again, giggling, wide-eyed, nudging her sister. Families were strange. Sometimes their closeness, their familiarity, was embarrassing. A kind of vulnerability, like being poor. He was well out of it.

A low pulsing had begun in his temples. He'd need to take something. You had to play a few gigs to remember why you didn't play them any more. Still, it was good to keep your hand in, keep up contacts, live on your wits a little. You could lose your chops

really quickly and then your options ran out. Running a music shop or a studio was one thing; playing was another. He'd never really wanted to run a business, just drifted into it because of Alec, because the chance was there. The gig had paid well this time – and money from playing music was the best kind. He'd always felt that, from the first time he'd been handed a tenner for a night in Clitheroe.

The scuffed aluminium flight case appeared. Pablo dragged it from the carousel. He'd packed his Strat, a tuner, a lead, some sheet music. He lugged it through customs. Then he was out of the terminal, heading for the bus to the shuttle park where he'd left his car. The air was sharper here, sky clearing to a burnished blue. When the bus arrived, three girls in culottes and crop tops jumped off, texting, lugging their bags, leaving the vehicle empty except for a woman in a black hijab who dozed next to her husband, her head bumping against his shoulder. Pablo pulled his gear on board. They set off into scattered sunlight that bounced off concrete and glass buildings. He just had time to get to his flat and shower. Then he'd hit the road.

He'd sleep later. After a few pints in the local, watching his dad nurse a half all night. He'd sleep in his old bedroom, waking to pigeons calling from the woods behind the house. It wasn't their house, exactly; it was rented from the estate. But that didn't make it anyone else's, either. His father had been born in that village, his mother in the one that was flooded to make the reservoir. They'd met when she worked as a domestic at the hall. The bus paused at a barrier, then entered the shuttle park. Pablo had made a note of where he'd left the car and stowed it in his wallet. He rang the bell and the bus shuddered to a halt. The woman in the hijab woke up and her husband touched her cheek and said something that made her smile. The doors jerked and hissed open.

Pablo scanned the rows of cars for a silver Saab, long and low-slung. He dropped his guitar case and shoulder bag in the boot, fumbled the keys into the ignition, pulling the gear lever out of reverse. The engine started first time. His feet felt sweaty against the pedals. He let out the clutch and pulled away, pushing in his credit card to open the barrier, turning past the Shell garage towards the city, then gliding past rows of red brick terraced houses and high-rise windows that gleamed in the sun. He thought of a shower, of breakfast. He thought of the road home.

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Pablo changed down to leave the motorway just after Burnley. Huddled towns dotted with mills, hills pocked with old mine workings, blackened shale and sandstone walls, then hedges, fields of sheep and cattle. Even a herd of red deer where someone was raising venison. There were still empty farms and fields overgrown with thistles and buttercups, emptied by foot and mouth disease. He'd heard of a herd of water buffalo that had been put down. That was weird, water buffalo in North Lancashire where even the deer looked incongruous, grazing in a huddle behind barbed wire.

Pablo switched on the radio, but the aerial stammered on the rear wing until he gave up and turned it off. There were some lights out on the fascia, the rev counter had died, the window seals were turning green with moss. He nosed through another village where a boy in a Man City shirt was ramming newspapers into letterboxes. The road turned and dipped and rose towards the moor.

The lift had been of order again and he'd dragged his gear up five floors of stairs

with their stink of piss and cigarette smoke. There was a burnt out scooter on the patch of grass outside, washing hanging from the balconies, wheelie bins spilling their waste for gulls to fight over. He had a security door fitted to his apartment. Not that you could rely on that. Any flat left empty for long was likely to be taken over by squatters or dealers. Sometimes you had to shoulder through groups of lads on the landing, trying not to meet their eyes. The flat smelled musty. He locked the guitar in a steel cabinet he'd got from an office clearance, bagged up some rubbish, dropped it into the chute, binned the junk mail and checked his answer phone. Nothing urgent. Nothing from the accountant. He left a message for Alec at the shop. *Hey, it's Pablo. It's 7-30 and I'm back and just touching base. Good gig. Catch you later. By the way, you should be there by now, you lazy bastard.* He half meant it. Then he'd managed a shower but hadn't had much to change into. He stuffed a couple of shirts, a pair of trainers and some jeans into a bag. Then he cut the mouldy bits from a loaf to make toast and fried some eggs that broke their yolks as they hit the hot oil. He couldn't remember if his father still owned an iron.

The drive to the village took an hour and a half, less if the traffic was sparse. He was on the road again in twenty minutes. He'd sleep later. In the house where he and Tim had grown up. Except that Tim hadn't. Pablo shook the sleep out of his head and re-focused. He let his eyes settle on the white lines as they zipped past the car. At this hour the roads were almost empty. The odd heavy goods vehicle, milk tankers heading for farms, a few motorcyclists screaming towards the Lakes. They passed insanely close, overtaking just before bends, engines howling, knees almost touching the road.

A spider had tied a thread of silk between the wing mirror and the body of the car. It trembled, gleaming as he drove. The Saab had a long bonnet and a wide windscreen. He'd bought it because of that, because he loved the bonnet mechanism, which slid forward as it opened. And the boot was flat loading. Great if he had to lug his amp to a gig, though not very often these days. He passed a posse of cyclists on racing machines, tightly clad in black and yellow Lycra, chatting as they pedalled, futuristic in their elongated helmets. They rode two abreast, trying to own the road.

Pablo changed gear and felt the worn clutch lurch. He was tired, still buzzing a little from a late night and vodka, the adrenaline of playing live. The sax player had been good, but he knew it. A flash bastard, hogging the solos. Pablo exchanged a wry glance or two with Sol over his Zildjians. Young, something to prove. A real wanker, but at least he could play. Pablo had nothing to prove. He'd made his living from music one way and another since he'd jumped college, and that was more than you could say for most of the guys he'd started out with. Those that were still around.

Playing took you somewhere else. It blanked things out. And that had worked at first. Then it hadn't been enough. He'd had a few years of hard drinking. Mad benders where he'd woken up with bloody knuckles and no idea why. Except his best friends stopped talking to him. One day he'd woken in the doorway of a Turkish takeaway in Tottenham. He'd puked over himself and broken a tooth. That had finally been enough. He'd cut the booze. Not altogether, but he didn't get pissed any more. Just nicely mellow. Like the tone he tried for when he played: warm, but with an edge. A little fire and danger. Pablo ran his tongue over the crowned tooth. Alec had been there for him with an idea when he needed it.

The road climbed steadily onto a rim of moorland. At the watershed it dropped down into another valley, dark green, funnelling out below him. It was the way home. It was the road he'd taken out of here twenty years ago. Now it ran back there, a smear of tar and gravel. Sun was just tipping the horizon, showing dust and dead insects on the windscreen. He pressed the washer arm. Worn wiper blades juddered on the scarred glass. The washer nozzles coughed up a few speck of foam. He'd have to get that sorted with the money from the gig. He'd signed for a wad of cash, even used his own name and address. He was getting too old take on the taxman.

The trees were in spring foliage. The valley was bleak for most of the year, dun coloured or khaki. Then it was the most beautiful place on earth for ten days in May. Though sometimes it was June before the blossom appeared. Pablo's head felt as light as a paper ball. A wasp nest. The Paracetamol hadn't helped. He was driving impatiently, almost losing it on a corner where loose gravel spilled into the road. He hit the brake and shifted down a gear. The bottle of mineral water shot off the passenger seat into the foot well. *Shit!* He stooped forward, catching his chin on the wheel, still unshaven. It was impossible to reach the fucking thing. He was drifting into the centre of the road, again. A motorcyclist flashed him a vee sign in alarm.

Pablo angled his face into the rear view mirror. There hadn't been time or inclination for a shave. He needed a haircut. His clothes still had that smell of stale beer and sweat. He'd have a soak at his dad's tub and change later. Then he'd take the old man to the pub for a pint. Then they could fall asleep together in armchairs as the television blared. They'd never talked much. Never needed to. And it wasn't much to ask once in a while.

The sun was behind him, the car chasing its own shadow, light taking on a harder edge. It'd been a dry spring. Blackthorn blossom had come early. Now hawthorn flowers were gushing from the trees. Whitethorn came after blackthorn and bore bright red berries instead of bitter sloes. He hadn't seen such heavy blossom since he was a kid. Days from his childhood had been like that – all sunlight and shadow. *Chiaroscuro*. The blossom made bridal tunnels of the hedgerows, skeins of cream coloured lace. White flowers picked out the thorn trees where they crouched on the fells. Even the lightning-struck stumps lying broken in fields had produced a show. All that bad luck: his mother had never allowed it into the house.

It was still only eight-thirty. His dad would have already been up for a couple of hours. Forty-odd years as a gamekeeper had seen to that. He'd have the table set for his breakfast. Blue striped mugs and plates. A pot of tea that he'd keep going for an hour or so as he did his jobs. A lifetime working on the estate had left him rheumatic and slow on his feet. But he was pretty good for eighty-four.

Pablo changed gear and swung the car into a long bend. The village would be just the same: the pub, the post office and church, the old schoolhouse with its modern extension, the humped bridge at the river where they'd tried to tickle trout. The doors and windows of houses that belonged to the estate painted regulation white. A few pebble-dashed semis had grown on the outskirts. There was a new car park for tourists: the Lapwing Café where bikers gathered on Sundays. Pablo changed up for a straight run. A hen pheasant darted for cover. Faint mist rose from the tarmac. What little rain there had been that spring had come by night. Even in Manchester the soil had a baked, friable feeling. It smelled of the

long summer just beginning.

Pablo made the window glide down. The blossom had a faint, almost erotic scent. He was a kid again, riding down a valley striped with light. The past was a dream he couldn't stop dreaming, waking with that suffocated feeling he'd had since he was ten.

Pablo pulled the car into a lay-by and scrabbled for the bottle of water. He felt desiccated. He needed coffee. He needed to wake up next to a woman. There'd be no one since Ellie. They'd lived together for nearly two years and then...it was hard to remember what had happened. And why was way too complicated. She'd moved out when he was in Majorca, playing in a nightclub in Palma. He'd wanted her to come out for a few weeks, but it was too late by then. She'd run into somebody else. Someone who'd stick around.

Pablo tossed the empty bottle to the back seat. A thin headache was mithering his right temple. He climbed out of the car and stood with the sun on his face, breaking a sprig of blossom from a thorn tree overhanging the wall. He'd taken his mother a bouquet one time. Wanting to please her. Tiny cream flowers with roseate centres. She'd almost panicked. *Not in the house, Philip. Never in the house!* But she'd loved those bunches of marsh marigolds he brought early in the year, the catkins from willow trees. They were dusted with pollen, the way her cheeks had grown soft with down as she grew older.

That was thirty years ago now. Maybe that was what the music drew upon when it was good. Memories. What was unresolved. You had to reach down to bring that back. Only it came out as a stream of notes. A musical phrase you hadn't found before. Slow vibrato. The nuance of a bent string searching for pitch. It came out as silence, the space between notes that the notes themselves were reaching for. The silence everything reaches for in the end.

Pablo yawned, glancing up at a kestrel hovering above the verge. It tilted its wings so they glowed rusty in the early light and then dipped away across fields. It became a speck and then invisible. He switched on the engine and pulled onto the road, taking the car into the long descent that ran to the village. His father would be shaving, brewing tea, cursing the tie he was trying to fit around his neck, swaying on his buggered legs. Leaning forwards, Pablo swept a dead bluebottle from the fascia. The rev counter flickered feebly at the start of its ascent. The exhaust pattered under him, almost blown, a thin integument of rusted steel. He hated cars. All cars, even this one. He'd need to get it sorted.

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The front door hadn't been used in years. Pablo stared at it from the unlit hall that smelled of damp and distemper. Outside, the timber was cracked and purple clematis had grown across it. Inside, the cream paint had cracked into yellow scabs and lumps. The knock came again. He walked from the kitchen into the dark hallway.

'You'll have to go round the back.'

'OK.' A woman's voice.

His ankle was still sore and swollen. His own voice sounded thin, distant. It'd be one of the neighbours commiserating. He hardly knew them now. Or maybe his father took a paper. But the papergirl would know to leave it in the porch. And he doubted if his father had ever done any such thing. He went into the kitchen, moving cautiously. His shoulder and neck ached. Through the etched glass of the back door he saw a green shirt and a flash of copper.

He fumbled then wrenched the back door open where it stuck on the tiled floor. A woman with bright hair stood there. The hair was loose and frizzed out from her head in fine, unruly spirals. Her eyes were light blue, her nose straight with slightly flared nostrils. It was strong face and she was frowning.

Pablo saw the horse running across the field. The way light flickered in the valley. The way it flashed through trees or through the spokes of a bicycle wheel as he followed the road, followed Tim's striped tee shirt.

The woman wore Levi's and a green sweatshirt. She came two inches above his height. Not unusual. He was small, wiry and dark. It was why they'd nicknamed him Pablo. There was a dimple in her chin and freckles down her nose. When she moved her head the sun haloed her hair, a floss of light.

'Hello, I was...' Her eyes dropped.

Pablo held himself awkwardly. 'My father's not here.' He shrugged as if it could explain something. She frowned slightly, trying to remember. Pablo started again. 'He died a few days ago. I'm Phil Beddowes, his son.'

She looked at him as if he wasn't understanding something. 'Phil, that's right. I know. It's you I want. I'm sorry about your dad. I heard a couple of days ago. It must have been a shock. After everything else.' He swung the door open with his good hand and it squealed against the tiles.

'That's OK. It was a shock all right. Come in. But it's a mess, I'll warn you.' He hadn't been able to do much. There were piles of newspaper all around the room. Opened tins of meat for the cat. A dried-up saucer of milk that had evaporated in rings, like dust circling a planet. Dishes in the sink. The smell of old age.

She stepped into the room, her hair brushing against him, a bush of fire, a sudden ionisation of the air. 'I could give you a hand if you like...' She gestured at his hand in the splint.

'No, no it's OK.'

It wasn't OK. He'd got home from the hospital after the accident—after A & E, the unanswered calls and messages, after the ambulance had dropped him at the front gate—to find his father asleep in the chair. He was still cradling the telephone in his lap, wearing an old pullover with burn marks down the front where the sparks from his pipe had dropped when he fell asleep.

But he wasn't asleep. He'd called Pablo because of some premonition, remembering he was going to die. He didn't even look asleep. His head was thrown back and his mouth was open; his face was unshaven and grey, drained of blood; his dentures protruded. Pablo had to prise the phone from his hand to ring the doctor. His father's hands were claws, cold and stiff. The fingernails were badly cut and dark, as if he'd bruised them. He'd had a series of mini-strokes the year before and was on tablets for blood pressure, when he bothered or remembered to take them. He had angina and carried a GTN spray. On the bureau was a tablet dispenser with compartments for each day of the week, untouched since Wednesday. He'd soiled himself and the room was sour as a rookery. He'd spent his life on the moor, then died in an armchair. The cat had rubbed against Pablo's legs, mewing for food as he stood there, trying to decide what was best.

Pablo turned to the woman again. What was she saying? She smiled a little self-



consciously. Her teeth were even and sharp. There were freckles in the dimple on her chin.

'I'm Anthea Lee. I'm sorry, I should have said. Do you remember me? I just came...'  
She couldn't finish a sentence. He interrupted her, pointing to one of the kitchen chairs.

'I'm sorry, have a seat...' Anthea *Lee*? She was tucking herself in behind the pine table, crossing her legs and her feet in their neat white pumps. He sat down opposite her. He saw the red horse leaping the gate, the halter tangling in the top rail. 'I've got you now. I'm sorry about the...' Another unfinished sentence. The horse's head jerking back in the woman's arms. The neat round hole in its forehead where it lay under the blanket on a green verge. Bad luck blossoming on every tree. She must have started a sentence, but he only caught the end of it. 'I'm sorry?'

'... the horse. It was called Star. Not very original. The kids called him that. He was just two.' *He*. Like a person. The neat hole had been in a white whorl of hair. A white star sucking everything into itself.

'I'm sorry.' There must be something else to say. He thought of what she'd said. There were children. Dust glinted in the sunlight coming through the window. She was leaning forward. He eased the wrist support that fastened with Velcro.

'Why?'

She looked away. Her face was blank. 'Why did I come to see you?'

'Well, yes. No. Why did it...?'

'What?'

'Jump. The horse. Star.' That wasn't a question now, more a translation of what he'd been trying to say into something said. 'What made it do that?'

'I don't know. It's never happened before. It was young. Maybe an insect stung it. I honestly don't know.' That cleg on his arm, its armour of silk gleaming as it pushed its proboscis under his skin to take a bellyful of blood. She was still speaking. 'You were lucky, you could have been killed. And then your father. I didn't know him really, but I saw him out and about on his pushbike. He seemed a nice old chap. He was the keeper wasn't he?'

'Yes, his dad, too.' And yes, quiet. Worked for the estate all his life. Gamekeeper, mechanic, then odd jobs when he retired from looking after the birds. Why was he telling her this? She'd know it better than him. He stared down at the kitchen table.

'Will there have to be an inquest?'

'Don't think so. He had a few ailments. The doctor put it down as a stroke.' No inquest. Not like Tim. The inquiry opened then adjourned. All those questions from the police. Then misadventure. Misadventure, as if...

'I'm sorry. And your mother, too...I knew her a bit. Just from going in the shop, the post office, you know, just bumping into her.'

What did she know about his mother? That had been years ago. She'd been doing OK. She'd got a job in a shop selling knitting wool and had seemed settled there, getting up early every day to catch the bus. He'd been touring in Denmark with a little jazz-blues outfit, backing a Jamaican vocalist. *Dorothy Gainsborough*. Great voice with a huge range that rumbled at the bottom end and fell like tinkling glass at the top. He'd had to come back early for the funeral. That arsehole Ray Bostick had taken over and he'd made sure Pablo never got back in. 'Nothing to be sorry about. My mother was a long time ago.'

'Yes, it was, I know. But we felt so sorry, after everything.' There was some kind of

doubt in her eyes now. She pushed up the sleeves of her sweatshirt. 'I just wanted to say that if there's anything I can do, then I'm just in the village. And I wanted to tell you that it wasn't your fault, it was a chance in a million. Bad luck. It was very unlucky. And I'm so sorry you got hurt...and your car.' She let out a puff of air.

'It needed a service.'

She smiled awkwardly, fiddling with her wristwatch. 'There was a bit of madness in him, Star. It happens sometimes. A bit of wild horse that can't be broken or bred out. We'd have had to get rid sooner or later. But it was sad for the kids.'

He looked up, quizzing her

'Two girls. Seven and nine. Amy and Sarah. They're at my mum's for a few days.'

Seven and nine. He had to rouse himself then. Remember she was a real person through the haze of the dream. 'I could offer you some tea.' He corrected himself. 'Sorry. I mean would you like some tea? Might have to skip the milk.' The black and white cat came to the window and looked in, rubbing its cheeks against the glass.

'No, no thanks. I'm OK, honestly.'

A little silence blew in between them. The cat jumped up and ran its arched spine against the window frame. Anthea smiled as if that was significant. Pablo felt a sudden spurt of anger. It was just a fucking cat. An animal.

'How badly were you hurt?'

'Just bruises, a sprained wrist, I was lucky.'

'You were unlucky, you mean.'

Pablo shrugged again. 'I've got Paracetamol. It'll be OK. I'm not even sure how it happened. I saw something moving in the field. All I remember is that horse appearing in the air. Then bits afterwards.'

'What about the car?'

'Written off.'

She looked smitten, grimacing neatly. 'It's OK, it's insured. I'll get another. It's only a car. I quite liked it though.' He paused, shifting in the chair. 'It's funny, but I thought you'd be the one who was angry because I'd killed your horse.'

'Not you. Not you. It was the vet who put him down. You only ran into him because he jumped out.' She put her hands together. Neat fingers. No wedding ring. 'I'd better get on...' She was standing up... 'Leave you in peace.'

Get on? With what? With everything there was to do. To face, to sort out. None of which he'd really registered. And he'd felt nothing yet. Not relief. Not grief. Not anything really, except a kind of mild surprise.

'Shall I call back? I've got a couple of days. I could help out a bit'

'What about your husband. Wouldn't he mind?' Maybe that was overplaying it. She turned back to him, laughing quietly. A bitter little laugh that seemed out of keeping with her composure. Like the hair, unruly, when everything else was neat.

'You don't know me yet, do you?'

But he did. He'd known her because she was burning back there in his memory.

'I was Anthea Kellett at junior school. We were in the same class. With Miss Henderson, remember? Nearly thirty years ago, mind.'

'Anthea Kellett?' He was thirty-nine now, so they would have been ten years old.

‘My parents had the village post office. We’d just arrived. You’d have thought I was a right stuck up little twerp.’ He remembered that, too. A girl on a white pony passing him in the road with copper hair stuffed inside her riding hat. ‘I married Billy Lee. I must have been mad. Remember Billy?’

He had a scar below his left knee to remember Billy by, a little white moon. They’d called him Stacko. After the blues song. But he’d buried that, deep in the quiet and mess of the past. She was smiling at him again. That open freckled smile that he’d seen in the schoolroom thirty years back.

‘I think I did it to annoy my parents.’ She laughed, neat again. ‘Bull’s-eye!’

He remembered the dark little shop and post office, which was a Spar now. Her mother briskly cheerful, her father who’d been in the RAF with his little white moustache, blazers and striped ties. ‘How come I’ve never seen you around?’

‘We moved away after we got married. Billy got a job on an estate near Hexham. The girls were born up there. We came home when Billy’s dad couldn’t manage the farm, about two years ago.’ She looked suddenly shy. ‘You don’t look much different, Phil. It’s funny, I thought you might know me. You were nice to me. I remember. Your brother, Tim, I don’t know...it was such a business, such a shame.’ She was on her way through the door. ‘Anyway, you don’t want me going on like this. I kicked Billy out long ago. I should’ve had more sense than to marry him. He’s not all bad. But about as sensitive as a brick, but you’ll know that. I was bored, I suppose. And spoiled. He got worse after his accident.’

‘What accident?’ Pablo hadn’t seen Billy in years.

‘Caught his foot in a mower haytimming. He was off work for months with not much to do but drink and moan about it. He has to wear a special boot. Being Billy, he thought it was someone else’s fault, of course.’

‘Sounds grim.’

‘It was. I’d better go.’ She shrugged and left, pulling the door a little so that it squealed against the tiles. Pablo sat in a band of sunlight, listened to her car starting up then going down the lane away from the house.

Billy Lee. Stacko. Thirty years ago they’d been friends at school. Thirty years was nothing. It was yesterday. The past was always there, always available. You carried it around somehow, like music. The way your fingers found it, stumbling, making sense of its scattered intervals. Pablo stood up and pushed the door to, dropping the rusted catch.

§

His father had planted damson and apple trees in the garden. There was a yew tree at the gateway that had always been there; an outhouse with kennels, a workbench and toilet. Then the cottage: two downstairs rooms with stone fireplaces, a small kitchen with a gas cooker and a broken range. The walls emulsified white, stained yellow where damp had penetrated. A bathroom had been fitted in the ‘sixties, just before he’d been born, cut out from the largest bedroom with a studding partition, so you could hear everything. Nowadays, it was what the estate agents would call *desirable*. Unspoiled. But renting from the estate had always meant bodedged jobs and penny-pinching. His father had retreated to one room that had a floral carpet trodden with food stains, twin armchairs and an almost new TV. He’d never quite mastered the remote control and whenever Pablo rang him he

cursed it to cut the volume, fingers fumbling on the tiny buttons.

Pablo started in the kitchen and moved outwards, throwing old newspapers, magazines, empty bottles, burst packets of soap powder, piles of used tea bags and other junk into black bin liners and stacking them next to the front gate. The porcelain sink was foul with grease and he cleaned it with a rusted scourer. There was no mains gas in the village, and he had to heat water with the immersion heater. The tank was mounted in the bathroom and rumbled through the floor as the water heated up.

The outhouse held his father's old bicycle, stepladders, deckchairs, a rusted push mower, tins of paint, spades, forks, trowels, plant pots, a sickle, a line of snares hanging from hooks, a tool chest, tins of screws and nails, an enamel pail, some coiled rope and a rotted dog leash. It was slow going with one hand and almost impossible to tie off the bags. His ankle had a dark blue bruise spreading outwards and yellowing.

Each morning he walked to the village shop for a newspaper and a few provisions to get him through the day. An Asian family had it now. The Patels. They'd had a restaurant in Mombasa and had decided to get out in the '80's. Rajiv had arrived in Pablo's class in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. They were the first and only Asian family in the village. Though Rajiv always said they were African, just to wind up the locals. He'd got out too. Smart kid. The Patels had a cash machine now, so he was able to use his debit card.

Pablo found a deckchair in the outhouse that hadn't rotted away. The grass on the lawn was knee-high and matted but he cut a clumsy circle with the sickle, remembering the cigar-shaped sharpening stone that must be somewhere in the tool box. He'd find it when he had a minute and put an edge on the blade. In the afternoons he sat in the garden with the paper, knackered after his one-handed attempts to get things straight. He'd made arrangements for the funeral with the Coop. So far, he hadn't had the heart to look through his father's papers, though he'd found a sheaf of photographs in an envelope showing the local snooker team in the 'fifties. His father was a boy in a thick tweed jacket and tartan tie. His grandfather was there too, hair oiled back, a hand on his father's shoulder. There must have been more stuff like that. He was in no hurry. All in good time.

At night he sweated in a set of half-clean sheets in his old bedroom. His shoulder ached. He lay awake worrying about the flat, his gear. He ought to get Alec to call round and make sure everything was OK. When the insurance cheque came through he'd need a car. Right now, driving was out of the question and the bus service was next to useless. Alec would have to run things back in Manchester. And he needed to find the family address book to let people know what had happened. It was tucked underneath some magazines on the TV stand. Most of the names had a thick pencil line drawn through them.

§

He'd fallen asleep in the deckchair with the paper when he heard tyres on the gravel. It was a red VW. Anthea climbed out, came towards him, freckled arms, hair blazing in the sun. Behind her, the blue-grey line of fells. Behind them, tall thunderheads puffing up. The hot air balloon was shrinking in the distance, the burner flaring, a breeze blowing away the sound of its breath.

Anthea glanced back at it. She smiled and held out a pair of rubber gloves. 'I'd love to try that.' She bit her lip. 'I've come to give you a hand, at last.' Pablo was struggling to

rise one-handed from the chair. She took his wrist and helped him up, her fingers cool against his arm. 'How are the injuries?'

He winced theatrically. 'I'm just a bit bruised. Chest and shoulder. Aches a bit when I laugh my head off.'

'We'll have to be careful then.' She grinned, showing her sharp teeth.

Pablo balanced on his ankle, wincing. 'Actually, I haven't had a laugh in years.'

'I believe you. I'll be careful.' She was looking round at his handiwork. At least he'd got on with it. Made a start.

'How are the kids?'

'The girls? They're OK, still upset, still at Mum's.'

'Where's that?'

'Clitheroe. My parents moved out when they sold the shop. Couldn't get a house in the village with the estate owning everything. We were always off-comers.' They were walking towards the house.

Pablo paused in the doorway. 'We used to steal penny chews from your Mum when she wasn't watching.'

'So did I...'

He did remember her. She'd slipped back into a place. He wasn't ready to tell her. Not yet, because he had other questions. Things that might just as well be left alone.

They set about cleaning the kitchen, scouring surfaces, polishing the chipped sink. Anthea took the lead and Pablo helped as best he could. He found an ancient cylinder vacuum cleaner under the stairs and managed the carpets and rugs in the downstairs room one-handed. By the time he'd finished, she'd made a pot of tea. Somehow she got all the windows open and air began to flow through the house. Outside the sky had darkened with coming rain.

When she turned to bring the teapot to the table he noticed that she had a small blue tattoo on one shoulder. A single tulip just below the neckline.

The damson tree was coming into bloom and the air smelled of rain and sap. His mother had loved damsons when he was a child. She stewed the fruit until the stones separated and rose, let them cool, serving them with Carnation milk. They'd always tasted like brass to Pablo, bitter and unforgiving. Like thrupenny bits. But he'd loved their darkened crimson, the colour of his guitar.

When Anthea sat down he noticed the neatness of her body, the fullness of her hips. She wore a gold stud in each ear and she'd pulled her hair back into a green band so that it was clear of her face. There was a spattering of freckles in the parting her breasts made before they dipped into the scoop of her tee shirt. Her eyes really were the blue of cornflowers. They gave her an air of innocence, of directness. She had a tiny gap between her front teeth and before she laughed her nostrils flared a little.

Back in the day he'd been more interested in learning chords than going out with girls. He'd played those LP's again and again on his portable record player, riffing along on that first acoustic guitar with its hopeless action. John Mayall and early Fleetwood Mac albums. Then Lightnin' Hopkins and Freddie King. His dad had bought the guitar one market day, brought it home in the Landrover. He'd never said why, what had prompted him, but Pablo's future had turned on it.

## §

Anthea came the next day for a couple of hours, then the day after that. They worked quietly together, brushing past each other, getting together to lift the settee or a chest of drawers to clean behind. On the third day they made tea and drank it in the garden without sitting down. A line of teasels was spearing through against the wall. Anthea traced their leaves with her fingers. There was something ugly about them, malevolent.

After the tea they made a start on his father's bedroom. They worked without speaking for the most part. It was oddly intimate. Here where his parents had slept and made love, where he and Tim had been conceived. There was surprisingly little in there. A few jackets in the wardrobe, shirts, neatly folded underwear, striped pyjamas under the pillow. Anthea stripped the bed and carried everything to the washing machine in the kitchen. Pablo heard her fumbling around for washing powder and then the slam and rumble as she switched it on. His mother's stuff had been cleaned out long ago. Now this.

Anthea came behind him to look at the clothes. He could smell hot skin, a faint musk of sweat. 'They could go to Age Concern in town.'

He nodded. 'I guess so.'

'I could take them next time I'm in. Unless...'

'No, that'd be great. That's kind of you.'

His face was abstracted, as if he'd been carried away by a thought. She dropped her voice. 'I'm sorry, I don't mean to rush you.'

'It's OK. You're not.'

Anthea backed away. Had he sounded annoyed? Pablo wandered into his old room to lean on the window ledge where the paint was flaking. A few spots of rain had hit the flawed window glass and were beginning to darken the dust on the track outside.

She came behind him, leaning close to push at the rusted catch so that the window creaked open, so that her hair touched him. Her breast was soft for a second against his arm. 'It's going to rain.' Her voice was husky.

'Yes, guess so.' He could feel his heart pumping, that lopsided rhythm warning him. 'I didn't mean to sound cross.' His mouth was suddenly feathery.

'It's OK. I know.' Her eyes gazed directly on his, blue against peat dark. She touched his arm, tugging almost imperceptibly. He kissed her faintly on the temple, then on her throat, then on the tattoo, his mouth against her freckled skin. She steered him away from the window and pushed him gently onto the bed. For a long time they lay there not moving. There was peace, the weight of their bodies against each other; then his hand was across her waist and they were kissing again. Anthea winced and laughed as the Velcro of his splint caught on her skin.

'Ouch!'

She undid it carefully, kissing his hand as he flexed it. She kicked off her shoes and they thudded to the boards. 'I don't have long. I'd better help you.' Pablo nodded, sitting up. When he was naked she dragged the tee shirt over her head, unfastening her bra, stepping out of her underwear, which was white with tiny blue flowers embroidered on the fabric. She pulled off the hair band and slipped it onto her wrist. Her hair burned like brass as she straddling him on the bed, easing her tongue gently into his mouth.

His body was thin and covered in dark hair. She nuzzled into his chest allowing her

fingers to trail up his thighs. He craned his head to her belly, pushing his tongue into her navel, then up over her belly and over each nipple. A little gasp shivered from her lips and was sucked back as he touched her.

Afterwards, they lay listening to the rain, to the washing machine rumbling in the kitchen below. She lay in the crook of his arm, her hair loose across the pillow, across his chest. There was a diagonal bruise there, blue and yellow, where the seat belt had stopped him. She bent over him to kiss it. 'Pablo.' She was whispering, almost to herself. 'Pablo. That was it wasn't it?'

Her breath was warm against his chest. She sat up to look into his face. 'That's what they called you wasn't it?'

'They still do.'

Anthea lay down again, stroking his wrist, his arm. 'Do you remember me now?'

'I always did. Couldn't quite place you at first, that's all.' Was that a lie? Maybe he hadn't wanted to place her.

'Do you still play the guitar?'

He wondered how she knew that. They'd gone to different secondary schools. Maybe she'd seen him in one of the high school bands, knocking out Chicago blues through shagged-out gear. Rajiv had played bass for a while until he became more interested in girls than music. 'Yep. I still play. It's what I do.'

'That's great. I wish I'd been good at something. Anything, I mean. I'd like to see you play.'

'Then you should have been in Amsterdam last weekend.' That was a strange thought, because if she'd been there, none of this would or could have happened like it had. He hunched back against the pillows, raising himself awkwardly in the bed so that he could see her face. 'You were there weren't you? When Tim died? That's what I remember.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'But it happened. Time doesn't change that. Nothing changes it.'

She bit her lip, didn't reply, but leaned to kiss his forehead. They listened to rain striking against the window, to jackdaws clambering the roof and their own breath in the moistened air. Then the washing machine began to spin, throbbing against the flag floor beneath. She'd have to go soon. Back to her mother, back to the kids. He wondered if she had a job. He hadn't asked, hadn't even thought to ask. He still hadn't had the courage to look behind his brother's bedroom door. And now she was using his old name. Now she was above him again, her hair touching his face, allowing her nipples to graze his chest. Whispering. *Pablo, Pablo. I always loved that name.*

Afterwards they dressed and went downstairs and loaded the boot of her car with bin bags and she'd drove away with his father's clothes and shoes. They'd end up being picked over by strangers. Maybe he thought about these things too much. She'd never answered his question about Tim. But that could wait. Other things were more important than the past right now. He picked up the phone to call Alec.

§

The latch on Tim's door was stiff. Inside, it could have been 1976. The bed still made, the sheets tightly folded. A pair of Superman slippers lay under the bed. A shelf with Tim's books, a deal table, a chair, a patchwork rug. A half-built glider hanging from the

ceiling. They were going to finish that together. Pablo went to the window to look into the damson tree. The curtains had faded and the metal catches were rusted tight.

It had been the year of the long drought. Their father had bought them second-hand bikes and restored them over the winter, putting in new wheel bearings, fitting tyres and brake blocks, cleaning up the frames. They'd come down on Christmas day to find them propped up in the hallway. He'd been a bit jealous that Tim got his at the same time, that he hadn't had to wait until he was ten. Their dad had lifted the bikes and spun the wheels so they could listen to the bearings. He'd made them learn to ride properly, taking their cycling proficiency test at school before he'd let them out on the roads. Tim had taken his twice, but they'd got there in the end and that summer the whole valley would be theirs with nothing much in the way of traffic other than the odd tractor or hay bailer to worry about.

That day they'd packed sandwiches in their rucksacks and set off for the reservoir. It lay crammed into the valley like amalgam in a tooth. Saturday morning and it hadn't rained for weeks. They set off in shorts and tee shirts, the radio playing from the kitchen. *Going up the Country*. Canned Heat. Their mother calling at the doorway for them to be careful.

The valley had been flooded in the 'thirties and the church moved, stone by stone, to a new site. It was said that all the bodies had been dug up from the churchyard and moved with it before the flooding could go ahead. Under that pane of water were houses, a post office, the village pub. The Fylde Water Board had bought up the houses and farms one by one. All flooded to send drinking water to Manchester. Conifers had been planted along the flanks by the Forestry Commission, regimented lines of larch and fir. They'd pretended it was Canada, imagined that China lay beyond the notch of the next valley, if they could only keep travelling into that grey-blue horizon.

That day, their father had left for work early and the house was peaceful. Sometimes he took Pablo with him to feed the pheasants, set traps for feral mink that preyed on the young or check on the young grouse before the shooting season. That day they'd been free to cycle down through the scent of conifer woods, Tim in the lead, his spokes flashing, until they glimpsed the reservoir through the trees. It had been a dry spring and the water level was the lowest they'd ever seen. Hose pipes were banned, car washing forbidden. Not that they had a car, just the old estate Landrover. All around the reservoir was a bleached rim of stones where the water level had fallen. They'd heard that the tip of the old school steeple and the chimneys of some of the houses had re-appeared. But all that turned out to be a lie.

They'd cycled into the sun where it flickered through the trees, Tim ahead in his striped tee shirt and baseball cap, the sun glancing against his legs, turning now and then to make sure that Pablo was still there. Still behind him, still looking after him.

§

Pablo lunched on sardines and toast then fetched the worm-eaten stepladders from the outhouse and dragged them upstairs. He steadied them on the landing and climbed them, pushing up the loft hatch. Sunlight was filtered by the grime on the skylight. There was a stink of soot. Piled in there were a couple of cane-hooped trunks, some broken lampshades, a pudding basin crash helmet that had belonged to his father when he had



a moped. Pablo pulled himself awkwardly through the hatch. Some old door panels had been placed across the joists to make a platform. The lime torching had fallen from the underneath of the slates and lay everywhere. There was a dead bat cobwebbed to one of the oak beams.

There was his first guitar in a cheap tartan zip-bag. A plywood acoustic from Woolworth's with a slotted headstock and chrome tailpiece. Good for firewood, but his parents had kept it. It was amazing he'd learnt to finger chords on that. Pablo laid it back against the crumbling wall. He opened the lid of a cardboard box and found it full of his school exercise books. Tim's would be at the bottom, though they stopped in 1976. Pablo tasted a spurt of bile as he stooped under the eaves. He wasn't ready for any of this. There were other things to do and Anthea had promised to lend him her car.

§

Pablo borrowed the Volkswagen the next morning, waving at the two blonde girls who watched him from the kitchen window, wondering if they knew who he was. Maybe Anthea would have explained about the horse, about the car. The rest they couldn't know. But the fact he'd turned up at her house would have half the village talking.

His left arm and shoulder felt stiff as he drove. He didn't intend to be away long. He needed a few clothes. Maybe his little acoustic to practice on. He had a series of gigs in September at a club in Birmingham. Before that, a few hours in the studio. They'd got a new mixer desk to set up. He needed to straighten a few things out with Alec, take some time to himself now.

The lock was stiff as he entered the flat, stepping over junk mail into a smell like old oranges. There was a line of pigeons on the balcony railings, staring in. They took off, a handful of paper scattering. Pablo emptied his answerphone, packed some more clothes, found a dark suit, brought his guitars to the car. When he locked the steel door it felt oddly final.

Early afternoon, he dropped into the shop to store his gear. Alec was setting up a drum kit. A grey ponytail, spotless trainers. Alec was solid. They'd helped each other out over the years: Alec's divorce, Pablo's break up with Ellie. He was tightening the snare drum to a stand. 'It's your old man, you've got to take some time.'

Pablo punched him on the shoulder. 'Cheers, just don't mess everything up, eh?'

Alec picked up a cymbal and turned it on one finger. 'Go on, fuck off, Pab. I hope everything goes ok.'

Pablo found his work diary and the phone, cancelling everything for the next two weeks. By then the funeral would be over and he'd have got his head around the other stuff. The studio was at the back of the shop and he spent a couple of hours testing new gear. The digital stuff was amazing, but they still had some old gear—a Watkins copycat, a Vox AC 30, a WEM Dominator—because even young bands wanted those classic sounds. Retro sounds. He spent an hour on the accounts, checked out a new line of amplifiers and ordered a couple for display, then went out for a curry.

By eight o'clock he was on his way out of the city. He took the motorway to Clitheroe, then went on back roads. It was a close evening. A yellow moon burned above the hedgerows. Most of the hawthorn blossom had fallen and there were stands of cow parsley and meadowsweet in the headlights. He was tempted to idle, to stop for a pint.

To spend an hour with strangers at a bar, lose himself in thought. But he pressed on. He thought about the village, about home, about Anthea. It had been so long since he felt close to a woman without wanting to run away. He'd been running for a long time. He tried not to think about the other stuff. The complications. They'd come soon enough.

The roads were almost deserted. People sat outside village pubs to catch the last evening light. The road narrowed and climbed. Pablo changed gear and gunned the engine. He was about a mile from the village when a set of headlights appeared behind him. They drove up close, backed away, came close again. In the rear mirror Pablo saw a set of chromed bull bars. He couldn't see the driver. He slowed down for a bend and the headlights flashed on and off three times. A few yards on, he pulled into a layby and the Range Rover drew up behind. He wound down the window and waited with the engine idling. He heard boots slur on the road. A figure came towards him in the side mirror, blackened by the headlights behind.

'Anthea?' It was a man's voice. Familiar. 'Anth?'

Pablo wound down the window and turned his head. 'No. Obviously not. Sorry.'

'Eh?'

'I'm not Anthea.' It was Billy. *Stacko*. It made sense, somehow.

'It's her fucking car, pal.'

He decided to lie, just for the hell of it. 'Yep, she sold it me.'

'Sold it? Bollocks! And who the fuck might you be?' Billy had been there that day. Billy and Carl, both. When Tim died in the water. 'C'mon Stacko, you're losing it.'

The man's hands came up onto the roof of the car as he peered closer. 'Fuck me!' There was a pause, the big man in his baseball cap hunkering down. 'Pablo? Well, well! Pablo...'

Anthea above him, her nipples against his chest. He could smell drink on Billy's breath. He stood up so his face was shadowed from the light.

'Oh aye, heard you were back. Heard about your dad. Shame.' Then he was laughing softly. 'Heard you ran into Anthea's horse, too, you stupid twat. She loved that horse. You always were a fucking disaster.'

Pablo stayed silent. He thought about the heft of the wheel brace, but it'd be locked in the boot. The engine panted quietly. 'Did she, Billy? News travels fast, eh? Anything else you need to tell me that I already know?'

'Now don't get fucking smart Pablo, I though you were our Anthea, that's all.'

'Yeah. Best not to, eh?'

'What's that?'

'Think, Billy. Best not to. Doesn't really suit you.' Pablo slipped the clutch, put the car into gear and pulled away. He saw Billy silhouetted against the lights of his vehicle, unmoving.

The Range Rover pulled out behind him, but this time it kept its distance. Billy and Carl and Anthea. They'd all been there. He couldn't remember why. Pablo pulled into his driveway and switched off the engine. The headlights faded, dropping the house into darkness apart from a smear of moonlight on the windows. His key grated in the lock. Then he was dragging his bags into that smell of bleach, mildew and damp.

The funeral was held on a Wednesday. A day that started with sunshine and turned to drizzle, then sunshine again, so that the headstones steamed in the churchyard. Someone had planted daffodils on Tim's grave. They looked like dabs of butter when the sun touched them. The service was held in the church, then a short ceremony at the crematorium. The undertaker handed him his father's things—wristwatch, dentures, wedding ring. He'd need to go back for the ashes.

Two of his aunts were there, an uncle, a couple of distant cousins, a few villagers turning up at the church to pay their respects. The vicar in his white surplice leading in the coffin; the formalities of the service; platitudes about a full life and the high esteem in which he'd been held. His father had never been a churchgoer. Weddings and funerals, that was all. He kept a black tie in a drawer like all old men.

Pablo had arranged for a small buffet in the pub, so he had a few drinks afterwards, standing with his back to the fireplace in his suit, talking to people he hardly remembered, who he'd probably never see again. They were taking away the remains of the sandwiches when Carl turned up, his big hands raw from farm work. His hair looked as if he'd cut it himself, his face broken-veined, hook-nosed and hard-set. He looked like his father now. They'd bumped into each other now and again over the years.

'Pab. I'm sorry about your dad. Grand feller. Old school. It's a shame.'

'Carl. Good to see you.' They shook hands. 'Drink?' They stood awkwardly with a pint each. 'Thanks for coming, Carl. I don't know many people here now.'

Carl looked at him from under the tousled hair. 'Least I could do. They're pretty horrible dos, these.' They let that remark drop into silence. 'Are you still playing' guitar for a living, like?'

Pablo ordered a couple more on the slate from Millie, the landlady. She was married to Walter, a tight-fisted sod who took a delight in strict closing times and adherence to the law. 'On and off. Mainly studio stuff these days. Producing.'

'Oh aye?'

Pablo took another pull on the pint. 'Yeah, just keeping my hand in. I've got a share in a music shop and a studio, now.'

'In Manchester?' He made it sound like Babylon.

'Yeah, it's handy enough.'

'Globe trotting got too much, eh?' Carl laughed and dipped his mouth to his pint. He'd lost a couple of side teeth since Pablo had seen him last. But that'd be a fair few years ago. Longer than it seemed.

'How's the farm?'

Carl brightened. 'Oh, not bad. We've had us moments as you know. Got culled wi' foot an' mouth. Restocked. That were a bad job, but we're o'er it now. Started a pedigree herd.' He pulled on the pint, licking foam from his upper lip. 'Limousins. They can be awk'ud buggers, but I've tekken to 'em'—more'n they've tekken to me any road! Millie was hovering, leaning her fleshy arms on the bar. 'I'm in the farmhouse now, mum and dad are in a bungalow. So they've retired at last. That last do finished 'em. Bein' culled. The spring went out o' me dad, like.'

'Oh well.' Pablo wished he hadn't said that. It sounded feeble. He tried again. 'It's been weird going through things.'

Carl put his face into the pint glass. 'I'll bet.'

'My mum never changed Tim's room, you know. I don't know what to do with it. All his things are there. It's a time warp.'

Carl was putting his arms into his coat. 'You should come up and see us before you go off on your travels again.' Except there was no us. It was just Carl running things. Carl who, like Pablo, had never married or had children.

'OK, I'll take you up on that. I'd like to see the place again. What's a good time?'

'Oh, I'm nearly allus there. Anytime'll do. It'd be good to see you. Like I said, I'm sorry about your dad. Hope you get sorted. Let me know if I can help wi' owt.' They left it at that. Pablo didn't mention Billy or Anthea.

The guests finished their drinks, made last visits to the loo, took their coats from the row below the stuffed fox in its glass case. Pablo refused a lift from a neighbour. He needed some air.

The rain had cleared earlier and the sun was raising a mist from the road. Then rain came again. Pablo walked the mile home through drizzle, the hedgerows and ditches thick with garlic mustard, its musky scent. Then the sharp stink of something dead. When he passed Anthea's house he saw the Range Rover in the drive. When he got home, the house seemed to have sunk into its overgrown garden, the unkempt trees.

Anthea was waiting for him in the living room, perched on the settee, knees together, reading an out of date newspaper. She'd let herself in with the key Pablo had lent her. He hadn't expected that.

'Hi. How did it go?'

'Oh, OK. How come you're here?'

'It's OK. Billy's with the girls. I told him I had to pick up some shopping. I put the car round the back. He can't be in two places at once and he promised to watch telly with them. It's none of his business anyhow.'

Pablo laughed. 'Well, he seemed interested enough the other night.'

Anthea rose to kiss him, loosened his father's tie, brushing rain from his lapels. 'What does he care? He's been with enough other women—that was the problem.' She straightened his tie. 'You look nice, dressed up. I'm sorry I couldn't be there.' She ducked her head against his chest.

Pablo slipped out of his damp jacket. It was chilly in the room without a fire. Even on a warm day the thick walls kept the heat at bay. Anthea was smiling at him, dropping the shawl from her shoulders, pulling him close. When they kissed, her mouth was soft, familiar. His fingers brushed her nipples through the cotton of her blouse.

§

The bath took ages to fill, the water discoloured from ancient plumbing —lead pipes and a dented copper cylinder the estate plumbers had reclaimed from somewhere. There were streaks of green on the enamel. The only soap he could find was a packet of Wright's coal tar that his father had bought in bulk. He lay in the hot water, letting the steam float past him, allowing the day to replay in his head. The funeral. The curtains at the crematorium parting. His father slipping away in the oak coffin. Carl, Billy, Anthea.

He was drying himself when he heard tyres on gravel. He tied the towel around his waist and waited. It couldn't be Anthea. She'd be with the children now. Pablo switched off

the bathroom light and went to the front bedroom, bare feet creaking on warped boards. The double bed was stripped. Twin wardrobes tilted towards each other on the ramshackle floor. Pablo moved to the window and looked down. He couldn't see a car at first. Then he caught the glint of green paintwork beyond the beech hedge.

Billy was at the edge of the little orchard his father had planted, standing under the damson tree, staring at the house from under his cap. He'd always been the biggest of them and he'd filled out over the years. He was wearing a camouflage jacket, cargo pants, yellow work boots. From what Anthea had said he worked as a contractor, fencing, walling, harvesting. That gave him lots of time in his own company. Time to turn things over in his mind where they'd get bigger.

Billy stood for a long time. It was dark in the garden, no lights from the house, a blade of moon sliding between clouds. Pablo stared down from the window. Billy cupped his hands and a flame lit his face under the peaked cap. Then he turned away, dragging his foot. He paused to take one last look, breathing smoke, as if he knew Pablo was watching. A door slammed. The Range Rover lit up, then started up, its wheels turning on loose gravel. Pablo sank onto his parents' bed and let the towel fall.

§

The next day Pablo sat down at the kitchen table with a piece of paper and a pencil. He'd found the rent book safely stored in the oak desk and up to date. They'd gone to the estate office with their mother as kids, a stuffy little room with brown lino and a storage heater on full belt. The woman behind the desk had given them wine gums. They must have bought the place twice over since his grandfather's day. When he was eighteen all he'd wanted was to be elsewhere. Getting those bicycles had been the first taste of freedom.

It had been early in the year, but already blazing hot. The last week of the Easter holidays. They'd stopped for Tip-Tops at the village shop. Holding them to their cheeks then tearing open the plastic sheaths with their teeth, sucking the column of frozen blackcurrant juice until it turned to ice. So hot that pine cones were cracking on the trees beside the road. The woods were tinder dry. Up on the moor the heather was already burning where their father was at work. Swifts were slicing up the sky. So hot, their legs burned and the tar on the road was melting. Their bicycle tyres made a sticky swishing sound. Pablo following the print of Tim's wheels—a zip mark in the melting tar. Tiny stone chippings stuck to their tyres. The backs of their knees were wet and their plimsolls had that gritty feel of sweat between the toes.

Wood pigeons were calling, desire bubbling in their throats. A sound they didn't understand. Tim's Dennis the Menace tee shirt made him look like a wasp hunched over the handlebars as he cycled ahead, freewheeling downhill, changing gear as the road rose to the plantation. A milk tanker approached them and they pulled into the verge, dismounting, straddling the crossbars to let it pass. The driver gave them a friendly wave. He'd admitted them to the adult world, the highway and its code.

On days like this buzzards drifted over the valley, spiralling on upturned wings like huge moths. Today the sky was empty except for swifts, a jet heading south. It was weird the way the contrail began just after the plane, so that there was a space between. That was because the gases had to cool before condensing. He'd learned that in science. Things had a reason now. Things could be explained if you knew the right person or knew where

to look.

Pablo's forearms scorched as he rode. The breeze in his hair dried the sweat on his forehead. His feet were on fire against the pedals, the road's ribbon of hot tar unfurling. Stonewalls burned white in the sun. The valley funnelled them towards the lowest point of the reservoir. It appeared through the trees, a sheet of gleaming wind-beaten lead.

They were supposed to be meeting up with Carl and Billy, but someone else was there as well. Pablo looked down at his new wristwatch, freewheeling to read the time. It was 12.20. That had stuck, somehow, luminous green hands against plain numerals. They had lots of time. They had sandwiches and Coke and an apple each in the rucksack that bumped against their backs. They had the whole day. Forever.

Sometimes he thought he remembered flames. But the fires on the moor were too far away for that. The bit that mattered, the bit where things were happening, had gone missing, though he remembered the ambulance, the huge weight of fear and dread. He remembered Tim in the water, his white skin, his dark blue underpants. How thin he was. The feeling that something had happened that could never be changed. Suddenly knowing what love was, how deep and irretrievable.

§

When the knock came, the piece of paper was still blank. He'd made a list of nothing and hadn't heard the car draw up on the driveway. A heavy knock, three raps. It wasn't Anthea, it wasn't Billy, who he'd been half expecting. It was Carl in blue overalls and flat cap, his Wellingtons slurried in cow shit.

'Carl!'

'Pab, I can't come in.' Carl gestured towards his boots.

'What's up?'

'Bloody hell, Pablo, you know what.'

'Such as?'

'Stacko came round this mornin'.'

'I bet that was a laugh.'

'It's not funny Pablo. He were upset.'

'About?'

'About you. About Anth.' Carl turned the cap round in his hands. 'He's not daft, Pablo, he knows you're going with her. Half the bloody village knows you're shagging her. You didn't waste much time, either.'

'And...?'

Carl put his hand to the doorjamb, leaning in. 'We're old mates me and Billy. What was I supposed to say?'

Pablo stared past Carl's shoulder. The yew tree shuffled. 'Do you think it's any of his business?'

'Maybe not. They're divorced, but there's still the girls and he still cares about Anth. There's other stuff, too, you know there is. You can't carry on just as you like in a village like this. It's not Manchester where no fucker knows anyone.'

Other stuff? Carl was putting his cap on and pulling at the peak.

'Anyway, you need to be careful, that's all, or it'll end in a bloody mess.'

Billy silhouetted in the headlights, dragging his boot back to the car. *You always were*

*a fucking disaster.*

‘OK. Thanks Carl. I am careful. I will be.’

‘I think you’d better wi’ this one. I’ll see you for that drink sometime.’ He turned to leave. ‘And don’t be a silly bastard.’

When the Landrover pulled away Pablo was still looking down the driveway. But he wasn’t thinking about what Carl had been saying. Carl and Billy and Anthea, They’d had all been there but he couldn’t remember why. He couldn’t remember if they’d all arranged to meet. He couldn’t remember much except Tim in the water and the ambulance. That glimpse of red hair, which must have been Anthea, what drew them there. Though none of them understood.

§

Pablo’s wrist had healed. He was able to practice, running through scales each morning on the little acoustic guitar he’d brought from the flat. Scales were beautiful in their logic, the way they cycled back to their source. The way chords were built, stepping off into new places and harmonies. What started off as a simple progression becoming almost infinitely complicated. Then the way practice became improvisation, spontaneity. It wasn’t that practice made perfect, but it allowed you to take risks. Then to play with other musicians, inside the music, alert to the pulse of the moment.

The girls were back at school and Anthea had some time off. She came over most days to help with the house, to make love in the back bedroom. Pablo liked to trace his tongue over her freckles where her breasts divided. She’d laugh and roll over on the bed, so that sun fired her hair. He remembered Tim’s back wheel blurring, that slight wobble as the tyre passed between the brake blocks. The sun had flickered through the trees as they rode.

Anthea put her fingers against his neck, feeling for his pulse. ‘Still there?’

Pablo opened his eyes.

‘I’d like to see you play.’

‘I’m not in a regular band.’

‘You said. But you played in Amsterdam?’

‘Depping.’

She jabbed him with her finger.

‘*Deputising*. Standing in for someone else.’

‘I’d still like to see you.’

‘There’ll be a time. I’ve got a few of gigs coming soon with an outfit I used to play with.’ Pablo rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling. When he spoke, his voice had thickened. ‘How old were you in nineteen seventy-six?’

‘When?’

‘Nineteen seventy-six.’

‘You know how old. I was eleven. I was a few months older than you.’

That made Tim the youngest, him next. Her armpits smelled faintly of fenugreek. ‘I need to know what happened. What were you doing at the reservoir?’

Swirls of dust glittered as she sat up. She pulled a pillow behind her and leaned back, drawing the sheet over her lower body, folding her arms. ‘That was a long time ago.’

‘I know. But...’

She smoothed the sheet under her hand. 'We went there all the time. Me and Billy and Carl were already there when you and Tim turned up. We had a den, remember?'

'What kind of day was it?'

'It was hot. Sunny. Much hotter than usual. The water level was right down. They said you could see the school steeple, but you couldn't.' Anthea swung her legs over the side of the bed. 'I'd best get going.' She lifted her bra against and fastened it behind, pulling it into her flesh under the tulip tattoo where freckles clustered.

'I need to know what happened.'

'You know what happened. Tim went into the water and got into trouble. Billy went after him, but it was no use. You know that.'

Did he? Tim had always been the best swimmer. He'd been fearless in the water, like a frog, jumping in to the deep end at the swimming baths. Putting Pablo to shame. 'I remember that. I don't remember why.'

Her head emerged through the top of her tee shirt. She dragged hair from her face. 'Why what?'

'What he was doing in the water. Nobody else went in.'

'Apart from Billy.'

'OK. Apart from Billy.'

Anthea was slipping on her sandals and Pablo watched her from the bed.

'What were you doing?'

'What was I doing?'

'With Carl and Billy?'

'Playing. We were just kids, remember? What else was there to do round here? Just...playing, larking around, the usual stuff. Carl had some cigarettes.' She shrugged and stood to go. 'It was nearly thirty years ago.'

'But why Tim? I don't remember.'

She didn't answer but looked back from the doorway. 'I'm sorry Pablo.' She tightened the belt on her jeans. 'I'll see you tomorrow, if you like. But I've got some things to do first. So, afternoon?'

Pablo let her go without answering. Tim was struggling, too far out. Carl had thrown the cigarettes away, as if they might get into trouble for it. They'd disintegrated in the water. And Billy never got to Tim. He'd disappeared under that grey surface, joining the ghosts in the village below.

Pablo had ridden for help. A man had phoned the police and ambulance. *You shouldn't have been playing in the water. What were you doing?* He kept saying it as if Pablo hadn't realised. He'd put Pablo's bicycle in the back of his van and they'd driven back to the reservoir, the scone his wife had given Pablo crumbling in his hand, the weight of dread pressing air from his chest.

It was a police diver who pulled Tim out in the end. Someone had got a message to his father and he was running down the path. Then the frogmen bobbing up and down in wetsuits and goggles. A commotion, then voices shouting. His father crouching down near the water until they were lifting him to the shore. He'd never forgotten the look on his father's face, as if something had sheared away inside him. They kept asking him: *Why Tim? Why was he in the water?* And Pablo couldn't answer them. Couldn't answer them



then and couldn't answer them now.

Pablo carried a stack of old egg boxes to the bin. He switched on the kettle, listening to its snare drum rattle. He could smell Anthea's sweat on his fingers. He brushed some woodlice from the windowsill. He had to decide what to do with the house.

§

It was fine day with black-headed gulls hanging over the village. His father had always said that they meant rain. Pablo walked to village stores and bought a loaf and a newspaper. When he pushed into the street he almost collided with Billy.

'Now then.'

'Hello Billy.'

'Pablo, we meet again!' Billy grinned. He had good teeth, strong and white, handsome in a careless way. His was in work gear – boots and army fatigues, a blue baseball cap. He knuckled the stubble on his cheek.

'Seems like it, Billy. How're things? Busy?'

'Oh aye, they're busy alright Pablo, allus busy in my line of work.'

'That's good, then.'

Pablo made to move past him. 'I hear you're keeping the cottage on.'

That was quick. 'Well, I paid the rent that's all. Is that OK?'

Billy looked down at the back of one hand. There was a fresh scratch running across the knuckles. 'So you're staying around?'

'I don't know. I've still got a lot to sort out.'

Billy waited as one of the old ladies in the village went past, nodding courteously, then leaned in to where Pablo stood, tapping the rolled newspaper against his leg. 'You always were a rum cunt Pablo.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

But Billy was turning away now, pushing the shop door open to buy cigarettes. 'It means owt you want, Pablo. Things allus did wi' you.'

Then the door was clanging shut, the little bell jingling. Pablo walked home slowly. Billy went past towing a trailer full of fencing stakes. There was a collie yapping from an old coat in the back of the trailer.

Pablo called Alec as he walked. He could hear someone thumping away on a bass guitar in the background. Alec reminded him that he was supposed to be working in the studio next week. He had six days to get back to Manchester.

His father's grey and white cat was back, brushing against his legs, mewing for food. He pushed it away. He was going to have to start throwing things out. He called Anthea. 'Are you busy tomorrow?'

'Not especially. Just in the morning. Got to be in work.' She worked as a receptionist in a medical centre.

'Could you give me a hand? I've ordered a skip.'

'You're moving out?'

'Dunno. Just paid the rent. Whatever I do, some stuff's got to go.'

'OK. I'll see you around half-two?'

'That'd be great. Most of it's sorted. It shouldn't take long.'

Pablo sat for an hour with the guitar, tuning it to open E, practicing bottleneck. His

left hand still felt stiff from the sprain. He remembered the Woolworth's guitar up in the eaves. There was a lot of other stuff up there. Schoolbooks, off-cuts of carpet and lino, an old folding bed they'd used whenever relatives came to stay. His mother never let anyone use Tim's room. Towards the end she'd begun to sit in there. Then Pablo's father had come home from work and found her in Tim's bed, her clothes folded on a chair, empty bottles of pills laid out neatly with a glass of water.

Pablo spent the afternoon dropping stuff from the roof space down onto the landing below. The chimney had a crick in it so a hatch had been fitted to sweep above the constriction. The village lay under a ridge and its chimneys sulked in damp weather, laying hanks of smoke over the rooftops. Now everything had a thin layer of soot. He could hear jackdaws on the roof as he worked, a greenish light falling through the skylight.

By four, he'd pretty much emptied the space. He swung down into the box room, filthy with dust, and piled up the rolls of carpet, old travel trunks, exercise books and other debris. There was no point in doing any more until the skip came. He built a bonfire in the garden and burned the school books, stuff he didn't want to be retrieved. Then an old axe haft, a spade handle, some off-cuts of skirting board to stoke the blaze. The flames licked at them like a cat's tongue. Black pages curled and drifted. Afterwards he stank of smoke, like those days on the moor when his father was burning off the heather. He went to Tim's room and took down the glider, then put it back where it had hung for thirty years.

Pablo ran the bath and took a long soak. The smell of fire reminded him of the village on winter days the rooks rose like soot from the churchyard and smoke coiled over the roofs. He changed into his last clean shirt and jeans, then put his filthy clothes in the washing machine, crumbled congealed powder into the soap drawer. Then he lifted the ring-pull from a can of beer and sat in the ruined deck chair to read the newspaper.

That night Pablo was woken by moonlight shining through the curtains he'd forgotten to close. He woke thinking of the river meadow where they'd played cricket in the old days. There were still the remains of a pavilion and an old iron roller, though the strip was long overgrown and the team was a parade of ghosts in the black and white photographs in the pub.

The moon moved from view, but its light was bright. He heard a noise from the garden. It sounded like someone on the path. Then there was a crash of paint tins where he'd piled them against the outhouse and a soft curse. He moved to his parents' bedroom to get a better view. He stood for a long time before he saw the outline of someone in the shadows of the building. Whoever it was wore a peaked cap and was watching the house.

§

In the morning Pablo went to the outhouse and pulled out his father's old pushbike. It had a rusted chain cover and a sunken leather saddle. The gears were stiff and the chain dry. Pablo found some oil. He pumped up the cracked tyres and they held firm. Then he found his father's bicycle clips and fastened up his jeans, taking the road out of the village. He hadn't ridden a bike for years. It was strange sensation, following the hedgerows, changing gear for the hills, rising in the saddle. Just as he had when Tim was riding ahead, the sun milled into a thousand shards of light by his spokes. He had to dismount at that first hill with its hairpin bend, just as they had back then, pushing their bikes to the summit, then

following the road down to the water.

The hot air balloon was there again, drifting over the valley. Some trees had been felled there were new saplings in white plastic sheaths. Alder and silver birch had taken over where the ground was boggy. It had been a new frontier when they'd cycled down it that day. And he remembered that the others were already there when they arrived. This morning, the ride took him forty minutes. It'd seemed longer back then. But then memory stretched some things and compressed others. He'd read about that, how times does and doesn't exist. Music was like that, measured by beats and missing beats, by sound and silence.

He laid the bike against a wall in a layby and hung the clips over the handlebars. Then he walked through a mulch of mud and reeds to the same gate that led down through trees to the water. Black-headed gulls circled the woods. The tapping of a woodpecker came from deeper in the trees. Then the scent of pine and larch cones, layers of soft conifer needles decaying underfoot on the path that curved down to the little beach. Season upon season sank underfoot. If you dug deep enough there'd be the detritus of that summer in seventy-six. The past crumbling through your fingers.

He'd never been back, not once. He'd got close to it a few times when he was a teenager, roaming the woods with Carl, but somehow they'd always turned away. Turned back. The beach was smaller than he remembered. Grey water lapped at the pebbles. An orange cartridge case bobbed. A beer bottle. The water must have been much back lower then. A moorhen was circling in the reeds, anxious for its mate. He remembered the tidemark on the beach, a scum of leaves and twigs. Right now, the water was high, lapping at his shoes. There was a red and white lifebelt hung above a warning notice. Useless. Tim was too far out by then, too far to throw the belt. Carl had tried and it bobbing uselessly a few yards from the shore.

Pablo sat on a fallen tree and stared at the water. The woodpecker drilled again, a rapid, dry hammering. A wood pigeon blundered above him. He watched a tree creeper working around the bole of a fir, its curved beak tapping for grubs. There was Tim's face, blue at the lips. He'd left his glasses on the bank on top of his clothes. His father had folded and pocketed them, picking up the tee shirt when they'd taken Tim away. It looked tiny. Then all those nights awake in his bedroom with the voices below, his mother weeping, his father's blurred tones. They'd never blamed him, however much they'd wanted to. There'd been times when he wished they had.

When Pablo got back to the bike there were fresh tyre marks next to it where some one had pulled up then driven away, a fresh cigarette butt trodden into the grass. He turned the bike and rode back down towards home, remembering how he'd sat next to his father in the Landrover, frozen. Knowing the enormity of what had happened and that couldn't be changed.

He pumped hard on the pedals, hearing the whirr of the chain, the hiss of the blue balloon with its spike of flame as it drifted back towards the estate. He'd be a speck to them, insignificant, moving down the lanes towards the village they could see and he couldn't.

Back at the cottage he rang Alec to check on things in Manchester. All good. Sound. No sweat. He rang off and took stock. He'd almost finished clearing the house and putting

things in order. He needed to give Anthea her car back and buy something else now that his was written off. Then he'd have to work out when to let the lease on the cottage lapse. When to let that go. He couldn't decide now. That was to do with the future. What happened next. Or what might happen. He needed to talk to Anthea. He remembered the horse rearing at the windscreen, the way she'd held its head as it lay dying in the road. That glimpse of copper hair through the hedge as she ran towards it.

Pablo made lunch from bits and pieces left over in the fridge, toasting some old bread. He'd need to shop again if he was going to hang on a bit longer. He spent an hour with the guitar, playing over some familiar changes, then tuning it for slide. He loved that ring of brass over strings, the way a slight movement of the wrist made them sing. He tried a version of *Fixin' to Die*, humming over its sliding chords. All music was about death or love in the end. Tension and resolution. Making love. Fixing to die.

At two-o'clock he walked into her driveway. She appeared at the kitchen window first, dressed in a lumberjack shirt that might have been Billy's. Then she came through the door, smiling, showing the little gap in her teeth. It was funny how she was always able to do that. To smile, whatever she was feeling.

'Hi. Are you OK?'

'Yep. Don't I look it?'

She frowned and leaned against the driver's door where he'd pushed it open. 'You don't usually come to the house.'

'Come on. I'll drive'

'Where are we going?'

'It's a surprise...' 'I'd better put some decent shoes on. Hang on.' She was wearing leather flip-flops. A few minutes later she came appeared wearing trainers, locking the kitchen door, a shoulder bag slung. Pablo kissed her. She was all warm skin and freckles and hair that smelled of lemon shampoo. 'Hey! Everyone can see.' She was more than half serious, pushing his arm.

'It can't always be a secret.'

Anthea pulled the seat belt across and locked it. 'Meaning?'

'You know what I mean.' Pablo started the engine and drove down the valley, back to the reservoir. And then she knew. She knew where they were going and sat in silence, twisting the strap of her bag. For a moment, as he pulled into the layby and locked on the handbrake, he thought she was going to cry. Instead, she was whispering. *OK, OK.*

They walked the tangled path through the trees, catching their feet on old brambles, Anthea trailing him through the scent of larch trees. Her shoulder touched against him as they got to the water's edge and she stumbled. Silver birches and alder. Pools of standing water. Pablo picked up a flat stone and skimmed it, watching it skip seven times before sinking. 'This is the spot.'

Her hand was stroking his arm. 'Pablo.'

He didn't answer, taking up another stone that died in the water.

'Pablo?'

'You know I've got to ask you. You know that's why we're here.'

She laid her cardigan on the trunk of a tree and sat down, brushing something from her knees. There were doves cooing softly behind them, music sobbing in their throats.

§

Night was falling when Pablo got back to the cottage. He pushed the door where it scraped on the tiles. They'd never got into the habit of locking up here. It'd never occurred to them that they had anything to steal or that anyone would think they had. The house had that faint musty scent, a smell of damp plaster and mould, the tang of soot from the chimney.

Now there was another scent. He left the door ajar and moved softly. The living room lay down a short corridor. It wasn't totally dark outside, so a faint light came in through the window that looked out upon the yard. He reached the living room door and waited. His breathing had quickened. He could feel his heart rising against his ribs. His hand found the light switch and eased it on. Nothing. But there were three cigarette filters in the hearth.

Pablo paused again to listen. The floors in the house creaked under the slightest weight. It was silent except for the croak of a bird beyond the garden, a crow or heron roosting for the night. Pablo snapped the light on in the kitchen. Nothing. Just the sink of unwashed pots he'd left. He closed the front door, lifting it on its worn hinges. Then he took the two-pound weight from his mother's kitchen scales and moved upstairs step by step. The weight in his hand was cold, deadly. Pablo went through the bedrooms, one by one. His guitar was missing.

He'd bought it in Denver on California St. It was hand-made, small bodied with a deep waist, a slotted headstock, abalone inlays and a biting tone. He'd lived for a time on the east side of town not far from Union Station. Sometimes he and his Mexican neighbours jammed over a few beers on the steps outside. There was a girl who sang. *Henriquetta*. You couldn't place a value on that, on an instrument. His parent's bedroom was undisturbed as far as he could see, the bathroom just as he'd left it: towels scattered, toothpaste leaking, curtains blowing into the room.

He found the guitar in Tim's room, laid out on the bed. Someone had put his or her foot through the soundboard. The strings had done the rest, dragging the splintered wood into itself. It was wreck, a breakage of wood and steel and rasping bronze wire. Pablo sat on the bed and took the shattered pieces in his hands. It was beyond repair. It was senseless. Except there was sense here. There was purpose and logic. Whoever had done it had wanted to destroy, not steal, wound not kill. Whoever had done this had known where to hurt him. They'd known Tim because they'd carried the guitar to his room and stamped it to splinters there. Then those three cigarette ends left in the grate downstairs. Whoever did this had been there, that day.

Pablo took the guitar downstairs and wrapped it in a bin liner. Billy had always had that numb quality, that instinct to damage or destroy. Pablo's mother had bought him a new fountain pen when he started secondary school. A Waterman with a black barrel and gold top. Billy had taken it and put the top in his mouth. When Pablo had protested, he'd bitten down, flattening the metal, laughing. Pablo had tried to straighten it out and then he'd lied to his mother to protect Billy. Like kids do, covering for each other. He remembered that look on Billy's face. That perverse delight in spoiling something.

Pablo was wearing his leather jacket. He zipped it up. It'd do. He could go back and borrow the car, but that was too much hassle. He'd drunk too much to drive. Fuck it. He'd walk. The village was silent. Just a few lights on in upstairs rooms, the pub still lit as they cleared up. Pablo took a left over the river bridge, climbing the southern flank of the valley. The moon was gliding behind ragged clouds and his eyes adjusted, picking out the dying blossom on the hawthorn, stands of mustard garlic and cow parsley. Two miles down the road he turned left again at a crossroads. Half a mile down that road a right turn took him up the track to Laithwaite Farm.

Limestone gleamed underfoot, scarred where overloaded trailers had touched down. He hadn't been here since he was a kid. The last time had been when his dad had something to deliver to Billy's father from the estate. They'd stood around awkwardly. Billy had left school by then and Pablo was in the sixth form. They were on separate paths. His father had never had much time for Billy's dad. *Rough farmers*, he called them. Not surprising when you looked at the land. Billy didn't keep much stock now.

The ground was marshy and rushes spiked the land. There was just enough moonlight to follow the track. Pablo could see the lights of the farmhouse ahead. Billy still ran some sheep. Rough Fell and Blue Faced Leicesters. He had a small herd of Dexters for beef. They'd kept a couple of horses when Anthea lived with him. But they were long gone. The farm was set back into the hill, a low whitewashed building with a barn at one end. The outbuildings were newer: a steel shed for wintering beef cattle and storage for tractors and combines. The usual stink of cow shit and silage. A kennel with a chained collie inside. It was an old dog, nearly done. It came out to look at Pablo but didn't bark, shaking the chain incuriously, cocking its leg against the wall. It didn't seem like Billy to keep on an old dog, nearly blind.

He stepped into the yard and faced the house. Billy's Range Rover was parked there. He went past the dog to put his hand on the bonnet. The engine was still warm. Pablo knocked on the door, three raps. A light came on in the passageway. Then slurring footsteps on a flag floor. When Billy opened up Pablo could hear the television. Billy looked past him to the dog, a flicker of annoyance passing over his face. Then that wide, easy grin. He didn't seem surprised to see him.

## §

In the morning Pablo woke to unbearable light. A blade was hacking at his temples, a hot wire pulsing. He ran a bath, swallowed some aspirin, fried some rashers, dropped an egg into the hot fat. He made a pot of tea and drank it, cup by cup, feeling the tannin coat his teeth. He hadn't drunk whiskey in years. He drank a long glass of water, cleaned his teeth, then walked to Anthea's, tapping on the window and pointing to the car. She passed the keys through the kitchen window. His face must have told a story, because she didn't ask. Pablo drove out of the village. He was probably still over the limit, but fuck it. He drove three miles over moorland. Lapwings were rising and diving, a cluster of rocks was silhouetted on the horizon, the house hidden in the fold of a higher valley. When he reached the farm gate, he got out, opened it, drove through then closed it behind himself.

There was an uncut meadow yellow with buttercups. Half a dozen Texels grazed the field next to the house. The tractor was in the yard, a bale of hay speared on its lifting spike. The dogs at the gate set up a clamour as Pablo got out. No answer at the house when

he knocked or when he opened the door to call out. There were blebs of resin pushing through on the paintwork, a split bin bag spilling beer cans in the yard. When he pushed his face against the window there was no movement, just a settee scattered with coats in the living room, a gun cabinet, a sink full of pots in the kitchen.

Pablo found Carl in the bottom pasture with a lamb trapped between his knees. He was slipping an elastic ring over its tail. He pushed the lamb away and it ran back bewilderedly to its mother. 'Pab!' The cap was pulled low, his face hard to read. He spat onto the grass.

Pablo watched the lamb tugging furiously at its mother's udder.

'I've been expecting you. I thought you might pay a visit.'

'Like you did?' A fighter jet was streaking across the valley towards them, tugging the sound of ripping sky in its wake.

'I'm sorry about the guitar.'

Pablo waited, watching glossy grass bend away from them.

'I'll pay for it.'

'You couldn't.'

'It's not hand-to-mouth, you know.'

'It's not the money that matters Carl, it was a one-off.'

'You're a fucking one-off.'

'Meaning?'

'You wouldn't listen, Pab. I tried. You just didn't get it. I'd had a few drinks. I only came round to talk, found the house empty, like...thought you'd be at Anth's. I waited and fucking waited, then I just lost it.' Carl's hands, big and raw, hanging out of the blue overalls.

'Was it because of Anthea?'

Carl turned the elasticator over as if inspecting it. He pulled his cap off and stuffed it in his overalls pocket, glancing at the sky where the sun was trying get out. 'It was because of everything Pab. Because you wouldn't leave things well alone.'

'I've talked to Billy.'

'You're lucky he didn't fucking belt you. He'd have had cause.'

'He told me you used to help my dad, when I wasn't around.'

'It wasn't just me, Billy too. After your mother...'

'Why didn't I know this stuff?'

Carl laughed, showing gappy side teeth. 'You couldn't wait to get away, that's why. We didn't even blame you, but you were no bloody use to anyone. Couldn't see the wood for the fucking trees.'

'I'm sorry if I've made a mess of things with Anthea. I didn't mean to.'

'There was never anything to make a mess of. I thought there might be one time, that's all. I s'pose I was hoping. It's not just that, it's everything else. Come here.' Carl took his arm and walked him to the high point in the meadow. They could see down the valley to the grey tip of the reservoir. Whitethorn was wasting from the trees in the fields and beside the road. 'I don't know what this is to you, Pab, but this is my life. It's all there is. It's blood, sweat and fucking misery at times. But on days like this I want for nothing.' Carl wiped a finger across his eyebrow. 'Well, nowt but company.'

The ragged calling of lambs came to them from the pasture. ‘You come back and you’re like a ghost. Poking about, knowing nowt. Nothing’s ever been enough for you. You couldn’t see we tried to look out for you, especially Billy. But you treated him like a twat.’ Scraps of wool blew across the grass from moulting sheep. They weren’t worth shearing any more.

‘Did I dare him, Carl?’ Silence. The harsh calling of mothers to their straying lambs. ‘Did I dare him?’

‘Who? Tim?’

‘Who else?’

Carl bit a piece of rough skin from his cuticle, brushed his fingers against his unshaven chin. ‘Aye, you dared him. You were showing off to Anthea. She were well ahead of hersel’ back then. Billy, me, you. Like a deck o’ fucking cards.’ Carl laughed again, a cynical spurt of breath. ‘You dared him and Billy tried to stop him. Then he went in after him.’

‘That’s what you remember?’

‘It’s what happened, Pab. But we never said a word. None of us. It were keeping quiet that fucked everything up. Mebbe we shouldn’t have. Mebbe you should’ve had to live with it instead of us.’ He touched Pablo on the arm.

They’d kept quiet and shouldered the silence. For his sake. For his parents’ sake. ‘Jesus, Carl’ He was dashing the tears from his face. Watching the sun cast cloud shadows across the valley. Two buzzards circling high up, stray specks against the blue.

‘You were a kid, Pablo. It’s what kids are like. We were all to blame. Or maybe none of us were to blame.’

Pablo thought about the horse that day. About the flash of copper hair behind the hedge. The horse dying there in the road. He felt Carl’s arm across his shoulder, but pulled away. He nodded at him, the way you nod at an acquaintance. ‘Thanks Carl. That’s something I needed to know. I have to get on with it now.’ And he was walking back to the car, hearing the air fill with the cries of lambs. He passed a sheep feeding on her knees, another limping away from the hay Carl had put down. He drove down the track too fast, feeling the exhaust catch on the gravel, seeing the tip of the reservoir curl like a ram’s horn, then disappear. When he got back to the cottage, a yellow skip had appeared in the driveway.

§

Pablo went to the window, watching a half moon sail behind clouds. He sat in Tim’s room under the half-built glider that hung from the ceiling. He waited for birdsong, which came at four-thirty with the repeating call of a song thrush. He watched the first herons silhouetted against the sunrise, flying east to work the little becks that fed the river. At eight o’clock he left the house to buy bread and a tube of glue. He left the bread untouched on the kitchen table. The next time he noticed it the crust had been nibbled by mice. They left their droppings on the wood his mother had scrubbed and bleached.

He took down the glider from Tim’s room, sliding a cardboard box out from under the bed. The balsa wood struts, tissue paper cladding and scalpel were there, just as he remembered. Even the front wheels on their wire frame, that still needed fixing. The plane had a three-foot wingspan and it took him half a day to complete the tail section, cutting



the wood to shape and gluing it into place. When he'd finished it he covered it in paper, doped it and hung it back up to dry. It'd need another coat. The dope smelt like pear drops.

On the evening of the third day there was a knock on the door. When he opened it, Anthea was there, her hair tied back, wearing the same green tee shirt she'd worn that first time. 'Pablo?' He couldn't answer and she took his face in her hands. 'Oh, Pablo.' He felt her arms around his neck. 'It wasn't your fault Pablo, it really wasn't your fault.'

He felt the first sobs heave into his chest like rocks. 'I stink.'

She smiled then, touching his chest. 'You do.' When he began to cry she soothed him with her kisses, wiping his face with her hand, pulling him close.

Anthea ran a bath and helped him to undress. His body was thin. She traced his ribs with her fingers. The hot water closed around him and he wanted to sink under it. His heels squeaked against the enamel as he soaped himself. When he was clean and dry, Anthea led him to the bed. He was floating above his life, above his own self. Floating above the blossom-laden valley, her hands pressing lightly against him. He fell asleep almost at once, his head nested into the curve of her belly.

When Pablo woke, it was dark except for a glimmer of moonlight at the window. The landing light was on and he could hear Anthea downstairs clinking cups. Then she emerged with two mugs of tea and sat on the bed. They didn't speak, but cupped heat in their hands, breathed steam, drank bitter black tea. 'I had to throw the milk away.'

Pablo didn't answer. He traced the silver bangle on her arm. He tugged at her arm now, feeling that little shrug of resistance. 'Where are the girls?'

'My mum's got them. It was all getting too complicated'

'With Billy? Carl?'

She frowned. 'With you. With everyone.'

Somehow she'd been the flame that drew them all together.

'You can't blame yourself, Pablo. We were children. All of us. Children do things... they explore...they don't really know what they're doing. Maybe Tim had his own reasons...'

'He was just a kid. He looked up to me. I betrayed him, didn't I?'

'He wasn't afraid. I remember that. Even when Billy tried to stop him.'

'Why didn't I try? Why did I dare him?'

'It wasn't just you. It was the game. It was a stupid forfeit, that's all. No one imagined it could go wrong...'. She was blushing under her freckles, looking away to where the branches of the damson tree darkened the window. 'That's what kids do, explore...don't blame me.'

'I'm not.' *Show. Then touch. Touch or swim.* They'd all done it in the shelter of the trees. All except Tim. He'd thought it was stupid. But he took the forfeit anyway. 'It killed my mother, one way or another.'

'Don't you think you've suffered enough for it? However it happened?'

'You mean by forgetting? By burying it all? By blaming everyone else?'

She smiled and touched her hair to his face. 'Yes, because you weren't able to be free. None of us were.'

When he'd touched a guitar in the early days, that feeling had melted through him

as he played. Something guiding his fingers. *Duende*, the Spanish called that. Playing with passion, without thinking. But it meant more than that. It meant a dark thing, a diabolic inspiration. Robert Johnson at the crossroads, making his pact with the devil, fingertips against strings, pulling and bending, flattening and sharpening, those molten blue notes sliding between minor and major. Between sadness, hope, redemption. *Suffering*, the blues players would have said. You suffer to play and that's the deal.

When he woke Anthea was gone. Pablo dressed slowly, feeling under the bed for his shoes. He took his father's bike and cycled down the valley in the moonlight, the glider slung across his back. He stopped at the layby, leaning the bicycle. He took the plane and carried it through the gate, down the path to the little beach. There was the reservoir. Under it houses and farms, walls, chimneys, slates and roof beams falling slowly to rubble. The same water poured purified from taps and standpipes in the city.

Pablo laid the plane at the water's edge. There was a glimmer of dawn. Sun and moon rising and falling as counterweights. Waterfowl were calling. He thought he could make out their shapes on the water, creasing its black foil. He took a run with the plane and hurled out over the lake expecting it to nose dive. Instead it began a curling ascent that took it back towards the land, just clearing the stunted birches, then back out over the lake, gaining height. It appeared then faded in the moonlight as its wings tilted, rising towards the faint apparition of hills. Then it was gone.

Chilled air seeming to hum with coming light. A pair of ducks took off in panic, wing tips scuffing the water as they fled. The moon was taken by a drift of cloud, black with silvered edges soldered to the sky. A barn owl called across the lake and another replied. Call and answer, the source of all music. Pablo watched a low planet, pendant above the wooded ridge of the valley. It would also hang above the city that was rooted by concrete and steel to the curve of the earth, seething with electric light, riven by roads and railways, monumental with the anonymity he'd come to need.

Pablo walked at the water's edge in the scent of larch trees, feeling his boots press into leaf mould and sour mud. He'd been forgiven all along and not known it. He sat for a long-time, hearing birds wake the valley. He remembered the horse plunging and falling as its life left it, eyes wild with inner-surgings darkness. That was an age ago now, like the flare of copper hair behind hedgerows. He rose stiffly and walked to where he'd left the bicycle. The owl broke from the trees, flying with kissing wing tips. He rode home as the sun strengthened, tinning the hill ridge with molten light.

When Pablo reached the village the hot air balloon was rising from the fields beside the river. It swayed, collapsing, inflating, righting itself with hoarse exhalations. Then tilting above a needle off flame, drifting over the glittering spillage of the reservoir, above its own drowned reflection. The passengers saw their double rise towards them from an underwater realm, its drenched fire ceasing, then flaring again. The balloon hung undecided in crosswinds. It rose engorged with heat above meadows, moorland, mown hayfields, the green sorrow of the valley. Then it seemed to flee its own shadow, veering towards the wide hush of the sea.

About Whitethorn Games. We're an indie game publisher focusing on pleasant, cozy games that can be played in pieces, that require no special skills or knowledge, and that anyone can pick up and play. We're believers in accessibility, inclusion, and widening the audience that gets to play. We like to consider ourselves the defenders of easy games. While our games might challenge you, they'll respect your time, they'll make sure you can play, and most importantly, they'll never punish you. Whitethorn games are Whitethorn may refer to:

- \* Whitethorn, California, United States
- \* Whitethorn (hawthorn), a species of hawthorn native to Europe, northwest Africa and western Asia
- \* Whitethorn (novel), an Australian novel
- \* Whitethorn (shrub), a small shrub in the family

Wikipedia. Whitethorn White thorn , n. (Bot.) The hawthorn. [1913 Webster] The Collaborative International Dictionary of English. Rowan Whitethorn is a Fae Prince, warrior, and formerly one of six elite warriors of Maeve's Cadre. He is also King-Consort and mate to the Queen of Terrasen, Aelin Galathynius. He is one of the main protagonists of the series. After his blood oath with Maeve ended, he swore the blood oath to Aelin Galathynius and became the first member of her court. He is the most powerful full-blooded Fae in existence.