

Concealed Emotion: Isolation and the Restrained Self in Fiction

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Aamir Mehar, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:

Abstract

A novel and a critical piece exploring the themes of restrained emotion and isolation in fiction. The novel is a first-person narrative that focuses on exploring the emotions and relationships between restrained and isolated characters. The story mainly takes place in London, with a modern setting. The narrative takes place over the course of years, following the protagonist, Rayhan. Emphasis is placed on the protagonist, but two other characters (named Safia and Claire) are also central to the narrative. The critical piece concentrates on analysing Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Remains of the Day' and Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre', exploring how both authors approach these themes through a close reading. The opening section is an introduction that details the general concepts behind the thesis as a whole. There is a chapter on my own novel, and my approach to writing it, including analysis of the characterisation and how it relates to emotional restraint and isolation. The chapter on 'Jane Eyre' examines the protagonist's childhood and adulthood, aiming to cover significant events during both periods of Jane's life. The opening of the chapter pays particularly close attention to Jane's relationship with Mrs Reed, along with the moment that Jane meets Brocklehurst. The chapter then moves on to explore Jane's relationships with Rochester and St John. The chapter on 'The Remains of the Day' mainly focuses on Stevens's relationship with Miss Kenton. The final chapter is a conclusion that looks at all three works ('Jane Eyre', 'The Remains of the Day' and my own novel) together.

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The Awkward Shape

CHAPTER ONE

I left the house for the first time a few days ago.

It was Autumn, and the street outside was strewn with leaves the colour of amber and burnt copper. Sunlight came into my room in soft fragments, scattered by the tree branches above, and when I touched my window I could feel the cold in the air through my fingertips.

It's one thing to entertain the thought of stepping outside -- it's quite another to actually go through with it. I was particularly apprehensive after examining myself in my smudged mirror; a thick, dark beard covered my cheeks, and my eyes seemed somehow dull and softer than before. When I held my hands up to the light I could see dirt gathered in clumps behind my long fingernails, and there was a grey, papery quality to my sagging skin. A laugh rose in my throat, guttering out before it reached my mouth.

I opened my cupboard and looked through my clothes, trying to ignore the smell of sweat and dust. I eventually decided on a white button-up shirt, black trousers and a brown overcoat. The overcoat had been a particular favourite of mine when I was younger -- I would carefully tug the collar up around my chin and strut around with a thoughtful expression on my face, like the detectives I used to see on television. They were always in control, regardless of apparent danger. Always one careful, critical step ahead. It was strangely comforting to go through the basic ritual of looking at different pieces of clothing, examining the way the colours mixed or clashed with one another, and then deciding upon the best combination. There's an art to it, a sense of pieces slowly clicking into place. When I'd finally finished dressing, however, I felt odd; every pose and gesture I practised in front of the mirror was slow and mechanical, as if I were adjusting to some sort of elaborate disguise.

I looked around my room one last time before leaving. The walls were covered with old star charts and pictures of spaceships, and the shelves were packed with movie and music discs. The bed in the corner stank of something unidentifiable, and there was a dark grease mark on the pillowcase. There were plates and mugs near my feet, still stained with dried cheese, tomato sauce and the remains of a blackcurrant drink. I nudged them aside with my feet, ducked under the dangling light bulb and moved into

the hall. I was fine until I reached the front door, but the moment I touched the handle I found myself slowing. My heart was beating with a force that momentarily scared me, and even when I closed my eyes and touched my eyelids I still felt it pumping. I spent a long time in that position, sucking in deep breaths and exhaling slowly before I finally pushed the door open and stepped outside, hands in pockets. It felt like walking into a storm; I flinched at the sound of cars as they moved past, and there were people arguing nearby, their faces contorted. The light around me was so much sharper than I recalled, and I instinctively glanced around for some sort of shade. The uneven pavement was peppered with garbage and there were pieces of broken glass near one of the older buildings.

Every time I passed another person I felt my nails curling into my palms. I kept thinking that someone was staring at me. They knew everything about me -- surely they could read it in a single glance. I felt like I'd forgotten to walk like other people. Most of them seemed to move as if they were continually late for an appointment, bulling their way past others. There was a certain rhythm in place, and despite my best efforts it was impossible to replicate it. Rather than stepping to the side to create room, I veered away from others, my feet sometimes getting tangled in my haste. At one point I tried to move aside for an approaching man and we ended up moving in the same direction, as if part of an ugly dance. I stopped and stared at the ground. I felt his irritation in the way he slowly stepped around me and carried on down the street.

I spent most of the day walking past places I had once visited, refusing to glance up at the sun as it picked away at the back of my neck. I lingered around an old art museum for a while. Afterwards, I watched teenagers playing games in the run-down arcade nearby, howling or swearing whenever they lost a point. In the evening I walked through the park and sat under an old tree, scraping my back against the bark.

Sentimentality can be a slippery thing; it slinks towards you through the grass and slips into you before you've even noticed its touch. I've seen people who can ward it off -- they have some sort of invisible armour, I suppose. It glides right off them. I used to think of myself as one of those people, but lately I've begun to wonder.

I sat there for a long while, simply looking around, taking note of every detail, piece by piece. There was a crooked blade of grass near my finger, and I heard trainers hitting concrete as someone jogged past. Children were playing on swings nearby,

occasionally squealing with the sort of pleasurable fear that comes from knowing they cannot fall. A couple were sitting together under another tree with a neat picnic -- the woman nestled against his shoulder, laughing as he whispered something. They were both handsome and polished, as if posing for a photograph or painting, and they radiated warmth. I had a sudden hunger to see them fighting, screaming, pushing one another and finally walking away, leaving the picnic in disarray.

I've been wondering for a long time -- not just days, but weeks, even months -- how to make sense of certain things. I have led a trivial, even pathetic life, and if there is anything of value to be found in the time I've spent alive, something worth recording and remembering, it probably rests in the periods I spent with two particular people. The trouble is knowing where to start.

I already know, I suppose. I've known for a long time, but I really didn't want to dip into such old memories. It's embarrassing, dull, and not something worth revisiting.

But I'll do it anyway — context is everything.

I was apparently born in Cornwall. I use the term 'apparently', because I barely have any memories of the place. My parents moved to the borough of Camden in London when I was only three years old, as my father couldn't handle the seclusion. I do sometimes have an image in my head of foamy water and dark rocks, but it's probably just wishful thinking. I've always wondered if I might have been happier if my parents had stayed there.

I grew up in a needlessly large house. When I consider my old neighbourhood now, I mainly recall its strange atmosphere. On one hand there were massive trees lining my road, with dark green leaves and pale pink blossoms in Spring, a grandeur that was reflected by the ostentatious houses and cars on all sides. On the other hand, it only took a five-minute walk to find that the area was also home to 'the estates', as my aunt called them. She had a very strange way of saying it -- she somehow managed to mix sympathy and condemnation. I was always told to never go near the estates, and so naturally I tried to examine them at every available opportunity. The first time I saw them I was disappointed, though; part of me had hoped for crumbling black towers and a one-eyed ogre on patrol. What I instead saw were faded grey buildings and a small park-like area nearby, complete with old swings and monkey bars. I sometimes noticed

a few kids in hoodies hanging around, but they never paid me any particular attention. They sometimes shouted words to each other that were forbidden in my house, usually while laughing, but I also saw them generally enjoying themselves, arm-wrestling and swinging around on the monkey bars. Both parts of the neighbourhood were utterly different and yet oddly similar; there was a sort of hollowness and monotony in both places, a collective thirstiness that made me nervous.

Life at home was quiet. I remember my father leaning forward on the couch, and the wrinkles in his neck as he watched a Lennox Lewis boxing match. Normally he would stick to old matches, but Lewis was one of the few modern boxers that he liked. His favourite fighter, however, was Sugar Ray Leonard. I suppose that was also why my father always used a shortened version of my name when he referred to me — Ray, instead of Rayhan. He had to link me to his interests in some way. Well, I suppose it wasn't just that. Ray also had the positive impact of sounding Western instead of Asian. I had no interest in boxing matches, so I sat on the floor near his feet, amusing myself with my toys. He always laughed when I pointed out that Howard Cosell had a 'stupid voice'. My father had been an amateur boxer in his youth; he stopped competing after only a few fights when he suffered from mild hand injuries. Even then he would have still continued to box if his parents and siblings hadn't pressured him into giving up. He always spoke of his time at the gym in a wistful tone, and he was keen to get me interested in the sport.

One day, when I was still in primary school, he took me to his old gym. There were faded posters all over the wall depicting famous fighters -- I recognised Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis, Ray Robinson and Thomas Hearns. Heavybags hung from chains, and the ring seemed to grow as I approached it. I felt an instant aversion to it, but I didn't want to embarrass my father with complaints. He eventually put me in the ring with another child. I kept fiddling with the bulky gloves and the headgear, and felt like I could barely move, let alone defend myself. The ropes around us made it feel like I was trapped in a colourful cage with a canvas floor. The other child was another novice, but he was taller than me, wiry and quick. He threw a few practice hooks while we waited to begin, and I looked at my father, silently waiting for him to come over and intervene. He shouted advice that I didn't hear, and I just stood in the middle of the ring and tried to breathe. The adults around us were also talking, but I didn't turn to look at

them, and I didn't really register what they were saying either -- everything outside the ring was swallowed up in a dull mist.

I didn't hear them telling us to begin, but the other boy ran at me, swinging for my head. He was clumsy, he had no real technique and his punches weren't powerful, but I jumped away from him as if I'd been scalded. As he closed in he landed a shot right on my nose. It was such a shocking and painful experience that my mind went blank, and the only thing left was fear. I tried to smother him by wrapping my arms around his waist. I had seen this done before on my father's boxing videotapes, and I knew my father disliked it and called it cowardly, but it was my only answer to the assault. I heard someone outside the ring barking for me to 'stop clinching', again and again, but I didn't listen. I clung on desperately, as if doing a wild, farcical dance with my opponent as he swung me this way and that, trying to throw me off. He finally succeeded, and this time I put my gloves up to guard my face, aping the basic posture my father had showed me. I hopped backwards until my back was against the ropes. I shut my eyes and held my gloves up while the other boy continued to flail at me. Even though I was trying to block, the punches still hurt. I don't know when my father stepped in the ring, but when I felt him separate us I still held my gloves up in resentment, hiding behind them. He had to pull them down to look at my face.

"You're supposed to hit him back!" he said, frowning at me. His words sounded dull amidst the ringing in my ears. The other boy looked confused.

"I don't want to," I said.

"You have to. That's the point of all this. Come on, it'll be fun. Just throw your arms out, like I showed you. You remember, don't you? The one two? Jab, right. Jab, right. Go on."

I didn't remember what the 'one two' was. I wanted to get out of the ring and tug off the gloves and shake off the headgear.

They started the match again, and I still refused to throw punches or attack in any way. The only thing I would do was clinch or block. I knew that I still wasn't safe, but they were the only actions that appealed to me. His punches rocked my head through my guard, but I didn't drop my hands. Eventually he tired, and his punches became slower, more predictable. This would probably have been the best moment to

finally attack him, but instead I decided to quickly slip out of the ring, breathing hard and tripping over the bottom rope as I did so.

“You’re doing it *wrong*,” I heard the boy say, and he made it sound like a grave injustice. I looked around and saw that my father was staring at the floor, while the coach scrutinised me as if I were an unfortunate accident of nature. My arms throbbed and my head was still aching, but all I could think was that it was over, and that I didn’t have to get back into the ring. My father eventually ushered me out of the gym -- his face was red when he said goodbye to the others, and they barely acknowledged him. None of them looked at me any more; they had already returned to their own training, skipping and hitting speed bags. We drove home in silence. He never spoke about that gym session again.

As time passed my father forced himself to spend less and less time watching boxing. It wasn’t an easy transition. Sometimes I saw him shadowboxing in the kitchen, only to catch himself and stop, motionless for a minute or two before he finally returned to cooking or washing dishes. After his mother fell sick he stopped following the sport entirely, and instead spent more time with his parents and siblings. When his mother died, five months later, he barely spent any time at the house at all. Sometimes he came back in the early hours of the morning, stinking of cigarettes, before falling asleep on the sofa downstairs.

His habits slowly became more normal, and he was much more careful and well-spoken than before. It wasn’t surprising, as he had always possessed the sort of social skill that my mother and I were rarely able to grasp. I often heard him telling my mother about the importance of presentation -- how she should choose her clothes more carefully, or even give more thought to the way she entered rooms and introduced herself. I don’t think she ever listened, although she nodded and agreed with him. I was also subjected to his sudden speeches and scrutiny; the smallest things made him irritable and stressed, like my hair being too long (‘sloppy’, he called it), the way I walked with a bent back, or, most importantly of all, my inability to capture people’s interest and attention.

“When I was at school,” he once said, “I was caned for my lack of manners. My teacher beat me just for laughing at the wrong moment.” I refrained from pointing out that children were no longer caned, and simply nodded, as I had seen my mother do.

“It’s that first impression,” he continued. “It has to be perfect. Once you get it wrong, it’s over, no matter what you do.”

The problem was that I didn’t have that power of being likeable, or any real charisma at all. I wasn’t talkative, passionate or interesting in any way. I had no brothers or sisters, and so I had to find ways to amuse myself. I particularly liked to quietly observe people. I was more confident conversing with imaginary creatures in my head than other children, and adults made me nervous. My room was my world, and there I became whatever I wanted to be. For the most part I was a noble knight of The Round Table. I didn’t fight off evil monsters, though -- in my mind I always battled people from the real world. A dentist, a teacher, the boy from the ring, anyone who looked at me in a disapproving light. Even when I was an adult, many years later, I found myself sometimes slipping into those pleasurable illusions while laying awake in bed. By then I did more than just fight -- I walked through fields and conversed with Merlin. It was childish nonsense, of course, but it was also a drug.

My father refused to accept my lack of social skill, and referred to this failing so frequently that it became frustrating. In most areas he was grounded and reasonable, but when it came to social interaction and poise he was a perfectionist. During some of our conversations he carefully watched my face and hands -- when I didn’t maintain eye contact or when I sat with a slouch he suddenly halted the conversation just to point it out. It was crucial to always shake someone’s hand firmly and to avoid mumbling. Men were always talkative and bold, according to my father.

My mother, on the other hand -- well, most people thought her a bit eccentric. I simply recall her smooth, delicate hands, and the way I played with the silver ring on one of her fingers, sliding it up and down, up and down, until she swatted at me. She was taller than my father, and on certain days she looked oddly pale, as if anaemic. Despite this, she was one of the most spirited people I’ve ever seen, always interested in learning obscure facts or fussing over some article or another. She taught History of Art, and was constantly away on trips to museums or lectures at universities. There was an infectious excitement in her voice when she chattered about these trips, and I found myself asking her questions about her work purely for the pleasure of seeing her enthused reaction. She was particularly fond of Manet; she spent hours writing about him and pointing out little details in his paintings that completely escaped my notice. When she was upset I often saw her quietly looking at prints of his work.

On one occasion she brought a modern painting home that genuinely scared me. I could watch my father's boxing footage (filled with bleeding and concussions) without even blinking, but this painting terrified me. Most people probably wouldn't have found it particularly striking; it was a simple depiction of an empty room. There was a table and chairs, with elegant plates and cutlery set out, but no actual people there to use them. I wondered about that -- perhaps the family had abandoned the house, I once reasoned, or perhaps there had never been people there to begin with. Maybe the people *were* there, but they were ghosts, invisible to human sight. Regardless of the reason, the work made me deliberately avert my gaze each time I came across it. This irritated my mother, which I found inexplicable.

Sometimes I went with her during her trips to the museums. I think she sometimes worried that I found it dull, but I actually quite liked it. I was drawn to the sculptures, particularly the ones in which the figures appeared frozen in the midst of movement. The fact that many of the figures were also nude contributed to my awe -- it was the first time I'd seen people treating nakedness as something to admire, and I couldn't really understand why. It felt like the cold, silent museum was another world where the normal rules didn't apply.

On one day we were late to the museum after my father thought that I should change my sweater for a carefully ironed white shirt. He went as far as to iron it himself. I didn't understand why it was such an important issue, but I did as he said. I was silent as I sat in the back of the car, watching my mother drive. We stopped at some traffic lights and she turned to me.

"A little quiet today, aren't you?"

"I'm tired."

She drove in silence for a minute before speaking again. "You know," she said, "Your father wasn't making it up when he told you that he was beaten. It wasn't just his teachers who did that, though -- it was his parents, too."

I took that in for a moment. "Why?"

"His family are a little difficult. He didn't help matters, though -- he refused to fall in line. He got into so many fights. He ran away from home for a while. There are certain people in his family that haven't even spoken to him again since then."

I wanted to hear more about this, but she seemed to sense that she had already said too much, and quickly changed the subject. Afterwards, however, what she had told me burrowed into my mind; every time I saw my father adjusting his tie in the mirror for ten minutes, or polishing his already gleaming car, I remembered my mother's words.

It really wasn't a bad life at that stage. Years later, I tried to make out that I had endured a troubled childhood at home, that my parents had never given any genuine time to me. I let these sentiments slip quite carefully in conversation -- only a sentence here or there, and then an instant transition into 'dismay' as people pressed me for more information. At some point I probably even convinced myself with those pointless lies. I don't even know why I did it -- it wasn't planned. It would just come out of nowhere, and I never really questioned it. I spend a lot of time wishing that I could go back to those old days at home.

There were, however, certain occasions that I don't recall as fondly. There was a day in the midst of summer when my parents had invited guests over for lunch -- family members and business friends. I was still in primary school at the time. As usual, I wore a shirt and trousers, and the collar was so tight that I had to tug at it every now and then to ease the pressure on my throat. I didn't dare to undo the top button, so I sat in silence, sweating and trying to breathe. Every time an adult smiled at me and offered a few words I smiled back, nodding and pretending that I knew what they meant. I noticed that the men had a strange way of crossing their legs; they balanced one leg over the other in a very square, rigid looking way. I shifted around in my seat and tried to emulate their posture, and I felt my smile slipping. It was horribly uncomfortable, and strained my leg. Why on earth did they sit that way? It wasn't enjoyable, and it looked ridiculous. Perhaps my legs were just different to most, somehow stunted or twisted. I put my leg back down.

It got gradually hotter, and my neck felt like it had been scraped raw by my collar. The chatter around me built, a drone like buzz. I blinked, trying to clear my head. I glanced at my father. He was busy speaking to Professor Williams, an elderly friend of my mother. My mother was in the garden, sitting on a bench under a tree. Neither of them paid me any attention.

I don't know what possessed me to do it. It had never happened before.

I stood up and casually walked out of the room and through the front door. As soon as I was on the street I began walking more quickly, then jogging, then running at full speed, delighting in the feel of wind through my hair. When I slowed down and regained my composure I claimed the day for myself, and decided to explore the nearby streets.

I didn't like the noisy main roads, so I stayed on the smaller ones, gazing up at trees and buildings. It wasn't long before I started sweating, and my legs started to ache. I had to search for another fifteen minutes before I could find a small park area with a bench. I realised, at this point, that I was no longer in my neighbourhood, but I was so tired that I pushed my uncertainty to the back of my mind. The bench was my main concern. It was the most uncomfortable bed I'd ever used, but it was enough; I let my feet dangle off the edge as I lay on my back, squinting at clouds.

I don't know when I fell asleep. I just remember opening my eyes and looking up at the night sky. I felt a shock travel through my body and push me upright. One or two cars passed, but there was no one anywhere on the street. I was convinced, for a moment, that the world had ended while I had slept. A monster from a Goya painting had raced through the streets, devouring everyone, before slipping away into the darkness, leaving a cold, shivering boy staring out at the black shapes around him. Everything looks different at night, and I couldn't figure out how to find the way back to my house. There was no light in the windows of most of the houses around me, and even if there had been I was too scared to knock at the door and ask for help. Strangers could do anything. They could be anyone. As soon as they realised that I was alone they would abduct me or murder me. No, I needed to find my own way back.

I think many people find the night unsettling. It hides too many things. In my case, it's not just that, though; it's a certain kind of quietness that steals in with it. There are still sounds out there, like cars in the distance, dogs barking and such, but there was nothing human, no reassuring chatter or faces. That scared me more than being unable to see clearly. I had been eager to escape the lunch party, but at least I had been safe there, with my parents nearby. This situation was alien to me.

Shadows moved over the road as I walked, flickering in the streetlights. I could hear the rhythm of my shoes on the pavement. I was so cold that I began to shiver, and hugged myself as I moved. A cat observed me from the opposite end of the road,

languidly trotting back and forth. As I drew near I could see it watching me, eyes glinting. I walked faster, my breath coming quickly.

Cars passed now and then, hateful things that never slowed. They sprung out of the gloom, raced past, and left me bewildered. I stuck to the patches of the road illuminated by streetlights, and finally saw someone loitering around under a tree ahead. It was a thin man walking up and down, moving with the sort of jerky, quick motion of a squirrel. He had a bottle in his hand, and he swung it as he walked. As I neared, emerging from the shadow, he saw me and moved back, the bottle slipping from his grasp. It hit the pavement and shattered. I instinctively froze.

“What are you doing?” he said after a moment, eyeing me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Forget it. Fuck off.”

I noticed that some of his drink had splattered on my shoes. I tried to rub it off on the pavement, and glanced up at the man again. He looked at me with disgust.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Right. Whatever. Just go -- go back to wherever you came from.”

Usually I would have instantly obeyed him, but I couldn't face the prospect of trudging back into the darkness. I was too scared to even consider what he might do to me.

“I need to go home. Can you help?”

“Fuck off,” he shouted, and I tottered backwards, starting to run. He stopped me. “Wait. Look, I can’t help you.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He considered for a moment, then laughed. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what day it is. How old are you?”

“I can’t tell you,” I said again, quickly.

“Oh yeah. Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. You’re a smart kid. So you’re lost, are you? You at least gonna tell me where you live?”

Normally I would never even hint at it, but in this situation I was trapped. I needed help. I told him my address, and he blinked. “Never heard of that road.”

I felt my throat tightening, and I couldn't even muster enough composure to reply in the polite way I had been taught. He seemed to have already forgotten my dilemma, however, and was staring at the fragments of glass on the concrete.

"Wish I could sleep. Fuck them, though. I don't need anyone. Why would I? I've got a job. I've got a house. I've got everything I want." I flinched at the sharpness in his tone. He rubbed his head for a while before speaking again. His voice was softer now. "You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Why are you allowed to be so bloody ignorant?"

I wasn't sure how to respond, but he continued to speak.

"Kid. Boy. Whatever. You better run along home now. Run, before I get pissed again. Go."

I moved away slowly. When I turned the corner he was still staring down at the ground. That was the last I ever saw of him.

I needed to find a police station, but I had no idea how to do it. There were no pay phones around. I just kept wandering, at one point walking down the middle of an empty road, careless of the potential for danger. Finally, I gave up and sat on the curb, hugging my knees. I was too scared to sleep, so I just sat there, wondering what I was waiting for. My family didn't know where I was, and they wouldn't find me. I thought of my father and reflexively reached for my shirt to fasten my top button and smooth it out. It stank of the beer from the stranger's bottle.

I was still sitting there, hunched over and red-eyed, when they found me. I sat in the back seat of the police car and listened to the reassurances and questions while I watched the sun rise through the window. My mother wouldn't stop hugging me when I got back home, and kept on talking about how she should have been keeping a closer eye on me. When I told her about my meeting with the stranger I could feel her arms trembling. My father also greeted me by gripping me tightly, and I felt his heavy hand running over my head. He was quieter than my mother, however, and even when he sat back down his fists were clenched. I think they even entertained the notion that I had been trying to run away from home; I had to explain to them that it was nothing like that, and that I had just followed an impulse to get away from the tedium of the party.

They were still concerned, however, and my mother kept asking me if I was happy, while my father watched me in silence. They seemed to think I was hiding

something, and I suppose I was -- I had no desire to leave my home, but I did want to find a way to leave the world itself. I thought about how I was supposed to grow up to be a proper, polished gentleman who went to work, came home, went to sleep and repeated this cycle the next day -- all the while speaking to people in a charming, hollow way -- and it frightened me. The problem was that there was nowhere to run from something like that. I wondered if the man I had encountered had felt the same way, and suddenly I wished that I had asked him when I had the chance.

I wasn't allowed to leave the house for a long time afterwards, not even on drives to the museums. I didn't mind; I'd had enough of the outside world. It couldn't offer me what I was looking for.

I don't remember much of my primary school days. What little I can recall consists of a few patches that I have to stitch together. Small pieces of a cookie floating in a glass of milk, and the powdery taste as I drank; pretending to sing hymns in assembly with the others while my legs throbbed; the sound of pages turning as our teacher read to us, and the way she licked her finger while doing so, which always confused me. I forced myself to play football with the rest of the boys during my last years at the school -- I was never any good, and they always just made me the goalkeeper. On more than one occasion my attempts to block and catch the ball resulted in disaster, for which there was an equal mix of rage and hilarity, a few pushes and cuffs over the head, and eloquent outbursts at the 'bitch' or 'dickhead' ruining the game. I'm not going to complain, because I deserved much of it. I never really gave any effort at all. For most of the time I just sort of stood there with my hands in my pockets, as motionless and uncaring as the dirty goalposts.

I should note that the football game during our break period was very much a lens through which classroom politics were expressed and revealed most clearly; the place you stood on the pitch was the place you stood in life. This wasn't as prominent as it became during high school years -- when football sessions became ground for far more dramatic bursts of emotion and social issues -- but it was definitely a sort of embryonic stage of that. Most of the time, however, I wasn't even looking at the ball; I was far more focused on the other areas of the playground, particularly the territory that the girls usually occupied.

Don't mistake me: I wasn't interested in that way. I was just curious, or as curious as I could be at that puny stage of mental development. I wondered what girls spoke about, what they *did* with their time while the boys played football. They seemed to indulge in skipping here and there, but not much else in the way of physical activity. While the boys ran around, focusing on the ball and foot movement with the usual intensity, the girls spoke amongst one another and traded pictures. While the boys spat on the concrete, leaving dark saliva patches near the goal posts, the girls laughed at mysterious jokes. While the male fights often consisted of wrestling, biting and flailing, the girls seemed to settle matters behind closed doors, and when there *was* a fight (on the odd occasion) it was bizarre to watch, a short affair with little real damage done. I was fascinated by the colourful jewellery and dresses that some of the teachers wore. I wondered why boys couldn't wear rings, bracelets and necklaces -- I knew it was considered wrong, but no one ever explained the reasoning behind it. I also liked staring at the blue ring one of the teachers wore, but I always had to make sure that no one saw me looking at it.

The girls noticed me watching, of course. I caught some of them glancing at me, speaking to one another and then shaking with laughter, in the way that comes so casually to children. On these occasions my scalp and cheeks felt prickly, as if someone were heating me up on a stove and constantly poking me. I didn't know *why* my attitude was wrong, but I knew it was wrong with a deep awareness, the sort that was reinforced whenever I glanced back at the football game and saw the casual way the other male students stood together, the way they knew exactly what to say and how to behave, a bit like a troupe after hundreds of rehearsals. I wondered, on more than one occasion, if there was some sort of secret to it all, as if key instructions for living had been delivered to the rest of the school during one of my absences. I wanted to care about the same things as them, and so at one point I just began pretending.

When it came to friends, I'm not really sure where I stood. I was never completely certain what a 'friend' was -- where was the line between acquaintance and friend? If I spoke to someone for a while, could I call them a friend? Or was there some sort of set time in which friendship came into being, and not a second beforehand? A mystery, as far as I was concerned. I often spoke to others, though. I chatted to some of them about video games, which was a boyish pursuit that I *did* genuinely enjoy, a topic I brought up as much as possible. I let people copy my work in some classes, and that

naturally prompted a brief social exchange here and there. My work was nothing special, so they must have been pretty desperate. I'm not sure if any of those people were ones that I would call a friend, though. They tolerated me, and I tolerated them, and that was that. The same unspoken code echoed throughout my relationship with my school subjects; it was a game of tolerance, and no more. I got by in most subjects by simply recalling what the teacher had said and writing it down. It gave me little genuine enjoyment, but I approached it in the same way I approached employment later in life -- I switched my mind off and worked, only surfacing at the end of my designated time. Dive, surface. Dive, surface. Each day bleeds into another.

In one class we were asked to write down what we wanted to be when we grew up. It was supposed to be some sort of miniature essay. I spent most of the class fiddling with my pencil, spinning it around my finger and staring down at the blank page. It was still blank when the teacher came around, collecting the papers. I still don't know why she never chose to speak to me or my parents about that. If they had asked me about it, I wouldn't have known what to say.

Drama class was a different story though. Pretending came naturally to me, and it wasn't until much later in life that I grew to despise this quality of mine. At this young age, however, I saw no problem with it at all; I enjoyed pretence, and Drama felt like a godsend, a ritualised, accepted form of indulging in my favourite habit. It was a lot like hiding in full view, and for a long while I kept looking for a catch, some sort of horrible downside to the whole affair. During one period I even convinced myself that an adult would burst in during class and give us all a stern lecture for daring to pass off enjoyment as 'work'. I can't remember much of the class format, but I'm sure it was nothing particularly challenging, and there wasn't much 'acting' going on. It was mainly very simple and strange group work exercises. We sat in a circle and made random noises; we closed our eyes and thought of various exotic places and animals; we made shapes with our bodies and just generally played with one another. It was, despite its weirdness, the sort of play that I secretly considered to be much more enjoyable than what actually occurred during our formal break.

Our teacher wasn't particularly good. His name was Mr Solomon, but I always thought of him as 'Solo-Man', mainly due to my desire to picture him as some sort of supervillain in disguise. Every time I called him over -- deliberately mispronouncing his

name -- there was a pinched expression on his face, but he listened to what I had to say, and replied in his usual flat tone. He would set us an exercise and observe us for a moment or two before moving to his desk to read old magazines, humming under his breath. He was quite a skeletal figure, and he walked with long, loping strides, with his arms hanging down by his sides. His brown shoes were always scuffed. Whenever another teacher entered the room his tone became a little more spirited, and he smiled -- when they left his shoulders inevitably sagged, he mumbled instructions once more, and the life drained out of him, seeming to dissipate into the air.

It was on one of these days -- in our final year, when we were all around eleven, I guess -- that he set us one of my favourite tasks. We were to think of an animal and attempt to embody it. The class shortly filled with children hopping like monkeys, or moving across the floor while making broken, piercing noises that were supposed to emulate birds. I instantly decided upon being a badger. I'd never seen a real badger, but the illustrations in one of my books had convinced me that the creature was the epitome of nobility and grandeur, a far cry from the boring choices around me. I remember feeling quite excited at the thought that my idea was unique, and that I might be praised for this clear example of creativity. I moved off into a corner of my own with what I deemed appropriate, badger-like disdain. The corner in question was behind a large piano and a stack of worn, padded chairs, and I was fairly pleased with this cosy little area until I noticed that someone else had arrived there first -- a girl was playing with some sort of figurine near the drapes of a curtain. It was, I gradually realised, the 'weirdo' girl, as some of the others had artfully dubbed her. I was never actually told *why* they thought she was weird -- I'm not even sure if they could have explained it themselves. Like most children I've come across, we had a good feel for emotions, as if they came off people in waves. The children knew that the girl was strange, and the matter was as simple as that; logic wasn't only unnecessary, it was a foreign creature. Children simply stayed away from her. Even the teachers looked a little uncomfortable when addressing her, as if they were breaking some sort of unspoken rule by calling attention to the poltergeist in the room.

I was curious. No -- it wasn't some sort of silly longing for a friend, regardless of what she might state. It was more like the type of fascination some people show for watching a freakish animal, something alien and different. I was also unusually cocky

that day, having spent several minutes strutting around the room as a badger, looking down upon everyone around me. Maybe it was simple intuition. Call it what you will, but I moved over to observe her from close range.

At first the girl didn't seem to notice me. She continued to play with her toy. From this distance I could see that it wasn't a doll, as I had expected. If anything, it resembled a boy's plaything -- some sort of battered toy soldier -- and she was calmly making him walk across the floor, his plastic legs stiff and shining. Considering her reputation, she certainly didn't look distinctive at all. If you saw her in a crowd your gaze would skate right off. 'Unremarkable' would be the best word.

I rapped my knuckles on the floor. She ignored me. I shook my hair. She ignored me. I brushed hair strands back behind my ears, considered her for a long moment, and then crept up to her, planning to gently paw at her with my hand, as I imagined a badger would to greet someone. She finally turned around and frowned at me. I stopped in mid-motion, arm still extended, looking more than a little ridiculous. Finally I withdrew my hand. She watched me all the while, unblinking.

"Hello," I said. "What animal are you?"

"Nothing at the moment," she said.

"Oh." I paused for a moment, examining her toy soldier. "Why aren't you playing with a doll?"

"The smile."

"What?"

"The smile," she said slowly, as if speaking to a toddler. "They all have those smiles. Can't change them. Don't you find that dumb? I can't play with them, 'cause I keep thinking that they're not real. They don't get mad or sad or anything. You understand?"

"You shouldn't have it," I replied, pointing to her toy. "It's not allowed. You'll get in trouble."

"No I won't," she said, and squinted at me. "You're the one that got hit in the face yesterday. You are, aren't you? The one with the ball?"

I was flattered by the apparent concern. "Yeah. It didn't really hurt."

"Why didn't you do anything?"

"What?"

“You got hit in the face. Why didn’t you do anything?”

I couldn’t quite figure out how to respond to that.

CHAPTER TWO

I have a strange memory. Sometimes it feels utterly useless, a dream-like collection of fragments that occasionally come into sharp focus before blurring again. Many days that people would class as important quickly fade from my mind, but details that others would probably call insignificant come to life upon command; the sharp purple of the flowers during one of my first talks with Safia, and the way she would angle her head to the side at points, squinting as if trying to sight down a telescope. The dried blood on her elbow, dark and flaking, and the way our shadows shifted as the day passed.

It was Summer. Summer was sweaty palms and sunlight, thin fabric and dried lips. Summer meant the feel of grass on my skin. I remember wandering around the playground and weaving through running kids, constantly searching. The girl from my Drama class had vanished; I'd been thinking about her since our first meeting, and I found myself strangely disappointed when she didn't turn up to the following class. I assumed it was a simple absence due to illness, but after she missed a few classes in a row I finally decided to take action. If you couldn't find someone in class, the natural alternative was to brave the chaos of the playground with a full-blown search. I abandoned my usual position in goal -- I'm not sure if anyone even noticed, to be honest -- and I even summoned up the courage to enter the other end of the playground, the one mostly occupied by girls.

I walked around as if in a daze, avoiding eye contact. I could only hear shouting and the rhythmic slap of skipping ropes hitting the concrete. At some point I finally spotted her at the very edge of the playground, perched on a small wall under a Willow tree. She was, as I had expected, alone. I stood in front of her, hands in pockets, suddenly wondering what to say. She wasn't playing with her toy, but she did have a stick, and she was twirling it between her fingertips. She looked up and frowned.

"You again," she said. She could have been commenting on the weather. I shifted a little and ventured a question.

"Why don't you come to class?"

"I do."

"Drama. You never come to Drama."

"Oh," she said. "Sometimes they move me. I'm in another group."

“Why do they move you?”

“Why do you think?”

I was a bit thrown off balance at this. “What?”

“Guess,” she said, looking at me a little more closely now.

I felt as if I were back in the classroom, being asked a question that I couldn’t answer. I could feel her interest gradually slipping away as I thought, so I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“You’re...you’re an alien.”

“What?”

“Everyone thinks you’re weird. Teachers keep moving you. So there’s a big thing, a big secret, about you, and they never told me. So they all know you’re an alien, except me. That’s what I think.”

She studied me for a few moments, and then got up. “What do you want?”

“I dunno. I think -- I was just bored.”

“No. You want something.”

“Who told you that?”

“It’s true. If you don’t know that, you’re pretty dumb. You better learn quick. There’s always a reason. Why do you think everyone works so much in class? ‘Cause they want the teacher to say how clever they are.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Yeah? Well what did you write for that essay, the one on what you want to be when you’re older?”

“I didn’t write anything,” I said. “What did you write?”

She paused. “You wrote nothing? What do your parents want you to be?”

“I don’t know.”

She raised her eyebrows, rocking back slightly in an almost comical fashion. It was probably the most extreme reaction I had managed to get out of her to that point. It worried me a little, and I wondered if I had somehow insulted her without knowing it.

“You’re lying. I should hit you,” she finally said, brandishing her stick.

It’s shameful to admit this, but I was scared. Genuinely scared, of a little girl with a stick. She didn’t have a particularly large frame, and her arms were just as weedy as mine, but something about her expression made me step back. I never retaliated when

someone attacked me -- I always curled up, head tucked to my chest, as if I could will the other person away if I just didn't see them. If she decided to hit me I knew I would freeze, as always, and I'd be helpless. I tried not to show any of these thoughts on my face.

"Girls shouldn't hit boys," I said, carefully. "It's not fair."

She stopped, and then lowered the stick. For a moment her face was blank -- then she was laughing, actually laughing. There was a pleasant tone to it; it reminded me of tinkling bells. It was so infectious that even I caught myself smiling. She slowly sat down, still watching me.

"You're scared."

I shrugged. "I don't like hitting."

"No. You just don't want to get hit. I was watching you. You moved back before I even did anything. You're strange."

"So what would you do?" I said, annoyed. "You would fight someone?"

"Of course."

"Girls don't do that."

"You don't know much about girls, then."

Even I knew when someone was insulting me. I found that I didn't really care, though -- either because I thought she was correct, or because I just didn't like the idea of confronting her. I also figured that she was trying to make me angry, and I didn't want to give her any satisfaction. Looking back, she was a bit like a scientist prodding a creature on her table, trying to figure out if she could make it snap with enough prompting. She was testing the limits, checking the boundaries. There was a long silence, during which she cocked her head to the side, examining me again.

"You think I'm an alien?"

I nodded. She actually looked pleased as she thought about this, squinting into the distance.

"What if I said that you're right?"

I thought for a moment. "Thanks."

She walked up and down, staring at the sky before stopping and pivoting to face me again. "You're a 'C'," she said. Before I could respond, she walked away, humming to herself.

We talked again after that, and these conversations continued after we left primary school and entered the local high school. Most of the time I spent with her took place outside school, on the streets around my neighbourhood. Safia refused to take me to her house or anywhere near it -- she never mentioned her home life, and I didn't ask about it.

On certain days Safia walked home with me, ranting about her current obsession. On that particular day she was talking about the planets. She had found a book on the topic in the school library, and she had been poring over it. She immediately settled on Mars as the planet that best suited her personality, but was puzzling over which one to pick for me. Her best guess was Mercury. When I disagreed with her choice, mainly out of confusion, she scoffed, and we started to argue. True to the style of all our arguments, it soon expanded in different directions, and I ended up questioning her own choice of planet.

"Of course I'm Mars," she said. "It's not even a question."

"What does being like Mars even mean?"

She paused for a moment, speaking carefully. "Mars is...when you're strong. It's when you have guts. That's what it is."

"How do you know for sure?"

"What do you mean?"

I realised that I'd dug myself a hole. It was impossible to scramble back up, though -- any attempt at retreat would just provoke her. The best approach was to meet her head on.

"When was the last time you did something that needed guts?"

"I always do stuff like that. Always."

"Uh," I said, faltering before continuing. "I don't see you do it that much."

"I can do anything. Name something and I'll do it. Shall I kick that guy across the road?"

"No, we'll get in trouble."

"I don't care."

"We can't do that," I said, desperate, looking around for something to distract her. I pointed to the nearest tree. "This tree. You can climb this tree."

The tree was one of the biggest on the road, and even if the fear of heights didn't scare someone then the awkward shape would make climbing it next to impossible. There was barely any place to lodge the feet and reach for the branches, and few convenient knobbly bits to grip. If I had studied the tree properly I never would have suggested it in the first place.

"Wait," I said, "not that one. I meant --"

"No," Safia said, her words slow. "I'll do this one."

"I was just joking," I said. "There are better trees than this one."

She paid no attention to me, and was already looking for places to grip on the bark.

"I didn't mean this one," I continued.

"Will you shut up, Ray? You're gonna make me fall."

The thought of that scared me into silence. She did fall, of course -- more than once. She was never high off the ground when it happened, though, so she could land on her feet or stumble into an ungraceful crab-like posture. Her hands were red and raw from her attempts to grab parts of the tree and hang on, and her legs were also scratched and chafed. After she fell off for the tenth time, I stopped counting. The sky darkened as she made her attempts, and neither of us spoke. All I could hear was her heavy breathing and grunts of frustration, slowly shifting into anger as she continued to fail. I sat on the grass and watched.

"This is dangerous," I said.

She sighed, reaching for a branch. "If it wasn't, then there wouldn't be a point to doing it."

"Aren't you scared?"

"Why would I be? If you get scared then you mess up. If I do that then I lose."

When she finally made it up into the tree branches she balanced there for a long moment, smiling down at me under the evening gloom. She held eye contact until I broke it, nodding.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

Only then did she slide down, dropping to a heap on the grass below. We continued to walk home, and after a while we started chatting about another topic. I

noticed how her legs trembled as she walked, however, and when we left one another I looked back over my shoulder and saw her cradling herself as she walked away.

Safia never referred to herself as my friend, and I never dared to mention the word -- I didn't want to risk bringing it up only for her to laugh and call me foolish. I barely spoke to others, while Safia only associated with whoever she deemed interesting at the time, a span that could vary from days to seconds.

As we grew older, the innocent things I'd always noticed about her started taking on a new light, and I would catch myself staring at her crumpled shirt, her thin legs, the notes she had scrawled to herself on her hands and arms in blue ink. I'd feel guilty after this, and instantly focus on something in the distance, trying to wrestle my thoughts into a more appropriate shape.

Sometimes I felt like she was trying to instruct me -- at other points it felt like she only wanted me around to mock me, to laugh at everything I said or did. I didn't care either way. I just knew that I had finally found someone to talk with, someone who made me feel strangely comfortable. There was no need for politeness or small talk. I knew, of course, that she would only talk to me as long as she found me entertaining, so I endeavoured to be just that. I would search for random facts in books and store them in my memory, keeping them ready for a time when they would be needed to divert her attention or soothe her in a heated moment. Sometimes I would say deliberately dramatic things, inevitably triggering a debate. She knew what I was doing, but she didn't seem to care as long as it kept her amused. At times I wondered who was manipulating whom, but I was never able to settle on a definite answer. Did it even matter?

She was particularly interested in stories and facts about violence. No, 'interested' is probably the wrong word -- 'obsessed' would be more fitting. Whenever there was a fight brewing between two boys she would make sure to witness the eventual explosion. Most of the time there would be a ring of jeering male teenagers surrounding the combatants, and she would be the only girl in the vicinity -- even when things became particularly ugly she would never stop staring, lips pressed together. It wasn't as if she didn't feel for people, and she certainly understood the concepts of pain and empathy, but it seemed as if there was something raw and magnetic about violence

that she wanted to understand. She would make me sit with her and describe some of the most infamously gruelling boxing matches in the past, despite my dislike for the sport. When it came to history class she completely neglected key areas and instead focused most of her attention on studying extreme, influential figures from varying periods. I joked about it at one point, asking her if she was planning on following in their footsteps. She told me that she only wanted to know personal details about their lives, how they grew up, and how they had developed.

“They made a mark,” she said. “Even though they were bastards, they still made a mark. It was probably *because* of that, actually.”

“What’s so important about making a mark?”

“That’s the only important thing, silly.”

“A lot of these big, important people end up -- badly, you know.”

“You mean they get killed? That’s true. But that can happen to anyone. It just takes one slip, and you’re done.”

She was never satisfied until she had buried herself in textbooks, searching for one critical mistake that the failed political figures always made. She insisted that it would always be there, regardless of whether it was blatant or hidden, and it was only a matter of having the patience and perceptiveness to find it. Only once she had marked down a specific reason for their failure would she allow herself to relax, and start talking about other things once again. I couldn’t understand this mentality, but the teacher was pleased at her spontaneous bursts of study, even though they mostly fell outside of the curriculum material.

She gradually became better at socialising, while I got worse. The students and teachers still sensed her strangeness, but because of her confidence and speaking skills she was often able to avoid being marked as one of the people to alienate or avoid. There was something about her that made you pause and take note, like a flicker in the corner of your vision. She was comfortable whether she was alone or surrounded by people. It didn’t seem to make much of a difference to her, but I always envied her carelessness and casual ability to draw people to her. I could never understand why she would subsequently discard them after a short while.

There were times when I grew frustrated with her. On one of those occasions we were sitting on a bench, watching the other students playing cricket during a break

period. I never played the sport, but I always liked listening for the sound that occurred when the batter hit the ball just right; that sharp crack reverberating through the air, and then the way the players' faces, completely stripped of pretence for one moment, all rose to watch the ball ascend. I was huddled into my jumper, my breath drifting like smoke in the air. Safia's legs were curled up underneath her. She was telling me that one of the students had been pulled out of the school due to depression, her tone scornful. I listened for a while, feeling unexpectedly irritated, until I found myself interrupting.

"How could he help that?"

She squinted at me. "Of course he could help it."

I shrugged, sinking deeper into my jumper.

She shifted a little to face me properly. "It's not really a decent excuse to get out of school. How can you not even be in control of yourself?"

I was unwilling to risk an argument, and stayed silent. She frowned.

"You're disagreeing?"

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I think --"

"How depressed can he be?" she said. "He's rich, he's got friends, family, and whatever else he needs. He's being spoilt. Throwing a fit."

"Maybe you're right...but it's not affecting us, is it?"

She was quiet for a moment, leaning back on the bench as she studied the people in the distance. When she spoke there was a note of weariness in her voice. "You better fix yourself. You need to start understanding how things work."

"Hey," I said, "I've got more of a normal perspective than you."

"Exactly," she replied.

When I wasn't meeting Safia, I kept to myself, and others didn't pay me much attention. I made sure that I was amongst the first students to arrive to class every day. I had a feeling that the other students weren't going to take to me, so I would have to make an effort with the teachers instead. It worked surprisingly well. I would even turn up before my form tutor had arrived on some days, and he would always shake his head and smile at me as he hurried up, folders clutched under one arm, his glasses sliding down the

bridge of his nose. Sometimes he would speak to me as he fiddled with the keys to the classroom.

“Early bird, eh?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Keep it up. Good habit, that.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I sometimes wondered if he even remembered our conversations, because he would often repeat the exact same lines to me on certain days.

I approached the other classes in the same fashion. I made sure to get my homework in on time each week, and I sometimes asked teachers eccentric questions about their subject area, hoping to persuade them that I had an intense interest in their field. Most of them reacted particularly well to this. Others were a bit more guarded, a little less simple to crack, and so I had to consider other ways of earning their respect. It wasn't all a game to me, though. I genuinely enjoyed some aspects of class. Drama was a given, of course, but I also surprised myself in that I began to derive enjoyment out of P.E., which I assumed I would detest. I hated rugby, football and basketball, so my guesses were confirmed there. But running -- running was different. There was no one relying on me, no social politics, no awkwardness. Not only that, but it never felt as if there were rapid changes in the flow of the exercise, never the threat of a sudden goal or the feel of someone crashing into you, tackling you to the floor. No need for brute strength or complicated movements. There wasn't even any real equipment. It was just me, my trainers, and the track. Sometimes I never wanted to stop. If I concentrate I can bring it back to mind: people in the distance, sitting on the grass, mere pinpricks. Blinking the sun away. My breath coming in and out, slow and steady. The world stops, and only I move.

I remember one of the P.E. teachers -- a rugged looking young man, bearded and well-built -- taking me to the side one day. I was on the field, having arrived earlier than the others, as usual. The air felt sharp against my skin. I rubbed at the goose pimples on my arms, bouncing on the earth in an effort to warm up. That was how athletes used to act in the footage I had seen on television. I tried to replicate their careless confidence, the casual springiness in their legs. It was at this point that I became aware of the teacher approaching, carrying equipment under one arm. The teacher -- his name was

Mr Marshall -- set the equipment down beside me. The cold didn't seem to bother him at all, despite the fact that he was only dressed in a t-shirt.

"Hey," he said.

"Hello, Sir."

"Nice trainers," he said, setting out the equipment on the grass. I could hear chatter in the distance as the other boys approached. "New?"

"Oh, they're, uh, just some old running trainers. Used to be my father's."

"Come from a sporting family, do you?"

My father was in fact one of only a few 'sporty' people in the family, and even he had long abandoned exercise at this point, but I just nodded.

"You like running, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

He paused for a moment, straightening up to survey the field. The grass was a deep, rich green, soaked through with rainwater.

"We got some good cross country events now and then. Been needing more students for it. Most of them go off to football or rugby."

I was silent for a long while. He glanced back at me. "I reckon you would do a good job with running long distance. What do you think?"

"I think -- I don't know."

"It's no harder than what you always do. Just gotta run and train a bit more."

"It's not that, Sir. It's more like -- I suppose I don't like competition."

He examined me for a moment. "That's the point of sport, son."

I remained quiet, unsure of what to say. He shrugged. "Think about it, anyway. You've got ages yet. Give it some thought, then get back to me. Would be a shame if you didn't."

I nodded as he left, watching him shouting instructions to the other boys. I ignored their gazes and got back to stretching.

Safia stopped by the track a little later to watch me run, her arms folded. I always ran a little more quickly when I spotted her out of the corner of my eye, pushing myself until I started to feel dizzy. On one occasion she even tried to run alongside me; I quickly realised that she didn't have a great deal of stamina, but once we started running

she refused to call a halt for a rest. I saw that she was breathing heavily, almost gasping, and so I slowed down to a walk.

“Finished already?” she said, still wheezing.

“Yeah, I’m getting too tired, to be honest.”

She looked up at me and offered me a rare smile. “Yeah. I can see.”

As we walked she continued to suck in air, and I wanted to ask her if she was okay, but I held back. Any sympathy and her good humour would instantly evaporate. After thinking for a moment I sat down on the grass, crossing my legs. She paused beside me and then sat down too, but much more slowly. We watched people pass. She laid back completely on the grass, still breathing heavily, one arm over her eyes, and then spoke.

“What was that teacher saying to you, before?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on.”

“It wasn’t important, he was just asking about long distance running.”

“You’re not going to do it, are you?”

I remained silent. She hissed through her teeth. “You’re so predictable,” she said.

“I like running, I just don’t like the rest of it.”

She didn’t press the issue for once. Her only response was her steady breathing. Then she spoke again.

“I always wanted to do a sport, back in primary. My parents said no.” She put her arm down and stared up at the sky. “I had to watch my brother practicing his Judo every week. One time I was at his class, waiting on the side, and the teacher mistook me for a new student. He taught me a few basic things, even said I had potential. But no, I wasn’t allowed to stay there.”

I wondered why she cared so much. If anything, I thought, recalling my experience in the ring, she was lucky to have avoided combative sports. “Your parents were probably just looking after you,” I said.

“They weren’t looking after me, they just didn’t want me to do something different. They think anything different is wrong. The most annoying thing is, I would have been better than my brother. I know it.”

“You could always start now.”

She laughed. “No, I’m still not allowed. I don’t have the money, or I’d just go anyway. You don’t get it, do you? Until we’re eighteen, we can’t do anything. I just have to be patient, that’s it.”

“Why Judo?”

She twisted her head to the side, regarding me while she replied. “Why do you think?”

“It’s violent?” I offered.

She didn’t laugh. “You really don’t get it. Here.” She stood, gesturing for me to do the same.

I complied, but not without a sense of unease. It was always difficult to predict what she might do when something occurred to her.

“I’m going to attack you, and you’re going to stop me,” she said.

“How?”

“Hit me once.”

“Let’s just go for another run.”

“If you don’t want to hit my face, you can hit me in the stomach,” she said, still serious.

“No way.”

“I’ll give you three seconds.”

“Safia, this is so stupid.”

“One.”

I backed away from her, and she advanced along with me. “Two,” she said.

“I’m not doing it.”

“Three,” she said, and started throwing playful shots at my head. I covered my face and felt her hands sting my wrists. She wasn’t throwing with the intent to do any real damage, just to irritate me into responding. As I backed away, trying to stop her with shouts and covering my face all the while, I fell back down to the grass. I heard people laughing in the distance. She pulled me up again and pushed me against one of the trees around us, pinning me with her forearm. I didn’t try to struggle, and just kept cowering away.

“You look ridiculous,” she said, finally.

“I’m not going to hit you.”

“Why?”

“I can’t.”

She lowered her forearm, frowning. I examined the back of my hands — they were red, but hadn’t suffered any real damage.

“Let me see,” she said.

Reluctantly, I offered her my hands, and she took them, turning them over once or twice as if she were a fortune teller reading my palms. “Maybe that was a bit too far,” she said, dropping my hands.

“A bit?”

“What, you want me to say sorry?”

“I’m not dumb enough to hope for that.”

I thought it would at least elicit a smile from her, but she turned away and watched one of the other students running, her hands in her pockets.

“It’s just irritating,” she said. “Everything is, and I’m not sure how I can fix it yet.”

I shrugged. “Some things can’t be fixed.”

“Wrong,” she said.

“Can you bring someone back to life? Or travel back in time?”

“Not yet, but maybe one day someone will find a way. How do you know that they won’t?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I doubt it though.”

“It’s easy to do that,” she said. “Anyone can doubt stuff. That’s boring as hell, though. The people coming up with the answers have to do all the hard work.”

“I’m going back to the changing rooms,” I said.

“Ray,” she said, as I turned to leave. “Sorry. About hitting you, I mean.”

I paused, trying to process this. “Sorry?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

I nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Sometimes I do things for stupid reasons. I’m working on it.”

I heard the teacher blowing the whistle to signal the end of practice in the distance. We walked back up the field together. She didn’t say anything else, but now

and then I looked over at her and saw her staring blankly at the grass, as if considering something carefully.

I had a bit of trouble with some of the other boys. My attitude at the time was simple -- whenever I was around some of the worst ones, I stayed completely silent, and made sure that I was never directly in front of them, never an obvious target. I figured that I could easily avoid any problems if I just didn't do anything. What I didn't realise, however, is that absence is, in many cases, so much more noticeable than actual presence. When you try to retreat from sight and hearing, you leave a noticeable hole in the atmosphere, and some people, almost as if they have a sort of radar, will notice this instantly. It's like looking at a painting and knowing that some small part of it has been defaced. You don't know what the exact flaw is, but you know it's there, and it'll just keep eating at you until you find it.

The one that hounded me the most was Scott. Not exactly a very intimidating name, but I'm always suspicious of people with plain names like that. It's like they realise that they've been given a bland, common name, and then they become angry at life and the world itself, and take it out on people like me. He was far bigger than me, bigger than most of the other students, even ones who were years ahead of us. It was just one of those odd cases where a teenager looks physically mature beyond their years. He always had his shirt sleeves rolled up, to expose just a hint of his toned arms, and he had a habit of moving his jaw around slightly, for no reason at all. Most of the time it looked like he was chewing imaginary food. He had a nickname for me, too: 'Puck'.

The reasoning behind this isn't exactly exotic or interesting. It was, predictably, due to the fact that we were studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in English class, and the teacher had randomly picked me to read out the lines for Puck. I was happy to use the class as an excuse for Drama practise, so much preferable to the boring essay writing, and so I threw myself into the role, and delivered the lines with such energy that there would be giggles and snorts around the classroom. Even the teacher would smile. Scott was useless in the class. He delivered lines in a monotone voice, spent most of his time speaking to other students, and never contributed a single point. Maybe he thought I was showing off whenever I read my lines. Maybe he just hated the play and so he hated anyone who seemed to enjoy it. Maybe the play had nothing to do with

anything, and he just used my role as a convenient nickname for his abusive sessions. I don't know, but whatever the reason, the name stuck.

"Puck," he would say, in that mocking, faux theatrical style, "Whatcha doing over there? Come over here, come on."

He had a favourite spot -- just behind the Art building, in a small, dark space near the shrubbery. He would sit there with his friends, smoking and chatting during break periods and after school. Sometimes he would make me hold his cigarette while he discussed the finer points of car engines. At other times they would all talk to me in an almost friendly way, as if they had momentarily forgotten that they were supposed to dislike me. I liked those moments; any situation in which I avoided being physically abused was a victory in my head. When they insulted me I would work out ways to lessen the impact by concentrating on the wall, or thinking about how it felt to run around the track. At other times I would go over memorised dialogue in my mind; if he wanted to refer to me as a character from a play, I decided I would just embrace this and use it against him as a form of escapism.

Everything I did seemed to irritate Scott. If I stayed silent and attempted to fade into the background, he would bristle and deliberately draw attention to me. If I tried to talk to him in the same language his friends used, it would make the situation even worse. I examined this issue from every possible angle in my head, and I was never able to come up with a solution. I couldn't ask Safia about it, as she would only tell me that it was my own fault. There would be no sympathy, no advice, just a look of distaste and dismissive words. In a way, she was actually part of the problem. Because I only spoke to her, and never associated with any boys, they seemed to think I was somehow offensively different. I was deemed pathetic, and a 'fag'. It seemed to alarm and repulse them to such an extent that they went out of their way to provoke me in various ways. I was rarely hit in the face, but sometimes I would take a punch to the solar plexus, and I'll never forget that swooping sense of breathlessness and the way the weakness would gradually spread to my legs as I crouched over, trying to suck in air.

On one occasion Scott was arguing with his friends about his science work. It always struck me as bizarre -- in most cases he had the sort of petty interests one would expect, in the form of racing, football, beer, the usual. Amidst all of this, however, was a semblance of scientific knowledge. Sometimes his friends would joke about it, but on

the whole it was actually regarded as impressive, something he would boast about rather than hide. During this occasion, he was spouting off random facts as a sort of showcase for his friends, to settle an argument over how advanced he was in the subject. Privately, I thought he sounded like he was parroting information rather than really thinking about what he was saying -- there was none of the thoughtfulness of Safia. It was like an actor repeating dialogue to himself in order to recall it later. Perhaps this showed on my face, because he chose that moment to address me once again.

“Puck,” he said. “What do you think? How did the Universe begin, man?”

I was silent for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“That’s bloody boring. Try.”

“I really don’t know.”

“The Big Bang? You heard of that?”

“Not really.”

“What are they teaching you in class, then?”

“I’ve heard of it, but I -- don’t know how to explain it properly.”

“So you were lying?”

“No.”

“What about climbing, do you know anything about that?”

“No.”

“Jesus,” he said, rubbing his cigarette out on the floor with his shoe. “Right, I’ll have to teach you some of that, then. Go up there, and stay there until I tell you to come down.”

He was pointing to the nearby wall, which separated part of the Art block from the Math department. Under normal circumstances it would be impossible to climb to the top, but there was a small, muddy ledge beneath it, and I’d once seen students using it to jump up and grab the top of the wall, pulling themselves up. Aside from doing this to show off to others, it was also a convenient shortcut through the school, which enabled students to get to the main gate more quickly after lessons had finished. Not many people bothered with it though, and I certainly hadn’t ever attempted the climb. I had a powerful fear of heights, to the point where I would sometimes feel dizzy even looking out of a window. The very thought of climbing the wall, let alone doing so in front of these people, left me paralysed.

“Come on,” he was saying, a thousand miles in the distance. “Come on.”

I turned around, fumbling in the air for something, mouth opening and then closing. Scott was beginning to look gradually more angry -- his good humour had evaporated, and he was starting to get up. I tried to laugh it off.

“What would that prove? Anyone can do it, it’s easy.”

“If it’s so easy, show us.”

“I can’t right now. I need to get to class.”

He stood directly in front of me, and I was forced to tilt my head upward just to meet his gaze. “No,” he said. “You don’t.”

“I just think --”

“Get up there. That’s the last time I’m telling you.”

The others were silent around me. They were all watching, waiting to see what I would do. A brave man would have stood his ground, defiant. A crafty man would have found the right words to defuse the situation or run away. I was unfortunately neither of these.

I turned back to the wall and slowly started to climb, timidly touching the bricks as if they would explode with too forceful a motion. I nearly slipped on the ledge, and a few loose pieces of dried mud fell to the ground below. I could hear them urging me onward, and another glance behind told me that Scott had moved closer, hands on his hips. If I climbed back down now I knew that the dissatisfaction would quickly spiral into another beating. I jumped up, and my hands scraped the edge of the wall. I jumped up again and this time I managed to catch hold and quickly swing myself up, monkey-like, before my arms gave way.

I crouched there for a moment, but this evidently wasn’t enough, as they hollered for me to stand and walk back and forth along the wall. I didn’t turn to look at them, but their voices sounded as if they were anticipating a wealth of entertainment. When I finally stood I had to stop myself from quickly crouching again -- the world moved and throbbed around me, and I spread my arms to stop myself wobbling. More people were starting to gather now, on both sides of the wall. They were probably wondering why I didn’t just slide down the other side, as most students did. I waited for Scott to call me back down, but he gave no signal. I only heard laughter and more shouting.

I told myself that I would be fine. I was a part of the wall, an extension of the brick and cement. My feet were roots that refused to let me move an inch, no matter what wind might come. I couldn't hear them shouting any more -- they were insignificant. I was the only one that existed. I closed my eyes and breathed before opening them once more. From this height I could see the sunlight creeping around the clouds and sweeping across the school grounds. I tried to smile.

When I woke up I was staring at the ceiling. I closed my eyes, trying to recall what had happened, but the pain distracted me -- it came in waves, and each time I tugged at a strand of my memory the next wave would neatly sever it. Fine, I thought. Have it your way. My eyes were oddly blurred, and my throat didn't feel quite right. I rolled over on my side, my arms dangling over the bed, and finally noticed the other person in the room.

She was dressed like a student, and she wasn't doing anything unusual -- just sitting in a chair and reading a tattered book -- but I felt unsettled. The thought of someone who had possibly been watching me while I was asleep sent a cold wave up my spine. As I stared at her, her eyes briefly left the page and flicked up to mine, and I moved back a little. There was a long moment where we stared at one another silently. Some part of my brain, the one that attended to social skills, was telling me that I should say something to remove the awkwardness in the air, or that I should at least look away in politeness. Normally I would have listened to those signals -- perhaps it was due to my aching head, but everything seemed very fuzzy and slow. I briefly entertained the idea that I was dreaming.

"What's going on?"

There was another long silence. Her eyes were blank, her mouth straight. There was very little colour in her cheeks. I sagged back against the wall, looking down at the white sheets. I tried to calm myself, to reach for some sort of etiquette, some kind of idea for what to do in this situation. After scanning the room, I determined that I was in the school nurse's office, but there was no sign of the actual nurse. I stood up, weaving unsteadily, my legs shaking. The girl watched me carefully, but made no comment. I made another attempt at getting her attention.

"What are you reading?"

As I came closer she raised the book slightly, as if attempting to shield its contents from a sudden aggressive motion. Then she slowly lowered it, and I could see that the pages contained images of paintings and paragraphs of accompanying text. Hazy connections formed in my memory.

“That’s...what’s his name...Waterhouse, right? John William Waterhouse.”

She looked up at me, and I felt as if she was neatly piercing through my fumbling attempts at conversation. I hurried on, taking a closer look at the painting. It was a depiction of an elegant woman in a dark red dress, gazing into something too small for me to make out. I gestured towards it, eventually coming out with the first inane thing that crossed my mind.

“Is that your favourite?”

I thought she would ignore me, or at least express some sort of distaste. After a moment, however, she flipped through the pages, stopping them precisely where she wanted. I couldn’t really make it out properly, but the page she had chosen appeared to depict an image of a small girl, staring directly out at the viewer. The gaze felt so real and oddly confrontational that I flinched. “Ah,” I said, searching for something complimentary to say. The truth was that I had little interest in paintings. My vision had cleared, and that strange soreness in my throat had faded. My head and body still throbbed, so I gently lowered myself into the nearby chair.

There was a mirror nearby, and I twisted around to check my appearance. I immediately regretted it. There was a large, dried cut across my forehead, with the surrounding skin swollen and red. The bridge of my nose had darkened and bruised, and my hair was a tangled mess. There were dried blood stains on my shirt. I’d never been considered handsome, but at that point I just looked pitiful. I glanced around again -- the girl still had her book open, but she didn’t seem to be staring at the pages as intently as before. There was a strong sense of self-awareness about her, as if she could feel me watching her and didn’t know what to do. Once again, I felt uneasiness brewing in the air and tried to find something to say.

“I must have slipped,” I heard myself saying.

That couldn’t be right, though. I hadn’t even decided on what to say, much less opened my mouth. Despite this, I still heard myself talking in a strange voice.

“If you want to laugh, then go ahead. I actually felt like laughing too, back there. It’s just too fucking pathetic.”

I closed my mouth and the stranger stopped speaking. I was horrified. I’d always been able to restrain myself from juvenile outbursts like this before; even at that age I was attempting to adapt to every person that I met, learning how to converse with them in a proper manner. Sometimes I watched adults and later attempted to copy their mannerisms while watching myself in the mirror, all in the pursuit of being more mature. This girl, however, had utterly destroyed all my childish cunning and diplomacy without doing anything. It was a repulsive lapse in my self control. I was too scared to even look around any more -- I fixed my gaze on the opposite wall, trying to find some sort of escape in the lines and smudges. The silence hurt, as if it were peeling pieces of me away bit by bit. I could briefly hear muffled shouting and screaming from the playground outside, and then nothing.

“You were bleeding,” I heard her say.

I let out a strangled laugh. “What?”

There was another long pause before she spoke again.

“When you fell.” I had to strain to catch her words. “There was blood everywhere.”

“There still is,” I said, glancing down at the stains on my shirt.

“They were scared. Those other boys. I think they thought you were dead.”

“They were probably just thinking about all the trouble they were going to get into,” I said. “I wish they’d been up there on the wall, so I could push them off myself.”

She was quiet. “Do you mean that?”

I thought for a moment, and surprised myself with my answer. “I do. I would kill them all if I could. They would do the same to me.”

She slowly closed her book. “How do you know?”

“Because they hate me.”

“The big one was trying to help you up when you fell. Some of the others ran off, but he stayed behind.”

“Scott? Like I said, they were probably scared about what was going to happen to them. Nothing else.”

“Maybe. But maybe they didn’t understand what they were doing.”

I felt a flash of contempt, and wondered if this is what Safia felt like during our discussions. “They’re not animals, or little kids...they know what they’re doing. You can’t excuse what they do. They screw with people because they feel like it. Because they’re bored.”

She was silent for so long that I thought she wouldn’t reply. “I’m sorry,” she finally said. “I don’t know them or you. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She opened her book again. I glanced at her. “Hey, don’t go all silent again.”

“Why not?”

“Because it makes me babble. I hate babbling.”

She raised an eyebrow, but maintained her silence. Perhaps I was still giddy from the blow to my head, or maybe there was something about her quiet watchfulness that provoked me into speaking more than usual. I was aware of my odd behaviour even as I spoke.

“Please,” I said.

Her lip twitched. “Okay. How did you know about Waterhouse?”

“Oh,” I said. “My mother. She teaches History of Art. We have paintings all over the house.”

Her lip twitched again, this time curving upward. “Ah.”

“I don’t find much of it interesting, to be honest. A lot of it is just religious stuff.”

“I don’t think it matters,” she said. “It’s the stories in them.”

“What stories?”

“I don’t know how to describe it.”

I frowned. “Do you paint?”

She looked down at her book. “I can’t.”

“You can’t? Why?”

“I just can’t.”

“You must have something else you can do. Some other talent.”

“No, I don’t. I have nothing like that.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. “Well...”

“Do you have something?” she said quickly, cutting me off.

“Drama, maybe.”

She frowned. "You?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

I turned my face to the side, wishing I could hide somewhere. I knew when someone was insulting my appearance. She seemed confused by my sudden silence. After a while she ventured another comment.

"I just meant that the students who do Drama are normally different."

I considered that for a moment. "I don't think I understand."

She nodded to herself, as if I had confirmed her theory. There was something strangely adult about her, the way she spoke and moved, but in a different sense to Safia. While Safia was constant motion, always glancing around and offering sharp opinions faster than I could react, this girl sat with complete stillness. She made no ripples in the environment around her. She spoke as if she feared to set off a trap if her voice became too loud; her words tip toed through the air between us. When we made eye contact we invariably broke it, and ended up staring at the wall or floor while speaking to one another.

We were interrupted by the sound of the door opening. The girl instantly looked down at the pages of her book. The school nurse, Mrs Gomez, came in, accompanied by a pretty short-haired woman in a black suit. They were both staring at me wordlessly, and I once again began to feel as if the world had become somehow surreal, as if I had woken up in some sort of parallel universe. People weren't acting normally any more. I nodded to them cautiously, and the woman in the suit came forward.

"Claire? Why did you stop? You were speaking, weren't you?"

The girl didn't look up. She continued to stare at her book.

"Claire," the woman repeated. "Weren't you just talking to this boy?"

When she got no response, she glanced at me, urgency in her features. "She was talking to you, wasn't she?"

I nodded, wary of some sort of trap. "A little."

"What did she say? What did she tell you?"

I looked at Mrs Gomez, but she offered no help. I turned back to the other woman. From this distance I could see that she had clear green eyes. They weren't

something to leisurely admire, however; there was an intensity about them that put me on edge. They pushed at me, and I reflexively held on to the chair to steady myself.

“I was just talking nonsense, really. She was just showing me her favourite painting. Then she, uh, commented on something else that happened to me.”

The woman put her hand on Claire’s shoulder. I could sense effort in the way she spoke.

“Claire, would you do that again?”

Once again, there was no response. There wasn’t even an indication that she had heard anything. Her eyes were focused on the book, but they were glassy, empty. I doubted that she was actually registering any of the words or pictures. I couldn’t tell where her mind had gone, but there was a definite sense that she wasn’t actually present with us in the room. We were all looking at a mannequin.

“How did you do it?”

She was talking to me again, I realised.

“What did you do? What did you say?”

“Nothing, I didn’t do anything. I just woke up and started asking her about -- what she was reading, and what was going on. That sort of thing.”

“What happened to your face?”

Mrs Gomez intervened here on my behalf. “He took a bad fall today. He was on a wall and slipped, according to other students.”

I shifted. “I slipped?”

She turned to me. “You don’t remember? The wall isn’t too high, but it seems that you fell face first. You were unconscious for a moment. What were you doing up there?”

“I...don’t know.”

Mrs Gomez came over to dab my face with a wet cloth. The other woman was no longer paying attention to me -- she was still looking at the girl, Claire. Finally she glanced at me again, and then back to Mrs Gomez.

“Where are his parents?”

“They should be here soon.”

“I want to speak to them when they get here.”

Mrs Gomez looked at her, frowning. “What for?”

“Personal business.”

I didn't like the sound of that, but I stayed silent. When my parents arrived I tried to ignore the way they were staring at my face and bombarding me with questions. The businesswoman eventually called them away from the room to talk, leaving Mrs Gomez behind. I noticed that Claire had quietly returned to us. There was something in her body language that had changed, and even though she wasn't looking up you could feel that odd, flickering self-awareness seeping out of her once again. I instinctively felt that the more attention you placed on her, the harder she would be to find. A single look could chase her into the dark, where clumsy fumbling would never reach her. This woman in the suit was far too sharp, much too direct -- she would have benefitted from lowering her voice, using less eye contact, and moving closer to the ground rather than standing over the girl. On the other hand, the idea of me giving people advice at handling other people was like some sort of twisted joke, the sort of thing Safia might enjoy.

After a few minutes my parents returned, and the businesswoman tugged Claire out of the room. Claire glanced back as she left. My parents were in a similar rush to leave -- they wanted to take me to the hospital, despite my complaints. As I got up to leave the room, I paused at the doorway and eyed myself in the mirror again, examining the slowly darkening, puffy skin on my face.

Just a slip, I told myself. Just one slip.

CHAPTER THREE

After careful checks and a scan at the hospital, I was eventually cleared and told that I should rest at home for a few days before I returned to school. I normally would have treasured being able to avoid school, but I was too worried over what the woman in the suit had told my parents. They had spoken for a few minutes while I sat there in silence with Claire and the nurse, and I could only wonder what they might be discussing. Being noticed is never a good thing; people start to assess you in a new light, perhaps even mark you down as some sort of threat or strange entity. I didn't know who that woman was, but she had deliberately moved a spotlight over me.

My parents treated me differently in the following days. My father avoided me and seemed embarrassed and awkward whenever I addressed him, while my mother wouldn't leave me alone. She was constantly asking me if I needed anything; a drink, some food, a game, a movie, a trip somewhere. Every time I entered the room I felt her nervous gaze on my back. My face was swollen and puffy, and it would throb as I sat in my room, wiping my forehead with a clump of wet tissues.

I started taking long walks outside. I wore a cap to cover some of the damage to my face, which probably only served to make me more conspicuous. The world felt different. I felt like I was walking on ice. When I'd crossed the road before, it had always been a reflex, something I never really thought about. My actions were mechanical -- one look to the left, one look to the right, then I would cross and be on my way. Now, however, I would linger on the side of the pavement even while cars were a fair distance away and other people were crossing, and when I finally moved onto the road I would scurry across as quickly as possible, always expecting a car to suddenly veer across my vision. If I came across someone who looked particularly rough I would cross the street or turn around and pretend to check something in my pockets until they moved past. I took my father's Swiss army knife in my pocket with me every time I left the house. I didn't even know what I would do with it if someone attacked me, but I liked knowing it was there. I just hoped he wouldn't realise that I'd taken it.

My sleeping pattern broke down. I woke up at unpredictable times, either very early or very late. I particularly remember waking up at four in the morning one day, going downstairs and sitting in the guest room, staring out through the window. It was

that small pocket of time in which sound drained out of the world. There were no cars on the street, no chattering people, no birdsong. Just a complete, all-encompassing silence that thickened the air around you, the kind that made me feel as if I were sitting in suspended animation. I thought about ways I could change myself, what I could do to step off my current path, but I wasn't able to settle on anything. It was just noise in my head, static and buzzing. I waited until sunrise to watch the way the landscape slowly shifted before my eyes, the dark sky giving way to streaks of red and gold, gradually expanding across the horizon.

I couldn't understand my own behaviour. I hadn't gone through anything serious or traumatic. I'd simply fallen off a wall and suffered a few surface injuries. It was nothing, and I should have continued with my life as normal the next day. My body refused to listen to any rationality.

I finally had to admit that it was really quite simple -- I was scared. I was scared out of my mind, and yet there was nothing and no one to be scared of. Scott and his cronies? They were pathetic, and I knew I could find ways to avoid them. No, there was something else unsettling me, and I needed to pinpoint it. Perhaps it was simply that I no longer felt like the world would take pity on me and spare me if I didn't bother anyone or anything. I hated that feeling, but I didn't know how to evade it. How do you ignore something that resounds with so much truth?

I never asked my parents what the woman had told them, despite the fact that it was often on my mind. I hoped that they would forget the entire incident if I didn't mention it. This expectation was, of course, disappointed.

It was two days after my accident. I still hadn't returned to school. I'd just finished eating dinner when my father told me to wait for a moment, as they wanted to talk to me. I knew something was wrong from the atmosphere in the room -- we sat around the table as if we were at a business meeting, my mother pretending to fiddle with her sleeve and my father sitting with a stiff, upright posture. My mother ended up speaking first.

"How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. "My face is still healing up."

"Not that. Are you okay? Do you want to talk about anything?"

"Not really."

“That’s fine. That’s perfectly fine.”

I waited, tapping the table with my fingertips. She glanced at my father, who frowned.

“Have you decided when you’re going back to school?” he said.

“Not yet.”

They exchanged another glance.

“What about starting again next week? You don’t want to get too behind with the class work,” she said.

“I don’t know yet.”

“You don’t know what?”

“I don’t know if I’m going back yet,” I said.

My mother instantly shook her head, and my father slowly exhaled.

“Of course you’re going back,” she said. “If you need a little more time off, I can arrange that, but you have to go back.”

“Why? There are plenty of people who drop out and still get good jobs.”

“I don’t think — I’m not sure if you understand what you’re saying,” my mother said slowly, fumbling around for something on the table. “We should have this talk another time, when you’ve thought about all this.”

“I *have* thought about it.”

“This isn’t a debate,” my father said. “You’re not going to get a good job without studying.”

It would also hurt your already bad reputation amongst your family if I dropped out, I thought, but didn’t dare to say.

“I can learn everything I need outside of school.”

“Right,” my father said, standing up and gathering the dishes. “Enough of this. I can get you transferred to another school, if that’s what you want.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t think you understand,” he said, speaking carefully. “You don’t have a choice. One way or another, you’re going to continue your education.”

“Why? For you?” I said, knowing that I should just keep silent at this point.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, and I shrank back in my chair. My mother looked nervous.

“Yes,” he said. “For us. You don’t think your choices affect us, is that it? How do you think people treated me when I dropped out of university? Like a piece of trash on the pavement. Do you know what that feels like?”

“I think,” my mother said, cutting in before my father could continue, “that we should leave this discussion for now. We’ll get back to it in a day or two, okay?”

My father looked like he was struggling with a headache, but he sighed, nodded and left the table to wash the plates in the sink. He was almost obsessive about that habit -- he always had to wash them by hand, and as quickly as possible after eating, before carefully stacking them in the cupboard to dry. My mother was tapping her teeth with a pen, her sleeves rolled up. I could tell that she was trying to think of a different topic for conversation. I got up to leave and she spoke again.

“Do you remember when you slipped?”

I frowned. She was talking as if it had happened years ago. “Yes?”

“What about that woman in the nurse’s office? I’m not sure how much she said to you. Her name is Mrs Donaghue.”

“I know who you mean. She was asking me a few questions.”

“What questions?”

“Just things about that other girl in the room. The quiet one.”

My mother nodded to herself. “Ah.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“You must have said something -- done something -- before we got there. What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing bad. It’s just...she claims that you spoke to her daughter, and that she spoke to you, too.”

“Only a few words. Nothing really.”

“The girl doesn’t speak to anyone. I don’t know what the specific problem is, but she doesn’t talk to anyone aside from her mother, and even then, very little. No one else. And her mother, Mrs Donaghue, she’s interested in how you managed to get her to talk. She sends the girl to school every now and then, but it never lasts for more than a few days. The girl doesn’t do the work, or communicate with anyone at all.”

I tried to work out where this was headed, but I was still confused. “What am I supposed to do? She asked me about it and I already told her everything I know. I can’t do anything else.”

My mother paused for a moment, frowning.

“I know. I just told her that I would ask you about it in private, just to see if you had remembered anything that could help her.”

I shrugged, hoping that my mother would drop the conversation if I simply stopped replying. At first I thought it might have worked, because she lapsed into silence and chewed the end of her pen. Then I remembered that she could simply be working up the energy to push her point again -- that was her usual style. Her attempts at persuasion always felt like a process of ebb and flow, with patches of silence separating her argument. My fears were confirmed when she spoke again.

“Mrs Donaghue said she was trying to get her daughter to spend more time at school, to speak to more of the other students.”

I remained silent, and I saw my father twist slightly to glance at us before returning to his washing. I had a feeling that I knew what was coming, so I stood up, taking my plate to the sink.

“I’m going to sleep,” I said. My father concentrated on scrubbing my plate, and my mother looked at me as if she had suddenly remembered something.

“What about you? Who do you speak to at school?”

“Safia.”

My mother frowned. “That girl from your old school? No one else?”

I shrugged.

“You should really speak to more of the other kids.”

“I’m not interested in them.”

My father shook his head slightly, and my mother leaned forward, seizing on my words. “You’re not interested in other kids?”

“I really need to sleep now.”

She eyed me. “Your teachers are concerned about you.”

“Goodnight,” I said.

She opened her mouth, and then closed it again. When she spoke she sounded tired. "Right. Fine. Just remember what I said -- think about it. I really think it would help you."

I couldn't think of a single reason to speak to the other students, even the bizarre girl, especially after she had disarmed me with such frightening ease. And yet I had to admit that it had been oddly exciting, in a way. I couldn't remember ever being able to talk to someone like that, not even during my conversations with Safia. I would always be too busy trying to make her laugh or impress her with information.

Just being able to speak, however -- just letting the words come without sitting and thinking about them, without crafting them and polishing them in my mind to ensure they were safe and sensible -- being able to do that had actually been enjoyable. There was no other way to describe it. I told myself that it was foolish to think like this, and completely illogical, but there it was. Part of me wanted to indulge in that freedom again. But the girl had heard me speak in such a basic, embarrassing way, not to mention seeing me in a terrible state. How could I look her in the face after that?

I returned to my room. It was a load of nonsense. I had no obligation to the girl. She was a stranger, and her problems were her own. I switched off the light and lay awake. I felt strangely troubled, but when I tried to get to the root of the feeling I felt even more irritated as it continued to slip away from me.

I didn't know why she'd spoken to me, but it made no difference. You can't help someone just by speaking to them, and even if you could, talking to me, of all people, was a twisted joke. I still struggled on a daily basis to talk to others properly, and I was supposed to help someone else to solve that? It was a simple enough matter, but I kept running through my own reasoning in my head, taking it apart, examining it, coming to the same conclusion every time and yet still being unable to think about anything else.

I must have fallen asleep at some stage, as I remember waking up at two in the morning. My mobile phone was buzzing -- this was an event in itself, as it rarely ever showed signs of life, aside from when my parents contacted me. At times it would become dusty from sheer lack of use. I blinked repeatedly to clear my eyes, twisting around under my sheets to reach the phone. It was a text message.

Humpty Dumpty: Come out in ten minutes. Lateness will be inexcusable!

Safia, of course. She was particularly fond of calling or sending messages at strange times. I had a feeling that she did it deliberately, just to be seen as even quirkier than she actually was. She lived nearby, which made meeting on short notice a simple matter. Two in the morning was rare, however, even for her. I hadn't seen her since the accident, nor had we spoken over the phone or interacted in any way. She was probably angry at me for not getting in touch, I thought, shrugging on a jumper over my t-shirt. I was eager to see her and talk to her again. I would have to withhold any admission of weakness, but it was the nearest I could get to releasing all my restlessness and irritation. Even when we disagreed, she still understood my perspective. I rubbed at my eyes and padded down the stairs, doing my best not to wake my parents.

There is an otherworldly quality to the streets at that specific time -- too late to feel like night, but too early to be called morning. I couldn't see a single person or car in the distance. It inevitably reminded me of the day I had wandered the streets, lost, and I shivered.

I loitered around outside my house, glancing around nervously every now and then, grateful for the street lights. Presently, I heard the scraping of shoes on the pavement, and I saw Safia approaching, huddled in a thick coat. She wasn't looking at me, though -- she was looking up at the sky, squinting. I sat down on the curb, examining her.

"What is it, Safia?"

She paused. "I'm trying to find Corvus. I wish I had a telescope."

"Is that why you wanted to meet at this time? For stargazing?"

"I don't actually know anything about constellations. Not yet, anyway. I'm going to spend this week going over them, though."

"None of this is for class, is it?"

"If it were for class it would be pointless."

I sighed, mechanically offering my usual advice. "You should pay more attention to the actual syllabus."

She crouched down beside me, arms balanced on her knees, and examined my face like a doctor, tipping my chin up with her finger. I cringed, but she didn't stop.

"Looking a little beat up."

“Just a fall.”

“I heard about the wall. Scott again?”

“Yeah. I must have tripped.”

She regarded me in silence for a moment before looking back up at the sky.

“You’re not coming back to school, are you?”

I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Just a feeling. You’re not coming back.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

She smiled. “So why were you up on that wall in the first place? Start from the beginning.”

I gave her my story, but when I got to the part about the nurse’s office, I felt oddly reluctant to go into full depth. Instead, I told her that a strange, silent girl had been there, and about the recent talk with my parents and what they had said.

“The girl doesn’t speak? At all?”

“Not much,” I said, already regretting what little I had told her. This was private, and none of her business.

“She sounds interesting.”

“It’s hard to be interesting when you’re not saying anything.”

“Rubbish. You just need to draw it out of them. What classes is she in?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s her full name?”

“Claire. I can’t remember the surname. Dona-something. Why?”

“Just curious. So the mother was some sort of businesswoman? Did she look rich?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Why are you so uninterested in any of this?”

I pretended to study my fingers. “I don’t even know them. I doubt I’ll see them again.”

“Why don’t you speak to the girl again?”

“She’s got nothing to do with me.”

She laughed. “When I criticise people you act like a Good Samaritan, but when it comes down to it you’re an asshole too, aren’t you?”

“Don’t start, Safia.”

“You can be the knight in shining armour. You can ride to the rescue of this poor princess, and save her, but you refuse. What does that make you, exactly?”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“If I were you, I’d find this whole thing interesting. If you play it right, you may even end up getting something out of it. You have no imagination, though. You’re flat as a plank.”

“Thanks.”

“Is it because you’re too busy? What else do you have on your schedule? Planning a few more tumbles off walls around London? You can do a tour, actually. Get people to pay to watch you.”

I got up, dusting myself off, hiding my irritation. “I’m going to sleep.”

She ignored me. “Find out more about the girl. I’d like to meet her.”

“Why?”

She kept moving around, walking back and forth. “Because I’m surrounded by lifeless people, including you.”

I stared at her. “You have all the friends you want. Your grades are all high. Everyone says you’re going to end up getting into Cambridge or something. What’s the problem?”

She looked pained. “So that’s what you call a successful life, is it?” I could tell that she was ready to explode into one of her rants.

“I need to get back,” I said, turning away.

She reached out and caught me by the sleeve. “You should have told me, you know.” Her tone was less playful now, her voice lower. “About your little accident with Scott.”

I paused for a moment, trying to decide how to respond. “It was nothing serious.”

“Sounded serious to me.”

“It was nothing. Why would I tell you, anyway? I don’t want more lectures on being aggressive.”

She shrugged. “Self defence isn’t aggression. I’m not going to go over all that again, though.”

As I turned away she spoke again. “You want me to do something about it, then?”

“About what?”

“Scott.”

I paused, and then laughed, shaking my head. “Very funny. I’ll admit, you’re good at finding new ways to embarrass me. You’re great at that.”

She let go of my sleeve. “I’m not joking.”

“What could you possibly do?”

She was silent for a moment, examining her nails. “Plenty of things.”

“Like I said, it’s nothing serious. I don’t know why we’re even talking about this.”

“And I thought I was stubborn.”

“Everyone will forget about it after a few days, anyway. They’ve probably forgotten about it already.”

She sighed, sitting on the edge of the pavement. “Of course they have. Can I ask you something?”

“You’re going to ask me anyway, aren’t you?”

“What your parents said got me thinking. What do you do when you’re not speaking to me?”

I focused on a flickering street light in the distance, avoiding her eyes. “I travel the world in search of my destiny.”

Even to my own ears the attempt at a joke sounded horribly artificial. She didn’t find it funny, and simply waited in silence. I spoke again, more seriously.

“I don’t know. I just live my life. What do you want me to say?”

“I never see you with anyone else. In class and out of class. The last student I saw you talking to was Scott. You barely even talk to your parents, right?”

“And?”

“You don’t have any friends.”

I was silent for a long moment. I didn’t understand. I wanted to ask her if she had forgotten that *she* was my friend, someone closer to me than anyone else. How do you ask about something like that, though? How do you talk about something that is supposed to be invisible and silently understood? I wondered, with a sickened feeling, if

she had ever actually considered me as a friend over the years we had known one another. I remembered that I had never actually heard her say the word, or refer to me as close to her in any way. Did she view me as her little puppet, her pet dog? I was someone to humour and pat now and then, but not someone to actually trust or consider on a human level? That couldn't be it.

"What do you mean?" I managed to say.

"I mean what I said. You have no friends, you jumped off a wall, and if you carry on like this your life is going to end in shit."

I regarded her with a coldness that I didn't feel. No, it was quite the opposite -- I was blazing inside, angrier than I could ever recall being. My voice shook with my effort to control it.

"I see."

She looked a little taken aback at something in my expression. "I'm just giving you advice, dummy. Some help."

"I don't want or need help," I said. "I always handle things by myself."

She was quiet for a moment. "Yes, you do," she said, and there was no cruelty or spite in her voice. There was only pity.

I didn't go back to school the next day, or the day after. I could have done, of course, but I didn't want to. I kept picking up my phone to call Safia and then putting it back down again. It wasn't just the embarrassment at the way I had lost my temper -- it was lingering anger and resentment. I went back through all my old memories with Safia, right up until our first meeting, trying to frame them in a new light. Did she ever truly like me? Perhaps she had laughed inwardly every time I sought her out or had spoken to her. The truth, I eventually had to admit, was that she had never displayed any real warmth towards me. It was all banter and conversations about the world and the future. When I had skipped school or didn't call her for a while she rarely ever came to find me and see if I was okay. I was an unwanted sidekick, and I'd spent years deluding myself about the nature of our relationship.

She had no place to lecture me. Not after her rants about violence, her belief in the inferiority of others, and her clear lack of compassion. The day I had most expected sympathy from her was the day she had given me scorn. The really galling thing was

that she had made *me* feel like the one in the wrong, the one who had a serious problem. The more I thought about this -- and about her disdain and secret laughter -- the more I paced, hands clenching and unclenching, eyes darting around the room for no reason at all.

I wondered if I should return to school. I thought of the way people would look at me, the irritating sympathy in the eyes of the teachers, and the sensation of having to walk past that wall every day. School had nothing to offer me. My parents, of course, felt differently. After more than one heated argument, I managed to convince them to let me take another short break before returning, using my head injury as an excuse once again.

What I didn't realise was just how much of a difference these long breaks would make on my life; I had always disliked school, but it had given me something to occupy my mind, different experiences and different people. Now that I was constantly at home, my world felt smaller, more claustrophobic. After the first week, I felt unaffected, but by the fourth and fifth I began feeling disconnected from reality. Safia had dropped out of contact after our last meeting, and my parents were busy with their own work. I also had the feeling that they were a little mad and embarrassed, unable to understand how I could have ended up in such a rut. My mother would take me aside every now and then in an attempt to teach me about Renaissance art history, Modernism, and various other fields, but I couldn't summon the necessary enthusiasm or energy to appreciate it. During one session we covered the Pre-Raphaelites, and I instantly thought of the strange girl, Claire. I wondered if her mother was still trying to force her to attend school, or if she still liked the same paintings. I had chosen to spend my time at home, I continually reminded myself. It had been my decision. So why did it feel as if I had walked into a trap?

When I wasn't being taught, I would be pacing in my room, staring at the ceiling, chanting lines of dialogue from plays to myself, acting scenes out by myself. Sometimes I stared at myself in the mirror, lines forgotten. When the room became unbearable I wandered around outside.

I wondered, more than once, if something had broken in my head after the fall, and if I was slowly going mad. Blaming everything on the fall was dishonest, however. When I really considered matters, I had to admit to myself that this -- whatever was

occurring to me -- had been building for years. The incident at school meant nothing. The world hadn't suddenly cracked around me. It was just a case of me opening my eyes and finally spotting the fractures. The more I thought about this, the less energy I felt, until one day I woke up and decided to take some sort of action to soothe my mind. Safia's derisive words still echoed in my mind, and I decided to silence them.

I left the house for one of my usual long walks, but this time I found myself getting on the bus and then walking to my school. I wasn't in uniform, nor had I informed anyone I was coming, but I still entered through the main gate. Lessons were going on, so I didn't encounter many people along the way, and the few that saw me seemed too preoccupied to pay me any sustained attention. I loitered around for a while, waiting for the right time to move on. As I waited I stared at the bench I used to sit on, the jagged graffiti on the side of a vending machine, and the classrooms I hated, the windows stained with age. I thought I would feel something, some sort of nostalgia, wistfulness, or even happiness that I might no longer have to stomach the place. None of that came, however. I felt like I was looking at a picture that had nothing to do with me, and like a detached observer I could only glance upon it and shrug. There were no sudden revelations, no resounding moment of regret. It was just a place I had once occupied but never belonged to, a place I wanted to leave behind. I was a stranger here.

When the time was right, I headed to the wall where I had fallen, and there was Scott, in his usual place, at the usual time. He was sitting on the ground, body craned over as if he was trying to stare at his own shoelaces. I was surprised to see that he wasn't smoking. He looked up at me and rose a little before slowing and sitting back down. There was a dark patch under one of his eyes.

"Puck," he said. "Been a while."

"Yeah."

"Some people were saying you weren't gonna come back."

"Really?"

He eyed me. "Where's your uniform? What you here for? You finally grown some balls and want to take a shot at me?"

I thought about the knife in my pocket, but then shook my head. "I'm not here for that. I guess I just felt like visiting."

"You're fucking weird. What's wrong with you?"

Any minute now, I thought, he would get up and hit me. I was amazed that he still hadn't done so. I tried to calm myself by breathing slowly, but it wasn't working.

"Even when you went up the wall," he continued. "You never tried to do anything to us, and you barely argued. You just climbed up and jumped off. I can't figure out whether you're a real pussy or just..."

I didn't reply.

He shook his head, brow wrinkling. "You can't blame me, you know. You think you're too good for people. That's your problem."

"I didn't jump."

"Yeah? I saw different."

"I should go," I said slowly. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"I'm not surprised, you know. I knew you'd do it sooner or later."

"What?"

"My teacher pulled me out of class a while back. She knew everything. I figured you'd tell someone a long time ago. Not surprised you finally did it."

"I didn't tell them anything."

He laughed. "Yeah, okay. I don't give a shit, anyway." He paused for a moment. "My Dad did, though. He sure as hell did." He stared at me. It wasn't a confrontational look; there was none of the old menace and intimidation. "This is going on my record. I might not even be able to get into the sixth form here. He wasn't too happy about that."

Good, I thought. If I'm finished with this school, I'd be glad to finish it for you too. I thought about every time he'd pushed me, hit me, laughed at me. It was hard to feel sorry for him. He seemed to read my thoughts even through my blank expression.

"Like I said, I don't really care. This place is a shithole, anyway. I just think it's pointless. I didn't do nothing to you. The others didn't even think we should speak to you. I talked to you, though. We messed around with you a bit, but that didn't mean anything. It happens to everyone. You think we've never gone through that? You know none of it was serious. And now you act like I've done something wrong to you?" He got up slowly, and I stepped back as he advanced. "I've had time to think, and I reckon you did all this to screw me over. That's why you jumped, right? You did the most serious shit you could think of, knowing what would happen. Well it worked. You can celebrate. You can laugh."

I stared at him wordlessly, fearing him and hating myself for it.

“The next time you jump,” he said, leaning in, “do it off a higher wall. Do it right.” As he moved away I looked up and noticed that he was limping, moving in a slow, painstaking manner, as if carrying something delicate in his gut.

I got back home in the evening. I hadn’t eaten, but instead of visiting the kitchen I went straight to the stairs. Before I reached the landing, however, my mother called up to me.

“Where were you?”

“Just out walking again.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just tired.”

She hesitated for a moment before replying. “If there’s something bothering you, you would tell me, wouldn’t you?”

I looked down at her, and offered her a small smile. “Yeah. I would.”

“As long as you’re sure, then.”

As she turned to leave I spoke again, my voice wavering. “You know...”

“Yes?”

I shook my head. “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“No, go on. I’m listening.”

“It’s nothing. I just wanted to say goodnight.”

She looked at me for a moment and then nodded.

I stayed right there on the stairs as my mother moved off, and then I went up to my room. She existed in another world. Even if I wanted to talk to her about everything that had happened, I wouldn’t be able to find the words; it was like trying to speak in a different language. My father was distant following our discussion about school. Safia still hadn’t contacted me. Perhaps they were all right and I was the one in the wrong. I wondered if even Scott had been more perceptive than I gave him credit for. Did I jump off the wall? I had been so sure that I had slipped, but that certainty had begun to erode.

I stared down at a Waterhouse book on my table. Perhaps that girl was the answer. I needed to look at someone even more wretched than myself to feel better. I would speak to her and use it, I reasoned, as a warning to myself -- I had to avoid becoming like her at any cost. She represented a future that I couldn’t accept for myself.

I also wondered how Safia would react if she saw me actively seeking another person out and trying to converse with them, something I had never done with anyone aside from her. She wouldn't regret her actions at first -- she was far too stubborn for that -- but perhaps, with time, she would feel differently about me. She was very possessive, after all, and she had spent more time with me than any of her other friends.

My reasons were perfectly clear in my mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

I wonder, sometimes, who I really am at heart. My head is always muddled. Sometimes I feel quite serene, and I genuinely care about the feelings and thoughts of others; there have been moments with my parents and Safia in the past that brought warm sensations out of me. I know they were there.

At other times, however, I feel cold. I disregard others, and disregard even myself -- everything feels hopeless and unworthy of consideration. People can suffer, and part of me might remain unmoved, hard and resilient as rock. I could do many troubling things when I feel that way. I try to avoid thinking about it, to pile it under pleasant fantasies and thoughts, but it's there, and after all these years it hasn't left. I wonder if Scott saw something like this in my eyes, and that is why he had that look of revulsion on his face whenever he saw me. It's just as likely that I give him too much credit.

I've learned to hide it as best as I can. I would like to be to be rid of it entirely, of course, but I don't know if these sort of qualities can ever be 'deleted'. People can change on the surface, and probably do so without even realising it a lot of the time, but their old thoughts and feelings are still inside somewhere.

My first problem: how would I approach Claire? The idea of walking up to her and striking up a conversation was beyond consideration. It would only result in embarrassment and disaster. I chose to wait and plan instead. I returned to school, much to the surprise of my parents, and spent my break periods looking for Claire. No matter how much I looked, however, I couldn't find her. I could have asked around, but that would involve interacting with the other students, and that was something I actively avoided.

I decided to regularly check the school nurse's office. I didn't go inside -- I simply passed the door every day, hoping that if I went there I might see her nearby. It wasn't a particularly clever approach, but it was all I had. I did this for a few minutes each time, walking past the same door and scrutinising it in the way I thought a detective would. Sometimes I sat down on one of the chairs outside the office, crossing my legs in the 'adult' manner I had first noticed years ago. It was still uncomfortable,

but I felt more confident when I did it. If I'd had a wide-brimmed hat I would have donned that too, although a teacher would have simply confiscated it.

When I loitered around in the corridor I always went over what I would say if I encountered Claire. I drew up plans in my mind, in which I naturally spoke with charisma and grace. I was in the midst of thinking about one of these plans (on the fourth day of my quest) when I nearly walked right into her.

She was leaning against the wall next to the door, her hair hanging down over her face. I stopped before she noticed me and stepped behind the nearby corner. I watched her for a moment, wondering how to approach her. I dismissed every idea that arose in my head -- none of them felt right.

Before I could come up with an appropriate plan, she turned and started walking away, her steps light and quick. I followed at a distance, trying to keep up without revealing myself. I kept worrying that she would look back, but she never did. I noticed that she had trouble walking in a straight line -- sometimes her feet would cross as if she were drunk, and her shoes appeared to be too big for her. She was also focused on the ground ahead of her rather than watching where she was going, and I kept expecting her to crash into the students walking in the opposite direction. Somehow she managed to avoid all of them, or rather, they avoided her. She turned into a different corridor, almost ran down a set of stairs, and then stepped outside. I paused at the doorway and watched how she quickly disappeared into the woods beyond the school grounds. It was the kind of area I normally stayed away from; the sort of students that sat around there were the types to jeer as others walked past, and I had no interest in exposing myself to more abuse.

I thought about abandoning my pursuit, and then remembered how difficult it had been to find her. If I let this chance slip away then I might not get another for a long time. I ran after her. I did wonder, as I ran, why I was so persistent about following her -- I felt like someone pursuing an urgent goal, and yet in reality it had very little significance whether I spoke to her or not. I didn't even know what I would say to her if I did catch up. 'Hi, I've been following you for absolutely no reason. Would you like to have a chat?' It was ridiculous.

I lost sight of her amongst the trees and foliage and stopped, glancing around to try and find her. All I could hear were the birds above me and the distant shouts and

chatter from the school area. Dry leaves crackled underfoot as I walked, and I had to duck under twisted branches. There were some sort of yellow flowers growing in patches of grass, illuminated by the sunlight above. I crouched down near them and ran a fingertip over a petal. I couldn't remember the last time I had just let myself relax like this in the outside world.

"Why are you following me?"

I instantly straightened, moving to the side. There was a tremor in her tone. I couldn't see her, and I felt dizzy from constantly turning and looking over my shoulders.

"I just wanted to talk," I said, feeling idiotic.

There was a long silence. Then she spoke.

"I remember you."

I turned around and she stepped out from behind a tree, eyeing me warily. I wondered how someone so clumsy could hide so quickly and effectively. There was an uncomfortable silence. I cleared my throat.

"You said you saw me, up on the wall. Was I falling or jumping?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again, as if she didn't know what to say.

"I just need to know," I said.

She thought about it for a moment, as if it were a trick question. "You fell."

I breathed out slowly, nodding to myself. "I know."

"I thought you'd left. Left school, I mean," she said.

"I did. But I came back -- to say hi, I guess."

She looked even more confused than before. "To say hi to who?"

"To you," I said.

She kept her distance. "Is that a joke?"

"No," I said. "No, I'm serious."

She sat down on a tree stump, narrowing her eyes. "I don't understand," she finally said.

"I don't understand either," I said. "Back in the nurse's office, why did you speak to me? Your mother said you don't speak to anyone."

She examined her hands with exaggerated scrutiny. She had barely met my eyes once during the conversation. My father always used to say that eyes are the best

indicator of emotion -- there was nothing scientific about his assessment, of course. It was just his assumption. I believe him, though. I found myself regularly avoiding eye contact when I was with Scott, simply because I thought he would see my fear, or perhaps take my expression for some sort of provocation, unintentionally signalling him when to attack. Safia, on the other hand, always stared people directly in the eyes for as long as they spoke to her, and grew irritated when they didn't respond in kind -- to me, this wasn't so much a sign of her honesty as it was a sign of her urge to dominate and express herself, regardless of the wishes of others. I couldn't tell what Claire's lack of eye contact signified. All I knew was that it was a strange conversation, as we were both staring into the distance or focusing on trees while talking, rarely ever looking at one another. On the rare occasion when our eyes met our gazes instantly slid to the side again, to focus on a safer spot. I felt oddly tense, as if I were playing a game and had no real sense of the rules. I approached every word like another step along a tightrope; I was slow, careful and patient. I wondered if she felt the same as I watched her struggling to formulate sentences.

"I've never seen someone here look so hurt," she said. "After you fell, I mean."

I reached up to touch my face. "I still have marks."

"Not just that," she said after a pause. "It was what you said."

"Forget what I said. My head was screwed up."

She nodded, but didn't look entirely convinced. She was quiet for a moment, and took a few deep breaths. Her face was impassive. She spoke up again.

"When I saw you I thought you were dead. You stopped moving as soon as you hit the ground."

I tried to remain casual as she spoke, but I had to fight down a queasy feeling in my stomach.

"What you said about Scott," I said, trying to distract myself, "that he was trying to help me up. Was that true?"

"I don't know his name. He was big...blonde hair."

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. "I still don't understand that."

"Why don't you ask him?"

The possibility hadn't even occurred to me, and I wondered how to respond. She continued to look at the ground. The silence became so awkward that I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I'm sorry, but I have to go now."

I walked away quickly, and didn't look back. I didn't hear her speak or move behind me. There was just silence, and the beat of my heart.

I found Scott in the gym. We weren't supposed to use the place when lessons weren't going on, but he didn't care. I found that I didn't particularly care either.

He was using a climbing rope, and I could see the muscles in his forearms straining under his rolled up shirt sleeves. I sat down and watched him. I couldn't even imagine pulling myself up to the top of the rope, let alone swinging from one to another, but that was exactly what he was doing. He wasn't graceful, but he was workmanlike and persistent. When he saw me he stopped for a few seconds, just dangling there, and watched me under his thick eyebrows. Then he slowly climbed down.

"Scott," I said, trying to keep my voice under control.

He wiped his forehead with his jumper, and then pulled it on. When he turned around he frowned at me. "What do you want now?"

"Back when I fell --"

"God," he said. "Let it go. I'm sick of hearing about it."

"When I fell," I repeated, keeping my voice low, "I heard that you were trying to help me up after."

He didn't respond for a few seconds, instead preferring to adjust his tie. Even when he stopped fiddling with it, it was still messy and loose. When he finally spoke he sounded pensive.

"Sounds like shit."

"Why?"

He looked at me and snorted. "Why do you always sound so old? You're like a granddad."

I waited, watching him. He shook his head.

"Fine. Yeah, I helped you up. What did you think I was going to do? I could have been expelled. I'm not stupid, Puck."

I nodded. "I just didn't get it."

He turned away and picked his coat up. "There's nothing hard to understand about it. It's about as logical as it gets, in fact."

"Okay. That's all I wanted to ask."

He gave me a strange look. "Right. Whatever."

I didn't move. He walked away, hands in pockets, but stopped at the door to turn back, as I thought he might. I just didn't know if he was planning to give me a goodbye punch or if he would simply settle for a quick insult. He surprised me and did neither. He simply stared at me.

"You hang around with some weird people," he finally said.

"What?"

"That Indian girl. What's her name?"

I paused. "Safia?"

"Yeah. What are you? Relatives?"

"No," I said.

"Friends? Didn't think you had any."

"I don't."

"Whatever. She's a head case. Stay away from her."

I noticed that he had slipped out of his usual aggressive tone, and I didn't know if I was unsettled or enjoying it.

"What do you mean?"

The anger returned then. "Don't fuck around, you know what I mean."

"Really," I said, edging backwards. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He studied me while he spoke. "You know Alex?"

Alex was one of those guys who followed Scott around, constantly trying to gain his approval. He was a small, wiry boy, and he'd been in a fair amount of fights due to his temper. He'd often watched me when the others had insulted or hit me. He didn't join in, but he didn't defend me either. I don't think I'd ever spoken to him.

"I know him."

"This was a while after you had your little accident. That girl asked him about me in their Technology class. She wanted to talk to me. He told her to piss off. She pretended to listen to him and then kicked him in the balls. I actually thought that bit was pretty funny until they told me the rest. While he was trying to breathe she picked

up the fucking saw he was using for his wood work and put it near his face. She whispered some stuff to him before the others pulled her off. He wouldn't tell me what she said. He's even got a small mark on his cheek...he goes around telling people that he cut himself shaving, even though he's barely got any hair."

"Oh."

"He's been waiting, but he's going to do something about her soon."

"Oh."

"That's it? That's all you have to say?"

"I didn't know," I said, feeling warm. Maybe Safia had threatened him, but I thought the part about the saw was just something that had been made up. It was too far, even for her.

"Well now you do. I know you don't have the guts to put her up to that, but you better warn her to stop. I don't give a shit if she's a girl. She tries that with me, or someone else, and she's not going to get away with it. She's mental."

"She's not crazy," I said.

"You're saying that after what I just told you?"

"She's not crazy," I repeated, more firmly this time, looking him in the eye.

He came towards me, hands bunched into fists, and I cringed. Here we go again. He stopped short, however, and just looked at me. I took a step back, hands up in a feeble attempt to make some sort of wall between us. He wasn't interested in hitting me, though. He just shook his head.

"First time I've seen you like that," he said. "If you did that a bit more, you'd be less of a prick," he added. He picked his backpack up and turned around to look at me again, irritation stamped on his features.

"One more thing. When someone tries to hit you, do something about it. It pisses me off when you stand there and do nothing like a little girl."

I was taken aback. "Why?"

"What, you get off on getting beat up?"

"No."

"If you're not going to hit back, at least cover your head."

I thought back to the way I had blocked while being pummelled during my first and last sparring session. They at least gave you gloves in the ring -- out here I only had two small, bony hands to protect myself. However, even taking that blocking posture

would simply provoke people like Scott into giving me more of a beating. Putting your hands up, even to defend yourself, was a kind of challenge -- it was a reaction to the other person, an attempt to deal with their attacks. It wasn't as safe as completely surrendering and simply going limp. Besides, even if I had used what I knew, it still wouldn't have saved me -- I didn't know how to fight. I wasn't my father, and I never would be.

"I don't want to," I said.

"You're a head case too, you know."

I shrugged, and he looked disgusted. "I'm off," he said. "Remember what I told you."

"Safia does whatever she wants," I said as he walked away. "I can't stop her or tell her what to do."

He paused at the doorway. "Shitty news for her then," he said, and left.

They cornered her after school a few days later, around the back of a classroom. I might not have even seen it on another day -- as it was, I happened to glance around on my walk out of school, and noticed a group of boys surrounding Safia. Alex was doing most of the talking, but I also spotted Scott leaning against a wall and watching. Some of them weren't just mouthy kids -- they had the reputation of being shoplifters and had beaten up more than one student. I couldn't understand why they hadn't been expelled. I didn't know how much of their reputation was based on lies and hollow bragging, but they certainly had a bad look to them. They were nothing like Scott's gang. These were the type of kids that you just didn't even try to talk to. The scene radiated trouble. Part of me wanted to walk away, or to watch from a distance, hidden. Another part even wanted to see Safia flustered and trying to appease the group after all her maddening confidence and swaggering about, just to see how she reacted when it all blew up in her face.

I couldn't do that, though. She was in this position because of me, even if I didn't quite understand her motives. If she didn't consider me as her friend, then why would she go to all this trouble?

I walked towards them, slowly at first, and then more quickly. Safia was standing with her back to the wall, arms folded in front of her. To someone who didn't

know her, she probably looked calm and amused. She was smiling, but I could see that it was strained, and she looked more tense than usual, her back stiff when she usually favoured a loose, casual posture.

One of the group -- a tall boy with a sour expression -- was talking to her.

"What was that?" she said.

"You heard me -- why did you cut him?" He jabbed a finger at Alex.

She laughed. "Why not? I felt like it."

No one laughed with her. Alex moved forward. "You think it's funny?"

"I think it's funny that you need all these guys with you, yeah."

"You think I need them for someone like you?"

"Why are they here then?"

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, I thought so."

The tall boy stopped Alex from getting closer to her. He spoke up again. "How about you just pay us something?"

"Yeah? How much?"

He paused for a minute, turned back to the others, and listened to their comments. Some threw out ridiculous, unrealistic sums, while others just laughed. He turned back to her. "How about a hundred quid?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You expect me to have that? Do you think I'm fucking loaded or something?"

"How much have you got on you now?"

"Nothing."

"Then give us a hundred quid by tomorrow."

"I told you, I'm not rich."

"Check your daddy's wallet then."

She shook her head. "Even if he had it, I wouldn't give it to you imbeciles."

"So you're not paying?"

"You heard me," she said, imitating the tall boy's commanding tone.

The others shouted out more abuse, and Alex gestured to her, also shouting things I couldn't hear over the noise. She laughed, contemptuous. Some of the other boys went into hysterics, jeering. Alex called her a 'stupid bitch'.

I mentioned before that I could be quite cold, and that this quality worried me. What happened at this point was, in a strange, roundabout way, connected to this problem. It wasn't just anger. I know what anger feels like. This started as anger and kept growing, eventually rising to a level beyond it, and then it became something else. On the rare occasions when I was angry before it was usually over within a few minutes, and I was able to look at myself mentally while I raged; some part of me was usually still clear-headed. This, however, was anger that quickly became cold. My mind felt somehow flattened and slow. I felt myself pushing my way through the crowd until I got to Alex. Safia didn't look afraid, and she said something when she saw me, but I had no idea what it was. Alex turned around and said something himself, but I didn't hear it.

I hit him. There was no technique to it, no thought behind it. It was an instinctive, big, sweeping punch that rose from my waist and caught him on the temple. He went down. I kept hitting him, again and again, lowering myself down and pinning him to the ground with my knees. I felt people tugging at me from behind, but they didn't seem particularly important. I was under the sea, and they were all floating and shouting wordlessly around me. At first he tried to fight back, but when he realised that he couldn't hit properly from a prone position he just covered his head with his hands. When he raised his hands to shield himself I hit him around them, to the side of the head, then back to the front. He had big, chunky hands, and some of his nails needed to be trimmed. I realised, at one point, that there was blood on his face and all over my knuckles and shirt cuffs. I knew my parents would hate having to wash that out. I was thinking about that irritating detail when I felt myself being pulled backwards with so much force that I fell onto my back. Safia stood over me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she shouted, shaking me.

I frowned at her, and glanced back at Alex. He was tucked into a ball, blood trickling through his fingers. People were gathered around him, some of them shouting out advice and warnings, others trying to pick him up. Scott looked like he was going to be sick, and Safia was still staring at me, looking far more worried than I had ever seen her.

"I did it," I told her. "I did it."

CHAPTER FIVE

When I was younger, I wanted to be a superhero. It wasn't just about their powers and special skills -- it was their ability to always succeed. Even if the villain beat them to a pulp for most of an episode, I knew there would be an inevitable comeback at the end. They were acquainted with the concept of failure, but were never dominated by it. Whenever they employed violence it was quick, clean and bloodless, and it rarely troubled them afterwards. *Green Lantern* was my favourite, and even inspired me to wear one of my mother's rings around the house for a while, at least until my father noticed and told me to stop it. I kept reading the comics, even when I became a teenager. They were the perfect escape after a day at school. I still believed that they were special, and had worthwhile elements buried in there.

The day after I beat that boy I pulled out my old cardboard box of comics and decided to read one of my favourite issues to calm myself down. I sat at the foot of my bed, legs crossed, and opened the comic. I sat there for ten minutes, but I couldn't get past the first few pages. I ended up putting the comic back in the box and pushing it under my bed. It's probably still in that old box, slowly collecting dust.

I was scared. It wasn't just the violence itself, although that did disturb me. It was the knowledge that I had completely lost control. It was the powerful sense that I suddenly had of myself as someone unbalanced, unhinged, liable to surprise myself as well as others. What if something like this happened again? Would I even feel it coming?

The problem was very clear -- my self-control simply wasn't strong enough. I concluded that it was, in fact, shamefully fragile. I had completely lost my ability to analyse and study the situation, to think about what I was doing in the moment. There was also an irritating question at the back of my mind -- what had prompted such an extreme reaction from me? I had certainly been angry that someone was harassing Safia, but that wasn't the only factor. I had felt a bizarre flicker of something resembling hunger during the incident. I thought about blaming Safia -- I knew that her presence had been critical. I wasn't always able to be my usual self when I was around her. I had actually known this years beforehand, when we had first met as children, but I had

always assumed that it was a good thing, something that had felt comfortable and liberating -- it had never created problems like this before.

I kept seeing Safia's horrified expression in my mind. In comics the heroine never reacted that way when the hero arrived. Then again, I hadn't felt anything like a hero either before or after my actions. What I had done had felt like slowly hammering a piece of meat, and by the end of it my mind had taken a similar beating; now it was twisted into something that scared me.

The worst part were the moments -- only brief ones -- where something in me felt good about what I had done. Safia's expression had certainly upset me, but she had *looked* at me. That had to count for something. Hitting that boy's face, over and over again, was the only time in my life that I had ever felt strong, in complete control of the world around me. No one had laughed at me or jeered. They had just left me alone.

I expected to be expelled from school. Fights were common, but they rarely developed into something as serious as the one I had been in. I was surprised when I was only given a suspension -- the fact that my record had been unblemished prior to the incident was no doubt a major factor.

I spent the day after the incident in my room, flicking through channels on my TV without really caring about anything I saw -- reality shows, adverts starring beautiful people with empty eyes and quiz shows with meaningless questions. I knew my parents were eventually going to try talking to me, but I wanted to put it off as long as possible. I didn't come down for breakfast, and I also missed lunch, even though my stomach had begun to ache. The light behind my curtains had begun to darken when I heard footsteps on the landing. They were heavy and clumsy, the kind that sent vibrations through the floor. My father.

Even before he said anything, I knew he was agitated from the way he happened to keep passing my room, glancing through the crack in my doorway each time as if by accident. When he eventually shuffled into my room he just stood there, hands in his pockets, rocking from foot to foot. I looked at him expectantly and he finally moved, walking around my room and running an eye over the *Star Trek* poster above my desk.

"So," he said, still examining it. "Have you done your homework?"

I looked up at him from my chair. "Yeah."

"That's good. Very good."

He sat down on the bed next to me. "How are your hands?"

My hands were still a little swollen and red from the incident. I raised them up so he could take a look. When he started examining them he seemed to relax a little.

"They're healing up," he said. "Easy to damage, hands."

I nodded.

He held my wrists and stared at them. "I always told you not to fight with others, didn't I? I remember telling you that."

I nodded again, although I couldn't recall him saying it.

"Did anyone see you do it?"

"A lot of people."

He put my hands down.

"The other boy, is he okay?"

"I think so."

"You should find out. Don't start another fight with him -- just ask around. It's good to know this kind of thing."

The problem was that I didn't want to know. In fact, I never wanted to see his face again. Just thinking about what I had done, and the flashes of pleasure it had given me, made me feel guilty.

"Why?" I said.

"Why? Because...well, you just have to know. What I mean is -- you want to be seen as the bad guy here?"

"No."

"Exactly."

"I guess I could --"

"Good," he said, standing up. "Write a letter to your teacher and apologise to her too."

"I didn't do anything to her, though."

"That's not the point. I'm going to talk to her. I'm going to suggest that you do community service after your suspension."

I thought of how I would have to clean tables and dinner plates while the other students stared. "Isn't the suspension enough?"

"No, it isn't."

“But --”

“No,” he said, his face hard.

I knew better than to argue. He rubbed his hands on his trousers, then took a cigarette out of his pocket. “Now I have to get some work done.”

He cleared his throat loudly and, copying the character from the *Star Trek* poster on my wall, gave me the Vulcan salute with his free hand before he left. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’d done it incorrectly.

My mother came home that night, when my father had gone to sleep and I was still up, flicking through channels. It wasn’t unusual for her to come back that late -- unlike my father, who left the house and came back at around the same time each day, my mother was more unpredictable. Sometimes she came in the early evening, and at other times she would turn up late at night. I went downstairs and saw her snacking on a cold pizza slice while reading her notes for the following day. She hadn’t even taken her shoes off, and had left dirty footprints over the white kitchen floor. I had a sudden urge to scrub them all away, but I restrained myself. When she saw me she looked up and smiled.

“Why are you still up?”

“Mum,” I said. “Why don’t you ever get mad?”

She frowned. “What kind of a question is that? I always do.”

“Not like Dad,” I said, “and not like me.”

She laughed, looking back down at her notes. “You won’t believe how many papers I still have to check. I’m not sure how much sleep I’ll get.”

“Aren’t you even going to say anything about the other day?”

“Your father told me he’d speak to you.”

“I hurt someone,” I said.

“And you know I want you to make sure it never happens again. You never used to have all these problems at school.”

“He was hurt real bad.”

“It’s not going to happen again.”

“When I did it,” I continued, a little louder, “I couldn’t stop. I wouldn’t have cared if he had died.”

“Will you stop saying horrible things like that? What’s wrong with you today?”

“I just wanted to talk about it.”

“I don’t like hearing about these things.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m really busy at the moment. I have a mountain of papers to get through. I promise that I’ll talk to you about this tomorrow, okay?”

I waited, watching her, but she was already busy scrawling notes on one of her papers, frowning at it as if it had offended her. When I left she was chewing on the end of her pen, blue ink staining her lips. I thought about how she had been so concerned after I had slipped off the wall.

I had to speak to Safia. I wasn’t even sure what I would say to her, but I wanted to see her, to somehow assure her that I hadn’t changed, that I didn’t deserve that odd look she had given me. I called her mobile repeatedly while I sat on the floor of my room, tapping a finger against the receiver. She never answered, and I was left staring at the phone in my hand, listening to her cheery Voicemail message. ‘Hi, this is Safia. You’re unlucky, but you get to leave a message. Later!’

On my first day back at school I went to find Alex during my break period. It was a stupid, irrational idea -- I knew that but still went anyway. I knew he was in the same Science class as Safia, so I could also use the opportunity to see her. I waited outside the classroom after his lesson ended. Safia wasn’t there. The other students quickly left the room when the bell rang, but Alex moved slowly, collecting his books and carefully putting them in his bag. It hurt to look at his face. There were small, fleshy lumps on his forehead. His eyes also seemed to have shrunk, retreating inwards into his face, giving way to a spread of dark red which ended at his cheekbones. His lips were puffy, and he kept pressing them together as if trying to work some life back into them. When he reached over to get pieces of paper and pens, he did so with the care of an elderly man.

Surely I couldn’t have done that to him. He had been hit by something large and powerful, not my puny fists. When he saw me walk in he froze, just watching, his eyes blank. Then he stood, his chair squeaking against the floor as he pushed it back.

“I just wanted to talk,” I said. “I want to --”

“Motherfucker,” he hissed. “Get out.”

"I wanted to say sorry," I said.

"You're taking the piss, aren't you? I know what you're doing, you prick."

"No, I just want --"

"Get out."

"Please just --"

"If you don't get out," he said, his voice higher than I had yet heard it, "I'm going to fucking kill you, I swear. I'm going to kill you."

I believed him. I opened the classroom door.

"Wait," he said.

I looked back, hoping that he would at least give me a minute to talk, but he cut in as soon as I opened my mouth.

"It didn't mean nothing. It was a sucker punch. Anyone can do that. You're a pussy. A joke."

I nodded. It was instinctive. Then I caught myself -- I stared at him.

"No," I said slowly. "No, I'm not."

"What was that?"

"I said no."

He stared at me -- he couldn't believe that I was talking to him like this, and I couldn't quite believe it either. I raised my open palms, trying to calm him down, but when he saw my arms come up he suddenly jerked back and almost fell over his chair.

I was confused for a moment, and then understood.

"I'm going," I said. He kept staring at me as I moved away, and I didn't start to feel sick until I was halfway down the corridor.

Only one student approached me to talk during my first week back -- Scott. He stopped right in front of me and looked at me carefully, as if sizing me up for something. "I'm trying to come up with another name for you. Puck ain't gonna work any more. I can't remember any other bloody characters from those plays though."

When I refused to reply he continued, with a forced note of casualness in his voice.

"The hell happened to you, anyway?"

I wanted to laugh. He almost sounded concerned, but I knew that was nonsense.
“It was nothing.”

“Nothing? Tell that to Alex.”

I flinched. “Have you seen Safia?”

“Her? Haven’t seen her around in weeks. I thought she was just waiting for things to cool off. Then I heard Jo talking about her a while back. Apparently she just stopped turning up.”

I froze. “What?”

“She’s gone, probably left school.”

It was a lie, I instantly knew. The idea of Safia leaving school without even telling me was ridiculous. She could be callous at times, and she rarely paid attention to normal standards of manners, but even she would never do something like that without informing me beforehand, in person.

“Scott,” I said, trying to be patient, “This ‘Jo’ must have made a mistake, or you might have misheard her.”

He frowned. “If I said she told me, then that’s what she told me.”

Then she was wrong, I thought. If I wanted answers I would have to ask someone else.

“Jo made a mistake,” I repeated to myself.

“Forget that, and listen,” Scott said. “I need to tell you something. I’m going to tell Alex and his lot to stop coming after you.”

“They would do that?”

“The fuck do you think? You think he was planning to just leave you alone after all that?”

“I thought -- he could get expelled --”

“Shut up. It doesn’t matter. I’ll see if I can call him off.”

I paused, wondering what to say. “Why?”

“Because I’m bored of all this back and forth bullshit. This all started with you and your drama queen stuff on that wall. I’m fed up with it. Wish I’d never sent you up there. Just keep out of sight, and I’ll tell him the same thing. Got it?”

I nodded slowly. “I get it. But --”

“No questions,” he said. Then he turned and left, shaking his head.

Normally I would have been curious enough to try and untangle his odd behaviour, but in this instance I was too busy trying to find out accurate information on Safia. I decided to ask the teachers. They weren't particularly forthcoming, however -- all I could determine was that she hadn't mentioned where she was going, only that she was moving too far away to attend our school any more. I sat down on a bench outside the Maths department to think.

It still didn't make sense. Then again, she wouldn't be able to fake leaving school. I didn't know exactly where she lived -- or rather, where she used to live. She had always refused to take me to her house, and she had only rarely spoken about her family. I had no real way of contacting her. She could be living in another part of England, or she could have moved halfway across the world.

I'm not sure how to explain how I felt about this. I guess I've never been an optimistic person. I always believe the worst of every situation. If something can ruin a good situation, it probably will. However, it was only then, while I sat on that bench, that I realised (despite all my pessimism) I had never even entertained the idea of Safia leaving me alone. I was ready for arguments, for brief periods of sulkiness on both our sides, for everything, as long as we resumed our normal relationship in due time.

The other students stood around me, chatting, shouting and enjoying the sun. They didn't come near me, and didn't appear to notice me staring at them. It was like watching a movie. I had felt this way before, on the day I had spent the night alone, wandering and lost as a child. At that time I had craved anything to put my mind at ease. I needed the same thing now. The older I became the more alien the world seemed. I wondered how it would look to me when I was as old as my parents. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

I was still thinking as I walked to the nurse's office, my limbs stiff and slow. Claire sat outside the door, staring at the floor. On other days I would have been surprised to actually see her there; on this day the oddity of her presence was perfectly fitting. I sat in one of the other chairs, hands in my pockets. We were both silent for a moment.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello," she replied.

We both fell silent again. Then she spoke up.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“You don’t look well.”

I thought about it. “I guess not. I think it’s all in my head, though.”

“Isn’t that important?”

“I can deal with it.”

“Okay.”

“Have you ever thought of leaving school?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“What about leaving town completely?”

She paused before answering. “Yes.”

“Where would you go if you did that?”

“I don’t know. I think I’d just find somewhere I felt comfortable. Why?”

“Comfortable,” I repeated to myself.

“Why are you asking?”

“I’m thinking about how I can find someone. They left without saying where they were going.”

She looked up at me. “What if they didn’t want to be found? What if they deliberately left without saying anything, to keep people from following?”

I swallowed. “That’s not what happened.”

“It was just an idea.”

“It’s wrong,” I said.

“Is it okay to ask you who you’re looking for?”

I thought about it for a while. “Her name is Safia,” I finally said.

“Your friend?”

“I’m not sure,” I said slowly.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Why?”

She didn’t reply.

“I’m going to find her,” I said. “But I don’t know where to start.”

“You haven’t looked her up in the phone book?”

“If she’s already moved, there’s no point.”

“You could ask the neighbours for more information.”

I knew I sounded desperate and silly. If Claire was correct, and Safia deliberately hadn't told me where she was going, then my efforts took on an embarrassing tone.

“Could I...” Claire started, and then stopped. “Is it okay if I ask your name?”

I wondered why I hadn't told her in our previous meeting. It's not like it was a private detail.

“Rayhan,” I said.

“Ray-han,” she repeated. She said it in a curious way, as if trying to decipher something behind the letters.

“Most people just say Ray,” I said.

“Could I use the full version?” she asked.

“Yeah.” It didn't matter much to me. I didn't like any part of my name; the full version was awkward for people to pronounce, and the shortened version felt too casual and typical. I'd learned to accept both.

“I heard --” she said, and then halted, licking her lips. “Some other students talking in class. They mentioned you.”

“Oh.”

“They said you almost beat another boy to death.”

“That's a lie,” I said, trying to control my breathing.

“It is?” she said slowly. “I thought it was weird.”

I had meant, of course, that they were obviously exaggerating -- Alex was fine now, despite all his bruises and swelling. She seemed to have concluded that the entire rumour was false, however, and now I found it very difficult to backtrack and contradict her. Why was it so difficult just to tell the truth? Maybe it was because she was so certain in her tone and expression. She hardly knew me, though. I wasn't to blame for her assumptions.

“Do you know,” I said, “that I'm not a good person?”

She examined me, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I don't know how to explain -- I just felt like telling you that right now.”

“You seem okay.”

“You don't know me,” I said, and quickly regretted the harshness in my tone.

Claire flinched, and I continued. “I only just met you, I mean.”

“Sorry.”

“No need for that,” I said, stumbling over my words a bit. People rarely apologised to me, let alone twice in the same conversation. I pointed to the bracelet on her left wrist and asked her about it, trying to distract her. The bracelet looked like a thin, silver thread, twining around itself, with some type of flower carved in the middle.

She instinctively covered the bracelet with her right hand, then slowly withdrew it. “It’s just a present.”

She said it so quietly, and with such a startled look, that I couldn’t help pressing the issue.

“From who?”

She was silent, and I quickly realised I had offended her. Why did it even matter who had given her the bracelet? I tried to think of another way to change the topic, but while I did this she spoke again.

“My father.”

“It’s nice,” I said.

She looked at it, shifting it around under the light. “I don’t like it.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I just don’t like it.”

I wanted to ask her why she wore it if she didn’t like it, but I didn’t want to offend her again. I stayed silent. I noticed, however, that she kept her fingertips on the bracelet while we spoke, rubbing it gently every now and then.

I looked up Safia’s address soon afterward. She lived in Harrow Weald, an area I had never visited, although I had heard my parents speak about it in a distasteful tone. Now that I finally had the address and phone number in front of me I found myself reluctant to make use of it. What was I supposed to say to Safia even if I found her? She could laugh in my face, and tell me that I had wasted my time, that she had no interest in speaking to me. If she asked me for a reason for my actions, I wouldn’t even be able to give her one -- she had already declared that we weren’t friends. Why would I bother chasing someone who said such a thing? However, the thought of abandoning her as she had abandoned me left me feeling queasy.

No, I would find her and speak to her. I decided to start with the number. I tapped the numbers into the phone, hesitating after each one. I felt the receiver shaking against my cheek. No one answered. After the fifteenth ring I put the phone down. I would keep trying over the next few days, but I didn't expect any result. I would have to go to the house.

Something between Claire and me had opened up, even if only in a small way. We didn't suddenly become friends, but I found myself speaking to her more often. Our meeting place -- decided with an unspoken agreement -- was the space outside the nurse's office. It wasn't as busy as the other corridors in the school, and students rarely used the chairs in that section.

Our conversations were short to begin with -- both of us were unsure of what to say, and I was wary. Safia was so open that I normally just had to ask direct questions to get direct answers, but Claire was very different -- I found myself talking more around her, as she naturally retreated into silence to listen. I had to fill the patches of emptiness and quiet that she created to avoid feeling awkward. She listened with an intensity that I'd rarely seen in anyone else. Even though she usually avoided eye contact I got the sense that she was taking in everything I said and giving it careful consideration in the privacy of her mind. She actually seemed interested in hearing my thoughts on matters, and if we happened to have differing viewpoints, she wouldn't get frustrated or demand that I change my mind. She simply accepted it. It was comforting to talk to someone without the constant fear that they would judge my responses and tear them apart.

She was also the only person I had ever met who seemed more isolated than I was. I didn't realise it at the time, but the fact that we even had conversations was a sort of triumph for her. I was particularly fond of talking about science fiction with her, because she offered perspectives on it that I had never considered. She was also constantly bringing up books during our conversations, even though I hadn't read many of them. When I told her that Scott had nicknamed me 'Puck' she frowned at me.

"You're nothing like that character," she said.

I wondered if that was a compliment or a critique. Claire wasn't always clear about whether she regarded something positively or negatively. At even the hint of a

disagreement or debate she would skitter away from the topic nervously, referring to something else or agreeing with me, with a note of doubt in her voice all the while.

We stuck to safe topics, like the horrors of socialising.

"I just try to rehearse the conversations before they happen," I said. "Then I rehearse it with corrections after I mess it up, as if I'll somehow get another chance at it."

She smiled. "Exactly."

"I sometimes think it would be nice to just say stuff without thinking, though."

She narrowed her eyes. "You already do that now and then."

"I never do that."

"I can remember you doing it...I'll just record you one day and play it back to you."

I recoiled. "God, please don't."

"See? Just like that."

"That doesn't count," I said, but I gave a reluctant smile.

I watched the other students heading to their classes. "Claire," I said.

"Yes?"

"Do you hate them?" I asked, gesturing to the students.

She frowned. "No. Why would I?"

"Not all the time. Just sometimes."

"The bullies, yeah. The rest, no."

"I meant the rest too."

"Why would I? They haven't even done anything to me."

"I don't know how to explain it."

She regarded me for a moment, looking like she wanted to ask another question, and then headed off to her class, with a polite goodbye. I stood there, hands in pockets, thinking about how repulsive I was.

We ended up taking a walk after school. There was no real planning behind it -- we talked a little, and then found ourselves walking while we spoke. I liked to watch people and their mannerisms while I walked, the way they spoke and moved. Sometimes I even tried to memorise certain postures and gestures that caught my attention, to use it for

myself later. Claire barely looked at the other people at all. Whenever I glanced around at her, she was staring at the buildings, the sky, and the grass. When we passed groups of people her gaze was directed at the floor, but it always lifted once we were clear of them again.

We crossed Waterloo Bridge. A thin coat of frost covered the ground, and I kept my stiff hands in my pockets, occasionally wiggling my fingers to reassure myself that they hadn't stopped moving from the cold. Evening was approaching, and buildings were starting to light up in the distance. I could see cars and cyclists ahead, racing through the London smog. A constant flow of people came at us, and I had to keep adjusting the angle of my body to avoid them. Some walked at a leisurely pace, chatting on mobile phones or to the people beside them. Others moved as if they were fighting the air, powering forward without looking at the world around them. Claire had covered her mouth with a dark blue scarf, and her fringe obscured her eyes. She was still walking beside me, but she was a half step behind, leaving me to cut through the incoming people. I was talking about running and why I enjoyed it (she didn't practice any sport). She had stopped beside me, and had one gloved hand on the bridge railing.

I stopped and followed her line of vision. I could see boats passing and pale light on the rippling water below.

"I just wanted to look," she said. "I've never been here before."

I didn't think there was much to see. It was a typically grey, cloudy day, and the Thames water looked as dark and dirty as ever. I wondered how much rubbish and how many people it had swallowed into its depths over the years. An old man nearby coughed and spat over the side of the bridge as he passed, and I shivered, wanting to move on. Claire, however, started talking again.

"My parents used to speak about this place."

I rubbed my arms. "It's nothing special."

"They came here a lot," she said, as if she hadn't heard. "My father proposed here."

I wasn't sure what to say. She usually avoided talking about her parents. She turned to look at me.

"Would it be okay if I asked you something?"

"Okay," I said.

“Do I seem -- am I normal?”

I tried to read her expression, but her face was carefully blank. She stared back at me and repeated her question.

“Am I a normal person?”

“No,” I said, and regretted it. “But --”

“It’s okay,” she said, but her face didn’t echo those sentiments. “I just wanted to check.”

The wind caught a few strands of her fringe, and she tipped her head forward to bring them back down. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, as if she had thought of something else to say but was trying to time it correctly.

“Would it be okay if --” she began, and this time I cut in.

“You don’t need to keep saying that,” I said, a little tired of her constant politeness. “You can just ask.”

“Okay...do you remember your dreams?” she asked.

I thought about it. “Sometimes.”

“I always remember them,” she said. “In one of them,” she continued, slowing down now, “I die every time I leave my house. No matter what I do. Sometimes I wait until early morning, and then animals appear and tear me up when I open the front door. Sometimes I wait until night and try to sneak out the back door, and it’s rats, or dogs. Sometimes it’s people.”

“Which people?”

“I don’t know them,” she replied. “They don’t have faces. They’re just people.”

“They’re just dreams,” I said. “They’re not real.”

“What if you had a dream and it came true?”

“Coincidence,” I said.

“I hope so.”

“It’s nothing to be scared of. The real bad stuff happens out here,” I said, gesturing around. “At least we’re safe in a dream. Out here anything can happen.”

And we can also find ourselves doing anything to other people in the real world, I privately added to myself. If anything dreams seemed like a safe haven to me -- a place where there were no consequences or cost, even if you lost control and did something terrible. Danger was always just an illusion.

She looked at me and smiled, and I wondered if I had said something foolish.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said. “You just looked very serious.”

I snorted. “Claire, what are you going to do when school ends?”

“I can’t go to University,” she said.

“Why?”

“What would I do?”

“Don’t you have a subject you like?”

“I haven’t even been coming to school much. I’m not going to pass any of the exams.”

“I can help if you need it,” I said.

She frowned. “You don’t understand, this is -- it would take weeks for me to learn everything.”

“I know.”

She fell silent and stared at me. I turned away, tugging at my collar, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Why do you want to help me?” she said at last.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel like it.”

Strangely, I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t hiding anything, or trying to throw her off in any way. I had offered to help without even considering the matter properly and analysing the positive and negative elements involved. I just wanted more chances to speak to her. It wasn’t the same as my reasons for following Safia around when I was younger -- I didn’t think Claire’s presence was empowering in the same way. She wasn’t a source of strength. She was something else that I hadn’t figured out yet, but whatever it was, I had to admit that I liked being near her, talking to her, and feeling like we were two equals who each benefitted from one another’s company. It was a fascinating feeling.

On one occasion I stayed after school with Claire in the Art department to finish some work. The teacher and the other students had left a while ago, and I felt like I finally had the freedom to stretch a little and stop working. It had been raining earlier in the day, but when I glanced through the window I could see a clear sky. I opened one of

the windows for some fresh air and then looked over at Claire. She was busy sketching an image of what looked like a London street. To be honest, I found most of her paintings and sketches a little bland -- they were usually images of simple countryside scenes, or still life. To put it clearly, the sense I got of Claire as a person was very different to the sense that I got from her artwork. Of course, I didn't know her well enough to be sure, but I couldn't see any of her quietness or eccentricity in the images. During my old trips to museums and my talks with my mother, I'd always assumed that there should be a clear, solid connection between the artist and their work -- when I'd bothered to pay attention to paintings at all, that is -- and so Claire's situation confused me.

"What do you think?" she said, glancing up.

"It's good. Your technique is very good."

"Ah."

"Yeah. Although -- I was just wondering if any of your pictures are different.

Personal, I mean."

I knew it was the wrong thing to say from the way her shoulders tightened before she replied. "Personal?"

"It doesn't matter. I was just wondering."

I turned away and washed some of the dry brushes under a tap. I could hear Claire fiddling with paint behind me, moving around in her seat. After a moment the sound stopped entirely. I kept washing the brushes, restraining myself from looking over to see what she was doing.

"They're not," she said.

I turned around, hands dripping. "What?"

"I guess they aren't -- personal."

"They don't have to be," I said, regretting that I'd brought this up. "As long as you get the grades --"

"I never thought it was a problem."

I switched the tap off. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," she said. "If there's something wrong then I need to fix it." She turned to me. "What do you think I should do? What would be personal?"

I shrugged, but decided to go along with it after seeing the look in her eyes. “I guess you could do a self-portrait?”

She shook her head.

“Or maybe,” I continued, looking her in the eye, “Something from your memory?”

She stared back, and then looked away again. “Memory? I don’t know.”

She trailed off, looking at a blank sheet of paper. At first I waited, assuming she would continue in a moment, but she stayed silent. I cleared my throat. She didn’t look up. I came a little closer. She still didn’t react.

“Is it okay,” she said, “if I do this by myself for a while?”

I stopped, my palms sweaty. “Oh. Yeah, I can go.”

I wondered if I had seriously offended her, but I didn’t know how I could have done so. I dithered for a moment, collecting my things, and then turned back to her.

“Claire --”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then -- I should get home.”

“I’m coming,” she said. “Just please give me twenty minutes to get started on something. I have to at least start before I can go.”

I left, feeling guilty, and sat on one of the benches outside the department, huddling into my blazer, and looking through one of my textbooks. Claire didn’t emerge after twenty minutes, but I hadn’t expected her to be that precise about the timing anyway. I waited for another fifteen minutes before I started to get restless. After an hour had passed I stood up and wondered if I should go up to remind her, or go home. The sky had darkened as afternoon gave way to evening. It felt strange to be on school grounds at this time; I was so used to the constant noise of students talking and shouting, and the sight of some of them sitting on the railings, teetering as they tried to balance, or leaning against the walls and laughing at jokes that I couldn’t hear. I walked back and forth, trying to force feeling back into my legs while shivering. It started to drizzle, and I felt raindrops sliding through my hair. After another ten minutes I finally decided to go back inside and see what she was doing.

I carefully opened the door, only to find her slumped on her desk, hair falling off the edge of the table. I crept a little closer and finally made out her slow breathing in the

gentle rise and fall of her shoulders. I don't know what else I had expected to find; perhaps it was simply Claire's fragility that worried me. She always looked as if she were about to break in some way. I realised, at that moment, that this was the first time I would have the luxury of actually looking at her properly. Our eyes didn't meet much during conversations, and I would have felt awkward if I studied her at other times. Seeing her now, from close range, I thought that there was a sharpness to her face that seemed at odds with her soft personality. Even while she slept, she was defensive -- her hair was a messy shield for her eyes, and her arms were curled around her head like a fighter ready for a hook. I moved a chair over and sat down, leaning forward until I was only a few inches away from her. She looked so peaceful that I could hardly believe her claim that she suffered constant nightmares. I had a sudden desire to reach out and brush some of her fringe hairs away from her eyes, and I even raised my hand for a moment, fingers extended, before I closed them into a fist and drew back. I didn't know where that absurd impulse had come from, but I wasn't going to indulge it.

When I forced myself to look away, I noticed all the scrunched up paper in the bin and on the tables. I couldn't even count how many sheets she must have gone through. I unfolded one of them and just saw an incomprehensible mess. It was the same for the second I looked at, the third, and the rest of them. In some of them I could see that she had drawn something beneath all the scribbles, but it was too difficult to make out the images. All I could see was a tangle of colours and lines. I made sure to scrunch the paper up again and to put them back where I had found them, and then returned to her side. I was about to wake her up when I realised that there was another piece of paper just under her arm, pinned to the desk by her elbow. I put my fingertips on the paper, and then slowly slid it away from her. She didn't wake up. I knew I shouldn't look at it, but I couldn't resist.

Finally, a page that hadn't been spoiled by a mass of scribbles. I examined the image she had drawn, and then wondered if it was some sort of joke. It was just a picture of a glass on its side. For a while I stood there, staring at the image, and yet none of this gave me any greater insight into it. There was nothing dramatic or significant there. It was just a glass. Disappointed, I lowered the paper and tried to place it under her arm in the same position that I had found it.

When I woke her up, she mumbled her thanks, and then -- once she realised the time -- stiffened.

“It’s that late?”

“I should have checked in on you earlier.”

“No, it’s not your fault. I’m always falling asleep everywhere. I hate it.”

She fumbled around for her coat. As she got up the paper slid away, and she snatched it out of the air, staring at it as if it had just appeared, hovering in the air. She looked at me while she held the paper, and it started to crumple in her tight grip.

“Did you see?”

“Did I see what?” I said.

“My picture. This picture.”

I wondered if I should lie. It was clearly important to her, and I had already unwittingly offended her before. At the same time, however, I didn’t want to deceive her. She deserved better than that.

“No,” I found myself saying.

She didn’t look at me. She stuffed the paper into her pocket and put on her coat, fumbling around for her bag. She had to try to close the clasp on the bag twice, as her hands were shaking.

“Claire?”

She ignored me, and walked out of the room. She almost fell down the stairs outside before catching herself and continuing. I tried to keep up with her. It was still raining, only heavier than before, and I blinked the drops away, hugging myself to keep warm.

“Claire?”

No answer.

“Claire, I’m sorry, I -- I didn’t --”

I wished I could see her face. The damned hair was covering it again. She kept going, walking out of the school gate and into the darkness, completely silent.

“Claire, I’m sorry I looked at it. I shouldn’t have.”

She turned around, mouthing something, but no sound came out. She jerked forward and backwards, like a machine with a damaged motor. Then she spoke again.

“Why did you lie?”

I had been so focused on the issue of seeing the picture that I'd forgotten my other error.

"That was a mistake."

"A mistake? Because I could tell?"

I wondered how my reaction would have changed if I had gotten away with the lie. I would have still felt bad, but would I have admitted to seeing the picture?

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I shouldn't have done it. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even understand the picture, anyway."

She looked me right in the eye. She was soaked now, her hair hanging down around her in dripping knots. I stared back at her. We stayed there for a moment. Her eyes were like little blue stones. She turned and left. Rainwater flew off the back of her shoes.

I didn't follow. I just stood there, shivering and holding my arms. I knew that I had once again done something foolish. I was wrong, though -- that wasn't the right way to describe it. It wasn't foolish -- it was callous. I had hurt another person again.

CHAPTER SIX

The first thing I noticed about Safia's house were the crumbling tiles on the roof and the raggedy curtains behind the windows. The car in the driveway -- pale blue, with dirty windows and tyres -- wasn't faring much better. I rang the doorbell, pushing my father's sunglasses back up the bridge of my nose. As I waited, shivering and rubbing my hands together, I mentally rehearsed my lines once again. Someone opened the door.

"Who are you?" he said. He looked older than me by a few years, and he was in a black t-shirt with what seemed to be a rock band logo and rolled up jeans. He had a carefully shaved, square beard and small, dark eyes.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Is Safia in?"

He studied me for a second, leaning against the door frame. "Nope."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Rayhan. Maybe I could leave a --"

"The kid from primary school? That Rayhan?"

I frowned. "Uh, yes, that's the one. Did we meet before?"

"Nope. So this is you, is it?"

I had no idea how I was supposed to answer a question like that, so I just nodded.

"Well," he said after a moment, "come in, if you want."

"I just wanted to check on Safia."

"Yeah, I'll explain inside."

I paused, then nodded again, and stepped into the house. It felt more than a little strange. This was her house. This is where she had lived for all the years we had known each other. It wasn't what I had pictured -- it seemed relatively normal, with a few old shoes and slippers near the entrance and a corridor leading to what looked like a small, grey kitchen. What wasn't normal was the thick smell of incense in the air. I followed the man into the kitchen, looking around me all the while. There were empty chocolate wrappers and dirty plates on the dining table, and I could see biscuit crumbs on the floor. Two audio speakers, balanced on top of a cabinet, blared out a vaguely familiar sounding Queen song. When I passed the fridge I froze -- there, stuck under a few green

magnets, was an old photograph of Safia with her family. She looked even younger than when I had first met her, and stared at the camera with a frown, her hair in pigtails. There was a boy sitting next to her, looking at something outside of the camera focus, and the man and woman standing above them wore what I liked to call ‘formal smiles’, polished but distant. The man had a smart suit and a messy beard, while the woman wore a flowing shawl and had the same narrowed, cat-like eyes as Safia.

“You can sit down,” the man said, rummaging around in a draw. There wasn’t any hint of a question in his tone. I turned away from the pictures and chose the nearest chair, taking my sunglasses off and slipping them into my shirt pocket. The young man glanced over his shoulder at me, then lit a cigarette, balancing it between his lips while he sat on the chair opposite me. I stared at him over the small coffee table.

“You want a drink?”

“No thank you.”

He shrugged. “Alright. So, Rayhan — you Hindu or Muslim? Maybe Sikh?”

“My father was from a Muslim family. My mother from a Hindu one.”

He coughed, holding the cigarette away from his mouth. “First time I’ve heard that.”

I stared at him, and he held his hand up. “No offence. So what are you, then?”

“I’m neither,” I said.

“Good answer.”

“Okay,” I said, awkwardly fiddling with my overcoat.

He pushed a crumpled newspaper across the table. “Nearly finished the crossword. Last one is annoying me. What do you think?”

I glanced down at the clue. It was something to do with a famous pianist. I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You sure?”

“I really don’t know.”

“What about the Sudoku bit, right there?”

“I can’t do that either.”

He sighed. “So what do you do then? What’s your favourite class at school?”

“Drama.”

“Right.” He shook his head, then gestured to the photo on the fridge. “What was so interesting about that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t see many Polaroids these days.”

He studied me for a moment before replying. “She was a brat,” he said. “Still is. Just before that picture was taken she was pulling my hair, and my parents caught her at it. That’s why she looks so pissed off there. She said sorry and then did it again later that day.”

I smiled. He toyed with the small ash tray on the table. “There’s some other pictures around here. There’s one of her wearing my clothes when she was around 12 -- she liked my jeans and jacket, so she just wore them one day. I showed her how to put a tie on too. She even used my dad’s aftershave,” he said. “That was fun. I took a picture before my parents got back. Where did that picture go?”

He stood up and started rifling through a draw.

“What did your parents say?”

“They didn’t like it. They wanted her wearing shawls and dresses. They’re strict about that stuff.”

He turned and flicked another Polaroid down in front of me on the table. It had dirty edges, but the image itself was clear. A young Safia had her hair pulled back and her head tilted at an angle, a cocky smirk on her face. The cuffs of the leather jacket she wore extended past her knuckles, and she had stuffed the bottom of the jeans into her shoes.

I looked up and saw him watching me. “She’s not coming back here,” he said, blowing smoke up into the air.

“Where is she now?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“She’s my -- I’ve known her for a long time.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You have, I guess.” He shook his head slowly. “Look, forget about it. My sister isn’t coming back to London. My parents thought she needed to move, so she’s moved. That’s it.”

“Did she want to move?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t even here at the time. I just heard that they were suggesting it for a while, and one day she just agreed.”

“You haven’t spoken to her since she moved?”

“Only a bit.”

“Where did she go?”

He laughed. “Is this an interrogation? She’s gone for a ‘fresh start’ -- that’s the way they said it. You know you’re the only kid that has ever come here looking for my sister? She never used to mention people at her school either, but she mentioned you.”

“What did she say about me?”

“Nothing interesting.” He got up and stretched. “Nice that you came asking about her, but my advice -- forget about her.”

“Could I at least have her number? Her email?”

“My parents don’t want anyone from here bugging her. You understand, right?”

“I understand...but I still want to talk to her.”

He shook his head. “You have to do better than that.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

He leaned back against the kitchen counter. “How about you tell me why you’re so desperate to see my little sister? If she wanted to keep in contact she probably would have told you.”

“She can’t just...disappear. That’s not right. If she doesn’t want to keep in contact, then that’s fine, but I want to hear it from her. I want an answer, not this. This is nothing.”

“That’s all that bothers you? You didn’t get an explanation before she left?”

“That’s right.”

“How much do you even know about my sister?”

“I know some things.”

“Go on.”

“She’s...she likes...”

He laughed. “You going to list her hobbies?”

“No, I mean --”

I could have rattled off a few personality traits. She was ambitious, I knew that. She was argumentative, competitive, and had little patience. I knew those sort of details. But had she ever told me what scared her, and what she loved the most? Did I know

much about her family life, or how she had grown up? I didn't even know what she really thought of me.

He studied me while pouring himself a glass of water. "Yeah, I thought so."

"But that's why I need to talk to her again. I can't leave it like this."

"You should, but I guess you're not gonna listen."

He turned to do something on the table behind him. When he turned around he slid a small piece of yellow paper over to me. It was a number and address for a house in Oxford.

I folded it carefully and tucked it into my pocket. "Thank you," I said, standing up.

"It's not her house. She's living with our cousins. If she doesn't want to talk to you, you leave, got it?"

"I will," I said.

He came closer, frowning down at me. "I'm serious. Don't bother her."

I nodded, and he stared at me for another few seconds, while I edged backwards. Then he brushed past me and opened the front door, looking back over his shoulder as if he were letting a pet dog outside.

I knew something was wrong when I got home. There were dirty plates in the sink, the television was still on, and the shoes under our staircase were strewn around rather than in a proper order.

"Dad?" I called, but got no response. I wandered to the back of the kitchen, and saw that the shed door in the garden was open. The moment I stepped into the garden I knew what had happened. I could hear it already.

My father was concentrating so intently on the speed bag that he didn't even notice when I stood at the shed doorway. He was wearing his old silver shorts, a white t-shirt and black gloves. It wasn't quite the same as when he had trained in the past -- he had more of a visible paunch now, and lines of grey amidst the short black hair -- but I remembered that look of complete concentration. His eyes were blank. I knew he wasn't trying to follow the small bag with his eyes, but was instead moving his arms in a tried and tested pattern, feeling his way through the exercise. I coughed and he glanced back at me, the bag faltering and then stopping after a few more bounces.

“Ray, when did you get back?”

“A few minutes ago,” I said.

“Right. I’ll make dinner soon.”

“So...what are you doing?”

He looked around him. “Just felt like hitting the old bags.”

I thought about the promises he had made to his relatives and even my mother about giving up on boxing. “So this is just exercise? You’re not going to...spar, or anything?”

“Give me a minute, Ray. I’m trying to work on the left hook to the body. You remember that one? How to place it?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I watched him for another moment. He put his forehead on the heavy bag and then twisted his waist, turning into his punch and sending momentary ripples throughout the tough, scarred bag as it swayed on its chain. I wondered, not for the first time, what fascinated him so much about this sort of training.

After a few more minutes of watching him use the same hook, over and over as if he had been programmed, I left, shutting the door behind me, and made my way back to the house. He didn’t come back inside to make dinner, so I cooked a plain tomato and basil pasta, and sat by myself to eat it at the kitchen table. I made sure there was enough left for him in the pot, and then left the house again, carrying my coat under my arm. I could still hear him hitting the bag in the garage when I walked out of the driveway.

It was evening, and I wondered -- if only for a moment -- if I should postpone my visit until tomorrow morning, but the thought of going back to the empty house was too depressing to stomach. Even though I had walked Claire to her house on various occasions after school, she had never invited me in. Frankly, I had always been relieved. Her mother had seemed a little too intimidating when I had seen her, and I would have felt awkward being in Claire’s room. On this occasion, however, I doubted that Claire would even answer the front door. I’d never seen her look as angry and hurt as she had during our last meeting.

Claire lived in a quiet part of Swiss Cottage. I never really cared for the area. It always felt like the residents there were looking at me and picking my features and clothes to pieces in their mind as I walked down the street. It actually reminded me of

my own area, but with an even more ostentatious feel to the houses and cars. I even saw a sculpture that worked as a fountain outside a house. It looked like some sort of angel. Claire's house was much bigger than both mine and Safia's; there was a patch of vibrant yellow and purple flowers in the front with a slim, neat stone pathway cutting through it and leading to the door. It wasn't as big as a mansion, but it didn't look like it was far from that. I almost turned back at least twice, but I finally mustered up the nerve to walk up the driveway, past a black Mercedes and up to the front door. I rang the doorbell and waited, hands in pockets, feeling guilty for sneaking up here without warning. No one opened the door. I loitered around for another moment, wondering if I should take this opportunity to just turn back. They would have opened the door by now if they were interested in seeing me. As I turned to leave I heard the door click open behind me.

"Hello?"

It was Claire's mother. She looked a little more worn out than when I had last seen her. Her hair was loose, her black suit crumpled. Her eyes were just as sharp as before, though. She gave me a questioning look.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you. I just wondered if I could talk to Claire. I'm from her school."

She frowned. "You're the boy from the nurse's office."

I nodded.

"Your face looks better now."

I winced. "That took a while to heal."

"Why do you want to see Claire?"

"I just wanted to talk, I guess."

"She's eating dinner at the moment."

"I can go -- it's not urgent, I just --"

"No. You can come in for a little while, if you want."

"Thanks."

Most of the furniture in the house looked very old, almost as if they were living in the Victorian era. I caught a glimpse of myself in an elaborate mirror hanging on the wall. I looked scruffy and suspicious, even to my own eyes. She walked ahead of me

down the corridor, leading the way. I followed her, fumbling with words in my mind, trying to compose the perfect sentence that would lead Claire to forgive me. It didn't come. By the time we entered the dining room -- complete with a chandelier, a polished wooden table, chairs and a silver clock on a mantelpiece -- I was sweating. Claire was sitting at the opposite end of the table, facing us. She straightened in her seat, but her face didn't display any clear look of shock or anger. She just looked blank, as if I were staring at a painted mask.

"Have a seat," her mother said.

I sat down in the nearest seat, and looked down at the table, then looked back up at Claire. She was still staring. I cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry," I said, and then got up again. Before either of them could react I turned and walked down the corridor, the way I had come. I heard her mother say something, but I was moving too quickly to make it out. I shut the front door behind me and I was almost out of their driveway when I heard a shout.

"Rayhan?"

I turned, but kept my eyes on the ground. I could only see her feet. She wasn't wearing shoes or slippers, only black socks, and I hoped the gravel wouldn't dig through them.

"Hi," I said, after a moment.

"Why are you here?"

What a great start. I looked up again at her face, scared to see her expression but still curious. She was holding her arms as if cold, and she still had that careful mask in place.

"I already told you. Sorry. I came to say sorry. I shouldn't have looked at your stuff. That wasn't right. I shouldn't even have come here without telling you first, but -- I figured you wouldn't agree to see me. I don't blame you."

"It's okay," she said quietly.

"It's not, but thanks."

I turned and started to leave again, but she stopped me.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know." I laughed. "Home, I guess. There's nowhere else."

"Why don't you come back in?"

I looked at her, incredulous. “You want me to come back?”

“As you’re here now...yes.”

I watched her for a few seconds to see if she would change her mind, but she didn’t waver, so I nodded and followed her back in. I noticed that she walked a little straighter than she usually did, but she was still slow and deliberate.

“Your mum probably thinks I’m crazy.”

“She’s used to me, and I’m worse.”

Claire’s mother was still sitting at the table, and she raised an eyebrow when I came back in.

“Back so soon?”

I faked a cough to hide my face for a moment. “I apologise for that. I appreciate you inviting me in like this.”

She rubbed her forehead, elbows on the table. “Claire, you should finish your food. As for you -- what was your name again?”

“Rayhan.”

“Rayhan, we haven’t got any dinner left, but you can have a drink. Water?”

“Yes, please.”

I sat down at the table again, closer to Claire’s seat this time, and watched her eat. The food didn’t look particularly appetising. I was fairly sure that it was the kind of ready made cottage pie you put in the oven. It was too much of a gooey mess to be certain, though. Claire’s mother brought me my water, and then loitered around, moving things around on the table before putting them back where they had been. The only sounds in the room were Claire’s spoon scraping against her plate, and my occasional slurp when I tried to take sips of water. Finally Claire’s mother got up and took a mobile phone out.

“I better make some calls, or they’ll start hassling me again at work. I’ll just be a moment.”

When she left, Claire continued to eat in silence. I looked around, and saw some pictures on the shelf. I remembered how Safia’s brother had seemed to open up a bit more when I had spoken to him about his old pictures. That might be a good way of opening up a conversation again. I pointed to one of the pictures which looked a few

years old, with Claire, her mother and a handsome man in a suit. They were all smiling, and the warmth was infectious.

“That’s a nice picture,” I said.

She looked at it for a while and then went back to eating. “That’s old.”

“How old?”

“Three years,” she said, without pausing.

I studied the picture a little more. “Is that your father?”

“Yes,” she said. A small pause this time.

“He looks like a nice guy,” I said, wondering if I should change the subject.

She pushed her plate away and stared at it silently.

“Claire?”

“I just need to get something from my room.”

“Oh — okay.”

She walked out, her back stiff. I got up and wandered around the room. There were some small statues of what looked like figures from Greek mythology, and there was a painting of a vase of flowers on the wall near the window. I moved closer to the shelf to get a better look at the picture I had been looking at before, and then realised that nearly all of the other pictures featured Claire’s father. A few were family portraits, but he was also the only one in a lot of the other pictures. One particularly distinctive frame held a black and white picture of him leaning against a tree on what looked like a river bank. He had a more serious expression in this picture, and I felt a little uneasy as I looked at it. There was nothing in any of these pictures to feel bad about, but something about the way they were all grouped together like this, sitting on a dusty shelf, made me want to avert my gaze.

“It’s a nice picture, isn’t it?”

Claire’s mother was standing at the room doorway, her arms folded.

“It is,” I said.

“Does she ever talk about him?”

“No, not really.”

She sat down at the table. “I thought so.”

I wondered how I should phrase my own question, and then decided that it was better not to ask at all.

“She rarely looks at them,” she continued.

I shifted from foot to foot. “I should probably go home.”

“Where is Claire?”

“She just wanted to get something from her room.”

She sighed. “Listen...”

I looked up at her, but for once it seemed that she was struggling to formulate words. She frowned, and then continued.

“Does she have any other friends at school?”

“I don’t really know,” I said.

“Just going from what you’ve seen, then.”

“Well...I guess not.”

“Why?”

I was growing increasingly uncomfortable with this conversation, but she didn’t seem to care. She was looking at me intently, the frown deepening.

“She doesn’t talk a lot,” I said.

“I know that. She’s been quiet since she was just a child. She needs more friends. Right now it’s only you — how did that happen?”

Friends. Was that what we were? It was odd to consider it -- the idea that I was actually in some sort of friendship -- but it was true.

“Because...I don’t know, exactly. I like talking to her.”

She stared at me. “You like talking to her?”

“I offended her, though. That’s why I came here today. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“What did you do, exactly?”

“Her pictures -- I looked at one. Without asking her, I mean. I think it was personal, but I honestly didn’t understand it. I think it was just a glass?”

She shook her head slowly. “A glass?”

I edged towards the doorway. Claire still hadn’t returned, and I doubted that she was planning to come back downstairs at this point.

“I should really --”

“No. Listen. Be patient with her. She’s gone through a lot.”

The bad feeling in my stomach intensified. “Okay.”

“Just remember that when you talk to her.”

“I will. I promise.”

“I won’t keep you trapped here any longer, so stop looking so worried. You can leave.”

I started to turn, and then stopped myself. “I think I’ll wait for Claire. If that’s okay?”

She studied me a little more closely. “Fine. She might not come back down, though. She gets like that sometimes.”

I sat down at the table and waited. Claire’s mother didn’t seem to be in the mood for any more talking, and she left the room soon after, leaving me alone with just the quiet clicking of the clock. It was about half an hour before Claire came back downstairs. She jerked to a stop when she saw me.

“Sorry,” she said. “I got distracted, I forgot -- I should have come down before.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I just wanted to wait to say goodbye. I need to get back.”

“Oh — of course.”

“I’ll see you soon, then.”

“That picture --” she suddenly said. “The picture I got mad about. It’s from a memory. It’s the last time I saw my dad.”

I stopped in the doorway, watching her. She took a deep breath and continued.

“He poured himself a glass of lemonade, right here,” she said, gesturing to a spot on the table before us, “and it was the last of it, the last bit of the bottle. Then he got a call, something important for his work, and he left. He forgot to drink it, so I covered his glass with a tissue paper. When he didn’t come back, and we got a call, about the — the car crash, my mum poured it down the drain. I got so angry about that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said after a moment, wishing I knew what else to say.

She hadn’t looked up at me at all while she spoke, and now she continued to stare at the table. She seemed composed, almost expressionless, as usual, but her fingertips trembled on the polished surface of the table. I felt a sudden urge to reach out and hold her shoulder, and then recoiled at the thought. I sank back down into one of the chairs and just waited in silence. She looked up at me and smiled. I was taken aback by it -- Claire always gave small smiles, as if reluctantly tugging her lips upwards with a weak string before letting it collapse again. This was a full, unguarded smile, showing a

hint of her teeth. I didn't realise that I was smiling back until a few seconds had passed, and I stood again.

"I know," she said. "You need to go, right?"

"Yeah," I said.

She stood up too, her face serious again. "Thanks for coming, Rayhan."

"Thank you for having me."

I left the house, looking up at the dark sky. I could hear music throbbing from one of the houses on the road, balloons hanging from the front door. There was a breeze, but not the bitter kind that I was so accustomed to. It still had an edge to it, but it was mostly gentle, and I left my coat open while I walked, enjoying the feel of the evening air on my throat and cheeks. I glanced over my shoulder just once. She was standing by the door watching me, and she waved when I caught her eye. I waved back before walking home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I often hear adults parroting the dull phrase that ‘school years are the best years of your life’. I still don’t understand that idea -- most children behave like idiots, and teenagers are often even worse, just in different ways.

On the last day of school I saw students getting friends to sign their shirts with generic ‘good luck’ messages. One girl wrote ‘love always’ with a misshapen heart below it in dark blue ink on a guy’s shoulder. I wondered if he would remember that girl’s name -- or if she would remember his -- after a couple of years, when they had moved on and started socialising with different people. Some of the other students were crying as they looked at the yearbook, and again when we sat in assembly and listened to the teachers telling us about the great contribution we had made to the school as a year group. I thought about my own contribution -- falling off a wall, beating another student until he was bloody, and being decidedly average and unremarkable in almost every subject. I was sure that they would all remember me fondly. I was surprised, then, when one of the students, Ann, stopped me in the hallway and asked if she could write a message on my otherwise blank shirt. I didn’t really know her, but we had been in many of the same classes together. She had curly brown hair and a nice smile. She patted me on the arm after she had finished writing her message. Later, in the school toilet, I turned around and peered in the mirror to see what she had written on my back, in big green letters: ‘Safia’s Bitch.’

Scott was in his usual hangout area during the lunch period, lounging around and smoking. I wondered how black his lungs would be after another ten years. He was alone, and had his backpack at his feet, his legs crossed as if relaxing on sand instead of concrete.

“Puck,” he said, waving me over.

I eyed the wall behind him, ignoring the bad memories.

“It’s the end of an era,” he said, looking through his backpack. “You know that? The end.”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t be so boring.” He pulled out a beer can and threw it to me. I caught it instinctively.

“How many of those have you got in there?” I said, noticing how puffy the bag seemed.

“Forget that. Just have a drink.”

He took another can out, opened it and took a few gulps. I sighed, but opened the can and tried it, out of curiosity more than anything else. It didn’t taste very good. We sat there drinking in silence; Scott stared at his feet, and I sipped from the can every now and then, leaning against the wall. I could smell fried fish from the nearby canteen.

“Don’t think I’ll see you again.” Scott said suddenly.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you look happy, then? You’re gonna escape this place for good.”

I remained silent. He grimaced. “Don’t start that again. Fucking say something.”

“What do you want me to say?”

He put his can down and put his head in his hands. “One of us will be on the news.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“If I knife my parents, I’ll be on the news. And I think you’ll end up doing some crazy shit. I just don’t know what. Maybe jumping off something.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not interested in that.”

“You’re not interested in nothing.”

“I guess.”

He shook his head. “You still following that girl around? You should drop her.”

I put the beer can down on the ground, and then straightened. “I’m going to get some lunch,” I said.

“Hey,” he said. “I’m warning you. You should listen.”

“You don’t even know her,” I said under my breath.

“Every time someone mentions that girl to me, it’s because she’s pissed them off. She’s done some pretty sick shit. You know about that, right?”

“I’m not interested.”

“You got her name on your back, and you’re not interested?”

“Ann wrote that.”

He laughed. "I don't blame her. Ann was just talking to her mates like everyone does, saying stuff about other girls. One of them brought up Safia, and Ann said something about how she was ugly and poor. That was it. Then, later, her bag goes missing. Couple of days later they found it in the field. All the stuff inside was ripped or smashed up. Even her mobile."

"That could have been anyone," I said.

"Yeah? After that, rumour suddenly went around that Ann was screwing Omar. I know Omar, and he didn't do a damn thing. Because of that, though, her boyfriend broke up with her, then beat the hell out of Omar. And there was other stuff. Ann hands in coursework at the end of class, and then the work disappears before the teacher sees it."

"Safia might not have anything to do with that," I said, uneasy.

"That message on your shirt really is true."

"I have to go," I said, refusing to react to his taunt. I started to move away.

"Fuck it, I give up," he said, standing. "You don't wanna listen to anything logical, do you? Get lost then. It'll be good to finally get rid of you. When you get screwed over, don't cry. You deserve it. Remember that."

I considered his words for a moment, but made no response. I don't understand why he believed I would actually trust him or take any advice he tried to give. The only time he had ever helped me was when I had fallen off the wall, and even then he was just trying to get out of trouble. There had been times when I came close to believing that he was actually trying to be friendly, but ultimately I knew I had been mistaken. I walked away, and didn't look back.

Claire was waiting for me at the school gate, when most of the other students had gone home. There were no scrawled messages on her shirt or blazer. I had my blazer on, to hide the back of my shirt.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," I replied, suddenly feeling a little awkward. I wasn't sure if we would go to the same university. If that didn't happen, it was possible that we would barely see each other after today. She might even end up disliking me after an extended absence, and wondering why she had ever bothered talking to me in the first place.

We weren't sure what to do for an occasion like this — we weren't going to celebrate, because of the uncertainty of our future, and we weren't in the mood to look back on our days at school with nostalgia either, as there was nothing to be nostalgic about. So we just walked out of the school gate as if it was just another day, and then continued down the road together. It was warm, and I could feel myself sweating under my blazer, but refused to remove it. Some kids sat on the pavement nearby, ice cream dripping from the cones they held, and a man jogged past us in a t-shirt and shorts. Claire, I noticed, was looking up and around us while we walked, even when people passed us. Her back was a little straighter, and her fringe was swept to the side, making her eyes more distinct. When we reached the park nearby, we stopped walking and settled down on a bench. Thankfully, I couldn't see any of the other students around — they had probably gone to the shops around the corner. Claire sank back on the bench and closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them I was still staring at her, and glanced away, embarrassed.

"It's nice today," she said, looking at the park surroundings. There were some men playing football nearby, wheezing as they ran, trying to dribble the ball around their opponents and occasionally sliding in the grass and dry mud.

"Are you happy," she said, "now that school is over?"

I shrugged.

"I'm happy," she said. "Happier than I thought I'd be. I feel like I can do something with myself now. I just don't know what."

I felt irritated without knowing why. "There's nothing to do," I said. "University is just the same thing, with older people."

She covered her eyes from the sunlight while looking over at me. "We don't know that."

"I can tell," I said.

She was quiet for a moment, looking back at the people playing. "Are you still going to look for that girl?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think it's a good idea," she said.

Was there some kind of agenda today? First Scott, and now this. I kept my anger in check. "Why is that?"

“I don’t think it’s good to be too...fixated on one person.”

“Fixated? I’m not fixated at all. She was just a friend.”

“I know,” she said. “But you can still be fixated on a friend, right?”

I felt my cheeks getting hotter. “Stop using that word.”

“It’s not my business, I know. I won’t bring it up again.”

She shifted around on the bench before speaking again.

“Can we go closer to the pond?”

I wasn’t in the mood to argue, so I just nodded and followed her. We passed under the trees, their leaves slowly shifting back and forth in the breeze, and I watched our shadows moving on the grass. The surface of the pond gleamed under the sun, with the ripples becoming more evident as we got closer. People continually passed by on a long brown track through the greenery. Claire stopped at the very edge of the pond, her hands in her pockets. She looked around for a moment and then produced a silver compact camera from her left pocket.

“My mother gave it to me a while ago,” she explained as she tried to take pictures of the pond. “I think she thought it might encourage me to go out more. This is the first time I’ve used it though.”

She turned then, and without warning snapped a picture of me. I nearly jumped, and put a hand over my face.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s just a picture. Hold still, I’ll try another angle.”

“Claire, I don’t — you should focus on the park.”

“Come on, Rayhan. It’s the last day.”

Reluctantly, I lowered my hand, squinting at the camera lens. Normally photographers urged me to smile at family occasions — I was relieved that Claire was content to just take pictures of me as I was, without asking for an artificial smile, but I never felt comfortable in front of a camera. I moved around instead of posing, and found myself near the edge of the pond. As I turned towards Claire, I slipped and soaked the bottom of my trousers with water. I looked up to see that Claire, laughing, still had the camera aimed at me.

“Not exactly fair,” I said, trying to shake my trousers, but I smiled, despite myself. She chose that moment to take another picture.

“Finally,” she said.

“No more,” I said. “Let me take some of you.”

She lowered the camera, pausing. “Me? I don’t need any of myself.”

“It’s the last day, Claire,” I said, in the tone she had used, and she acknowledged me with an amused nod.

“Fine.”

She handed me the camera. I still have a copy of the picture I took that day. She’s looking directly at the camera, trying not to look self-conscious and failing, arms behind her back as if she’s hiding something. The pond is shining in the background, and you can make out distant figures of people passing on the other side of the park.

After I lowered the camera she took a look at the picture I had taken and nodded, which is about as close to approval as she got when it came to images of herself. We ended up sitting by the pond, watching the light on the grass slowly darken as the sun began to set. Claire was examining her camera. She looked up at me.

“It’s interesting.”

“What is?”

“A camera. I can take all these pictures, and they won’t change. They’ll just keep existing as they are, unless I decide to edit them.”

“Yeah, it’s useful.”

“I don’t know. Some things I wouldn’t want to see again. Others I would love to. At least with memory you can block certain things out. Pictures don’t block anything, do they?”

“Then erase the ones you don’t want to see again. They’ll be gone for good.”

“Is that right, though? It’s like you’re erasing a part of history.”

I laughed. “Maybe, but like you said, history isn’t always nice.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s just something I’ll think about.”

“The pictures you took today are worth keeping, anyway.”

She put the camera down and frowned at me, her lip twitching as if she was trying not to smile.

I glanced at her. “What?”

“You’re different, you know. Compared to when I met you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure how to explain it. You’re more...relaxed? Maybe that’s the word.”

“I feel the same as I always have.”

Even as I said that, I thought about how I had slipped in the pond, and Claire had laughed, taking pictures of me. If that had happened with another person, I would have been angry and intensely embarrassed, walking away in silence. Even if it had happened with Safia I would have been irritated, as there would have probably been a malicious edge to her amusement. I wondered why I didn’t have the same reaction with Claire — it was a little troubling, that I couldn’t understand the mechanics behind it.

“What about you?” I said. “You wouldn’t even talk to me at first.”

She plucked a small blue flower and studied it in her hand, rolling it between her long fingers. “I didn’t know you then. Besides, I still have trouble with other people now. I don’t know how I’ll talk to other students at university.”

“Exactly as you are right now,” I said.

She smiled at that, shaking her head. I wondered what she was thinking about as she studied that flower.

“I have a long way to go,” she said. “I get angry sometimes, mainly with myself. When I do something I have to know it’s the right choice, or I’ll go crazy. Do you know what I mean? Even if I’m certain at the time, I’ll doubt it afterwards, and then I won’t be able to stop thinking about it. Sometimes for months. I wish I could switch my mind off, and leave it off.”

“That’s normal,” I said.

“I don’t think so.” She put the flower down. “Do you worry sometimes about being...crazy? Seriously crazy, I mean.”

I paused, and thought about how I had felt after attacking Alex. “No,” I said.

She studied me for a moment before continuing. “It’s something that I think about sometimes. My mother used to say that I was just shy, but I’m not sure. The other day I stayed in my room, not even doing anything. Just being scared, and not knowing what I was scared of. That’s not right.”

“Everyone gets scared,” I said.

“Of something, yeah. But when there’s no real reason? That doesn’t make sense. It’s not rational.”

“All of that stuff is just in your head. You don’t have to just sit there and let it happen. You can force it away, ignore it.”

She was nonplussed. “That doesn’t work. I wouldn’t even know how to start.”

“It’s not like I’m some expert or something. I just think better self-control is the answer to this kind of thing.”

Hadn’t I had a conversation about this topic with Safia before? I couldn’t remember the specifics, but I was sure that my answer had been the same then. Claire nodded to herself, but didn’t respond. It struck me, watching her under the darkening sky, that there was something particularly endearing about her when she was like this, troubled and uncertain. A good person would want their friend to be happy. However, I wasn’t sure, in that moment, if that was what I truly wanted for Claire. As soon as that thought entered my head I attempted to avoid it, hoping that my mind would quickly replace it with something else, but it remained there, impossible to ignore, a dash of black paint on a white wall. If she could tell what I was thinking, she would hate me, and I would deserve it. I wondered if I would ever find a way to fix my twisted mentality. She stood, brushing grass off her skirt, and I also got to my feet.

“It’s getting late,” she said.

“I’ll walk you home,” I blurted out.

I rarely made that offer. She was taken aback for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

It was much cooler in the evening, and as we walked I hunched over a bit, trying to keep the breeze from tickling the nape of my neck. Claire rubbed her arms.

“You can use my gloves if you want,” I said.

She squinted at me. “What’s all this?”

“What? I was just asking. If you don’t want them, fine.”

She laughed at my grumpy expression.

“It’s just a pair of gloves,” I said under my breath.

She was still smiling when we got to the driveway of her house. “Well,” she said.

I started to back away. “I’ll see you around.”

She held up her hand. “Thanks for today. It was good.”

“It was just a park.”

She sighed. "I want you to remember something. School is over. You never have to go back. You can do anything you want."

"I know that."

She came up to me, her arms folded. "Aren't you excited about anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing out there is worth it."

Claire was looking increasingly irritated. "If that's the case, why live at all, if nothing is worth it?"

I smiled at her. "I have no idea."

She didn't have any immediate response to that. "One day we'll talk about this again," she said after a few seconds. "Maybe you'll surprise yourself."

"Maybe," I said, but I doubted it.

She waved as she left, and I waited until she had closed the door behind her before I walked away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One of the best things about acting is the way you can take on false wounds, false memories and illusionary pain. The best actors have to connect with these things in some way on an emotional level, but after they're done they can disengage. Those roles and lives -- once the play or movie is over, well, it's not their problem any more. They move on to the next life, like a process of reincarnation. When they're in those roles they can also escape from their own problems, if only for small moments in time. It seemed to me that actors had the best lives. That was mainly why I decided to take Drama at university. There wasn't much else I could have done, anyway -- I didn't have the discipline or the grades for the more scholarly subjects.

I spent my first few days on the course figuring out how I was going to last for the next few years; the students and even the lecturers irritated me. They all seemed to exist in a more glamorous and exciting world. Many of them were good-looking, chatty and incredibly boring. A few did approach me to talk on the first day, and they all quickly realised that I wasn't going to be 'someone' in the future, so they eventually stopped paying attention to me outside of the mandatory group work. That suited me just fine. I was busy adjusting to the world of adults.

Claire chose to study English Literature. Privately, I wondered why she hadn't pursued Art, but I didn't nag her about it. She was fairly sharp in English, and she probably could have gone to one of the better universities in the country, but she chose to go to the one I attended. That was something I *did* nag her about, but she would just shake her head and shrug, claiming that she had chosen the university herself, and that she thought it was the best option. She was a poor liar, but I humoured her.

She was different after the first few months of university. She didn't make some sort of dramatic transformation, but you could see small changes here and there -- her fringe didn't cover her face quite as much, she could look people in the eye now and then, and the weariness that had always surrounded her had lightened a little. She was still very quiet, and rarely socialised with others, but her spirits had improved, and I wondered if they would continue to do so. It was selfish, but the thought of Claire becoming one of the masses of students annoyed me just a little.

She became a little more awkward around me, for a reason that I couldn't identify. It was just small, subtle things. Sometimes I would look at her during a conversation and she would quickly glance away. At other times we would walk together and there would be a little more space between us than usual. While she was improving when it came to interacting with others, I wondered if our friendship was worsening at the same time. My best guess was that she was having second thoughts about associating with me after meeting new, normal people at university. It wasn't a surprising thought -- I made for bad company. I regularly told her about how much distaste I had for other people, and my belief that the worst types of people were the most prized in society. The men were particularly offensive. Everywhere I looked, I just saw variations of Scott and Alex. The faces were different, and the cruelty was harder to detect, but it was there. They all wanted to be lawyers, doctors and bankers. Safia had known all of this back when we had debated over things in high school, but I hadn't been sharp enough to understand her perspective. I wished I could tell her about it now.

If someone disliked you in high school, you often knew about it, especially if they were a boy. It was trickier in university -- everyone was so busy trying to be 'mature' on the outside that they kept their real opinions about people a little more hidden. Some of them were pretty poor on stage, but excellent when it came to performing at social occasions. I wondered why they couldn't just transfer some of that potential into their roles on stage, but it didn't work that way. It did make me think about myself, and how I handled the people around me -- even though I had always enjoyed Drama, I hadn't often thought about applying what I did in classes to the real world. If I approached conversations as if I were another person, a role on the stage, how would it work out? Maybe that was the solution I had been missing for so long. I toyed with the idea for a few days, and then decided to test it out.

There were parties going on constantly, but I rarely went to any of them, and I wasn't invited to many either. After my idea, however, I waited until I heard some of the other students in my class talking about where they were going to go clubbing that night, and, offering them my best smile, I asked if I could go along. They didn't seem particularly excited by the prospect, but the girl I spoke to -- her name was Mia -- said it was fine.

I spent a while getting ready at home. I shaved, combed my hair, and patted my cheeks and neck with old, sweet smelling aftershave. I decided to wear an ironed shirt with dark blue trousers, and practiced smiling, flashing my teeth at the mirror until I could do it without feeling awkward. I still wasn't handsome -- no amount of shaving or style was going to solve that, but I thought I at least looked a little more respectable. I slipped on my father's sunglasses and left the house.

The music in the club was so loud that I felt my eardrums were going to rupture. The only thing I liked was how dark the room was, as it made me feel as if I could blend in to the environment, but there were also the sharp flashes of colour that kept cutting through the room: blue, green and red, stripe after stripe reflecting on the sweaty faces of the people dancing around me. Some of them held up compact cameras, and I turned my face away, unwilling to be caught in a stranger's photo. It was a world of flashing light, swaying limbs and deep, thrumming music that I could feel pounding through my shoe soles.

I thought about Scott, and the casual way he walked. His back had always been straight, as if he were in the army. I tried to mimic those traits as I moved through the crowd. I saw the other Drama students standing in a small group, shouting to one another over the music. There were four girls and two guys. They were dressed quite casually, mainly wearing the type of clothes that they would at university, although the girls wore more make-up. I gave them my plastic smile again and they waved me over.

"What's up?" I said. I hated that phrase.

"What?" the closest one shouted, a guy named Pete.

"I said what's up?" I shouted back.

"Nothing."

I nodded as if he had said something interesting. People kept pushing past me. One of them was another Drama student, but I didn't know her name. She had short, dark hair, however, and it reminded me a little of Safia.

"Hi," I said to her.

"Hello," she said, giving me a smile before looking away into the crowd.

"What's up?"

"Oh, not much."

“This is the first time I’ve been here.”

“Really?” She sounded as if I were giving her my shopping list.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’m just going to have a drink,” she said, and moved away.

I smiled at her, and hoped she would fall on the way to the bar as she disappeared into the moving bodies. I spent the next hour moving around on the spot and nodding to people, wishing that I had stayed home. To my relief, the other students decided to leave earlier than I had expected. I considered giving up, but forced myself to tag along with them for a little longer. They decided to go to the nearest pub. They didn’t even seem tired.

I bought myself a beer at the bar and sipped it as I watched the others talking. Sometimes I pretended to watch the television in the corner — it was showing a dull football game. It’s amazing how silence can cloak you. Even if you sit right next to people they can easily forget that you’re there if you just don’t talk. I wondered how many of them ever stopped talking just to observe everything in the room for a minute or two.

“Hey,” someone said, prodding me.

It was Pete. “Hi,” I replied.

“You alright?”

This time, instead of Scott, I visualised my father and his confident air. That would be easier to attempt. “I’m good,” I said. “Great. The beer is terrible though.”

He laughed. “Yeah, it’s crap. Is this the first time you’ve come out with us? Don’t remember seeing you outside class.”

“I’m busy, a lot of the time,” I said.

He nodded. “Yeah, I haven’t even got any work done this term. I’m thinking of joining one of the uni clubs, not sure which one to go for yet.” He followed my line of vision and saw the television. “You into sports?”

I gulped down more beer, and then coughed. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m into -- well, I did a bit of boxing a while back.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’m not an expert or anything, but yeah.”

“It’s pretty brutal, isn’t it?”

“It’s not bad. A lot of people don’t know, but it’s all about the left hook to the body. You have to get that shot in.”

“Like Frazier did, right?”

“Yeah.”

I had to listen to him ranting about Frazier for ten minutes. He didn’t really know much about the sport, but he blathered on, making things up as he went along. I didn’t understand why he was doing it. At one point even one of the girls opposite us became interested and joined the conversation, asking me questions about my experiences in the ring, and wanted my opinions on different martial arts that I pretended to recognise. Eventually, I stood up and politely excused myself. I didn’t relax until I had walked into one of the stalls in the pub toilet and locked it behind me. Someone had urinated all over the toilet seat and left the roll of tissues on the floor. I felt dizzy and slow, frustrated and angry. I unlocked the door and went to the sink, splashing my face with water and rubbing it into my skin until it hurt. I looked in the mirror. My hair was still neat. I didn’t recognise my own smile.

When I came out of the toilets they were all leaving. I turned away and left by another exit. No one seemed to notice.

Pete continued to talk to me whenever he saw me. I was fascinated by his inability to understand my contempt for him -- during conversations, while I was ‘in character’, I would watch him carefully and think about how vapid and dull he was. He never stopped talking, so all I had to do was nod, smile, and ask the occasional question, and it would be enough to satisfy him. He never talked about his dreams for the future, and never brought up any real ideas about the world around him. He just wanted to talk about sports, girls, and music. He liked basketball, blondes and dance music. The only time I could tolerate his company was when we sat in the pub after classes, while I drank and pretended to listen, occasionally playing with glasses and sliding them around on the dirty table. On one occasion I was in such a miserable state that I agreed to go to another student’s party with him after we had finished at the pub, just for an excuse to take my mind off things.

“It’s Katie’s birthday,” he said. “Gonna be a lot of people there.”

“Great.”

“I’m gonna invite some others. You should bring some people down there too.”

I laughed, wondering what he would think if he saw the almost empty phone directory on my mobile. I scrolled through the few contacts I had, and stopped at Claire’s name. Maybe inviting her to the stupid party would make it more bearable. I was also curious to see how she acted around other students, as we normally met outside university. I got the address and time from Pete and sent her the details. I doubted that she would actually show up -- she had certainly changed, but not significantly enough to enjoy parties, to my knowledge -- but it was worth a try. If she did decide to go, I would at least have a chance to show her how my own social skills had improved.

Katie’s house was only a few stops away on the train. When we arrived at the doorstep, I let Pete take the lead. I didn’t recognise the person who answered the door — a tall, light haired man who frowned at me as I walked in — but I gave him a nod. It was a small house with far too many people inside. There were some sitting on the staircase and talking, others loitering in the hallway, eating from a big bag of crisps, and I could hear many more in the other rooms, further along. As one of them passed, bumping into my shoulder, I thought about the signs in elevators that warned against too many people standing in there at once. Houses should have the same rules. I was so busy trying to slide around people or pull away to let them pass that I managed to hit my head on the door to the sitting room. I apologised to the nearest person, and then checked myself in the hallway mirror -- there was a small cut on my forehead. I rubbed the blood away with my thumb and then swept my fringe over it. Pete didn’t even notice. He was busy introducing himself to a chubby girl clutching a silver phone. I recognised some of the people around as other students from our university, all freshers.

Claire hadn’t even replied to my message, which didn’t improve my mood. Someone had left a glass on the kitchen table, so I helped myself to whatever was inside it, cringing a little at the taste. I then went around the room, drinking from all the plastic cups that had been left unfinished. I felt an urge to throw up, but I swallowed back the bad taste in my throat. All the while I felt more and more spiteful, and yet didn’t even know why.

“There you are.” It was Pete, his face flushed red.

“Hello,” I said.

“Come on, I found a nice bird. She has a friend too.”

“Not interested,” I said reflexively.

“Why not? You got a girl?”

“No.”

“Then come on, someone will get our seats.”

I let him lead me through the room, over to a red sofa in the corner, near a television. The girls sitting there were quite pretty. One was blonde and petite, with short hair. Her mouth hung open a little as she looked around the room. The other girl had longer, brown hair, and was taller. She was leaning back in her seat, playing with her black bracelet. Pete sat down next to the blonde.

“This is Ray. Ray, this is Natalie,” he said, pointing to the brown haired girl, before turning to regard the blonde. “And this is Sara.”

I gave them my best smile, and sat down next to Natalie.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, holding my hand out.

She raised an eyebrow, but shook my hand. “You’re from uni too, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you study?”

“I don’t.”

“If you don’t study, what do you do?”

“Nothing.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. We were just talking about personality types.”

I didn’t care, but I nodded. “Interesting.”

“The online quizzes might be wrong,” Sara said.

“And they might be right,” I said, for no particular reason. Pete nodded as if I had said something wise.

Natalie turned to me. “Have you tried any before?”

I hadn’t. “Many of them,” I said. “As many as I could find.”

“And what do you come out as?”

I thought about how Scott would react to a question he couldn’t answer, and then shrugged, lounging back on the sofa as if I had become bored of the conversation.

“You’re going to make us guess, right?”

I thought about how to respond, but I was interrupted by the sound of a voice nearby.

“Rayhan?”

I twisted around and saw Claire coming across the room, glancing around with unease at the other students. For a moment I froze, and only then remembered that I had invited her here. It seemed like a long time ago.

“Hey,” I managed.

“You invited someone after all,” Pete said, grinning. “Sit down, sit down. What’s your name?”

“Claire,” she said, lowering herself into a chair opposite me.

I avoided making eye contact with her and pretended to survey the room. I obviously couldn’t continue my role playing with Claire around, but if I didn’t then I wouldn’t be able to talk to them. I scratched my arms.

“You know Ray used to be a fighter?” Pete said. I looked over at him in panic.

“A fighter?” Claire repeated slowly.

“Boxing, right Ray?”

I laughed. “Not much, mind you.”

“Still cool though. How many matches?”

I paused, looking at my hands. “Not much.”

I poured myself some beer from the table in front of us. My hand shook a little when I raised the plastic cup to my face.

“The world,” I suddenly started, “is in dire peril. Why is the world always in dire peril in comics? I don’t read them, I mean. I just noticed that. I just wonder about it.”

There was a brief silence. “Man, I love comics,” Pete said.

I finished drinking. “I have to go now.”

“What? We just got here.”

I didn’t bother answering -- I just got up and walked off, bumping into more than one person along the way. My head felt light. When I left the house I sat down in the alley nearby and loosened my shirt button, rubbing my face. I could still hear the music from the party, faintly throbbing through the air.

“Are you okay?”

Claire. I didn’t look up. I was too worried about what her expression would be.

"I'm fine."

"Really?"

"I'm enjoying my university experience," I said, smiling. "It's really great, isn't it?"

"Rayhan, stop it."

"It's the best time of my life."

"Rayhan."

I laughed. "I'm gonna go back in there, get another drink, and then throw up on someone. Imagine their faces. Just imagine it."

"Stop it!" she shouted, and I jerked away from her. I finally looked up at her -- she looked ill.

"What was that for?" I managed.

"Why did you invite me here?"

"I...don't know." I put my head in my hands. "I'm sorry."

She was quiet, but I heard her walking back and forth. "You should get up," she said. "It's dirty here."

I nodded and slowly got to my feet, brushing the back of my trousers off. I nearly tottered into the alley wall, but managed to steady myself. Claire sighed.

"How much did you drink?"

"Not a lot," I said.

"Liar."

"Okay, more than usual."

She eyed me doubtfully. "You better come to my place before you go home. I don't trust you to get back in that state."

"I'm fine. You think I can't walk? I'm completely fine."

She ignored me, however, and after I realised that she was just going to keep being stubborn, I gave in. We took the train to her house, and during the journey she made me sit down on the seat while she stood and held the pole. She was still living with her mother, but when we got in the house it was dark, and Claire had to switch the alarm off.

"She's still at work," she said, to my questioning glance.

She treated me as if I were about to fall apart, telling me to sit on the chair in her room, before bringing up hot lemon and ginger tea for both of us.

“I’m not sick,” I said.

“Just drink it,” she said, sitting opposite me.

This was actually the first time I had been in Claire’s room. Even in my current condition, I was still curious, and took my time to look around while I held my cup. She had piles of books everywhere -- under her bed, on her study table, and even a few on her windowsill. A lot of them looked like they were fantasy and science fiction. There were all sorts of shiny, colourful things on her shelves: marbles, ornaments, and even Origami bird figures. She had left some of her clothes — an oversized blue jumper, a woolly hat and a grey t-shirt — on the floor in a messy heap that would have made my father wince. I tried to picture her growing up here, surrounded by all these things day after day.

Claire tilted her head to the side, watching me.

“Better?”

I took a sip of tea and regretted it when it burnt my tongue. “Yeah. Thanks.”

She hadn’t touched her own cup. It was still on her table, and I watched tendrils of steam lazily rising from the liquid inside.

“Why were you like that, back there?”

I shrugged. “I just drank too much.”

“You’ve been like this for a long time.”

“I haven’t been like anything.”

“Exactly. When we talk you get all — spaced out, and when you’re with others you just act weird.”

I smiled at her, and she cringed. “That’s what I’m talking about. That smile,” she said.

“So you prefer me when I’m not happy?”

“You know what I mean.”

I put my cup down. “No, I don’t. There’s nothing wrong with me, Claire.”

She stared at me and then shook her head. “Whatever you say.”

“Thanks for the tea,” I said, and reached over for my coat. She stopped me with a hand on my arm, and I glanced at her.

"I've told you a lot of stuff," she said. "Things I haven't told anyone else. If you want to do the same, I'm listening."

She quickly withdrew her hand. I turned to face her more fully. "What do you expect me to say?"

"I don't know. I'm not trying to criticise you or anything. I just think -- well, if I asked you what you want right now, would you be able to answer that?"

I thought about it for a moment. I didn't feel strongly about anything, one way or another. My family? They had their own lives. My studies? A waste of time. Well, there was one thing -- I still wanted to see Safia again. It was embarrassing, and I had tried to forget about her, but it wasn't working. The more I attempted to evade her in my mind, the more she taunted me. It was weakness, of course. A stronger, more sensible person would simply ignore her and move on with his life.

I smiled at Claire again and then caught myself, forcing my expression back into a more natural, serious one. "I would like," I started, faltering for a second, "to see an old friend again, I think."

"The one you mentioned before? The girl?"

"Yeah. Her brother gave me her address -- it's in Oxford. I haven't actually gone there yet though."

"How long have you had the address?"

"Since the end of high school."

She stared at me. "That long, and you still haven't gone there?"

I tried to shrug. "I just haven't yet."

"If you want to go, then go."

I could do it. I could easily get to Oxford on the train, and back again within a day. I had thought about it repeatedly since I had been given the address, but it was simply too daunting. I had no idea how Safia would react, and I had never even been outside London by myself. I would feel ridiculous, heading off on a journey that would, in the best case scenario, end up in disappointment. I didn't want to think about the worst case. But it was either that, or go on with my current existence, acting like a fool in front of others, skipping classes, and spending time thinking too much in my room. If I didn't do this now then I knew I would regret it.

"Maybe you're right," I heard myself saying.

She leaned back in her chair. “You should still think about it a little more before you decide.”

“It’s only for one day. You could come with me, if you want.”

It would be nice, I thought, to have her company on the train ride. It would also make Oxford feel a lot less alien. She was taken aback, however, and frowned at the carpet.

“But I don’t even know this girl.”

“You don’t need to see her,” I said. “You could come just to look around and stuff. I’ll have to leave you for a short while, so I can talk to her, and then I can just meet up with you again afterwards. We can go back together by the evening.”

I had my own relationship with Safia, and my own relationship with Claire. They were two very different things, and mixing them in any way wasn’t appealing. It would be fine, I told myself, if I just made sure that they didn’t meet. I doubted that Claire was interested in meeting her anyway.

Claire swivelled away. “I can’t decide this kind of thing on the spot. I’ll think about it.”

“There’s a good Art Museum in Oxford,” I said.

She smiled. “I’ve heard about it. You think that’s going to work?”

“What? I’m just mentioning it.”

“Try again, Rayhan.”

“There must be something that interests you over there.”

“The museum does interest me. I never travel, though.”

I nodded. “I don’t exactly travel much either. It’s just a train ride, though. It’s up to you, anyway. Let me know.”

“When are you going?”

“Tomorrow is too soon, so...the day after tomorrow. Friday. Do you have any classes on Friday?”

“Well, no...”

“Friday it is, then. Let me know.” I picked up my coat.

“Wait,” she said, and then picked at her bottom lip with her fingertips before continuing. “I guess it might be helpful if I decide to do one of my essays on Tolkien. I could do some research there. If it’s just for a few hours — fine, I can go. I should go.”

“You should?”

She nodded, her expression flat. She didn’t elaborate, however, and I knew better than to prod her over it. I had already pushed her far enough for one day.

“Thanks Claire.”

She looked up at me, her expression still unreadable. “Your friend will be happy to see you.”

“Maybe,” I said. Saying it aloud almost quelled the doubt swelling in my chest.

CHAPTER NINE

We arrived at Paddington station in the morning. ‘Chaotic’ would be a kind way of describing it — we found ourselves trying to keep our composure amidst a sea of frantic people. An elderly man was shouting at one of the staff over a delayed train, and a throng of others were hovering around just below the information screens, waiting for the precious moment when an update on the status of the trains would appear. A man carrying a large black suitcase nearly walked into us, and then glared at me for a moment before continuing.

The next train to Oxford was delayed, so we decided to sit and eat a snack at one of the small restaurants in the station while we waited. There were a few businessmen there eating burgers and pizza slices, laughing loudly over a magazine. We sat in the corner and ordered our food — a bean burger for Claire, and a small bowl of prawns and pasta for me. Claire nibbled at her burger, while I just stared at my bowl, trying and failing to work up an appetite.

“You look like you’re going to throw up,” Claire observed.

“I’m fine,” I said quietly.

“Calm down.”

“I’m not nervous.”

She looked at me. I returned her stare until we both laughed, turning away.

“I haven’t seen her in a long time,” I said.

She looked down at her food. “You must have been close.”

“I don’t know. I’m still not sure if we were even friends.”

Claire was quiet for a moment, frowning. She picked at the crust of the burger.

“So what were you?”

I shrugged, taking a bite from my food.

“What was she like?” Claire said.

“Confident,” I said. “Smart.”

She nodded to herself. “I did overhear some of the other students mention her once.”

“What did they say?”

She shifted around in her seat, staring at her food. “Nothing interesting.”

“I’d like to know.”

She looked up at me. “They said she was arrogant, I think. Well, they didn’t use that word, but that was the general meaning.”

“They’re just idiots,” I said.

Claire nodded, hesitant. “But she did leave without saying anything to you.”

“She must have had her reasons,” I said, but my tone wavered a little.

Claire traced the edges of her plate with her fingertips. “Maybe she did,” she said.

“We should get going. Our train has probably arrived by now.”

“Rayhan,” Claire said, as I got up to leave. “Don’t have...high expectations.”

“I’ve known her for years,” I said. “I know what to expect.”

There was a sense of quiet grandeur in the old buildings and elegant architecture of Oxford. It was a fairly busy city, but it didn’t have the suffocating and relentless feeling found in so many areas of central London. There was a faded, washed out quality to a lot of the buildings, and far more greenery around. A man on a red bike passed us, his tie draped over his shoulder as he rode, and an old woman was sitting on the nearest bench, shaking her head at something in the magazine she was reading. One thing that startled me was how some of the smaller roads were almost empty. We could stroll down them for a few minutes without seeing another person. There were, however, crowds of people in other areas, some of them involved in what looked like a tour. Claire was particularly taken with it all. She kept pausing while we walked, just to get a better look at one of the colleges or some of the stores and pubs on the slim, winding roads. She kept her camera close to hand, and took so many photos that I soon became impatient. We spent a while walking around, getting lost, finding a recognisable landmark and then getting lost once again. We did manage to find a large library, which Claire quickly insisted on exploring, a smile occasionally flickering across her face as she looked around. After we left it took about another twenty minutes of walking (and the help of a small map) to find the Ashmolean Museum. This was the place where we had agreed we would split up. We stood at the entrance, occasionally rocking back and forth to allow people past.

“So,” she said.

"I guess I'll be back soon. We'll meet here."

"Right. Her house is nearby?"

"Just a few minutes, I think."

She nodded, and we stood in an awkward silence while I shifted from side to side, as if cold. Claire was perfectly still. I was surprised to see that her earlier enthusiasm and energy had already faded.

"I'll see you then," she said.

I nodded, and turned to leave.

"Rayhan," she said, hesitantly.

"Yes?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter -- we'll talk later."

I wondered if she already wanted to go home. I had thought that her research would have kept her interested for the full day.

"I'll see you soon," I said, waving before I walked off. She was silent and expressionless. I looked back and saw her walking into the museum, her head bowed.

Safia's house was a little farther away than I had thought. It took me fifteen minutes to walk there, and it took nearly the same amount of time for me to gather up the nerve to walk up to the front door. At first I just walked past the house, only glancing at it as I passed. There was nothing remarkable or distinctive about it aside from the pale, pink flowers growing in the hedge near the maroon door. There was no car in the drive, and the curtains were drawn over the windows, so I couldn't tell if anyone was home. When I got to the end of the street I turned back and retraced my steps. This time I forced myself to stop in front of the house and slowly walked up the driveway, stepping over the paving stones as if they might set off a trap. When I got to the door I fumbled around with my pockets for a moment, and wondered if I should just turn back. I could easily walk to the museum and go home with Claire. The possibility lingered in my mind while I stood there, hesitant, but I knew I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for cowardice when I was this close. I pressed the doorbell and waited.

Nothing. No sound of hurried footsteps, or indications that anyone had heard me. I waited for a minute and then pressed the doorbell again. Another minute, and still nothing. It was the perfect chance to leave -- I could tell myself that I had at least tried -- but instead I sat on the doorstep and waited, arms hanging over my knees. Perhaps she

had just gone out for a while, and would return soon. Another unpleasant possibility occurred to me — her brother had given me a false address just to get rid of me, or play a nasty joke. People passed, some giving me odd looks, but I continued to wait, hugging myself when it became colder. I wondered, more than once, why I couldn't just get up and admit defeat. The more I lingered, the worse I felt. After an hour I finally stood up to shake some feeling back into my legs, and I was still doing this when she walked up the driveway.

She still had that short, messy dark hair, and she was wearing a black leather jacket with blue jeans and small boots. She had a shopping bag in her right hand, and a set of keys dangled from the other hand. She must have seen me before I noticed her, because when I looked up she had stopped, and was staring at me. I stopped shaking my legs and turned to face her.

"Safia," I said. I'd thought about what I would say and do when I met her again more times than I could count, when I was trying to sleep at night, or daydreaming at the pub, and yet now I had absolutely no idea what to do. The entire situation felt absurd.

"Why are you here?" she finally asked.

"I just wanted to see you again," I managed.

"How did you...?"

"Your brother told me how to find you."

"For fuck's sake."

"He told me not to hassle you, but --"

"But he gave you my address anyway."

"I just want to talk," I said. "That's it."

"Ray," she said, looking away. "This is...you can't just turn up here."

"I tried to call you."

"I know," she said, and her expression softened for a moment. "I know that. But this is very -- inconvenient."

"Inconvenient," I repeated.

She looked at the keys in her hand. "Fine," she said. "Maybe we do need to talk. You can come in."

“Thank you,” I said, as she pushed past me and opened the door. There was an umbrella balanced against the wall, and a few coats were hanging over one another on the stair banister. I closed the door behind us and followed her into what looked like a sitting room. It had the usual cream coloured sofas and a television, but there was also a small fireplace, a mahogany table, and a painting of a pot of purple flowers on the wall. The room was dark, but she didn’t pull back the curtains. She walked over to a sofa and sat down, indicating that I should sit on the one opposite. I did so, aware of how she watched me all the while.

“You said you’re here to talk,” she said.

I was at a loss. I felt like we were both children again, back on our old primary school playground, and I was trying to decide how to talk to this intimidating girl. “Not like this,” I said.

She sighed. “What, is there a ceremony we need to go through?”

“No, but —“

“Should I offer you some tea, or pull out a photo album?”

“No, I just —“

“Then stop wasting my time.”

“Okay,” I said, my back stiffening. “Why did you disappear without telling me? Why don’t you ever answer when I try to get in touch? Why did I have to talk to your brother and come all the way here just to get a chance to see you? Why, after all this time, do you act like I should just get the hell out of here, because I’m being a damn nuisance? Why do you never think about what I want? Do you hate me, or what? Why don’t you just fucking talk to me for once?”

I stopped, breathing heavily. I realised that I was squeezing my kneecaps.

“I’ve been unfair, maybe,” she said. “But most things aren’t fair, Ray. We just have to deal with it.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said, quieter now.

“I don’t hate you. If I hated you, I wouldn’t let you in here in the first place. I want you to go because there’s nothing to say. I felt like a change, so I moved.”

“That’s shit,” I said, before I could stop myself. “You also ignored me. That was for no reason at all?”

“We’re not friends, Ray. You’re just someone that I spoke to now and then. That’s it.”

“So who do you count as your friend, then?”

She was quiet before responding. “I never said I needed a friend, did I?”

“Is this to do with that fight? It’s that, isn’t it?”

“No, but it was a stupid thing to do.”

“He looked like he was going to kill you.”

“I know what I’m doing. He wouldn’t have done anything. You were the one getting bullied, not me.”

“It was an insult for me to help you.”

“You’re the one that needs saving all the time.”

I stared at my hands for a long moment. “I used to think you enjoyed some of the time we spent together.”

She got up and, with a sharp gesture, swept the mantelpiece with her hand. I couldn’t see any dust there. She sighed. “You don’t actually have a bad mind. You can think differently to most of the dipshits out there. The problem with you...the problem it’s always been, is that you want to be one of those dipshits yourself. In a way, you’re even worse than they are. At least they don’t have a choice.”

We were both silent for a moment. I looked down again, wishing I could think of something to say that would capture what I felt. Words weren’t my friends, however, and as usual they refused to come. I could only shake my head.

“Here,” I heard her say, and I looked up. My head rocked to the side and my cheek stung. She had slapped me. She shrugged when I stared at her.

“What? I felt like it.”

I felt a surge of anger, something coiling up inside and pushing at me from within, but I kept it in check, and continued to look up at her. Her own cheeks were red, and she had a disgusted expression as she stepped back.

“There’s this, too. Are you really going to let me just hit you?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Hit me back, or at least say something. Stand up. Don’t just sit there and sulk.”

“The last time I did that --”

“No,” she said. “You weren’t being attacked then, were you? You weren’t defending yourself. You were just being an idiot.”

“I’m not going to hit anyone again,” I said.

“Then talk. You weren’t shy about expressing your little opinion a few minutes ago, but now you’ve clammed up again, haven’t you?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come today,” I said to myself.

“Today? You shouldn’t have come at all.”

I looked up at her. “Are you okay?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“I was just wondering.”

She laughed, retreating until her back hit the table, and then she bent over and continued, giggling to herself as she had sometimes done in the past.

“You’re asking me...if *I’m* okay?”

“It’s not a joke,” I said.

“Now I know I’ve hit rock bottom,” she said. “I suppose neither of us are okay. I’ve been shouting at you, and all the while...shit. I don’t have anything. I don’t even have parents any more — they probably pretend that they don’t have a daughter.”

She sat down on the opposite couch again, staring at the wall behind me.

“You know what I did? You know how I convinced them to let me go? It was great. They had a relative over, an uncle. One of those really religious types, with the overgrown beard. I told him that I was a devil worshipper. That I burned a copy of the ‘holy book’ for my birthdays, starting from when I was ten. This crazy bastard actually believed me. He was scared to death.” She laughed again. “I kept going on about it, making random crap up, until he just left, and my parents went nuts. I hope they’re still dealing with that shit. I really hope so.”

“What had that guy done to you?”

“Nothing. His existence annoyed me, that’s all.”

“Like my existence annoyed you?”

She looked at me, tilting her head to the side as she studied me, in her old habit.

“No,” she said. “You’re different. But you’re still a mess.”

“A mess?”

“Yes, parrot. A mess. Let me ask you something -- do you have any goals?”

"I don't know," I said, after a moment.

"What a surprise. Ever loved someone?"

"How is any of this relevant, Safia?"

"You're a child. Or a robot. That's what I mean. You'll probably always be one."

I tried to ignore her. I knew she was deliberately trying to provoke me now. "You said you're not happy. Why can't I help?"

Her face twisted. "You can't help anyone. Don't even dare to make that kind of offer to me."

I stood. "I'm not trying to insult you. I just --"

She pushed me back down. "I said no. What does it take for you to stop following me around like a pest?"

I smoothed down the front of my shirt. My chest hurt from where she had shoved me. "Just tell me that you want me to go away, and I won't come back," I said, looking up at her. My feelings were so mixed, at that point, that I didn't know if I wanted her to do it or not. I just wanted some sort of resolution, some kind of final answer as to what she thought about me. I examined her face, and I thought I could see a hint of indecision there, as if she was carefully evaluating something. I stood again, slowly this time, so that we were face to face. I could see her breathing, quick and forceful in the rise and fall of her chest. Her green eyes were narrowed, sharp, inches away. She didn't step back.

"I want you," she said slowly, "to go away. Go away, and stop trying to contact me."

"That's it?" I said.

"Yes," she said, looking back at me, anger fading on her face. "That's it."

I brushed past her on my way to the door. Her shoulders were stiff, solid as rock. I didn't look back as I left the house. I walked down the street, and turned the corner on a whim, simply moving without purpose. I wasn't sure where I was going, I just knew that I needed to get away, to leave like I had promised. I didn't know how long we had spent talking, but it looked to be early evening, and cyclists sped past me as I walked along a cobbled footpath. I crossed roads without checking for oncoming cars, and I pushed past people when there was no space to move, ignoring their grunts or expressions.

I felt like I couldn't breathe properly, and tugged my scarf away from my neck. When I looked around to get my bearings, I didn't recognise any of the shops or roads around me in the fading light. A group of teenagers walked past me, chatting excitedly about a party they were attending, and I saw a bearded man in a long coat with a small girl on his shoulders. He was walking around wherever she pointed, so that she could see buildings in the distance. I wondered if my mother or father had ever done that with me. It must have felt good, being up there -- she only had to point, and her wishes were fulfilled. Children like that were probably smarter than me, too. They didn't pursue unrealistic things. It was just toys, watching the right programme on television, or sitting at home playing games on a computer. It felt somehow unfair that the world just kept moving along like this, unaware of what I was feeling. There should have been a storm, or strangers should have kept their own happiness respectfully contained.

It took a while for me to make my way back to the museum. This was partly because I was lost, but also because I had no desire to see Claire, to look into her eyes and admit that the trip had been a complete waste of time. That would be difficult to endure. I dithered around on street corners, but eventually asked an old woman for directions. By the time I got to the museum it was late, and completely dark outside. There were still people passing by, but it was far quieter than it had been early in the day. I didn't realise that the museum was closed until I crossed the road and saw Claire in front of the entrance, alone. She was shivering, hands in coat pockets, her scarf wrapped around her mouth. As I approached she looked up, but there was no warmth in her expression.

"Hi," I said.

She just stared at me for a moment. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's nine o'clock," she said.

I tried to recall what time it had been when I had left her. It had been sometime in the early afternoon. "Sorry," I said. "It just got late."

"You could have phoned me, sent me a text message?"

"I didn't know the closing time for this place," I said. "I didn't realise you'd be stuck out here."

She sighed, looking at the ground for a moment, and then back up at me. "Let's just go somewhere warm, please? Anywhere."

We walked in the general direction of the train station until we saw a small cafe. She was silent until we were inside, where she ordered a coffee for herself and then sat at the table at the back of the room, sinking down into her chair as if her joints were still stiff with cold. There weren't many people inside, just a couple sitting near the window and an old man reading a newspaper in the middle of the room. There was an old song playing faintly from a radio behind the counter, one that I vaguely recalled, but the title eluded me. I sat opposite Claire, without ordering anything -- I still felt too sick to eat or drink. Claire carefully unwrapped her scarf, and then felt the side of her cup, checking how hot the coffee was.

"We should leave," I said, looking at the wall. Oxford felt oppressive.

"I won't be long," she said. "We won't miss the last train."

I nodded, mute. She ran a fingertip around the rim of her cup, waiting, but I looked away, pretending to be distracted by a poster on the wall. It was advertising an upcoming play at a theatre nearby.

"That looks good," I said.

"Rayhan..."

"My mother loves them. She likes the old stuff, though. Shakespeare. I prefer more modern plays. Easier to understand the language. What are your favourite plays?"

She stared at me for a second before replying. "I'd have to think about it — I think there are a few of them."

"I'll look them up. Remind me to look them up when we get back."

"Rayhan, what happened?"

"What happened with what?"

"You saw your friend, didn't you?"

"Oh, that," I said. "Yeah, I saw her."

She waited for me to continue, but I fell silent again, tapping the floor with my toe under the table.

"I think we should hurry," I said, checking my watch. "We don't want to get stuck here."

Claire took a while sipping her coffee, and then put the cup down gently. “How did she react to seeing you?”

“Nothing interesting happened,” I said.

“Okay,” Claire said, sipping her coffee again.

We were both silent for a minute. I could hear the clinking of cutlery and soft conversations on the other side of the room, and now a different, equally unfamiliar song was playing on the radio. I tried to think of something to say.

“What about your research?”

“It went well.”

I felt a jolt of irritation at that, without knowing why, but I nodded as if pleased. “You were going to tell me something before I left,” I said suddenly. “What was that about?”

She looked down. “I can’t really remember now.”

“You must be able to remember something.”

“We can talk about that another time.”

“This is the best time,” I said, curious about her discomfort. “Please?”

She kept staring down at her cup, as if she were concentrating on something very hard. I felt a little uneasy as I watched her. She finally glanced up at me.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is going to sound really stupid, but...I guess I should start by saying thank you.”

I stared at her. “For what?”

“I’ve never had someone to talk to. There’s my mother, but she’s not interested in listening. Even with you, it almost didn’t happen. I didn’t have the guts to go and find you after I first met you. You were the one who came to me. Do you understand?”

I shook my head.

“It was hard for me to even look at people,” she continued. “I have no idea what I would be like, or where I would be right now if you hadn’t talked to me. So -- thanks. Thank you.”

I listened to all this, expressionless, but with mounting dread. She thought I was a good person. She thought I had helped her. I felt nauseous now, and put both

hands on the table, as if to steady myself. I tried to speak but none of the words would come.

“And,” Claire said, stumbling over her own words now, “there’s something else.”

“Don’t say any more,” I managed to say.

She broke off. “Why not?”

“I -- not now --”

“This is important, Rayhan. Just —”

“For God’s sake, I said no,” I shouted. “Why are you doing this? Just stop talking. Just shut up.”

I quivered, pushing down my urge to throw up, furious and panicking all at once. At first she was just baffled, her mouth still open. Then she closed it, and looked away. Her hands, still on the table, were clenched, and then they unfolded again, slowly, her fingers trembling.

“I’m going home,” she said, and pushed her chair back. She stood, and slowly walked out of the cafe. I was too disgusted with myself and scared to run after her and try to apologise, so I just sat there in silence, while the irritatingly cheery tune played on the radio. Claire’s scarf was still draped across her chair, her cup still half full of coffee. The couple near the window glanced at me, and I could hear the woman laughing softly, but I ignored them. The person behind the counter wished me a ‘good night’ as I walked out. I called Claire five times, my fingers fumbling on the buttons of my mobile as I weaved my way around people — she never answered. When I finally gave up and slipped the phone back into my pocket I stood in the middle of the street, looking at my reflection in the glass of a closed store. The image was too dim and indistinct to see my expression.

I caught the last train back to London, with Claire’s scarf twined over my lap.

CHAPTER TEN

When I woke, early on the following morning, I was still in my trousers and rumpled shirt. It took me a moment to adjust to the fact that I was in my room. I couldn't even recall getting home. Claire's scarf was draped over my table, just under the computer monitor. I drew back my curtains to feel the warmth of the sunlight on my face for a moment, and then got up, shaky and still tired. When I went downstairs, I noticed that my mother's brown coat was missing from the banister. My father was making some sort of omelette in the kitchen, while trying to watch the news report on the television. He eyed my clothes and disheveled appearance.

"I hope you're not going out like that," he said.

I didn't respond. I sat behind the kitchen table and started scraping some butter over a piece of stale bread. As usual, the butter was still hard from the fridge, and it wouldn't spread properly. It came out in chunks, and I accidentally tore holes in the bread while trying to flatten it out. I threw the knife down on the table, leaving buttery streaks across the polished surface, and ate the slice of bread as it was. My father glanced at the streaks, and then at me.

"What time did you get back last night?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

When I didn't respond he turned away from the stove, switching off the gas.

"Have you started your driving lessons yet?"

"I'll start soon."

"What day?"

"I have to go to uni," I said, after a moment, and got up.

"You haven't been going to your classes. I've asked your mother, and she said she barely sees you leave the house. I haven't seen you leave much either. When you left the other day you didn't even have your books with you."

I shrugged, and he shook his head. "This is serious, Ray."

I moved towards the door and he stepped in front of me. "We saved up that money for a long time, just so you could study."

"Then it was a waste," I said.

I thought, for a moment, that he would hit me. He had only done it now and then when I was a child, but he seemed to swell up, shoulders hunching and hands balling into fists, and I stepped back. He didn't move, though. He looked at me for a few seconds and then stepped aside again, suddenly a small and tired looking man, his cheeks sunken and eyes watery.

"You're an adult now," he said quietly. That was all, but it felt as if he had jabbed me in the pit of my stomach.

Yes, I thought. The wonderful world of adults. He took a yellow cloth from the sink and carefully wiped away the streaks of butter on the table, before putting my plate in the sink. Then he sat down and started eating, cutting his portion of egg into small, neatly divided strips, while I stood at the doorway. "I'm just in a bad mood," I finally said.

He didn't look up. "I get it. You don't need looking after."

"Everyone has to look after themselves," I said.

He glanced at me. "That's true."

"See you," I said, and left.

The first place I went was Claire's house. I mentally rehearsed my apology during my journey there, and I was still doing so when I walked up the driveway and pressed the doorbell. No one answered, and there were blinds over the windows. I tried again, and still no answer. I called Claire's phone while I stood there on the driveway, and when she didn't answer that either, I rang her house phone, a number she had given me a while ago. This time I actually got through.

"Yes?" It was Claire's mother.

"Hi," I said. "It's Rayhan."

"I know. Stop ringing the doorbell."

"I wanted to speak to Claire."

"She doesn't want to see anyone today."

"I just want to apologise, that's all."

"This is becoming a habit, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean to --"

"I don't care. You can't keep upsetting my daughter and then strolling up here to say sorry."

"I know that, I --"

"Even if she would allow it, I won't. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," I said.

"Now go home. If she wants to talk to you, she'll call you."

"But is she okay? What is she doing?"

The line cut.

I waited for a while, holding my phone and staring at the house. I tried to look for signs of Claire watching me from one of the windows, through a crack in the blinds, but I couldn't see anything. I wanted to show her that I meant my apology, that I wouldn't simply try once and then walk away, but what else could I do? Any more, and I would feel like some sort of stalker. She had been, I realised, the best friend I had ever had. No -- the only friend. I had ruined that, and the worst part was knowing that I deserved it. This wasn't a freak occurrence. I had upset her before, and she had forgiven me. This time I knew she wouldn't. I felt very drained, suddenly, and slipped my phone back into my pocket. I looked back as I walked away from the driveway, but none of the blinds moved.

The house was empty when I got home. The kitchen was immaculate. The only sign that my father had been there earlier was the gleaming rack of dishes, perfectly stacked on the table. I went up to my room, locked the door, and sat on my bed, trying to figure out what I could do. Safia was gone. Claire was gone. In that moment I even missed Scott. I wondered where he was now, and if he had managed to make it onto the news. I pictured him in the chair opposite me, still in his school uniform, one leg balanced over the other while he was smoking. I could even predict what he would say.

"Puck," he would grunt. "Real sorry for you. But you had it coming, you know that."

"Yeah."

"I told you to drop that girl. To forget about her."

"You did."

"Now she dropped you. This is what happens."

"I don't care."

“Oh yeah? What about Claire?”

I smiled at my own idiocy. “I don’t blame her.”

“Real noble of you, that.”

“Go away.”

I shut my eyes and pictured Safia instead. She was sitting on the windowsill, one leg down, lazily swaying back and forth as she watched me.

“Hi,” she said.

“This is ridiculous,” I said to myself. “This is completely ridiculous.”

“Ray, are you sulking again? Why don’t you just stop sulking and enjoy yourself?”

I ignored her.

“It’s not hard, Ray. It’s not hard to understand people.”

“Shut up.”

“Or what? You’re going to hit me?”

I tried to think of Claire instead, but the mental picture that I created of her wouldn’t speak. She just looked at me in silence, with the same expression she had in that cafe.

I must have fallen asleep again. When I got up, I didn’t stretch or move at all. I stayed as I was, looking at nothing in particular. Eventually I looked at the clock on my bedside table: it was ten in the morning. I got up and switched my old computer on. It groaned to life, the dusty screen lighting up in the dark room. As usual, I checked my email inbox. Most of the time it was full of dull messages from my university about upcoming seminars. Sometimes my mother would forward messages to me about plays and exhibitions, hoping to spark my interest, but I never paid them much attention. I went through the messages one by one, running an eye over them before deleting them. Spam, spam, a message from my course administrator at university, spam, an advertisement about a teaching position, spam, spam, a message from my driving instructor, and — I stopped on the final, most recent message, my finger hovering over the delete button. It was from Claire. I sat there for a few seconds and stared at my screen, my finger still poised above my mouse. Then I opened the message and sat back to read it.

Hi, Rayhan.

I don't really know how to go about this, but I don't want to just ignore you either. I'm not sure if I'll even send this. I'll decide when I get to the end.

The things I said at the cafe: I still stand by them. After I left I thought I had just been deluding myself, that I had misunderstood you for years. I was angry. It's been a long time since I was that angry. I've thought about it a lot since then, and I think my original sentiments were right. I just got a bit carried away with them, and started building something out of nothing. Sometimes, in my head, I don't see people right. Do you understand? It's not just socialising, like we talked about before. It's everything. I don't think I can 'read' people like you can. Maybe if I had that talent I wouldn't be so confused all the time. Sometimes I think you're a good person, one of the best I've ever known. Ever since we met I've thought a lot about how I could help you, and I still wonder. I don't know any more. Seeing as I can't understand things well, I think I should just be completely honest about what I'm feeling and thinking, even though that's what started all this in the first place. The truth is important, though. Everyone deserves that, right?

I shouldn't have just walked out like that back there. I'm sorry. At the same time, I don't think it would be a good idea to meet up anytime soon. I think a break would be good for both of us. I don't know how long it should be, I just know that I need one. Please stop coming to my house. I don't feel good any more. I feel like I'm getting worse again, for the first time since school. I need time to think, and to get better. I don't know what happened between you and that girl in Oxford. I didn't want to pry, and I still don't. I know you care about her a lot. I hope you can resolve things.

I thought of five different replies, and even started to write a few of them, but in the end I couldn't send any of them. I deleted her message and shut down my computer. Before I left my room I picked up her scarf and slid it into the bottom drawer of my desk, alongside a few dusty CD cases. I spent the rest of the day in almost complete silence, only responding to my parents with grunts and nods. I made myself meals, and then took them up to my room to eat them while I sat on the bed. In the evening I slipped on my overcoat and boots and left the house, closing the door gently behind me.

I didn't have any real destination in mind. I walked to West Hampstead station, and entered the first train that arrived. I waited in the jolting carriage until I got off at Finchley Road. Despite the cold, there were plenty of people walking around outside, taking pictures with their phones and staring into shop windows as I passed. I kept walking, watching the people around me carefully. They must have all had their own

worries, sorrows and anxiety, and yet I couldn't detect even a single trace of it on their faces. It was maddening, knowing that it was there but being unable to see it. It wasn't as if they were disguising anything. They must have somehow been able to forget about it all temporarily, pushing it away to avoid considering it.

I saw an old man sitting on the doorstep of a closed shop, huddled into an old, stained coat. He wasn't even looking up at the people as they passed, but he had turned his hat upside down for some coins. It was mostly empty. Normally I didn't give any money out in these situations — my father had always said that every penny was precious, and that I should take particular care with them, especially as I hadn't earned it myself. On this occasion I emptied most of my wallet into my hand and poured the coins into the hat as I passed. It wasn't a great sum of money, only about ten pounds, but the man shot me a grateful look, nodding to me. I should have told him that I hadn't done it out of pity. I had only done it because, unlike the others around him, he actually looked unhappy, and he allowed that unhappiness to show itself.

"Cheers," he said. "You got a light too?"

"I don't smoke."

"Doesn't mean you don't have a light, does it? Come over here."

He gestured to the place beside him. I paused, but after a moment I walked over and sat beside him, pulling my collar up around my chin. There was an old woman sitting like us across the street, but she didn't pay us any attention.

"You should always carry a light," he said. "Fire is useful. Carrying fire in your pocket — that's good, isn't it?"

I couldn't think of a situation where I would actually need it, but I nodded, humouring him.

"What's your name?"

"Ray."

"Yeah? Like Ray Charles. Good name."

"Mhm."

"So Ray, why all this?" He gestured to the money in the hat.

"Why not?"

He snorted, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "'Cause people don't do that."

“Who cares what people do?”

He eyed me, and then shook his head. “What’s the problem?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. You got parents?”

“Yeah.”

“You got a house?”

“Yeah.”

“You healthy?”

“I guess.”

“Then what’s your problem? Don’t tell me it’s girl problems. Please don’t tell me that.”

I thought about it for a moment. “No.”

“A break up, right? Get used to them.”

I shook my head. “I’ve never had a girlfriend.”

“Dearie. How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“Dearie.”

He picked at a scab on his forehead, glancing at me every now and then. I stared directly ahead, at all the people hurrying past. Some of them saw us and then quickly looked at the ground or one of the shops as they drew closer, but most of them didn’t even glance at us. We were invisible. No — they knew we were there, but made a deliberate effort to avoid acknowledging it. I wondered, with a burst of spite, if I should wave to them.

“They’re not all bad,” he said.

“What?”

“You got a nasty look on your face. Like the way I look when I see pigeons.”

“Don’t you get mad? Barely anyone gives you money.”

“You joking? Of course I get mad. Some of the assholes who pass here...but not all of them are like that. Even a kid would understand that. Look at you. You gave me some money, didn’t you? The other day a woman gave me some too. She also had a light, though.”

“I didn’t give it to you to be nice. I just felt like it.”

“I don’t really care what your motivation was, man. Far as I’m concerned, you’re in the good books.”

I shook my head and continued to watch the people pass. Something occurred to me then, and I turned to regard him.

“Have you ever been desperate enough to steal?”

He smiled. “Don’t ask questions like that. Not polite.”

I nodded and stood, hands in pockets.

“So you’re off, then,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“My name’s Campbell. Come visit me again?”

“Maybe.”

He waved to me as I left.

I doubted that I would see him again as I walked away, and yet the next day I found myself going back to the same spot at nearly the same time. He was sitting there again, but this time his hat had more coins in it. He had wrapped his grey coat around himself more tightly than before, and I noticed that he had a hole in one of his sleeves. He rocked back and forth almost imperceptibly, his chin lowered behind his collar. There was a flattened cigarette butt near his feet.

“When I said to come back, I didn’t mean this soon,” he said when he saw me.

“I was just in the area,” I said.

“Might as well sit down while you’re here, then.”

I took a seat beside him. He watched me for a few seconds, waiting for me to speak, but I stayed silent, and he went back to looking up at the people passing. We must have sat like that for at least five minutes. Maybe he was waiting for me to initiate a conversation, but my head was empty. There just didn’t seem to be any need to say anything.

“Have you ever been married?” I asked suddenly.

He laughed. “Yeah, I’ve been married. It’s overrated. She left me after a few years.”

“But you must have liked her a lot, at one point.”

He gave me a weird look. “Liked? Yeah, you could put it like that.”

“What did it feel like?”

“You actually asking me to describe what it feels like to love someone? Jesus.”

“Forget it.”

He examined his gloved hands. “It feels like — well — what kind of question is that? Look. I’m not good at this stuff, but the way I would describe it is — it’s like someone lying to you, and you know they’re lying, but you force yourself to believe them. If that makes sense.”

“I see.”

“Right. It’s pretty crap. You start caring about someone like that and you usually don’t end up in a good place. It’s not worth it.”

“No,” I said. “It probably isn’t.”

He laughed. “You wouldn’t know though, would you?”

I stiffened at his patronising tone, but didn’t rise to the bait. I waited for a moment before I spoke again.

“I have another question.”

“Why are you asking me all this? I thought you said you have parents?”

“I don’t want to ask them.”

“Well, I’m not the one to ask for this stuff. You want some philosophy, go take a class in it.”

“Are there some people,” I said, “who are always dissatisfied, no matter what happens? I mean, if they were rich, they had a partner, a job, a family, whatever. All that stuff.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“But is it possible?”

“If they’re crazy, maybe. Or ungrateful.”

“I guess.”

He shot me a look. “You ready to tell me what the problem is?”

“I don’t have a problem.”

He grinned. “I see.”

“I don’t have an issue,” I said, standing. He shrugged. I stared down at him, wondering why I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Rather than humiliate myself by sitting back down, I turned and left.

After the fifth time I visited him, he was noticeably exasperated.

“Don’t know what you hope to learn here,” he said, chewing a cereal bar.

“I’m not trying to learn anything.”

“You’re young, go do what young people do. Go to a club or something.”

“I like it here.”

“You’re a screwball. If you want to do something useful, bring me more money.”

“No thanks.”

He shook his head. “You’re slipping out of the good books. At least go and get me some food from one of the shops over there, then.”

Wordlessly, I stood and went over to the fish and chips shop. I paid for the food with my own money. When I came back he looked startled.

“You actually did it?”

I handed him his meal, and when he unwrapped it steam rose in the cold air. He stuffed his face with the chips, then complained about his burnt tongue. He used his own plastic fork to tear out chunks of the fish, and kept wiping his mouth with a dirty tissue.

“God, this is good. You’re a helluva guy, you are. Have some.”

I shook my head. “Not hungry.”

“Suit yourself.”

He demolished the rest of the food, and then sucked on the end of his fork.

“When you were young,” I said, “what were you like?”

“More questions? I was a little shit. You’re much more polite.”

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah. Don’t be too serious. Not good for you.”

I shrugged. He put the fork down and faced me. “I used to hang around another part of London, years ago. The kind of stuff I did...you think things will just fade away if you try to forget it, but it doesn't work like that. You’re stuck with it for every second of your life. I wish I was as young as you.”

“I’m not young.”

“Listen. You wanna change something, then do it. Don’t just walk around sulking. That doesn’t help anyone.”

I got up, brushing myself off. “I have to get home.”

He shook his head. “Whatever. Go on.”

The next day I left home at the usual time in the evening, and I wore my usual clothes — a shirt, trousers, an overcoat and boots — but it wasn't until I reached the train station that I realised I had no intention of seeing Campbell. I just wanted to walk through the night, as I had done when I was younger. This time, however, I *wanted* to be lost, to have no bearings or sense of support around me. Every time I tried to take action and control a situation, it would twist in my grasp, mutating into an even bigger, more hurtful problem. Well, then I would abandon the idea of control.

I would get rid of the overthinking, anxiety, and paranoia. However, while I could lose myself physically, trying to switch off the constant bombardment of thoughts was far more difficult. It was like attempting to remove a piece of my body. No matter what I tried, my mind would always return to the same topics, relentless, and always with the same conclusion: I was a twisted, stunted excuse for a man. Scott and Safia had been harsh to me, but they had both been correct. I should never have tracked Safia down, when all she had wanted was to be left alone, and I was just as much of a coward as Scott had always implied.

I came up to a cinema and decided to buy a ticket for a movie that I didn't know. It was called *A Step Back From Violet*, and the bored looking woman behind the counter seemed surprised that I wanted to see it.

The room where the movie was showing was almost empty, aside from two men at the front, both checking their phones while they lounged around. I sat at the back, right in the middle of the row, and watched the protagonist being pursued by a murderer. In the end, of course, he defeated the murderer without killing him, watched him get locked up, and then kissed his love interest just before the credits began to roll. There was something irritating about all this, but I was too drained to really care. The only thing that stuck out in my head, as I watched the white text crawling over the black screen, was the final ‘romantic’ image. As dull and flat as the hero was, there was still something attractive about the sheer simplicity of that ending. I pictured myself in a similar place; I had triumphed over the villain, Scott, and Safia was happy to see me when I had come to track her down. Then what? Was I really satisfied with that? I

thought back to how I had interacted with Safia before she had disappeared. There had been a couple of pleasant moments here and there, but I wasn't sure if I had ever actually been happy during all that time we had spent together. I had known, in fact, that I was just there as a sidekick or side character in her own story. She had never tried to hide it from me, and she had never misled me and claimed to feel attached to me in any way. It was odd, then, that I had expected otherwise.

Then there was Claire. I had never felt the need to impress her. I had never felt like I was an unwanted and irritating element in her life. I thought back to the time we had spent together. "I'm sorry," I mouthed to the dark room. The trouble was that 'sorry' was just a word that I leaned on. Every time something went wrong — 'sorry', as if that word had magical, redemptive properties.

When I came out of the theatre it was still dark outside. I glanced at the clock above the ticket office; it was just after ten. The shops around me had closed, the shutters grimy and covered with graffiti. I kept walking until I reached the nearest station, where I took a train to Embankment, trying my best to keep away from the other people in the carriage. I didn't come to Embankment often, as the crowds and noise were intimidating, particularly during summer. Perhaps it was simply the cold weather, but when I arrived it wasn't as busy as it had been during my last visit. I wandered around for a while, hands in my pockets, until I reached a long stretch of ground that I particularly remembered for being full of couples — they had sat on benches and looked out at the river below during sunset. It was, of course, mainly empty now, although I made out a tired looking man slouching on one of the benches, while there was a woman staring out at the water. I ignored both of them. It wasn't a great view, but I wasn't interested in it anyway. I just needed a place to decide what I was going to do. How could I move forward or change when I had only ever lived in one way? Perhaps the most frustrating thing was knowing that I could have prevented my current situation if I had been able to simply control myself. There wouldn't have been any outburst at Claire, and I wouldn't have even attempted my idiotic plan of finding Safia. It was childishness. That was the root of it all, and no matter what I tried, it was impossible to escape it. I was there until sunrise, hoping some kind of solution would appear before me. Nothing came, but I remained where I was, hunched over and staring at the ground.

Finally, as more people began to appear in the area, I left, shivering in the morning cold and trying shake away the stiffness in my legs.

When I got back home I went up to my room and checked my email while I collapsed on the bed. The first thing I did was search for any messages from Claire, but I couldn't see her name anywhere. There was, however, a message from an address that I didn't recognise — it was just a jumble of words. The message said:

Come to the Tom R.W Cafe, tomorrow at 6:00pm. Second floor. We need to talk.

I had to read it twice before I persuaded myself that I had read it correctly. Naturally, the next step was trying to figure out who had sent it, but it was too short to really pick apart and examine. Of course, I hoped that it was Claire, but she would have no need to use a strange, alternate email address. I wasn't foolish enough to believe that it was Safia. Pete would have just used his normal university account, assuming that he even wanted to see me, which was doubtful. He had probably forgotten my existence by now. I couldn't think of anyone else, so I just sat there in confusion. It might just be a scam. My mouse cursor hovered over the 'delete' button, but my finger remained frozen. I stared at the screen until I lost track of time, unable to look away from that short, simple message. Perhaps it was a trick, perhaps it didn't mean anything, but the possibility of it being Claire — no matter how unlikely — was something that I couldn't ignore.

I didn't recognise the cafe, but a quick search on the internet told me that it was somewhere in Kensington High Street. I shut my laptop down and sat back in bed to sleep, telling myself not to have any hopes about something that could be meaningless. If, however, it actually did turn out to be Claire... I would tell her everything that I had realised. Regardless of whether she forgave me or not, I had to tell her.

I took some precautions before I left the house on the following day. I made use of my father's sunglasses again, and also borrowed his black coat, which was too big for me. I added a grey cap, and then studied myself in the mirror. It was silly — I had probably only made myself look suspicious, and it wouldn't fool anyone who had seen me more than a few times. I still felt slightly better when I stepped out of the house.

I didn't like Kensington. It was too busy, too chaotic. It was the evening, so I at least had the comfort of the darkening sky, but the shops were distractingly lit up, and cars were as loud as ever, with aggressive honking and people swearing from their driving seats. A couple of teenagers honked at a young woman passing by, grinning at her through the windows. She pretended not to notice. It took me a while to find the right cafe, but when I saw it I stopped for a moment, looking up at the second floor. I was ten minutes early. From my vantage point, I couldn't see anyone that I recognised — just a family chatting to one another by the window.

I went inside, nodded to the staff member behind the counter, and went up the stairs, slowly and with care. I stopped at the entrance to the second floor, partly hidden by the wall, and examined the room. There was the family at the window seats, what looked like two male university students at the back, and a few businessmen, one with a newspaper. I couldn't see anyone I recognised. I went back downstairs, still wary, and ordered a cup of coffee, before coming back up and sitting at a table in the corner, where I could watch the whole room. I blew on the coffee and waited, pretending to read a newspaper that had been left on the table, ignoring some of the funny looks I got from the university students. I felt better behind the glasses, and I refused to take them off. I checked my watch — it was ten to six. I held the newspaper up, as if reading it, but my gaze kept switching between the doorway and my watch. The minutes passed, until finally it was six, and there was no sign of the person I was supposed to meet. That was fine. I hadn't expected them to be here at the exact time, anyway. As I waited, however, I grew more and more nervous. After ten minutes, I put the newspaper down and fidgeted with my cup. After another ten minutes, I sat back in my chair, looking around the room again. At seven o'clock, I wondered if I should go home. It was irritating to come here for nothing, but at the same time I was relieved. I'd had a bad feeling about the meeting ever since I had read the email, and while I had hoped that it was Claire, I knew that it had only ever been a very slim chance. I still couldn't explain who had sent it, but for now I just wanted to get out of the cafe. I got up, leaving my cup on the table, and I was just pushing the chair back in its place when Safia walked in.

She had her hair in a ponytail, and wore a dark purple coat. There was a black bag slung over her shoulder, swollen with whatever items she had put in there. I slowly

sat down. She walked over, dumped the bag on the chair beside us, and sat opposite me. We stared at each other for a moment, and then she laughed.

“What are you wearing? You look like such a dork.”

I took my glasses off, and placed them on the tabletop. “Safia,” I said. “What is this?”

“Yeah, I need to explain a few things, don’t I?”

I didn’t respond. I just waited, feeling something bubbling up inside me and doing my best to stop it. She looked around the room casually, but she kept rapping the table with her index fingers, over and over, and she was shifting around in her seat as if she couldn’t quite get comfortable. “Well,” she said, smiling at me. “I need a favour.”

Again, I said nothing. I kept my face blank. She continued, all the while studying me and occasionally pretending to glance at other people in the room. “My cousins didn’t like ‘the way I was living’, as they put it, so I’m not living in Oxford any more. I come back to London, and of course my parents are still pissed about what I did with that idiot at their house, so I’m not allowed back there. You know, I didn’t even have anywhere to sleep the other night. I had to sleep on someone’s doorstep.”

I nodded, my face still expressionless. “So?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I need a place to stay. Not for long. Just for a day or two, until I get sorted out somewhere.”

“So?”

She sat back in her chair. “Is that how it is? You’re telling me you’re not going to help me?”

“I thought you said that we weren’t friends, that you never wanted to see me again?”

“Listen,” she said. “At the time, yeah, that’s what I wanted. Now I need you.”

“You want to use me, you mean.”

She paused for a moment. “I mean I need your help. I’m not going to beg, and I’m not going to take back the stuff I said. When I said it, I believed it. Whether I was wrong or right, I don’t know right now.”

I shook my head. “You must think I’m really pathetic.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. But if you cared enough to come to Oxford to find me, then surely you care enough to give me a place to stay for a day. Hell, maybe

we can use the opportunity to talk. Maybe I'll even realise that I was wrong. I wasn't expecting you to help, you know — even you have a limit — but I thought I would try anyway.”

“If I help you, it would prove you right about everything you said to me.”

“Your choice.”

I looked at her carefully. She had her arms folded, her back straight, and she was staring at me with her usual intensity. Choose either option, her posture told me, but it ultimately doesn't matter. She was blinking more than usual, though, and I noticed she had small bags under her eyes. Her hair looked greasy, and she hadn't ordered anything from the cafe — I wondered how much money she actually had with her. The hefty bag that she had placed beside her probably contained all her current possessions. I would have thought that I would be triumphant to see a day when she actually admitted to needing my help, that I might even be hopeful for the chance to talk with her for a day or two and try to resolve our differences, to change her opinion of me. Admittedly, I did feel those things flickering inside me, but nowhere near as strongly as I might have expected. I felt angry at her presumption, and spiteful replies ran through my head, but most of all I was embarrassed and even disappointed. It wasn't right. Safia didn't ask people for help. It was part of what made her so strong. It was still her, of course, but when I looked at her there was something just a little different, in the way she moved and spoke. That slight difference bothered me and made me consider her request in a different light.

“It's not my house,” I said. “I still live with my parents.”

“I figured. You think they wouldn't allow it, is that it?”

If my parents had been traditional in any way, they would never allow it. However, neither of them were religious or traditional. It was possible that they would agree, but I was far from convinced that I would even ask them. I wouldn't forgive myself if I gave in here — but, despite everything she had said, I still felt a desire to help her, to win her approval. I fought against that desire.

“I don't know,” I said, my voice wavering.

She looked down at the table. “This is childish, Ray.”

“You would say that.”

“It’s like we’re back in primary. Why are you so bloody offended just because I don’t think of you as a friend? You don’t get it, do you? I don’t have any friends at all. I’m not singling you out or anything.”

I reached out across the table, and she watched my hands as they moved towards her, but I just picked up my sunglasses and put them back on. “I’m going to leave now, Safia,” I said.

She looked as if I’d slapped her. There was no more casualness, no glancing around the room or leaning back. She stared at me. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

I stood up, avoiding her eyes, and walked out of the room and down the stairs. My heart was pounding, and I had to make an effort to breathe properly. I heard the sound of rapid footsteps as I exited the cafe and continued down the street. I turned around just as she grabbed me and slammed me against the wall of a building, her reddened face inches away from mine. My glasses almost slipped off the bridge of my nose, and I tried to break free, but she had a tight grip on my coat collar, and while she didn’t have a large, strong frame, she seemed to put all her effort into pinning me down.

“Let go,” I said, keeping my voice cool.

“Not until you change your mind.”

“You’re wasting your time, Safia.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” she said. I felt her hands shaking against my neck, but I couldn’t tell if it was anger or fear. Some of the people passing looked over at us, but none of them stepped in or said anything.

“No.”

“Stop trying to hide it. Be honest. This is your revenge, isn’t it?”

“This is nothing,” I said. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Liar.”

“Let me go, Safia.”

She pushed me away and I almost fell — I somehow managed to steady myself against the wall with a hand.

“Fine,” she said. Her voice was different now. She sounded drained. She turned away from me and watched the people passing on the opposite street.

“I don’t need you, anyway. I just thought — well, I was wrong this time. You must be happy.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not.”

“I don’t understand you,” she said, as if talking to herself. “I thought I did, for a long time. I really don’t know. You were just a kid that kept following me around. We spent too much time together though. It wasn’t right.” She looked back at me, tilting her head to the side as she used to. “It’s probably for the best that you stay away from me.”

I was ready for her anger, the insults, the intimidation. This new attitude, however, left me feeling disorientated. If it were another person, I would suspect them of feigning weakness to garner sympathy, but that wasn’t Safia’s style. I straightened my coat collar, watching her. She was staring into the distance, her eyes glassy. I replied, frowning.

“Why is it for the best?”

She laughed. “Things don’t turn out very well when we associate with each other. Go home.”

I didn’t move. She sat down on the street, arms folded. I started to walk away, but my steps were halting and stiff, as if I had leg cramps. I turned to look at her again. If I left, it would probably be the last time I would ever see her. I would spend the rest of my life wondering if I had done the right thing. Was she correct? Was I taking revenge? Not just for her behaviour, but even for what had happened when I had spoken to Claire?

“Maybe,” I said, “I made some mistakes too.”

“Maybe,” she echoed.

I stood beside her, hands in pockets. “So you’re going to sleep out here?”

“Why not? Here is as good as anywhere.”

“You can’t sleep here.”

“You have a better idea?”

I was silent for a moment, and then I sighed. “Fine. Let’s go.”

She looked up at me. “So now you want to help.”

“I’m not promising anything. It’s not my house, remember.”

She didn’t get up. “Don’t force yourself, Ray. I’m not so far gone that you can take pity on me.”

“I’m not taking pity on you,” I said, but didn’t elaborate. She hissed through her teeth and then stood, as if she were doing me a great favour, dusting herself off.

“Fine,” she said.

As we walked together silently, both of us making sure to keep a moderate gap between us, I saw her lightly padding over the edge of the curb on the balls of her feet, and for a moment an image came to my mind of how we had walked home from primary school, years ago. I almost smiled. I just wished that I was sure that I was doing this for the right reasons. I was finished with trying to win her approval. This was just a common courtesy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We took the train to West Hampstead station. There was one seat left on the carriage, but Safia chose to stand instead, so I did the same. By the time we got to the station, she had regained some of her usual composure, and smirked at a bunch of loud, irritating teenagers on the street. She even poked fun at some of the lavish houses along the way. It was only when we got to my driveway and started to walk up to the door that she put a hand on my shoulder and stopped me.

“What are your parents like?”

“I don’t know...they’re just normal.”

“Don’t be boring. Describe them properly.”

“Why?”

“I’m curious.”

I shrugged. “Neither of them are religious, if that’s what you were worried about.”

“That’s a good start.”

“My father is the strict one. He used to box, but not these days. My mother’s normally busy with her work.”

“Not much of a description. Your mother teaches Art History, right? And your father does what?”

“He’s in IT,” I said.

“Right.”

I opened the front door with my key. I could hear the television in the sitting room — it sounded like some kind of action movie, judging by the gunfire and shouting. As we came into the room, my father glanced up at me, his face tired.

“Ray,” he said. “I’ve told you —“

He broke off when he saw Safia, who was observing him with an uncharacteristic quietness.

“This is Safia,” I said, moving to the side so that he could see her properly. “She —“

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, walking up to him and holding out her hand. He shook it, his expression guarded. “I used to go to school with Rayhan.”

"I think I remember him mentioning you," my father said. "High school, right?"

"And primary."

"That long?" He studied her a little more closely. "Have you been here before?"

"This is the first time."

"Well," my father said, floundering a little. "Hi."

"I remember Rayhan telling me that you used to box."

He glanced at me, and then back to her. "A long time ago."

"I wish I'd been able to learn. I've always wanted to try it."

"Well, I can always give you the name of my old gym."

"That would be great."

I was unable to tell if she was flattering him or if she was genuinely interested, but either scenario irritated me. "Safia needs a place to stay for the night," I said.

He frowned, opening his mouth, but she cut in before he could speak. "I had a disagreement with my relatives, so I can't stay with them at the moment."

My father thought about it for a second and then nodded. "It's okay with me, but we don't have a spare room. You'd have to sleep on the couch."

She smiled at him. "That would be perfect."

"Well," he said, "have a seat."

"Thanks," she said, and we sat down together. For a few awkward minutes we all just watched the action movie. Sometimes I glanced at Safia, but she looked calm, with no hint of her behaviour at the cafe. We heard the front door open, and my mother walked in shortly afterward, still in a coat and shoes. She put her handbag down on the table, looking at us in confusion.

"This is Safia," I said again.

"Nice to meet you," my mother said, glancing at my father.

"Likewise," Safia said.

"She needs a place for the night," my father said, shifting around. "I said she could use the couch."

My mother looked a little hesitant. "A night?"

"Two at the worst," Safia said. "It's kind of you to allow it."

My mother was still for a moment, and then nodded. "Didn't you used to go to primary school with Rayhan?"

Safia nodded. "And high school."

"So you both stayed in contact after school?"

Safia paused. "I moved away."

"I see," my mother said. "Well, I should get changed and go to sleep."

"Goodnight," Safia said. My mother nodded to her and left. We sat in silence, and I pretended to watch the movie. There was a scene where a messy-haired thug was shot in the chest and, with a wail, fell off a balcony and landed on the street below. My father chuckled and Safia smiled. I frowned. After another ten minutes of the movie, my father finally got up.

"I should get some rest too," he said.

"Goodnight," Safia said, in the same polite tone as before.

"Tell Ray if you need anything," he said, and glanced at us before leaving the room. I wondered how long it would take for my parents to start gossiping about me. Safia remained on the couch, looking around the room.

"You have a nice house," she said, draping her arm over the top of the couch.

I didn't reply. I knew how to behave with her in the outside world, but here I felt adrift.

"You should get some sleep," I said.

"Soon."

"Well, I'm going up."

"Fine."

I stopped at the doorway, looking back at her. She looked exhausted, her head drooping. Her eyes, however, were still sharp and alert. I left, but as I walked up the stairs I glanced through the gap in the banisters and saw her sagging back, arms dangling over the edge of the couch. She was probably already falling asleep. My mother called me as I walked past their room. My father was in bed, either sleeping or trying his best to get to sleep. My mother was reading a textbook at her desk, with a small lamp illuminating the pages. Her hair was loose, and she was wearing a housecoat.

"Has your friend gone to sleep?"

I shrugged. "Not yet, probably soon."

"Is she okay?"

“What do you mean?”

“I was just wondering.”

“She won’t steal anything I hope,” my father grunted from the bed.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think she’s the type.”

“You don’t think?” he said, sitting up a bit.

“At least,” my mother said, “you finally brought a friend over. You’ve never done that before.”

“She’s not really a friend,” I said, before I could stop myself. My parents looked at each other.

“Rayhan,” my mother began, but I held up a hand.

“I’m really tired,” I said.

She studied me for a moment and then nodded to herself. “Okay then. Get some sleep. I’d like to know more in the morning, though.”

I retreated as quickly as possible, almost falling over as I left. I noticed that the lights had been switched off downstairs while I walked to my room. I slowly changed into a t-shirt and shorts, slipped into my bed and switched the light off.

Sleep didn’t come easily. When I had agreed to let Safia stay here, I thought I was doing a good deed, but if that had been the case I would have felt peaceful and calm. I kept turning from one side to the other in my bed, until finally I just faced the ceiling and shut my eyes.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remembered was waking to a shout from somewhere below. I froze for a moment, squinting in the dark, caught in the foggy state that always arose in the first minute after I woke up. I slipped out of my bed and slowly walked across the landing. My parents had closed their door before sleeping, something that they did now and then, and as I couldn’t hear any muffled signs of them moving around or talking, I assumed that they hadn’t heard anything. I continued downstairs. I had briefly worried that it was a thief, but it wouldn’t make much sense for a thief to shout and draw attention to themselves. Unless, of course, Safia had woken up, seen them, and shouted before they could silence her. That gave me pause, and I switched on the lights the moment I got downstairs, as if the illumination could chase away my fears as well as any threatening figures. When I turned on the lights in the sitting room, however, I only saw Safia sleeping on the couch. She was quiet for a

moment, and then started murmuring, before falling silent again. I moved closer, trying to hear what she was saying. I couldn't make any of it out. Her language was garbled and broken, and she spoke so softly that I had trouble picking anything up. Her tone was almost fearful. I slowly reached out and prodded her arm, but she didn't wake up. She just kept whispering nonsense, her face tightening as if she was being squeezed in a clamp. I took hold of her shoulder and shook her. Her eyes opened, and for a second or two we stared at one another. Then she pushed my hand away and darted back, hitting her head against the edge of the couch.

"Sorry to wake you," I said. "But I think you were having a nightmare."

She still looked groggy and mistrustful. Her arm was extended to ward me away, and she only lowered it after a few moments. "How do you know?" she said.

"You were mumbling something."

"I don't mumble."

"I couldn't make it out, though. I'm not even sure if it was English."

"That's the only language I know," she said, shifting around and holding her head.

I heard a questioning shout from upstairs — my mother, wondering what was going on. I shouted back to reassure her, and then returned my attention to Safia. She was still breathing heavily, and there was sweat on her forehead.

"What were you dreaming about?" I asked.

"Nothing that involves you, don't worry."

I sighed and checked the clock on the mantelpiece. It was five in the morning.

"I'd like a drink," Safia said.

I nodded and went into the kitchen, filling up a glass with water and then returning to find her laying down, her eyes open. I put the glass near her, and she sat up a little while she drank. When she finished she shifted down the couch again into a sleeping position, but she showed no sign of trying to sleep.

"Ray."

"Yeah?"

"Tell me something interesting."

I looked at her, incredulous. "I can't think of anything."

"I'm a guest in your house, it's your duty."

“Not really.”

“At least tell me what you’ve been doing since high school,” she said.

“Now you want to know?”

I sat on the chair facing her. Soft, dark blue light came into the room through the gap in the curtains, illuminating the floor between us. Dawn was approaching.

“I haven’t done much. I went to university for a while, and then got tired of it.”

“That isn’t interesting. Haven’t you met anyone worth talking about?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking down at the carpet. “I did.”

“And?”

“And I don’t think she considers me a friend any more.”

Safia processed this for a moment. “You and your winning personality.”

“It was my fault, I know.”

“You did mention a girl, back in high school. The mute one?”

“She’s not mute. But yes, her.”

“I thought you weren’t interested in her.”

“That was a long time ago,” I said, wishing she would stop pursuing this topic.

She propped up her head with her hand, watching me with a thoughtful expression. “So why did she stop considering you a friend?”

“That’s none of your business,” I said.

“I hope you at least tried to apologise.”

“Yeah. She wanted some time to herself.”

“And that’s it? You gave up after that?”

“Yes,” I said, looking out the window. “Sometimes that’s the best option.”

She slowly sank back. I heard birds chirping outside, and a car rumbled past. I stood up, rubbing my eyelids. “We should both get some sleep. It’s nearly daylight.”

“Ray,” she said, sounding just as tired as me. “I do like you, to a certain extent. I just can’t give you whatever it is you’re looking for.”

“I’m not looking for anything.”

“Friendships, relationships...it’s all such bullshit. My parents even used to talk about getting me into an arranged marriage. Disgusting just to think about it. I’m better off by myself. You, though...I don’t know about you.”

I laughed. “I’m used to being alone. It hasn’t hurt me.”

“Really,” she said.

“Yes, really. If you think I can’t take care of myself by now, then you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She got up from the couch and looked me in the eye. “I don’t think you understand. At least promise me something — don’t spend the rest of your life as you are now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They’re wise words,” she said, abruptly smiling again. “I don’t have to explain them, boy.” She went back to the couch and made herself comfortable, using her coat as a blanket.

“Well,” I said, after a pause, “I’ll see you at breakfast, then.”

“Goodnight.”

I went upstairs again, looking out at the lightening sky as I passed the landing window. I slipped into bed. For the first time in a long while, I felt relaxed, my thoughts less anxious and overpowering. I wondered if I had perhaps been wrong about Safia. She could be cold and uncaring, but there was something different about her now. She wasn’t quite as strong as before, but rather than being disappointed, I was relieved. It was even possible that, given time, she would decide to acknowledge me as a friend.

I awoke to the smell of burning sausages and egg. Judging by the light that fell on my duvet, it was probably around eleven in the morning. I still felt sluggish and drowsy, but I forced myself out of bed and went to the bathroom to splash cold water over my face. It didn’t help much. I rinsed my mouth out, used the toilet and then changed into jeans and a jumper, smoothing my hair down and checking it in the mirror. When I was done I headed downstairs, already deciding that I would renew my conversation with Safia. There were still a lot of things I hadn’t told her, things that I always intended to bring up but never did. As I had expected, she was already awake — the couch was empty when I passed the sitting room. When I entered the kitchen I saw that my mother was just finishing her breakfast, scraping away the last few beans on her plate.

“Good Morning,” she said.

“Morning,” I replied, casually picking up a plate from beside the sink. “Where’s Safia?”

She coughed, and wiped her mouth with a tissue before replying. “She’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“I don’t know, she was gone when I woke up. Your father didn’t see her leave either. She left a note, though.”

She pointed to a piece of scrap paper stuck to the fridge with one of our magnets. I plucked it off the fridge. It just said: ‘Goodbye. - Safia’. I turned it over, but there was nothing on the other side. I kept reading the words as if there was some kind of riddle or hidden message there, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

My mother came up behind me, a hand on my shoulder. “You knew she was planning to leave in the morning?”

“Yes,” I said, after a moment.

“When will you next see her?”

I didn’t respond. I folded the note and put it in my pocket, and then I went out into our garden. I could see the leaves on the trees gently shifting in the breeze, and a patch of sunlight lingered on the grass for a few moments before fading. I walked over and stood in the same spot I had seen that patch, hands in my pockets. I wished that I could stay in that moment, unthinking, and never leave.

I spent the next few weeks helping out around the house. I barely spoke to my parents, but I mopped the kitchen floor, hoovered the upstairs rooms, and brought old things up into the attic. My parents wanted me to go back to university, but I explained that it wouldn’t exactly be easy, considering how many lectures and seminars I had missed, not to mention the work that I was supposed to have handed in. I wondered if the department had even noticed my absence. I also started searching for a part time job. It gave me an opportunity to take my mind off things, but when I tried to sleep I would inevitably start brooding again.

I finally decided to take my driving test, and passed on my first attempt. I hadn’t even had many lessons, and my instructor was impressed with my ability to cope with nerves on the examination day. The truth was that I hadn’t been very nervous. I had simply used driving as a way of getting away from myself. I liked to spend more and

more time on the road, using my father's old, dark brown Toyota. He rarely used it, preferring to drive the newer car that my mother had bought, so it ended up being handed down to me. I didn't care for speeding or showing off. I just liked the feel of being completely consumed in operating the car, changing gears, the satisfying clink of the handbrake, and the way I could pour all my attention into driving and push away anything else in my mind. Sometimes I didn't have any particular destination in mind. I just drove through London, and then drove back home. After a while, I couldn't even stand being inside my house. I thought of Safia every time I saw the couch in the sitting room, read a note on the fridge, or even just woke up in the early hours of the morning. When I wasn't driving around outside, I spent most of my time in my room, and I timed my meals so that I could avoid my parents. They made an effort at first, I'll give them credit for that, but after a while they tired of urging me to come out. They still made sure that I was eating properly, but aside from that they eased off and mostly left me alone.

I had never thought of myself as being particularly close to either of them, but I did find myself occasionally missing them when they were both out, and I was alone in the house. There's a stark difference between spending most of your time alone but still being in a house with other people, and being truly solitary. There was no clatter in the kitchen, or shouts from my father about the printer not working, none of my mother's constant suggestions to see exhibitions. There was just silence, and badly painted walls staring back at me.

Sometimes I welcomed that loneliness and maddening silence. It felt like an appropriate way of punishing myself. At some point I halfheartedly tried to return to university, but soon gave up out of a lack of interest. I continued to search for jobs, but my empty CV didn't impress anyone, nor did my attempts to project confidence during interviews. I did manage to get a work experience place doing part time night shift retail work twice a week, but of course, I wasn't getting paid for any of it, and it seemed as if every customer I encountered made a point of being patronising or obnoxious. I didn't try to talk to any of the other staff members, and they didn't pay any real attention to me either. Getting home from work was just about the only positive element in the whole experience; sometimes I would roll my car windows down just to feel the breeze as I sped down the streets. Sleeping through the daylight and waking up to darkness was

never pleasant though. When combined with being alone in my room, it gave me a sense that I had been cut off from the rest of humanity. I was in a bubble somewhere in the dark corners of reality.

The only way I had to combat this was to go online and look up the people I knew. It gave me a sense of being closer to them, even if it was just an illusion. There was nothing on Safia, as I had expected. Claire's only listing was on our university page, under an article concerning a student reading group in the English department. On one occasion I even typed in Scott's name. Quite a few pages came up, but the one that caught my eye referred to Scott as being one of the 'students of the year' for his university department. There was a thumbnail image of him too — his hair was slicked back with gel, and he was wearing a dark blue suit and grinning. There was no hint of his old self aside from the slight creasing of his brow, as if there was a small frown fighting to get out. I stared at the thumbnail for a while, bringing my head closer to the screen, and then exited the page. I wasn't disappointed in the way I might have expected. It was certainly irritating to see people praising him, but the real blow was that he had committed a kind of betrayal. I was supposed to have found an article about him being jailed for assault, or something similarly self-destructive. He had all but promised it. The fact that he had the audacity to move on with his life and make something of himself was galling. Life wasn't supposed to reward people for being cruel.

I stopped paying much attention to my appearance. Shaving was bothersome and pointless, so I just let my beard grow. I didn't cut my nails either, nor did I bother much with showers or baths. I spent most of my week in my room, assembling plastic starship models, and when I left the house I only said as many words as I needed to get by. Eventually I stopped even going to my night shift work, and I didn't answer the company's calls. When I went out, I always did it in the evening. There were times when the supermarket, with its shining floor, bright lights and announcements felt like a different world. People gave me a wide berth as I walked down the aisles, and the cashiers tried their best to avoid looking me in the eye. I had similar experiences when I visited the local newsagent and pub. Even my parents were troubled. My father made no secret of his disgust for my scruffy beard and dirty nails; on more than one occasion he demanded that I clean up my appearance, but I would always just ignore him. My

mother was more concerned with how I had dropped out of university. Whenever she happened to see me cooking something in the kitchen she would bring the topic up, and always implied that I had destroyed a vital part of my life. She didn't try to force me into returning, but instead would continually mention interesting courses that she had read up on, courses that she somehow knew I would find fascinating. I didn't know how to explain to her that none of it interested me, so I settled for shrugs and grunts.

There were times, rare moments, when I summoned enough energy to try and walk outside during the daylight hours. Most of the time, these attempts failed before I even reached the door. The pressure would build with every step I took, until it just felt like too much effort to overcome it. My most successful attempt was when I went to the local park and sat there for a while before returning home; it was actually that particular day that I decided to try writing this — whatever this can be called. A very long, dull sort of diary? I'm not sure if it has really helped at all. It might have just made things worse — I have had to dig through my memories and describe them in detail. I've actually felt disgusted at times, looking at some of the passages that I've written, particularly the ones about Claire. Months have passed since I began writing that first page, and I guess it's funny, in a way, because at a certain point I realised that nothing else was really happening. Nothing except the same thing, over and over — I wasted the day, wrote, slept, and then wasted another day, wrote, slept, and wasted another day. It's hard to communicate just how this feels; there's a sort of disorientation to it all. I wasn't even writing for it to be seen by anyone. Honestly, I don't think I even understand why I started and why I continued.

More than once, I contemplated the idea of locking my room door and starving myself to death, while I sat on the floor, my back against the end of the bed. I was never completely serious about that, though — even if I had been, I knew my parents would have noticed and stopped me. I spent months in this self-pitying, unchanging state. It sounds like a long time, but time didn't have a lot of meaning for me — one day melted into another. However, I did notice a certain type of pressure building up inside me, the kind that I had only experienced now and then throughout my life. I had never understood where it came from, and it made me contemplate things that I normally wouldn't have come close to considering — I would look at random people on the street, and quite coolly contemplate bludgeoning them to the ground, for no real reason

at all. When a pretty girl smiled at me for a second in a shop, I envisioned sleeping with her, even though I didn't know anything about her life or personality. Being that close to someone, skin against skin, was a compelling but frightening concept.

Finally, during a period of insomnia on a hot night in June, I remembered something Safia had said. She had implied I lacked determination, that I should have tried harder to make amends with Claire. I had dismissed this at the time. Of course I had made an effort — I had gone to her house to apologise in person, hadn't I? Claire had said that she wanted a 'break' in her email, and I had respected that decision. Looking back on it, however, I hadn't just backed away, I had given up entirely. Despite realising how important she had been to me, I hadn't tried to tell her at all. I had just accepted that I had permanently ruined our relationship. This thought kept me awake, until I finally rolled out of bed at three in the morning to compose an email message on my laptop. I didn't know where to start, though. At first I just tried to explain my thought process in detail, but it ended up looking like the introduction to a pitiful rant. My second attempt had more of a pleading, desperate tone, and I deleted that too. Finally, I decided on the following:

How are you, Claire?

I understand if you still need time to yourself...if you want to talk, though, then I'm around.

There was no reply the next day, nor the day after. On the third day, however, I saw a response in my inbox when I woke up in the morning. I stared at the screen for a long while before I could bring myself to click it. The message was short.

Hello, Rayhan.

I have some things I'd like to talk to you about. We can meet, if you want.

I suspected, after reading this, that I had finally driven myself insane. It was too difficult to believe that she was actually willing to speak to me again, and I read the message at least ten times before I finally convinced myself that it wasn't a creation of my mind. I replied and suggested that we could meet in three days at the park we had visited on the last day of school. I had initially wanted to avoid familiar places, but it was quiet and

peaceful there, and I couldn't face the thought of going to another cafe. After a few hours she replied, agreeing.

Life shouldn't reward people for being cruel, but now that I've been given another chance, I won't let it go.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I spent the days before our meeting getting ready. I put a beanie hat on to cover my long hair, and went for walks outside to try and adapt to all the noise and people around me. It wasn't pleasant. I kept thinking that someone was following me, and I routinely glanced over my shoulder, but there was never anyone there. I also made sure to shave, watching clumps of dark hair fall off into the sink and swirl around the drain when I twisted the stiff tap handle as far as it would go. It was an odd experience — it felt like I was cutting away moss to reveal a statue beneath it. When I was done I examined myself in the mirror. I didn't look as old and scruffy, but my eyes were still surrounded by dark circles, and my face had a gauntness to it that the beard had hidden. When my father saw me later that day, he paused for a moment, and then nodded to me, patting me on the shoulder as he passed. I think my mother, however, was actually suspicious at the sudden switch in my habits, but when she asked what had prompted it, I didn't explain. I just said that I had felt like a change, and left it at that. I wasn't sure if either of my parents believed me, but they were still pleased to see me leaving my room more often and taking better care of my appearance.

The day before the meeting, I took a train to Finchley Road and walked to Campbell's usual spot. I wasn't surprised, somehow, to find him gone. I tried asking a few of the people loitering nearby if they knew him, but I only received blank looks. I did see an old woman sitting on the opposite road, and I remembered seeing her around during one of my conversations with Campbell. She was wearing a faded yellow hoodie, and eyed me suspiciously when I approached her. She told me that Campbell hadn't been around in over a month, and that the last she had heard, he had caught pneumonia and had to be moved to a hospital. She didn't know where the hospital was located, or any way to contact him. I couldn't even find out what his surname was, as no one knew.

"Could you do me a favour?" I asked. "If he ever returns, can you give him a message from me?"

"Tell him yourself."

"It's not a long message. Just a sentence."

She deliberated for a moment, and then gave a grudging nod. “What is it?”

“Just tell him that Ray said thank you.”

She squinted at me. “That’s all?”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

She shrugged, and I moved on, glancing back at Campbell’s empty spot. I could still picture him sitting there, greeting me with a nod.

The next morning I put my best clothes on — a dark blue shirt, black trousers, boots and a light brown overcoat. It didn’t help much, but I at least felt that I could walk down the street without receiving any abuse. I glanced at my father’s sunglasses, but left them in their pouch. I stood in front of a mirror and practised what I would say, but my reflection always looked unimpressed. I looked over at the bundle of paper on the floor, the diary I had been writing for a while, and couldn’t avoid picking it up and looking through it. I found myself shaking my head sometimes at the moments I had included; secretly looking at Claire’s art after school and her reaction, the day we had spent in the park, and the entire trip to Oxford. Surprisingly, I was most drawn to my record of our first meeting. I had been in such a bad state at the time, but it was nice to think back to actually seeing her and interacting with her for the first time. At the time, I didn’t know it would prove to be the beginning of a friendship. I’m not sure if I had even realised that when I started writing this diary. It was a nice thought, but it was also hard to accept, because all I could focus on was how I had repeatedly harmed that friendship, and treated her in a pathetic way. I was too nervous to eat anything, so I just drank a glass of water before I left my room. The meeting time we had arranged was two o’clock. I arrived at the park at one. It had changed since I had last been there. Now there was a small area for children to play in, with a set of swings, a slide, and monkey bars. There were also some kids in hoodies occupying one of the benches. It didn’t feel quite as pleasant as I recalled, but I still took a walk around, eventually getting to the pond where I had once slipped. The dried mud crumbled under my shoes, and I watched ducks gliding over the water, their heads darting from side to side. I sat on the edge, where there was grass, and folded my legs, carefully going over all the things I planned to say later. I tried to come up with specific apologetic lines and memorise them, but my mind was unable to retain them — even the simplest sentences slipped away from me.

In an effort to calm myself down, I pictured myself sitting with Claire during one of our old, typical conversations. This didn't work at all. When I thought of Claire, I could only see her eyes accusing me, and I had no way of responding to that accusation.

I must have lost track of time, because the next thing I remember was hearing my name, looking up, and seeing Claire standing a few steps away. Her hair was longer than when I had seen it last, and she wore a grey jacket with light blue jeans. She had a brown messenger bag over one shoulder, and as I watched her she adjusted it slightly to keep it from slipping. I stood, brushing grass off my trousers, suddenly wondering what to say.

"I thought you might be here," she said.

I gestured to an empty bench in the distance. "We can sit there, if you want."

She nodded, and we walked in silence to the bench. I couldn't understand why I felt so nervous around her — I remembered how we had chatted and taken pictures of each other when we had last visited the park. On this occasion, however, I felt powerless, as if I were about to confront a judge in court, and had no satisfying or reasonable answer for my actions. There was something different about her, too. Her eyes were a bit more assured, although I could see that she was also feeling hesitant from the way she sat on the bench and fiddled around with her bag before finally dropping it to the grass beneath us. I sat beside her, making sure to leave a sizeable gap between us.

"I still have your scarf," I said, without thinking. It was a stupid, pointless thing to mention, but I saw her lip curl upwards a little.

"You can have it if you want."

"It's okay," I said.

She shrugged, folding her arms. "How have you been?" Her voice was cool, detached.

"Not bad," I said.

"You stopped coming to university, didn't you?"

"How did you know?"

"I ran into that friend of yours on the campus. He said you'd vanished."

"He's not my friend," I said. "But yeah, I gave up."

She paused for a moment, toying with her bracelet. "What are you doing these days?"

I didn't know what to say. I started to answer and then stopped myself. Finally I spoke up again.

"I was working, a while ago. Retail. I need to start again."

"Ah."

"And you?"

"I've been busy with essays, reading groups and stuff. I even exercise now and then."

"That's good," I said. "That's very good."

We watched the children playing in the distance. One of them was using the slide over and over, seemingly tireless, while another was trying to use the monkey bars, swinging from one hoop to the next, legs kicking in the air.

"Did you do that when you were younger?" Claire asked.

"No," I said. "I never enjoyed that stuff."

"I used to like the swing," Claire said. "I'm going to try it again."

I could only nod and follow her. When Claire got to the swing, however, she didn't push herself off the ground in the way the children did. She just rocked back and forth, shoes softly scraping the ground, hair hanging down over her eyes. She didn't ask me to push her, so I just stood to the side, watching.

"I'm such a child," she said, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, Claire," I said, surprising even myself with my outburst. "I know you're sick of hearing that word from me, and maybe it doesn't mean much any more, but I do mean it."

She stopped the swing and looked up at me, silent.

"You didn't deserve it," I said.

"Rayhan," she said carefully, "I'm not angry about that any more. I was for a while, a long while, I admit. But I didn't exactly behave well either. I walked out on you like a child having a tantrum. Instead of talking things over I just wanted to get away as quickly as possible."

"You didn't do anything wrong —"

“Yes, I did. I’ve been running from things for years, and that was just another example. The things you said....we don’t need to talk about it any more. Just leave them be.”

“But you accept my apology?”

She bit her lip. “I...yes. Okay.”

I felt considerably lighter, and leaned back, allowing myself to breathe again. Claire’s next question extinguished some of that relief.

“What happened to that girl, the one you went to see in Oxford?”

I was torn between laughing and shouting.

“She left again,” I said.

“Oh.”

“I should have listened to you. I shouldn’t have tried to follow her around.”

“I don’t always have the right answer.”

“Still. I was stupid.”

She shrugged. “It happens to everyone. At least you can recognise it...the worst part would be to keep repeating the same mistake, never knowing how to stop.”

I thought about how I had still agreed to help Safia in our last meeting. I gave Claire a small nod. “Yeah,” I said. “That would be the worst.”

She brushed some hair strands away from her eyes. “Being here reminds me. That last day of school — you said nothing was worth living for, right? And I said I’d ask you about it again one day.”

I sighed. “Surprised you remember that.”

“So?”

I shook my head. “What do you expect me to say?”

“Don’t tell me you still feel the same way.”

I paused, looking at the ground, before looking up at her again. “Maybe not exactly the same. But I haven’t had a lot of grand revelations or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

“That would be too much to hope for,” she said, smiling.

I snorted. “Yeah, I guess so.”

We both fell silent after that. I became aware, gradually, that I was breathing quickly, and my limbs felt tingly. This was it, I felt. The right place and the right time.

“I have something to say to you,” I said.

I saw her back straighten slightly out of the corner of my eye, but she still didn’t say anything. She was looking into the distance, where the pond was.

“Something to say,” I repeated, “but I’m not sure how to do it.”

“It sounds very serious,” she said, offering me a smile. She got up from the swing and faced me directly.

I looked at my hands. “You asked me if you were a normal person. I said that you weren’t. It was a bad thing to say, I thought. But I’d say the same thing today, and I think I understand now — it’s not necessarily a bad thing. So what I mean is...please don’t lose it, whatever it is that you have.”

She shook her head. “I’m not something to admire, Rayhan.”

“Still,” I said. “You’re a better person than I am.”

She shrugged. “Any more compliments and I’m going to get suspicious.”

“No more compliments,” I promised. “But —”

She glanced at me when I broke off. “Yes?”

Why was it so difficult to say it? It had taken a lot of effort to summon the earlier words, but I had managed it. On this topic, however, it felt like I was paralysed. My body was stiff, my face expressionless, while my thoughts were racing around and colliding against one another in panic. I looked her in the eye, summoning up all my resolve, and then — I stopped. I realised several things in those few seconds, as she stared back at me. For the most part her expression was carefully restrained and blank, but there was just a hint of nervousness and anxiety there, the smallest sense that she was bracing herself for something. It reminded me of the times I had thoughtlessly hurt her in the past. What I wanted to do was completely selfish, I realised. I wasn’t considering her feelings, only my own. What right did I have to say it? And even if she shared my sentiments, which was unlikely, it wouldn’t make me feel better. I would just feel that I had somehow tricked her into it. I was hoping for something I didn’t deserve, and what was worse was that, once again, I hadn’t given proper thought to how it would impact her. All these years, and I still hadn’t learned my lesson. It only takes a sentence, no, a single word, to make a mistake that follows you for life. I couldn’t inflict that on her, not after everything else I had done.

“You,” I said, almost whispering, “are going to be fine.”

She stared at me. “Nice of you, but —”

“Have you still got your camera?”

She took a step back, regarding me with a curious expression. It took a few seconds for her to reply. “That old one? It’s probably somewhere in my room. I have a new one now, I just keep it in my bag.”

“It’s a nice day to take pictures,” I said.

She slowly dug out a black camera from her bag, still looking thoughtful as she weighed it in her hand. “Maybe I’ll take some of the pond again.”

I motioned for her to lead on. As I followed behind her, watching her taking various photos and nodding to herself whenever she came up with a good one, I finally understood a little of what she must have felt in Oxford. When we got to the pond she casually turned and took a picture of me, just as she had done years beforehand. I made sure, this time, to keep my footing, and I smiled at the camera. She didn’t seem pleased when she looked at the picture on the display, however. I didn’t smile when she took the next one, and she preferred that.

She became more animated than usual as we stood there, prodding me into conversation more than once, throwing a few jokes out, even reminding me of some of our more memorable days at school, sitting outside the nurse’s office, sulking together. I reacted appropriately each time, nodding and laughing. It wasn’t enough to completely fool her — she was too perceptive for that — but it was enough to keep myself safe, my thoughts protected. It wasn’t as if I even needed to go to great lengths to pretend. It was genuinely warming and pleasant to be in her company again, even if there was a persistent ache that went along with that.

Finally, we walked back to the park entrance. She was carrying her jacket under her arm, her head lowered as she moved. I could still change my mind. I could completely alter my path right now. We stopped when we got to the road outside. She moved to the side to allow people to pass, and I sidestepped along with her.

“It was good to see you again, Rayhan,” she said.

“It was good to see you too,” I replied.

She shook her head. “I should have contacted you ages ago. Maybe I was just scared.”

“You didn’t have to worry.”

She nodded. "I'll see you around, then?"

"Yeah."

She walked a few steps and then glanced back at me. I waved to her, smiling, and she waved back, almost bumping into someone passing by when she turned around again. I watched her walking away. There was still a withdrawn quality to her, as if she were in her own bubble, floating in an ocean of people, but now and then she would look up at the sun, her bag swinging with each step she took. Eventually I lost sight of her, but I stood in the same spot for a long time. The world continued to move around me, with new faces appearing before me faster than I could study them, and the sound of people talking merged into an incomprehensible cacophony. I started to walk home, moving through groups of oncoming people. None of them looked at me.

When I got back to my house, I stopped on the doorstep outside and sat down, stretching my legs and leaning back. I watched the clouds in the sky, gripping my kneecaps to stop my legs from trembling. Perhaps, when I was younger, I was right to fear the world. It doesn't care about the petty, small lives of the people who inhabit it. There were, and still are, so many elements of life that I don't understand. I know one thing, though. The next time I smile, I want it to be genuine.

Introduction

The protagonist in my novel, Rayhan, is obsessed with control: not control over others, but control over his own mind and appearance. At times, he employs social disguises in an attempt to appear as something that he thinks will be more acceptable to the people around him. He constantly makes an effort to suppress his real thoughts and feelings, and dreads the possibility of succumbing to emotional outbursts. His self-restraint quietly eats away at him inside; this harmful process is, however, only due to his own self-imposed rules. No one has forced such an attitude upon him (although his father did influence him with his ideas about the value of appearances) and so he is ultimately his own worst enemy. His restraint hurts him with its emotionally stifling effect, and subsequently becomes one of the factors that lead to his isolation from others.

This thesis will examine the consequences of emotional restraint in fiction, for the characters attempting this restraint and for their relationships with the characters around them, as well as how the depiction of emotional restraint can be similar or differ when comparing the work of different authors. The theme of isolation will also be considered, and how this might link in to emotional restraint in a narrative. In the first part of the thesis, I have written a novel that aims to explore these specific themes of isolation and restraint. The works that will primarily be examined in the second part of the thesis (the critical chapters) are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), but I will also refer to my own novel and the ways in which I have approached similar concepts to both authors. I have selected *Jane Eyre* and *The Remains of the Day* as they are both two of the most famous novels in English Literature to focus on emotional restraint and isolation through characterisation, and I find both works to be highly effective at approaching these themes. They offer the benefit of approaching emotional restraint in very different ways in regard to writing techniques. They also approach it with a difference in historical setting and the gender of the protagonist, making the juxtaposition particularly useful for examining the theme of restrained emotion as a whole in fiction. These novels, including my own, are sometimes similar and sometimes utterly different, and all three will be examined in isolation as well as compared against one another. The final section of the thesis serves as a concluding chapter that will touch on all three creative works and how they can be

similar (or create their own styles) in their attempts to investigate the themes of emotional restraint and isolation in fiction.

I intend to argue that *Jane Eyre* and *The Remains of the Day* both display similar and contrasting methods of depicting emotional restraint and isolation, and that my own novel attempts to approach the same themes in a way that, while sometimes similar to the two works, is ultimately unlike both of those texts, and thus comprises my own perspective on this area in English fiction.

Psychoanalysis offers material which is significant to the area of emotional restraint and social withdrawal. David Lodge, for example, has remarked upon the connection between psychoanalysis and the evolution of literature: 'It was Freud who first produced a plausible and persuasive account of human nature in which behaviour was chiefly accounted for by motives that were hidden in the secret recesses of the individual psyche' (2012:896). He goes on to note how some of the concepts within psychoanalysis were 'immensely stimulating to literary imaginations' (2012:896), and states that 'Frieda Lawrence (...) introduced D.H. Lawrence to Freud's theories (...) and that this influenced the final version of *Sons and Lovers*' (2012:901). On the matter of the influence of psychoanalysis on my own work, Carl Jung's description of an introvert is pertinent: 'For him self-communings are a pleasure. His own world is a safe harbour, a carefully tended and walled-in garden, closed to the public and hidden from prying eyes.' (Jung, 1998, p.142). This description carries the sense of a firm division between the individual and those around that individual; he or she is 'closed' and 'hidden' from others, and in fact finds a form of solace in this isolation. Jung continues, stating:

'His relations with other people become warm only when safety is guaranteed, and when he can lay aside his defensive distrust. All too often he cannot, and consequently the number of friends and acquaintances is very restricted. Thus the psychic life of this type is played out wholly within. Should any difficulties and conflicts arise in this inner world, all doors and windows are shut tight. The introvert shuts himself up with his complexes until he ends in complete isolation.' (Jung, 1998, pp.142-3)

While introversion does not necessarily equate to emotional restraint, the above passage does capture one of the elements of emotional restraint that the thesis aims to address in both the novel and the analytical segment. Jung's choice of language ('hidden', 'closed' and 'shut tight') emphasises sentiments of concealment, and highlights the gap between

an outer and 'inner world' (to use Jung's phrase), in which the emotions are secreted within the latter. The bridge between these two realms (the intimate and the social) is one which the characters in my novel continually struggle with and seek to understand. Rayhan's inability to consistently engage with the social world results in him becoming bitter, and drives him further into the realm of emotional withdrawal and restraint. Another repressed, isolated character (Claire) looks upon the social world with more wistfulness: it is a world she does not feel that she belongs in, but this engenders resentment that she aims towards herself rather than at the people who reside in that other world. She wishes to enter this world, but approaches her goal with honesty in mind, rather than using the social disguises that Rayhan likes to attempt.

Jung's description of the introvert's reaction to turmoil is also significant; rather than express their troubles to the world around them, they confront them inwardly, eventually ending up in a state of 'complete isolation'. The natural response to danger is thus to seal it away from notice. This is a quality seen in Rayhan and his reactions to those around him. The full extent of his emotions are mainly explored through the first-person perspective narration, rather than through what he reveals to the other characters. The novel, in fact, opens with him in an isolated state, as he reflects on the root of his unhappiness.

Safia, another central character, is significantly different to both Claire and Rayhan; she lacks Rayhan's obsession with emotional restraint, and, unlike Claire, has little interest in learning to engage with the average person. She perceives Rayhan's emotional restraint as a negative quality, something that holds him back. While Rayhan is extremely attached to her, she does not have the same level of interest in him. All three characters, however, share a disconnection from the people and the world around them, and they all approach this form of isolation in different ways.

Jung notes that the introvert's 'retreat into himself is not a final renunciation of the world, but a search for quietude (...) This type of person is the victim of numerous misunderstandings - not unjustly, for he actually invites them.' (Jung, 1998, p.143). He elaborates on this last point by adding that 'being misunderstood gives him a certain satisfaction, since it reaffirms his pessimistic outlook.' (Jung, 1998, p.143). This concept of pessimism being a part of introversion is particularly relevant to the characters of Rayhan and Brontë's Jane, something I will touch on again in the following chapters.

Charlotte Brontë's protagonist in *Jane Eyre* and Kazuo Ishiguro's Stevens from *The Remains of the Day* are two characters that exemplify restrained emotion in fiction; they also happen to fit many of the aforementioned qualities that Jung described in introverted people, although Ishiguro and Brontë depict these characters and their emotional progression in markedly different ways. Jane is more straightforward and honest to herself and her readers in her efforts to contain her emotion. As Grudin comments, 'Jane is an open narrator who tells us all she thinks, knows and feels' (1977, p.155). While she is often quiet and careful she is also capable of heated outbursts. She has an extreme and vibrant temperament, but she keeps it well hidden during most of her adult years, until Rochester slowly coaxes it out of her. She is an example of a character who often contains her feelings (during her adult years) and yet is pained by her own continual restraint at other points.

Ishiguro's Stevens is much more slippery and inclined to self-deception in his narration; the reader has to piece together the character's feelings and actively work to decode what he says or, even more importantly, what he does not say. Meaning is found in absence and inaction. Stevens's restraint is inexorably linked to his profession, as his profession forms his life, and unlike Jane he is ultimately unable to overcome his own emotional walls and open up to the woman for whom he has feelings. The prose in the novel illuminates his emotions by depicting his desperate attempts to control them; Ishiguro reveals the protagonist's personality and feelings indirectly. Stevens is the sole narrator and the story is filtered through his perspective, but his attempts at restraint and detachment are defeated by his transparent self-deception. As Ishiguro notes, the novel's 'first-person narrative works to hide certain things, even from the narrator himself' (2009, p.119). Despite this, Stevens does not come across as the subject of parody or derision. He is a multilayered character who is mostly treated with seriousness. Both Stevens and Jane are similar in regard to their tendency to seal their emotions away from outward expression, but they end up in very different places due to the way in which they approach this personality element. Jane is ultimately able to maintain a healthy balance between the inward and the external, while Stevens is a study of an individual who is unable to reconcile the two and gradually comes to understand this crucial failing throughout his narration in the novel. Isolation is also a key element in the depiction of both characters; Stevens, due to his temperament, has

hardly any personal relationships with others, while Jane has few friends during her childhood. Jane, however, does not struggle quite as much with social skills when she reaches adulthood; she is able to converse well with others, and mainly feels isolated during times like Rochester's deception involving Blanche Ingram. Stevens, alternatively, has severe issues with social skills, most prominently whenever matters leave the area of his formal duties. This is highlighted in his scenes with Miss Kenton, but can also be seen in his interaction with other characters.

Brontë's St. John is also an important figure in regard to the issue of emotional restraint. While Jane is a very restrained, pessimistic creature, St. John is a character who falls into repression in the service of his religion, and he attempts to bend Jane's will with a firm, methodical approach. His own efforts at emotional restraint are seen through his reaction to Rosamond, as she continually tries to engage him on a personal level. Just like Ishiguro's Stevens, he is never able to accept his feelings for the woman who clearly cares for him. Also, like Stevens, his restraint is specifically connected to his ideals; in the case of Stevens, the character is fixated on the "dignity" (*The Remains of the Day*, p.43) of an ideal butler, which is an essential element of his continual efforts at restraint, and in St. John's case he is consumed with being a clergyman and missionary, refusing to face his feelings for Rosamond, as his ideals come first in his mind. He is thus actually more similar to Stevens than he is to Jane, but all three characters fall under themes of emotional restraint and isolation.

While *Jane Eyre* and *The Remains of the Day* may have been written in completely different eras, there are still areas where they are similar. O'Brien, in her discussion of Ishiguro's novel, notes that one of the ways she looks at the work is 'as a narrative which is thematically constructed around an opposition between what are commonly regarded as Victorian values-formality, repression, and self-effacement, summed up under the general heading of "dignity"-and those associated with an idea of "America", that has expanded, literally into a New World' (1996:788). Ishiguro's novel obviously takes place in a completely different historical and social atmosphere to that of *Jane Eyre*, but these 'Victorian values' that O'Brien notices are certainly evident too. Ishiguro's novel can even be said to be in 'the same nineteenth-century novel of manners category as, for example, Jane Austen's great works' (Belau and Cameron: 2007:74).

Emotional restraint can, of course, be depicted in various ways. Sometimes it arises in a natural manner as part of a character's particular mentality, while at other times it can be something forced on the individual, and over time it slowly becomes second nature. In Jane's case, restraint is forced upon her during her childhood, and she is continually provoked and abused. Her emotional outbursts, when they arise, are regarded as disgusting by the people around her. They lock her up in a room by herself, as if she has some form of madness that they think they can leech away with isolation. Gilbert and Gubar point out the parallel to Bertha, and how her depiction is reminiscent of 'ten-year-old Jane, imprisoned in the red-room, howling and mad.' (2000:361). This punishment of imposed isolation and physical restraint is so traumatic that, at one point, Jane faints from sheer fright. It is no surprise that she subsequently grows into an adult highly concerned with controlling her emotions and being a silent observer rather than an active participant in the life around her. She has been mentally conditioned to believe that this is the safe and acceptable way to live, and that any deviance from this course will lead to emotional and physical pain. Jane's childhood experiences are thus the key to understanding her continual attempts at controlling her emotions throughout the novel. *The Remains of the Day* offers little direct insight into Stevens's childhood years, instead choosing to focus on his experiences as an adult. Ishiguro does, however, spend time on the awkward relationship between Stevens and his father. Stevens also spends time relating stories about his father's professional bearing, and thus the text hints at the type of mentality and atmosphere that Stevens grew up with, and how he perhaps retained this mentality into adulthood, resulting in his fixation on "dignity" (TROTD, p. 43).

Jane's restraint changes throughout Brontë's novel. At the beginning, when she is a child, she is much more open to others and natural. When we are introduced to the adult Jane she seems more polished and dignified, but (at least, initially) something vital appears to have been lost. The defiant, passionate young girl we saw in the early chapters has given way to a character more in tune with conventional behaviour. It is only after she begins to associate with Rochester that her walls of restraint finally start to slowly come down once more, but even this cannot last due to the revelation of his hidden wife. There is a pattern in the novel where unrestrained passion leads Jane to the possibility of pain; she is persecuted for it at Gateshead, it is unthinkable at the rigid and

disciplined atmosphere of Lowood, and when she finally gives in to her feelings for Rochester her wedding is ruined. This pattern persists for most of the novel, but ends when she refuses to submit to the embodiment of a restrained individual (St. John) and instead follows her passion and reunites with Rochester. She thus goes full circle, back to trusting her emotions rather than closing herself off from others and thinking of herself as unworthy of happiness.

From a creative perspective, restrained emotion is an opportunity to create an emotional landscape in the narrative that is usually hidden from the other characters but vibrant and rich for the reader. The gap between the feelings within and the polished, passive exterior that the other characters see contains dramatic potential, and this is one of the main concepts behind the writing in my novel. First-person perspective is particularly important in this context, as it has the potential to create a direct, intimate link between the reader and the character, where the reader can be privy to direct thoughts and emotions. Pathos can be produced in this territory: the fact that this colourful inner world is only detectable by the reader and rarely leaks out to be detected by the other characters has a particular sadness to it. This sadness is found in lost possibilities for engaging with other characters on a personal level, opportunities that were once open but have now closed, all due to the continual restraint and the self-sabotage of the character. In my novel, internal damage is emphasised over drama created by external events. The novel concentrates on developing a sense of being psychologically troubled through the narration, and the way this difference leads to isolation, loneliness and a search for fellow outsider figures.

Restrained Emotion and Isolation in My Novel

Before I move on to discuss *Jane Eyre* and *The Remains of the Day*, I would like to address my own novel from a critical perspective. My aim in writing the novel was to explore a sense of emotional restraint and isolation through characterisation; the result would attempt a different approach to those themes than the methods that Brontë and Ishiguro chose. Upon completing the novel, I find that I have selected a route that contains elements from both of those authors, but also ultimately remains different. I am particularly interested in characterisation, the relationships between characters, and the exploration of emotion in fiction. My novel is an attempt to create a character based narrative, where emphasis is mainly placed on the emotions and thoughts of the isolated narrator, as well as his relationships with the other main characters, Claire and Safia. In my own approach to restrained emotion and isolation, I attempted to explore the sensation of loneliness and the sense of being an outsider, mainly through the characters of Rayhan and Claire. Both Rayhan and Claire are quiet and find it difficult to express themselves to the people around them, but they quickly find that they can achieve such expression through their relationship with one another. This relationship in turn leads to the opportunity for character growth throughout the narrative; Rayhan develops at a slower pace as he is more deceptive and emotionally closed off, whereas Claire (who is still a very private individual) brings more honesty and directness to the relationship, and eventually to the world around her.

The restrained emotion in my novel specifically emerges from Rayhan's inability to confront life. As a child, he is so overwhelmed by a social gathering that he leaves his house, seeking his own way of enjoying the day, and subsequently spends the night lost in London. For most of his early relationship with Scott, he does not confront him about his bullying or take an assertive, expressive stance about the issue, which is something that essentially reinforces Scott's annoyance. He does not truly confront Safia about certain issues until they meet again in Oxford, years into their friendship. His situation is made worse by the way that he associates self-expression and lax control with danger; on one of the occasions where he loses control, he attacks a boy and only stops when he is pulled away. On another occasion, he spends time drinking excessively, lying to

strangers, and eventually falls into self-pity. His worst moments tend to come when he relaxes his self-restraint, and thus he adjusts his behaviour according to this pattern.

Part of Rayhan's restrained emotion manifests itself in social role playing. He places importance on clothes, almost treating them as costumes. At one particular point during his time at university, he attempts to present his personality and experiences as one that differs from his own; he tries to be sociable and outgoing, implies that he has substantial boxing experience, and is deceptive in an effort to appear in a positive light. This is his attempt to replace his personality with a new, acceptable one that he thinks will be better accepted in society, but it simply serves to make him more miserable, as even he is always aware of his own deceptiveness. While Ishiguro's Stevens crafts a persona for himself to match his professional ideals, Rayhan attempts to create a role that he believes will grant him a place amongst a society that he does not understand, and struggles to sympathise with.

Safia is not intended to represent emotional restraint as Rayhan and Claire do; she is instead often the antithesis of restraint, and is consequently very expressive and direct in seeking what she wants while displaying a clear lack of interest or distaste for that which she does not. There is, however, a similarity between her and Rayhan: he rejects Claire when he realises the depth of her feeling for him, and she distances herself from Rayhan when she realises what she means to him, after he attacks a boy over her. She is unwilling to confront the depth of their relationship, and thus pushes Rayhan out of her life. While she does not always link in to the theme of emotional restraint, she does embody a kind of isolation. Rayhan and Claire often feel lonely in their isolation, and sometimes feel the need for company, while Safia actively chooses her isolated state. Rayhan is ashamed of his strangeness; Safia revels in her own eccentricity. This fundamental difference in perspective, regarding individuality and how it sets one apart from society, is one of the factors that damage their relationship. Safia cannot understand or support Rayhan's desire for normality. There is, however, a side of Rayhan that is actually more in line with Safia's perspective, complicating the matter: he looks down on those he perceives to be 'normal', even while he craves their ability to blend in. This is one of the reasons why he is continually unhappy.

All three characters end up in isolation at some point in the narrative, and each character approaches it in a different manner. The novel, in fact, opens on the note of

isolation: Rayhan is introduced as someone who has not even left his house for a long period, out of desperation and hopelessness at how he views his life. The younger version of Rayhan attempts to escape his loneliness by reaching out to Safia, and eventually turns to Claire. Both Safia and Claire, despite the numerous other differences between them, are both introduced as isolated figures, and both also choose to break away from their friendship with Rayhan at different points in the narrative. Isolation, in Rayhan's case, is often linked to his emotional restraint. Safia is disgusted with this trait, while Claire is hurt by it. In one of the final scenes of the novel (where he meets Claire in the park for a conversation) his emotional restraint is intended to be seen as less of a negative aspect, and one that is more mixed in nature. He is still not entirely truthful with Claire about his feelings, but this partly arises from his desire to avoid seeing her hurt again. This stands in opposition to the way his emotional restraint usually operates, in his former fixation on his own feelings and how things will impact him. Rayhan thus turns the personality element that has damaged his life into something he feels will help another person.

Rayhan is desperate for a strong connection to another, to the point where he does extreme, dubious things, such as travelling to Oxford to talk to Safia again. He is also the one who attempts to strike up a conversation with Claire after their first meeting. This is one of the ways his personality elements contrast with one another; he is introverted and bad with social encounters, and yet still craves companionship. While emotional restraint is a big part of his character, his desire for emotional connection is just as strong. One theme that tends to surface in my novel is that of gender or, to be specific, masculinity. One of the definitions that the OED offers for 'masculine' is: 'Of a personal attribute, an action, etc.: having a character befitting or regarded as appropriate to the male sex; vigorous, powerful. Of a man: manly, virile.' (Oxford, 2000). Rayhan is not a character that would be considered as traditionally masculine. It is significant that Rayhan's mentality is seen as disappointingly weak in the eyes of characters like Safia, his father and Scott, all of whom display traditionally masculine traits. Safia, for example, shows interest in boxing and martial arts, the exact things that Rayhan dislikes. At one point in the story, it is also revealed that she enjoyed dressing up in her brother's clothes. Rayhan cannot bring himself to fight properly during his sparring session, and when Safia invites him to attack her, he cannot do that either. Scott, another

symbol of traditional masculinity, is similarly displeased and even angered by Rayhan's refusal to become aggressive or bold. In this sense, Rayhan's lack of masculinity is linked to his powerful restraint, and when this restraint breaks (as it does when he beats another boy) he finds himself able to become aggressive and violent. This, however, leaves him feeling repulsed by his own behaviour; it is similar to Jane's reaction after her lack of restraint with Mrs Reed. Restraint is important to Rayhan, as it is to Jane, and when such restraint breaks it is uncomfortable and jarring for the character. After Rayhan's fight, the emotional process he goes through mirrors that of when Jane's restraint breaks in the aforementioned scene; both characters initially feel positively, but afterwards their mood declines as they reflect on the situation and what has occurred. Essentially, freedom from their restraint carries a psychological price.

I decided to approach isolation in differing ways, one of them being through Rayhan's detachment to what he views as masculine. His main encounters with male characters in the novel include his father, Scott, Alex and Campbell. Scott bullies him and they end up parting on bad terms, while his father never quite comes to understand Rayhan. Campbell, a person he randomly meets on the street, is the closest thing he has to a male friend. At one point Rayhan even dismisses men as a whole: 'The men were particularly offensive. Everywhere I looked, I just saw variations of Scott and Alex. The faces were different, and the cruelty was harder to detect, but it was there.' (Chapter Eight.) His relationships with female characters, while still troubled, don't give rise to the same sort of negative sentiments. Rayhan is thus established as one who is isolated from the stereotypical expectations of masculinity in society, and from other men in general. In most ways, this is actually by his own choice. It is important that when he chooses to try and fit in with other university students, he attempts to think of Scott and his father for inspiration. He does have some success, but finds it all too nauseating to continue.

Other factors, such as race and social class, can also be considered in regard to emotional restraint and isolation in the novel. Race is not particularly significant to my novel, although, in regard to religion, it is relevant that Safia comes from a traditional Islamic background. The way the character refuses to engage in the religious and cultural environment that surrounds her is another example of how she contrasts with Rayhan's emotional restraint. Rayhan is not religious, but rarely communicates this fact

or tells others around him. Safia, alternatively, deliberately taunts her religious relative with comments regarding Satan. Rayhan, early in his narration, despairs about the thought of having to become a polite, genteel figure as an adult, the way his parents wish him to be; Safia shares a distaste for the way she has been encouraged to behave, but she decides to actually demonstrate this to others around her. Rayhan, it should be noted, does not grow up in the same kind of environment as Safia, as his family are not as traditional, and are not particularly religious either; his family are much more influenced by a Western sensibility, evident in the way he is given a name that can be shortened to 'Ray'. Another way this is illustrated is the way that Rayhan's parents agree to have Safia sleep over when they have barely any knowledge of her, something that would be hard to imagine if the same scenario was presented to Safia's more traditional parents. Aside from a difference in religious perspective, there is also a gap in social class between both families, something that is implied through the descriptions of both neighbourhoods and houses. This is the opening to Chapter Six: 'The first thing I noticed about Safia's house were the crumbling tiles on the roof and the raggedy curtains behind the windows'. When it comes to his own house, he narrates this: 'I grew up in a needlessly large house', and he also mentions the 'ostentatious houses and cars on all sides' (Chapter One.) This is not as relevant to Safia, but Rayhan's attitude (running away in the first chapter during a later scene, and his narration during this scene) does imply that he feels a certain sense of emotional restraint and isolation from the way he must present himself and act. Even the act of wearing a shirt, as a child, makes him feel uncomfortable.

My approach to the first-person narration in the novel is one that is not modelled on either Ishiguro or Brontë's style. It is not as indirect and slippery as the narration in *The Remains of the Day*. It is closer to Brontë's method in *Jane Eyre*, in that the narrator is more direct with the reader about the character's emotions, but Rayhan is not entirely self-aware; he is still blinded to certain things, seen through his strong attachment to Safia despite the way she behaves towards him. Claire is able to anticipate his inevitable disappointment when he meets Safia again in Oxford, but Rayhan is, in this context, naive. While he does not always fully express himself to other characters, he finds more of an outlet for his emotions through his narration; the narration thus becomes a way of exploring a character that is normally very careful with what he shows to the world

around him. The structure of my novel is one that ended up being more complex than I had initially planned. Essentially, it opens *in medias res*, and then proceeds to a past account of Rayhan's life up until that point. Eventually, when it catches up to the present, the final section (the meeting with Claire) takes place after the scenes detailed at the beginning of the novel. I had to consider how Rayhan's narration would factor into his behaviour after he had finished writing the 'past' narrative, as well as how to make the opening scenes of the novel (where he is isolated and lonely) feel like something that is natural, in hindsight. I had also decided that the novel should both begin and end with Rayhan in isolation, a technique that was intended to reinforce this theme. In regard to my use of language, I ensured to have Rayhan avoid cursing unless the situation was depicting a break in his emotional restraint. For an example of this, see his interaction with Safia in Oxford. This quality in his language links back to his upbringing by his father, who stressed the need for attention to the way he presented himself to others: 'My father refused to accept my lack of social skill, and referred to this failing so frequently that it became frustrating. In most areas he was grounded and reasonable, but when it came to social interaction and poise he was a perfectionist.' (Chapter One.)

In hindsight, after completing this novel and now analysing it in a critical fashion, I believe that I did achieve what I initially planned; a novel that attempts to express emotional restraint and isolation in a different manner to that of Ishiguro and Brontë's work. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate the differing, skilful approaches that these two authors took in pursuit of the same themes, before returning to my own novel and how it compares to the work of Brontë and Ishiguro in this context.

Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre is, at its core, an exploration of emotion. Brontë explores how Jane's grasp over her own emotions changes over the course of her life, and how this is connected to her relationships with the people around her. This is perhaps why it has been noted that 'its 'vivid interest' also arises from the way the first-person narrator communicates the dramatic complexity of her inner life' (Matus, 2002, p.110). Knies states that 'The real triumph of *Jane Eyre*, as almost every commentator on the book has noted, is, of course, the character of Jane' (1966, p.548). The detailed exploration of Jane's emotions is what creates the sense of an 'intimate relationship to the heroine' (Minogue, 1999, p.IX) in the novel. Brontë is able to explore emotional restraint in more than one way, and with more than one character; Jane, Helen and St. John are all significant examples of her approach to this theme. I would also suggest that, out of all three narrators examined in this thesis (the others being Stevens and Rayhan) Jane's depiction is the farthest from unreliable narration. Knies puts it well, highlighting Jane's 'reliability' (1966:553), and stating: 'We never get the feeling she is trying to varnish the truth.' (1966:553). Knies continues by pointing out that Jane does not 'hesitate to tell us, her "Reader," about feelings that a respectable young girl of the 1840's would be likely to conceal carefully' (1966:553). Emotional extremity appears on multiple occasions, in Jane's behaviour as a child, Rochester's mercurial temperament, and Bertha's wildness. Even St. John, a character that can resemble Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, is most memorable for his continual efforts to control and suffocate his own emotions beneath his commitment to religion. Sally Shuttleworth has argued that 'Medical texts of the era foregrounded the same three concerns which dominate Brontë's novel: the mechanics of self-control, the female body and sexuality, and the insurgence of insanity.' (1996:148). Shuttleworth's phrase, 'mechanics of self-control', is apt, and particularly relevant to the concepts behind this thesis as a whole. Jane's own efforts to control her emotions can be traced back to the beginning of the narrative; much of her behaviour throughout the text can be understood better when examining her experiences during childhood, and the stifling environments at Gateshead and Lowood.

One of the more significant scenes at Gateshead is that of Jane's meeting with Brocklehurst, and its aftermath; this is a pivotal point in her narrative, a scene which brings her walls of emotional restraint crumbling down around her while marking the end of her life at Gateshead. It is essential to briefly recall what led up to this moment; the scene with Brocklehurst is the final part of a carefully woven series of events that Brontë constructs to tip her protagonist over the edge of control and into a full-blown fury directed at her governing figure, Mrs Reed. (A fury that irreversibly changes their relationship.) The first event in this series of blows to her restraint is her abuse at the hands of John Reed, who resents her 'sneaking way of getting behind curtains' (*Jane Eyre*, p.6). Jane's search for peace through isolation is something that he cannot understand. Mrs Reed has similar difficulty understanding and dealing with Jane's temperament: she wishes Jane to be 'more sociable' (JE, p.3), and yet chooses to punish her by separating her from the 'group' (JE, p.3) of her children. She dislikes Jane's introverted qualities and yet chooses to reinforce her isolation in a nonsensical manner. Brontë thus offers insight into the root of Jane's desire for solitude at the very opening of the novel; she is effectively a social pariah in her own home, 'excluded (...) from "normal" society', and thus she 'takes refuge in a scarlet-draped window seat' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p.339). Jane responds to John Reed's violence with violence of her own, but the two are 'parted' (JE, p.7), and Jane is taken away. Shuttleworth, in reference to *Jane Eyre*, notes that 'Together with the hysterical woman, the passionate child was perceived as a being dominated by the processes of the body, outside rational control; both were therefore viewed as disruptive, marginal groups, on the borders of 'real' humanity.' (1996:158). These are issues that Stevens never has to face, considering his gender and the completely different historical setting in Ishiguro's work, and thus it marks one of the central points where Brontë and Ishiguro approach emotional restraint and isolation in differing ways.

The second event is her mental and physical breakdown during her punishment in the following scene, her experience in the red room. While it is Jane's intense fear and panic that results in her collapse, this occurs as a result of enforced isolation. While she seeks to be alone at the beginning of the book, this is done on her own terms, in her own way; being forced into such a situation, and then subsequently having her imagination torment her with frightening possibilities, is too much for her to take: 'My

heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down' (JE, p.12). She cannot fight back, as she did with John Reed, as there is nothing tangible to attack; her only response is to attempt to escape the room and her enforced isolation. Mrs Reed, however, will only release Jane if she displays 'perfect submission and stillness', and refuses to change her decision even after Jane states that she feels she will 'be killed' (JE, p.12) if she has to continue to endure her punishment. Mrs Reed's specific requirement of 'submission' and 'stillness' looks ahead to Jane's development in the narrative, particularly in regard to her experiences at Lowood, where behaviour is strictly regulated and controlled. Jane's belief that she will be 'killed' demonstrates the strength of her passion in the scene. She is severely distressed, to the point where she suffers 'a species of fit' (JE, p.13) after Mrs Reed refuses to release her from the room. Jane's treatment in the red room is thus a scene that explores isolation as a form of punishment. Pykett notes that 'In the Victorian period female gothic (...) represented women's fears of domestic imprisonment, but also enacted and, simultaneously or by turns, managed and re-contained their fantasies of escape from the physical and psychological confinements of the domestic and femininity as conventionally defined' (2012:217). This links back to the work of Gilbert and Gubar that was mentioned earlier, in the sense of Jane's parallel to Bertha and how they are both 'imprisoned' (2000:361).

Each of the aforementioned events would be distressing and challenging to a child's restraint even in themselves, but together they serve to solidify her status as a victim and push her to the edge of her self-control, ready for her passion to boil over. The moment before Jane enters the room to meet Brocklehurst neatly captures the sense of emotional fragility in her character:

'I stopped, intimidated and trembling. What a miserable little poltroon had fear, engendered of unjust punishment, made of me in those days! I feared to return to the nursery, and feared to go forward to the parlour; ten minutes I stood in agitated hesitation' (JE, p.24).

The fear that she describes is the seed of her continual attempts at restraint in the novel. Even though she uses language that implies she has subsequently moved past this stage

(Brontë's specific use of 'in those days'), this harsh treatment will remain imprinted on her throughout the novel, resulting in her pessimism and carefully maintained exterior. Rochester will eventually bring her back into a more relaxed state, but at this stage of childhood Jane is in transition, forced into adopting restraint as a counter to the fear of persecution from those around her, a fear that threatens to paralyse her. She fears to return to the nursery, and yet also fears to go forward to the parlour; she has reached a stage in which she no longer knows the correct way to behave. She is punished and attacked regardless of the type of behaviour she displays: when she attempts to seek solitude, she is dragged out of hiding by John Reed and abused. When she bristles at this treatment and allows herself to passionately strike back, abandoning restraint, she is deemed monstrous and locked away. The quoted scene above, where she stands in 'agitated hesitation' before she meets Brocklehurst, is thus indicative of a child who has not yet settled on an established identity. She is not the consistently restrained, quiet woman she later becomes, nor is she constantly wild and passionate. She is torn between these two extremes, much as she is torn between the decision to 'return' or go 'forward'. Her emotional situation, in this scene, mirrors her physical one, an example of Brontë revealing character through action, or rather, inaction, in this specific case.

Jane's meeting with Brocklehurst reveals an exploration of deceit and helplessness in relation to restrained expression. One of Brocklehurst's first questions, and Jane's response to this, is as follows:

"Well, Jane Eyre, and are you a good child?"

Impossible to reply to this in the affirmative: my little world held a contrary opinion: I was silent. Mrs Reed answered for me by an expressive shake of the head, adding soon, 'Perhaps the less said on that subject the better, Mr Brocklehurst.' (JE, p.25)

Jane has already pointed out to the reader that she felt her treatment was unjust and incorrect, but she also realises that this opinion is not shared by the 'little world' she inhabits. She is still fearful after the punishment she had received earlier, and thus she must employ self-control and restrain herself from expressing her genuine feelings on her situation and her moral character. Even though she does not reply verbally, the fact that she is 'silent' is a response in itself: it denies both confirmation and rejection, and allows her to preserve her own opinions without risking further punishment. She allows

the neutrality of silence to provide her cover, and Mrs Reed chooses to fill this silence with her own response, allowing Jane to neatly sidestep the problem of offering a direct reply. Jane's tactic of remaining silent is, however, still dangerous, as she avoids immediate punishment but also submits to an artificial representation of her character. By allowing Mrs Reed, the presiding force over her 'little world', to respond in her place she loses the liberty of self-expression and influence over what others think of her. This issue will emerge again further into her discussion with Brocklehurst, and it is critical to understanding Jane's eventual explosion at Mrs Reed in the aftermath of the meeting. Freeman comments that 'Jane's powerlessness, in the presence of those two, is conveyed by the way they dominate her speech' (1984, p.689). This sense of powerlessness is what contributes to Jane's cracking restraint.

Mrs Reed's insistence on Jane being a creature of deceit (and the way this impression is transferred to Brocklehurst) is a key moment:

'I dimly perceived that she was already obliterating hope from the new phase of existence which she destined me to enter; I felt, though I could not have expressed the feeling, that she was sowing aversion and unkindness along my future path (...) and what could I do to remedy the injury?

'Nothing, indeed,' thought I, as I struggled to repress a sob, and hastily wiped away some tears, the impotent evidences of my anguish.' (JE, p.27)

This is the first major crack in Jane's emotional restraint since the conversation with Brocklehurst began, and it paves the way for her complete abandonment of self-control and propriety later when she is alone with Mrs Reed. The above scene stresses Jane's immediate instinct to 'repress' and hide her pain by failing to speak up and her urge to quickly erase the tangible, visible signs of her distress in the form of her tears, but it also draws attention to the cycle in which she is trapped. Her emotional restraint and introverted temperament make it easy for the characters to assume she is deceitful, and yet her only response to this false accusation is to once again fall into restraint. Rather than giving in to her hurt, raging and criticising Mrs Reed for her own falsities, as she finally does later, Jane chooses to remain silent and thus lends credence to the accusation by failing to remark upon it, actively concealing her own distressed reaction. This draws attention to the irony in the depiction of Jane's childhood: when Jane dares to give in to the demand for outward expression and retaliate against those around her,

she is punished, and yet when she keeps her silence and is able to control her emotions she is regarded with suspicion, and her temperament is connected to deceitfulness. This issue is also brought up earlier in the novel, when Miss Abbot calls Jane ‘an under-hand little thing’, claiming that she had never seen ‘a girl of her age with so much cover.’ (JE, p.8). This ‘cover’, Jane’s attempts at emotional restraint, a shield to keep her from further harm, only serves to make her that much more noticeable, suspicious and problematic for those around her. Her restraint, intended to push her attackers away, serves to open her up to their criticism and accusations. It marks her as an outsider and a victim. As Jane herself puts it: ‘I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfil every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking’ (JE, p.10).

The above ‘anguish’ scene is also noteworthy for Brontë’s connection between restraint and helplessness. There is a power shift at this point in the conversation between Jane and Brocklehurst; in the early stages of the conversation, her responses and thoughts are deliberately humorous and smug, such as when Brocklehurst asks her how she will avoid hell, and she replies with: “I must keep in good health, and not die.” (JE, p.26). This is later followed by Brocklehurst stating that her heart should be changed from ‘stone’ to ‘flesh’ (JE, p.26), in reference to her apparent lack of morality. Brontë’s use of inward narration reveals Jane’s mocking dismissal of his claims: ‘I was about to propound a question, touching the manner in which that operation of changing my heart was to be performed’ (JE, p.26). Jane does not even take his critique seriously. Her thoughts and words are that of an amused superior toying with an oblivious, narrow mind. Despite being the one summoned there to be scolded and interrogated, she is in control. Brontë, however, uses the ‘anguish’ scene quoted earlier to mark a shift in this balance of power, to dispel Jane’s sense of superiority and depict her emotional restraint as linked to her inability to continue challenging her persecutors. Jane asks herself what she can do to combat the accusation of being a liar, and Brontë’s language stresses silence and repression as something that take the shape of her hurt and helplessness: she can do ‘nothing’, she tries to ‘repress’ a sob, her tears are ‘impotent’ evidence of her suffering, she strongly feels the injustice of the situation but ‘could not have expressed the feeling’. Brontë’s choice of language in the passage overflows with a distinctive sadness that arises out of absence and withheld expression, an implosion rather than an explosion. Her emotional restraint does not serve to defend her: it hurts her and breaks

her self-esteem. Her loss of self-expression is a loss of power, and this is why she attempts to aggressively take it back the moment Brocklehurst leaves her alone with Mrs Reed: '*Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist? I gathered my energies and launched them' (JE, p.29). Jane, in this moment, decides to employ the opposite of her earlier strategy; rather than hiding within silence, there is the firm use of '*Speak*', communicating her desire for self-expression. Peters notes that 'Jane's fiery temper and strength (...) threaten Mrs. Reed', going on to state that 'although Jane's threat as a child is primarily limited to the Reeds, on a larger scale, her challenge to their authority also implies a challenge to the society and class they represent' (1996:61).

Jane's gradual loss of restraint as the scene progresses is a process that operates on dual levels; she gains a sense of power with her sudden explosion of self-expression and pent up bitterness, and yet she is also weakened by it, losing the more sympathetic position of a martyr due to her aggressive retaliation. The self-empowerment that comes when she briefly discards her emotional restraint is at first exhilarating to her, and she is described as 'Shaking from head to foot, thrilled with ungovernable excitement' (JE, p. 29). Her angry rant to Mrs Reed is followed by these inward reflections:

'Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhopd-for liberty.' (JE, p.30)

And:

'I was left there alone - winner of the field.' (JE, p.30)

The satisfaction she feels here derives from abandoning her old psychological pattern of constantly working through her emotional turmoil inwardly, always constrained to the interior; in this case she instead discards inwardness and restraint altogether. The passage conveys the satisfaction of gathering repressed feelings that had been buried within her over the years (the 'invisible bond') and unleashing them all at once. This lack of restraint has a price, however. Jane always falls back on her control and self-restraint as a way of assuring herself of her own worth and morality, such as when she

deliberately distances herself from Rochester and leaves Thornfield after her failed wedding. Complete loss of restraint is associated with Bertha, who is depicted as bestial and murderous, an antagonistic force in the novel. Loss of restraint goes hand in hand with danger and a loss of dignity; Brontë depicts this through Jane's own observations as well as the dialogue and reaction of Mrs Reed, who 'looked frightened', and Jane speaks in 'a savage, high voice.' (JE, p.30). Even as a child, Jane understands the connection between the loss of her restraint and the loss of her self-worth shortly after her outburst: 'half an hour's silence and reflection had shown me the madness of my conduct, and the dreariness of my hated and hating position.' (JE, p.30). My own work approaches broken restraint in a similar manner, such as when Rayhan attacks another boy and feels significantly uncomfortable and confused afterwards. He panics over his own loss of self-control, because it makes him feel as if he is capable of fracturing his emotional restraint at any second, and thus he wouldn't even be able to trust himself.

It is easy, when considering Ishiguro and Brontë's novels, to only associate their depiction of emotional restraint with negativity. Jane's restraint is largely born from her suffering, while Stevens's obsession with a kind of dignified restraint leads to an unfulfilling end to his relationship with Miss Kenton and a detached relationship with his father. The treatment of this theme in *Jane Eyre* is more complex than that, however. Helen Burns, for example, is depicted as one of the most positive characters in the novel, one of Jane's closest friends, and she is largely identified by her restraint. Jane's account of how Helen is beaten by a teacher is significant in this context:

'the teacher instantly and sharply inflicted on her neck a dozen strokes with the bunch of twigs. Not a tear rose to Burns' eye; and, while I paused from my sewing, because my fingers quivered at this spectacle with a sentiment of unavailing and impotent anger, not a feature of her pensive face altered its ordinary expression.' (JE, p.45)

Helen, in this scene, displays behaviour similar to the type that Ishiguro's Stevens associates with his ideal of 'dignity'. She allows herself a tear after the punishment, but while it takes place she contains all the pain she must have felt, refusing to permit a change in demeanour, in contrast to the seething Jane. In another scene, Helen elaborates on her personal philosophy when she points out that 'It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose

evil consequences will extend to all connected with you' (JE, pp.46-7). Helen's mentality of accepting pain is designed as a direct challenge to Jane's own attitude, who believes that, when attacked 'without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; (...) to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.' (JE, p.48). Helen internalises her pain and defuses it through her strong religious beliefs. Jane, however, lacks Helen's strong spirituality and the disposition that arises from that. Unlike Helen, Jane requires an outlet for her passion, seen in her scene with Mrs Reed, and also (during Chapter 23) her confession to Rochester. While it is difficult to measure the full extent of Helen's influence on Jane and how it impacts her conduct later in life, Jane is depicted as more of a restrained and careful figure after her experiences with Helen. She never loses her passionate and brave nature (qualities that surprise both Rochester and St. John) but she does soften and find more sense of self-control. She takes this restrained attitude to an extreme level when she decides to leave Rochester later in the novel. She asks herself: 'who will be injured by what you do?' and follows with "*I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.*" (JE, p.280) This is a long way away from the fearful Jane in the red room as a child. At this latter point in the novel she instead uses restraint and isolation as a way of affirming her own worth to herself; this is Jane's version of 'dignity'.

Chapter Ten of *Jane Eyre* marks a turning point in the narrative; the reader is confronted by an adult Jane, one who has decided to leave Lowood, a choice that will eventually lead her to Thornfield. Her advancement in age is reflected in a differing temperament, one that shows clear influence of her friendship with Helen and Miss Temple. Jane points out that 'to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character.' (JE, p.72). When Miss Temple leaves, however, her absence serves to erode the social veneer around Jane:

'another discovery dawned on me, namely, that in the interval I had undergone a transforming process; that my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple - or rather that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity - and that now I was left in my natural element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions. (...) it was not the power to be tranquil which had failed me, but the reason for tranquillity was no more.' (JE, p.72)

Despite spending years at Lowood, adjusting to the strict conditions and being influenced by other characters, Jane's passionate temperament (as she notes, her 'natural element') remains intact. It is simply better hidden than when she was a child, even, Jane implies, to herself. Her respect for Miss Temple is great enough to shape her mentality: Jane points out that, as a result of her association with Miss Temple, she had 'more harmonious thoughts: what seemed better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind.' (JE, p.72). The departure of Miss Temple is a direct blow to her emotional restraint, as she no longer has a satisfying reason to hold back her natural instincts. While this shift in Jane's feelings leads her to a new point in her life, it is important to note that she still carries the influence of Lowood with her throughout the rest of her narrative, even if it is something that she initially appears to discard: the restraint and manners she learns during her time there often serve as her way of engaging with society and hiding her less appropriate, passionate temperament.

When Jane reaches Thornfield, there is a key moment in her narration where she reveals the strong feelings that are mainly locked away from the outside world:

'It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. (...) Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer' (JE, p.95)

There is a powerful sense of desperation embedded in the passage above: it draws attention to itself in a stark, blatant manner, and captures the frustration and longing of the character. It also once again serves to highlight the gap between Jane's outward appearance and her thoughts: there is such force and passion in her sentiments that it reminds the reader of the strength of her feelings and the determination that accompanies it, such as in her encounter with Mrs Reed years beforehand. Brontë's language — 'stiller doom', 'silent revolt' and 'too rigid a restraint' — evoke images of imprisonment and cloaked emotion, emphasising the struggle between what one feels and what they reveal outwardly, and it is this struggle that Jane embodies so thoroughly. She is, at that particular moment, very aware of her own emotional restraint, as well as

the social restraints placed upon all women in her society, and this clearly chafes at her. In essence, the passage is Jane's argument for freedom of self-expression, highlighted in the use of 'exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts'. She wishes to discard the idea that she must always maintain a 'very calm' appearance when her real emotions might completely differ. Peters comments that 'she questions the traditional norms of women, again asserting an equality based on character, not birth' and so 'she threatens established social norms' (1996:64). Jane's emotional restraint must be approached in a different way to that of my own protagonist; it is critical to remember the impact that the Victorian treatment of women has on Jane's frustration and emotional restraint. Gender is thus an essential element in the assessment of Jane, much more so than in the case of Rayhan or Stevens. *Jane Eyre* also explores restraint through the theme of emotional self-harm. Jane seems intent on inwardly criticising herself constantly. One scene that is significant in this respect is when she believes Rochester wishes to marry another woman, Blanche Ingram. She goes as far as to create a portrait of both herself and Blanche, using 'the description given by Mrs Fairfax of Blanche' (JE, p.140), so she can compare her plain features to the beauty of the other. Sally Minogue, in her introduction to the novel, refers to Jane's behaviour here as involving 'masochism' intended to help her 'control' her 'Imagination' (1999, p.xvii). Jane carefully narrates the process to herself in preparation:

“Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: tomorrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully, without softening one defect; omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, “Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain.”” (JE, p.140)

She goes on to note that, in the matter of Blanche's portrait, she will 'delineate carefully the loveliest face' she 'can imagine' (JE, p.140), and that she intends to call Blanche's portrait ““Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank.”” (JE, p.141). This is a calculated plan to combat the hope and optimistic ideas in her mind for her potential happiness. This process of creating a tangible manifestation of her perception of herself is a way of training her mind to continually reside within pessimism and cynicism, to avoid being hurt by opening her mind to hopeful possibilities that may never come to fruition. The way she inwardly refers to herself during this scene is also significant, in that she

continually attacks herself; she calls herself a 'fool', 'idiot', and a 'Poor stupid dupe!', and addressing herself, states, 'your folly sickens me' (JE, p.140). This continual pessimism brings to mind Jung's connection between the introvert and a 'pessimistic outlook' (1998, p.143), an outlook that can also be seen in the depiction of Rayhan. Ashe also states that Jane 'is saddled with a tenacious pessimism concerning her prospects for happiness' (1988, p.121). She fights against her own desires, attempting to battle them by treating her situation as being about foolish romanticising coming up against reality. Jane often uses restraint as a way of punishing herself for her passionate temperament, and this restraint actively hurts her self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Even later in the novel, when she knows that Rochester cares for her and wishes to marry her, she still displays a certain pessimism about her suitability for him: 'I was determined to show him divers rugged points in my character (...) he should know fully what sort of a bargain he had made, while there was yet time to rescind it' (JE, p.241).

There is cruelty in the way Rochester deliberately lets Jane stew in emotional turmoil and jealousy, which highlights the way Jane's careful restraint is slowly eroded by Rochester's efforts over the course of the novel. He seems intent on drawing her out of her protective shell through their various conversations, and then goes on to watch her suffer in silence as he pretends to court another woman. While Rochester does have feelings for her, he is also concerned with control, and being able to wrestle her restraint (and thus her defence) away from her, regardless of the emotional distress this causes.

There is a scene in which Rochester disguises himself as a 'gipsy' (JE, p.175), and uses his conversation with Jane as an attempt to learn more about the emotional state that she keeps hidden. He uses his disguise to elaborate on his perspective of Jane's personality:

'You are cold, because you are alone: no contact strikes the fire from you that is in you. You are sick; because the best of feelings, the highest and the sweetest given to man, keeps far away from you. You are silly, because, suffer as you may, you will not beckon it to approach, nor will you stir one step to meet it where it waits you.' (JE, p.172)

On the whole, Rochester's evaluation is accurate, and 'a convincing assessment of Jane's character' (Chase, 1984, p.55). Jane is indeed suffering from her isolation, simply watching as Rochester misleads her into thinking that he is interested in marrying

Blanche. Her passivity and her reluctance to confront Rochester with her feelings are key elements in her character, and fall under her defining trait of emotional restraint. Rochester also makes use of his disguise to try and ascertain Jane's feelings towards him:

“You have seen love: have you not? - and, looking forward, you have seen him married, and beheld his bride happy?”

‘Humph! Not exactly. Your witch’s skill is rather at fault sometimes.’

‘What the devil have you seen, then?’

‘Never mind: I came here to inquire, not to confess.’ (JE, p.175)

The eagerness seen in Rochester's dialogue is revealing: his boldness and grasp of theatricality allow him to play a role, but he lacks Jane's refined skill for hiding emotion. He is the one who is disguised, and yet he cannot help risking exposure with an impatient attitude in order to satisfy his curiosity. Jane has no physical disguise to match Rochester, but her hidden defences are, in this instance, more effective. It is not simply that Jane guards herself against revealing too much to a stranger, but that she guards herself against revealing her longing to anyone, including even the object of her affection, much as Rayhan does in my own novel in regard to Safia and Claire.

Rochester's attempt to trick her into admitting her real feelings thus result in an almost immediate failure. In a sense, the scene represents a disguise within a disguise; while Rochester's performance does not last long under scrutiny, his emotional disguise is much more effective on Jane. While Jane conceals her emotions in a quiet, careful manner, Rochester hides himself with a flourish, attracting attention but simultaneously making use of misdirection. Jane is not the only one he fools with this strategy, as Blanche also appears to be under the impression that he wishes to marry her: Jane notes that she ‘read daily in her a proud security in his intentions respecting her’ (JE, p.162).

Rochester's first meeting with Jane, in fact, highlights his deceptive nature. After suffering his injury and receiving Jane's aid, he learns that she is the new governess at Thornfield and yet does not identify himself as her employer. He simply rides away, and Jane learns of the truth later. While Jane's restrained emotion and introverted temperament form the heart of the novel, it is significant that Rochester's own concealment — the secret of Bertha — becomes one of the critical plot points of the

novel. This is part of the mirroring quality that can be seen in the narrative, where characters and situations continually reflect one another in their emphasis on concealment: Jane hides her love for Rochester for a portion of the text, St. John struggles to contain his feelings for Rosamond, Rochester conceals the truth of Bertha, and also holds back in revealing his feelings for Jane until he judges the time to be right. While Rochester may be secretive and often seeks to mislead others, he can, at other points, be surprisingly direct and honest, as when he confesses to being a ‘trite commonplace sinner’ (JE, p.119). He is also able to determine significant aspects of Jane’s character early in their acquaintance:

‘I see you laugh rarely; but you can laugh very merrily: believe me, you are not naturally austere, any more than I am naturally vicious. The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs’ (JE, p.121)

He also notes: ‘I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high.’ (JE, p.121). Rochester is perceptive to note the influence that Lowood has had on Jane’s personality, but the seed for this character development had already been planted before her time at Lowood, at the very beginning of Jane’s narration, when she would be punished for expressing herself at Gateshead. The description of ‘vivid, restless, resolute’ matches Jane’s characterisation in the Gateshead segment well, especially the scene in which she confronts Mrs Reed. While these traits gradually retreat behind careful restraint as Jane ages, they never disappear. Rochester’s observation that Jane is a ‘captive’ waiting to break free from her emotional shackles can be measured against how Jane actually does react after Rochester reveals his love for her and they agree to marry. Jane’s narration at a later point is a marked contrast to her former thoughts: ‘While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect and life in its colour’ (JE, p.226). This brings to mind the scene in which, believing that Rochester would marry Blanche, she ordered herself to paint a self-portrait, as a way of solidifying her perception of herself as lacking and unworthy of the happiness she craves. Rochester’s words reinforce her differing mentality: “Jane, you look blooming, and smiling, and

pretty' (JE, p.227). This is another reminder of Brontë's treatment of the relationship between the interior and exterior in the novel, and the subjectivity of beauty: after being able to finally express her love, and have it returned, Jane's mentality and thus perception of her own features is altered. It echoes how she told Rochester that she didn't find him handsome, but as their relationship deepened his features took on a new light:

'Most true is it that 'beauty is in the eye of the gazer.' My master's colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth, - all energy, decision, will, - were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me; they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me, - that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.' (JE, pp.152-3)

Emotional transformations render physical appearances less important, as the novel emphasises inwardness through Jane's constant rumination and her restraint over what she expresses to the world around her. As opposed to Jane and Rochester, Blanche is regarded as possessing 'beauty' (JE, p.139) and yet Jane points out that 'she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her.' (JE, pp. 162-3). This dynamic between the interior and exterior is once again seen when Rochester wishes to give Jane jewellery, which she refuses, pointing out that 'Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them.' (JE, p.228). Rochester, however, tells her that he 'will make the world acknowledge you a beauty' (JE, p.228). While Rochester has a certain perceptiveness and can certainly look past surface details, his behaviour demonstrates that he is still more tied to superficiality and the exterior than Jane. While Jane is content to be a 'plain, Quakerish governess' (JE, p.228), Rochester feels the need for his feelings to be reflected in the world around him, to see his perception of Jane's beauty become universal. This partly stems from his tendency to want to dominate matters, as the confession scene between the two characters illustrates.

Rochester's efforts to deceive Jane are taken to such an extent as to appear bizarre. Unlike the scene in which he disguises himself as a fortune teller, the deception that he engages in, fooling her into thinking that he wishes to marry Blanche, is

prolonged, and at more than one point he appears to examine Jane for traces of the suffering that she feels in response:

“I am tired, sir.”

He looked at me for a minute.

‘And a little depressed,’ he said. ‘What about? Tell me.’

‘Nothing - nothing, sir. I am not depressed.’

‘But I affirm that you are: so much depressed that a few more words would bring tears to your eyes - indeed, they are there now, shining and swimming; and a bead has slipped from the lash and fallen on to the flag.’ (JE, p.158)

Rochester almost slips out of this facade, shown with Jane’s account of his parting words: ‘Good-night, my - ’ He stopped, bit his lip, and abruptly left me.’ (JE, p. 158). However, he still clings to his deception, and his detailed description of Jane’s tears, while she stands before him, is more than a little callous. He later clarifies his behaviour: “Well, I feigned courtship of Miss Ingram, because I wished to render you as madly in love with me as I was with you; and I knew jealousy would be the best ally I could call in for the furtherance of that end.” (JE, p. 231). He directly admits to attempting to manipulate her, and this pursuit of his goal involves seeing Jane’s reserve broken, and her feelings for him spilling out in some way, as depicted in the earlier scene where he specifically points out her own tears to her. It also brings to mind his thoughts about her as a ‘bird’ in a ‘cage’ (JE, p.121): he wishes to see what she is like when she breaks free from this state. This contrasts with the dynamic between Jane and St. John, who appears to prefer the ‘cage’ (Jane’s restraint), and it may even be part of Jane’s appeal for him. While Rochester’s behaviour is, in some ways, cruel, he encourages Jane to express herself, albeit in a specific way that conforms to his own desires.

The scene in which the truth of how they feel for one another finally comes to light reflects the novel’s preoccupation with emotional restraint and the breaking of that restraint. Rochester initially continues his deception, and informs Jane that she must leave Thornfield. Jane’s restraint finally falters: ‘I sobbed convulsively; for I could repress what I endured no longer; I was obliged to yield, and I was shaken from head to foot with acute distress.’ (JE, p.222). Even then, Rochester waits until Jane confesses how much ‘terror’ and ‘anguish’ arises within her at the thought of being separated from

him, comparing it to ‘the necessity of death’ (JE, p.222), before he finally begins to slowly reveal his deception. It is as if he wishes to break her down and completely dominate her on an emotional level before she is fit to be his wife. Before he fully exposes his deceit, Jane states:

‘Do you think I am an automaton? - a machine without feelings? (...) Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you.’ (JE, p.223)

This is a valuable insight into Jane’s perception of herself and how she believes her emotional restraint appears to others. The scene returns to the novel’s theme of the interior against the exterior, in which Jane warns Rochester to avoid the trap of assuming that the surface indicates that which is within. She fears her own emotional restraint, despite its importance to her; she understands how it can mislead others and hurt her. The way that she abandons her restraint in this passage is an indicator of just how strongly she feels about the situation, and how she has gradually been worn down by keeping her true thoughts and feelings to herself for so long. A parallel can be drawn to the scene in which she explodes at Mrs Reed early in the novel. In both situations, there is a gradual build-up while she suffers, unable to fully express her feelings, and in both situations, when she finally does choose to let her walls down, she does so in a powerful, almost aggressive manner. It is partly this process that so disturbed Mrs Reed, as she relates when Jane meets her as an adult: ‘how for nine years you could be patient and quiescent under any treatment, and in the tenth break out all fire and violence, I can never comprehend.’ (JE, p. 211). The Mrs Reed scene near the start of the novel also features a line from Jane that is close to the one she states to Rochester: ‘You think I have no feelings’ (JE, p.29), she points out, although the context is of course very different in that situation. This draws attention to Jane’s sense of herself as someone who is often misunderstood, and how this quality has followed her from childhood to adulthood. She wishes her feelings to be understood and acknowledged, and when she believes that she has not been given this understanding it is particularly hurtful for her; her response is to lash out. There is a bitter quality in her words to Rochester, a sense

that she feels she has been dealt with unfairly by life, in her references to ‘beauty’ and ‘wealth’.

St. John is a particularly significant character in regard to emotional restraint: it is one of his defining characteristics. Jane, for example, comments on St John’s ‘eyes’ (JE, p.305) with the following description: ‘He seemed to use them rather as instruments to search other people’s thoughts, than as agents to reveal his own’ (JE, p. 305). Diana points out that ‘St John looks quiet (...) but he hides a fever in his vitals’ (JE, p.315). He is similar to Jane in his habit of keeping his emotions concealed from the outside world, but he is also crucially different in regard to his motivation for his behaviour. Most of Jane’s self-containment arises from the isolation and conditioning she endured during her childhood at Gateshead and Lowood, where her attempts to express herself were constantly associated with negativity, and there were very few people who she could interact with in a friendly, open manner. St John, however, is a man consumed by ambition and religious fervour. Much of his intense restraint can be traced back to his commitment to becoming a missionary. Lamont aptly notes that ‘St. John buckles under the weight of his own perfection’ (2002:250). A big part of what draws St John to Jane is that he can see she is an individual with a superficially similar temperament to him. At essence, however, they are quite different (Jane is much softer and more sympathetic) but because both employ extreme restraint on a daily basis they can seem outwardly similar in personality. They also share the tendency to punish themselves with their restraint by refusing to yield to the one they have feelings for: Jane does this with Rochester before finally giving in to her instincts and emotion, and St. John does this with Rosamond but is never able to overcome his own restraint. As mentioned earlier, there are parallels between Brontë’s St John and Ishiguro’s Stevens; both men pursue a job that they imbue with great significance, to the point that it forms a wall between them and their romantic interests. In St John’s case, he decides (in a more deliberate, conscious manner than Stevens) to discard his romantic interest in the one who appears to care for him, Rosamond Oliver, in favour of what he perceives as a more important calling. Stevens gives signs of powerful regret when he realises that the chance for a relationship with Miss Kenton has passed, while St John displays flashes of regret, but still decides that Rosamond ultimately wouldn’t suit him, that she would be essentially incompatible with his ambitions and lifestyle:

‘Rosamond a sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle? Rosamond a missionary’s wife? No!’” (JE, p.331). Due to this difference, Stevens’s situation has more of a sense of pathos. Jane’s description of St John’s reaction to being in the presence of Rosamond is telling:

‘I saw his solemn eye melt with sudden fire, and flicker with resistless emotion. (...) His chest heaved once, as if his large heart, weary of despotic constriction, had expanded, despite the will, and made a vigorous bound for the attainment of liberty. But he curbed it, I think, as a resolute rider would curb a rearing steed. He responded neither by word nor movement to the gentle advances made him.’ (JE, p.322)

St John twice refers to himself as ‘cold’ and ‘hard’ (JE, p.332), and to a certain extent he is correct, but it is clear in the above passage (and at other points) that he is still more passionate than he might admit. He appears to use the repetition of ‘cold’ and ‘hard’ to remind himself of the mentality he wishes to enforce upon himself: they are like wards that he clutches to himself to try and defeat the unwanted feelings he has for Rosamond. Jane, however, is perceptive enough to identify the warmer, more sympathetic qualities that are hidden behind St John’s cold veneer:

‘Reserved people often really need the frank discussion of their sentiments and griefs more than the expansive. The sternest-seeming stoic is human after all; and to ‘burst’ with boldness and good-will into ‘the silent sea’ of their souls is often to confer on them the first of obligations.’ (JE, p.329).

This is a particularly easy thing for Jane to understand, as she is similarly reserved and restrained; when she elaborates on how the reserved require frank discussion on all the emotions they keep bottled within, she is perhaps thinking of her own desires, and her relationship with Rochester, a character that serves to draw her out from her shell. Her relationship with St John differs in that (in this scene, at least) she is the one attempting to draw St John’s feelings out, rather than trying to contain and hide her own. In another sense, however, Jane’s frank discussion of St John’s feelings for Rosamond is consistent with some of her exchanges with Rochester, and even that of her behaviour as a child; she is often reserved and careful, but is simultaneously attracted to pursuing the truth, which lends her character a surprising element of directness amidst her quietness. Mrs

Reed, Rochester and St John are all surprised by it. Rochester points out her tendency to 'rap out a round rejoinder, which, if not blunt, is at least brusque' (JE, p.114), and St John notes that she is 'original', stating, 'There is something brave in your spirit, as well as penetrating in your eye' (JE, p.331).

As with Jane, the strength of St John's emotional restraint is tested. Jane undergoes more than one of these moments (such as how she behaves when she believes Rochester wishes to marry Blanche) while St John's test manifests in a battle between his feelings for Rosamond and his calling as a missionary. There is a parallel between his conflict and the one Jane suffered. She decided to try and combat what she deemed to be her unrealistic romantic hopes by painting a picture of herself and one of Blanche. In St John's case, Brontë once again illustrates the conflict between romantic longing and doubt rooted in concerns of realism. St John is temporarily fixated on Jane's portrait of Rosamond, and after Jane bluntly confronts him about his feelings, it serves to momentarily lower his walls of restraint and leads into a significant moment where he talks at length:

"Don't imagine such hard things. Fancy me yielding and melting, as I am doing: human love rising like a freshly opened fountain in my mind and overflowing with sweet inundation all the field I have so carefully and with such labour prepared - so assiduously sown with the seeds of good intentions, of self-denying plans. (...) I see myself stretched on an ottoman in the drawing-room at Vale Hall at my bride Rosamond Oliver's feet: she is talking to me with her sweet voice - gazing down on me with those eyes your skilful hand has copied so well - smiling at me with these coral lips. She is mine - I am hers - this present life and passing world suffice to me. Hush! say nothing - my heart is full of delight - my senses are entranced - let the time I marked pass in peace." (JE, p. 330)

There is a poetic, romanticised quality and a powerful sense of passion in this passage, that is a marked departure from St John's usual dialogue and behaviour. St John, the character that utterly embodies emotional restraint, voluntarily abandons it for this short period of time, in order, he implies, to ultimately strengthen that same restraint by finally giving himself a small chance to experience 'temptation', or 'delirium and delusion' (JE, p.330). Mitchell points out how 'his consideration of Rosamond is remarkable for its frank acknowledgement of the potential pleasure of the

match' (2011:313). Much as Jane invented a way to condition her mind into a certain mentality, St John finds his own method through imagining all that he desires, even describing it aloud in a far warmer manner than he usually uses, and then dismissing it from his mind with cold rationality. When viewed as part of St John's story as a whole, the passage carries a certain sadness; this is, perhaps, one of the few times that St John allows himself the luxury of exploring his intimate desires and feelings, rather than instantly disregarding them, and it is a humanising, warm moment for a man who describes himself as 'cold' and 'hard' (JE, p.332).

Even though Jane and St John are similar in their dedication to emotional restraint and their introverted temperaments, they also differ from one another in crucial ways. St John lacks her depth of passion, and strives for a more detached, objective perspective on matters; as he puts it, 'Reason, and not feeling, is my guide' (JE, p.332). He also has a different perspective on his own emotions and desires. While Jane seems to long to express herself at times, and despite her restraint was still willing to confess her feelings for Rochester, St John places his religious responsibility above his own personal concerns, even seeming to look upon his desires as foolish and unwanted: 'When I colour, and when I shake before Miss Oliver, I do not pity myself. I scorn the weakness. I know it is ignoble: a mere fever of the flesh: not, I declare, the convulsion of the soul.' (JE, p.332). Jane is willing to give herself over to this 'fever of the flesh', and does not necessarily see it as a flaw. St John feels its presence but cannot engage with it in reality, as it clashes too severely with what he deems to be more important. The 'soul' that he mentions always takes precedence, and so the most he can allow himself is the short moment of indulging his desires in his imagination.

It is telling to compare his marriage proposal to the one between Jane and Rochester; the latter is overflowing with passionate words and the sense of release, in that Jane is finally able to reveal the depth of her longing. The scene in which St John proposes, however, is utterly contrasting: "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love." (JE, p.356) and 'I claim you - not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service.'" (JE, p.356). It is also St John's detached quality that so unsettles Jane: 'Reader, do you know, as I do, what terror those cold people can put into the ice of their questions? How much of the fall of the avalanche is in their anger? of the

breaking up of the frozen sea in their displeasure?’ (JE, p.365). Jane can engage with warmth and passion in her own quiet manner, but has difficulty dealing with St John’s behaviour. Eric Solomon points out that ‘Rochester offered love without marriage, Rivers (...) offers marriage without love’ (1963, p.215). Jane’s thoughts on being St John’s wife are also important to the theme of restrained emotion in the novel: ‘as his wife - at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked - forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital - *this* would be unendurable.’ (JE, p.361). Emotional restraint is something that comes naturally to the adult Jane: what she dislikes is to have this restraint imposed upon her in a forcible manner. This quality is established in her childhood scenes, and it is something that carries through to her behaviour in later years. St John pushes his emotions down as a byproduct of his intense religious devotion, but Jane lacks his perspective on religion, and naturally rejects the concept of having to dampen all of her desires and feelings.

St John’s assessment of Jane is that she is ‘docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous; very gentle, and very heroic’ (JE, p.357). Some of this is accurate, but he underestimates the fierce sense of independence that Jane possesses, and thus Jane, like Rosamond, would ultimately prove an unsuitable wife for him, only in a different manner. Freedom is important to her, as seen in her thoughts when he teaches her another language: ‘By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind’ (JE, p.352) and ‘But I did not love my servitude: I wished, many a time, he had continued to neglect me.’ (JE, p.352). The severe, enforced emotional restraint that a life with St John offers is one she cannot accept.

Jane rejects Rochester when he appeals to passion over morality, and rejects St John when he appeals to restraint over passion. While she ultimately only finds happiness after tragedy (Rochester’s severe injuries, Bertha’s suicide and Thornfield burning down), she remains true to her own values, balancing her depth of passion with her restraint, and refusing to compromise to the world around her. Brontë, in conclusion, primarily channels her concepts of emotional restraint through the characters of Jane, St. John and Helen Burns, and each character offers a different side to this theme. Jane’s restraint is crafted through the social pressures of her childhood and adult years, and Brontë approaches it from multiple angles. Helen invites

comparisons to the ‘dignity’ (TROTD, p.43) that Stevens speaks of, as Brontë depicts restraint from a positive angle. St. John (even more reminiscent of Stevens) draws the reader’s attention to restraint as a critical factor in a battle between romantic attraction and realism.

The Remains of the Day

The Remains of the Day primarily functions through absence and indirection: emotional expressiveness is carefully restrained on the surface level of the first-person narration, and yet the narrator's attempts to hide his feelings only serve to draw further attention to them. As David James notes: 'By its idiom of reserve, the novel paradoxically alerts us to all that lies beneath' (2009, p.57). Stevens's obsession with avoiding a confrontation with his emotions and relationships with others is captured particularly well through Ishiguro's exploration of the dynamic between the 'private' and 'professional being' (TROTD, p.43). This dynamic, and its importance to the theme of emotional restraint in the novel, is highlighted in the issue that Stevens obsesses over, 'the question *'what is a great butler?'*' (TROTD, p.32). The key passage on this topic in the novel is where Stevens identifies the quality of what he refers to as "dignity" (TROTD, p.43) being at the heart of what it means to be a great butler. His definition is as follows:

'And let me now posit this: 'dignity' has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role (...) They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstances tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone.' (TROTD, pp.43-4)

In this passage Stevens creates a clear distinction between a 'professional' and 'private' being. One of his biggest issues over the course of the novel, however, is that these elements of his personality are constantly in conflict with one another. Meera Tamaya, in reference to Stevens's approach to his job in *The Remains of the Day*, points out that 'The British class system makes such role playing mandatory as every individual is expected to act out the role assigned to him/her at birth. A crucial element of such "acting" is rigorous submission of the private self to the demands of the public persona.' (1992:48). This is similar to the issue that Jane expresses frustration with, in the passage

where she comments about women in general (JE, p.95). Stevens is so fixated on pursuing his conception of dignity, and what he might think of as the professional aspect of his being, that he finds it extremely difficult to accept and understand the more emotional, private elements of his personality. His aim, and the distinction he makes (attempting to neatly separate the professional and private realm into two areas) is too simplistic and restrictive. It implies that the qualities demanded by his job cannot intertwine even in the slightest way with his own personality and emotional bonds, and as Stevens places his job at the centre of his life, this naturally leads to stilted and unfulfilled relationships with others, such as his father and Miss Kenton. He has thus been described as ‘a man who must inhabit totally his role as servant, thus leaving no space for living, for a private life, for the life of his emotions’ (Sage, 2011, p.38). Stevens states that a dignified butler will only discard his suit of professionalism when he is ‘entirely alone’, but he struggles to even accomplish this, seen in his reliance upon cloaking emotional concerns beneath the facade of professional ones. Elements of self-deception and concealment continually run throughout his narration. Ishiguro refers to his use of the butler as a metaphor: ‘It seemed to me appropriate to have somebody who wants to be this perfect butler because that seems to be a powerful metaphor for someone who is trying to actually erase the emotional part of him that may be dangerous and that could really hurt him in his professional area.’ (1991:153). Jane and Rayhan, alternatively, are nowhere near as concerned with their jobs, which is partly why their emotional restraint arises from differing areas to Stevens.

Ishiguro’s constant use of the term ‘dignity’ in *The Remains of the Day* is a critical area when considering emotional restraint. This is the quality Stevens keeps mentioning throughout the novel, one which he deems the most important element of a great butler. His ideal is a butler who never allows something to provoke him and change his demeanour, no matter how alarming or offensive it may be. It is a mastery over oneself that is so extreme that it becomes troubling in its sheer rigidity. This ideal of dignity is unfortunately an obstruction to normal human relationships, which require a relaxing of emotional walls rather than raising them.

This dilemma is reflected in his social difficulties, such as his inability to handle his employer’s attempts at humour and playful interaction. He points out: ‘how would one know for sure that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is truly

what is expected? One need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate.’ (TROTD, pp.16-17) His difficulty arises from his obsession with propriety and his role as a dignified butler; these are not compatible with more relaxed, casual behaviour that humour invites. It is not as if he isn’t interested in relationships, and it is implied that he has feelings for Miss Kenton, but his ideal of restraint and dignity come first in his mind: it is something he regards as the highest possible achievement in life. There is a conflict between this ideal of extreme restraint and his personal feelings for others. He is unable to find a way of living which balances these things in harmony, and as the novel progresses he slowly understands this critical failing but is unable to reverse the impact it has had on his life. One of the critical terms when considering this novel is that of unreliable narration. Nünning notes how ‘Wayne C. Booth first proposed the unreliable narrator as a concept’ (1997:83), and also quotes Booth’s own description: “‘I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not.’” (1961 cited in Nünning, 1997, p.85). Ishiguro’s novel is perhaps one of the most famous examples of this device in English literature, and this device is also a contrast to the one used in Brontë’s novel, and (to a smaller extent) my own work. When one compares Ishiguro’s protagonist to Jane Eyre, or Rayhan, the difference in forthrightness is striking; Jane may be emotionally restrained, but she is also very different in personality to Stevens, much in the same manner as she shares similarities with St John, and yet is utterly different.

Stevens approaches his life through the scope of control: in regard to the world around him, he is constantly concerned with the staff duties within Darlington Hall being accomplished as smoothly and effectively as possible, and he takes similar care to exert great self-control and restraint over himself. One example of this is when he states: ‘The butler’s pantry, as far as I am concerned, is a crucial office, the heart of the house’s operations, not unlike a general’s headquarters during a battle, and it is imperative that all things in it are ordered - and left ordered - in precisely the way I wish them to be.’ (TROTD, pp.173-4). He even filters his appreciation for the landscape of Great Britain through this mentality: ‘What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint’ (TROTD, p.29). This is why he objects to Mr Graham’s idea of dignity being ‘something like a woman’s beauty and (...) thus pointless to attempt to

analyse' (TROTD, p.34). Mr Graham's argument that dignity is inherent rather than constructed, similar to the idea of talent, directly challenges Stevens's belief in control, and the idea that he can shape himself into the butler he wishes to be, if he provides the required effort. As Stevens states: 'It is surely a professional responsibility for all of us to think deeply about these things so that each of us may better strive towards attaining 'dignity' for ourselves.' (TROTD, p.45). His use of the term 'responsibility' indicates how seriously he takes the matter, and makes some of his behaviour throughout the novel more understandable, particularly in regard to the way he tries to distance himself from a personal relationship with Miss Kenton in favour of a more professional one. Hattori notes that, 'Whether dignity is inherent or acquired, Stevens's primary obsession (...) is in the maintenance of the conservative ethos of service that allows him to endure his economic subordination, and to idealize it, in fact' (1998:226). Gehlawat appears to have a similar argument, as she states how Stevens 'is socially, economically, historically, and emotionally bound to "the service"; this servitude is valorized in order to compensate for its fundamental impoverishment' (2013:514). At the opening of the novel, Stevens contemplates taking a short trip:

'The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days - indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts - is no doubt substantially attributable to - and why should I hide it? - the arrival of Miss Kenton's letter (...) But let me make it immediately clear what I mean by this; what I mean to say is that Miss Kenton's letter set off a certain chain of ideas to do with professional matters here at Darlington Hall, and I would underline that it was a preoccupation with these very same professional matters that led me to consider anew my employer's kindly meant suggestion. But let me explain further.' (TROTD, pp.4-5)

Ishiguro deliberately constructs an awkwardly phrased, convoluted passage to illuminate the psychological process of his protagonist's mind. This can be seen in the use of language, such as the repetition of the dash, which creates the impression of a character constantly interrupting himself as if insecure of his own thoughts and words; Stevens desperately seeks the most polished and least objectionable justification for his mentality and actions, and he is thus constantly censoring and correcting himself. The use of 'why should I hide it?' is particularly indicative of his defensive mindset, and it is

reinforced by the urgency he expresses when he wishes to ‘make it immediately clear’ what he means, as if begging the reader to forestall judgement. His explanation is already oddly long, and yet at the end of the passage he still wishes to ‘explain further’.

The most significant element of the passage is the way it reveals Stevens’s mentality regarding the dynamic between the personal and professional realm. His thoughts are fixed on Miss Kenton, and it is her letter which provides the driving force behind his trip, but he continually stresses that his motive arises from ‘professional matters’. He denies any trace of emotional reaction in regard to receiving a letter from an old colleague, and reframes his feelings in context of his employment and professional duties: he thus attempts to transform his ‘weakness’ into something more appropriate and acceptable for his own standards and attitude to life. In this context, his long explanations are aimed at himself more than the reader, which explains the convoluted nature and various interruptions, both of which emphasise a sense of Stevens persuading himself rather than another. The passage is one of the various examples of unwitting self-analysis in the novel: Stevens’s reference to a ‘chain of ideas’ is an apt description of Ishiguro’s narrative process, as the above passage is simply the first in a long chain of depictions of the narrator’s thought process and how his self-deception is stripped away, piece by piece.

In a novel which relies so heavily on implicit meaning and the reader’s ability to trust their own evaluation rather than the subjective scenario the narrator presents, it is noteworthy that Ishiguro has Stevens attempting to do the very same type of analysis with Miss Kenton’s letter:

‘So it was in this instance; that is to say, my receiving the letter from Miss Kenton, containing as it did, along with its long, rather unrevealing passages, an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, and - I am quite sure of this - distinct hints of her desire to return here’ (TROTD, p.10)

Also:

‘And the more I considered it, the more obvious it became that Miss Kenton, with her great affection for this house, with her exemplary professionalism - the sort almost impossible to find nowadays - was just the factor needed to enable me to complete a fully satisfactory staff plan for Darlington Hall.’ (TROTD, p.10)

He later adds that he has 'reread' the letter 'several times', and that there is 'no possibility' he is 'merely imagining the presence of these hints' (TROTD, p.10). Ishiguro constructs a frame within a frame, in which his protagonist serves as a parallel to the reader; we attempt to interpret Stevens while he attempts to interpret Miss Kenton, and the subjectivity involved in this process is highlighted by Stevens constructing evidence that doesn't exist. He is so desperate for her to return (something which becomes clearer as the novel progresses) that this desire manifests itself in convincing himself that she wishes to return to work at Darlington Hall, a place that comprises his safety bubble. While his thoughts in the above passage still sound carefully formal, his esteem for Miss Kenton is revealed through Ishiguro's choice of words: he feels that she has a 'great affection' for Darlington Hall, and possesses 'exemplary professionalism'. Professionalism and 'dignity' are the highest ideals in Stevens's mind, and her 'affection' is something that Stevens would prize due to his own clear attachment to the house. When considering his mentality and perspective, it would be difficult for him to deliver a greater compliment to a person, and yet, as ever, the strength of his feelings are cloaked behind the character's careful poise and sense of propriety.

The passage concludes with Stevens implying that Miss Kenton's return would be the perfect solution to the 'small errors' (TROTD, p.5) that trouble him during his duties, something he ultimately identifies as being rooted in 'nothing more sinister than a faulty staff plan.' (TROTD, p.5). However, Stevens has (at this stage of his narration) misinterpreted the source of his problems. The novel as a whole stresses emotional indirection and, in this particular context, redirection; Stevens is unable to face his personal attachment to Miss Kenton, and so he attempts to mould his desire into what he deems to be a suitable, dignified form, that of professionalism and employment. These 'errors' could be symptomatic of a conflicted mind, and he is unwilling to allow himself the embarrassment of his emotional attachment to Miss Kenton, particularly when he has spent years refusing to acknowledge this specific attachment. It is only at the very end of the novel, when he reunites with Miss Kenton, that he allows his walls of restraint and self-deception to slowly lower. This is similar to Freud's conception of sublimation, 'the process by which instinctual urges and energies get translated into

non-instinctual behaviour' (Thurschwell, 2000, p.105). Stevens's entire character is focused around denying natural, instinctual behaviour and channeling his energy into serving Lord Darlington and maintaining a professional air and distance from others. Ishiguro depicts the steady decay of this process during the sections set in the present tense, where Stevens serves a new man, Mr Farraday, and no longer has his father or Miss Kenton around him. The 'errors' that plague Stevens are partially a result of his inability to continue shielding himself from his own conflicted emotions. The attacks on Lord Darlington's name have caused him to lose faith in the work he did and continues to do, and the absence of Miss Kenton is a continual reminder of his unacknowledged feelings for her: in keeping with Ishiguro's style, absence is more powerful than presence.

The social misunderstandings that Stevens relates are critical to Ishiguro's treatment of emotional restraint. My own novel features a protagonist that struggles with interaction, and in this sense both Rayhan and Stevens are isolated by their social failings. The first real example of this in *The Remains of the Day* is Stevens's attempt to ask Mr Farraday for permission to take a trip and meet with Miss Kenton for professional purposes. On the surface level it is not a particularly difficult request to make, but Stevens fails: 'Not only was I unable to be certain of Miss Kenton's desire to rejoin the staff here, I had not, of course, even discussed the question of additional staff with Mr Farraday' (TROTD, p.14). He goes on: 'I suspect, then, that I paused rather abruptly and looked a little awkward.' (TROTD, p.14). When Mr Farraday assumes (or pretends to assume) that Miss Kenton is 'A lady-friend' (TROTD, p.14), Stevens does not correct him:

'Naturally, I felt the temptation to deny immediately and unambiguously such motivations as my employer was imputing to me, but saw in time that to do so would be to rise to Mr Farraday's bait, and the situation would only become increasingly embarrassing. I therefore continued to stand there awkwardly, waiting for my employer to give me permission to undertake the motoring trip.' (TROTD, p.15)

The first passage features a moment where Stevens is briefly able to look upon Miss Kenton's letter in a more realistic fashion, abandoning his wishful thinking. He acknowledges that he cannot be certain that she wishes to return, something that he

usually does not explore until later in his journey. The reasoning behind his awkwardness and inability to converse properly is once again due to the disconnection between his personal and professional perspectives. He cannot find a way to reconcile them, and thus when they intertwine, as they do here in regard to his personal wish to see Miss Kenton again and supposedly resolve the matter of additional staff, he is unable to understand it. Much as with Jane and her first meeting with Brocklehurst, Stevens's unwise choice of silence in the face of questioning allows Farraday to draw his own conclusions and increase the embarrassment of the situation. It is also possible, however, that Stevens does not wish to correct Farraday because he recognises a seed of truth in Farraday's assumption about Miss Kenton and the relationship between them. While Jane's silence and restraint implied fear and her inability to contradict her social superior, Stevens's silence reveals his confusion about his own emotional state and the subjectivity of his narration.

Stevens's inability to correct Farraday is also significant in the way it relates to other moments in the novel where Stevens allows characters to assume incorrect things about him and his relationships with others. Ishiguro uses these situations to explore emotional restraint through Stevens's display of omission and deception, particularly in regard to his relationship with Lord Darlington. On one occasion, a man asks him if he really worked for Lord Darlington, and Stevens replies with: "Oh no, I am employed by Mr John Farraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family." (TROTD, p.126). On another occasion, Mrs Wakefield asks 'what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him.' (TROTD, p.130), and Stevens is direct in his denial, stating: "I didn't, madam, no." (TROTD, p.130). He is unable to fully confront his conflicted feelings towards Lord Darlington, and so while he might praise him in the privacy of his narration, he outwardly denies their relationship, resulting in an inward conflict that he only starts to resolve at the end of the novel, when his emotional restraint weakens during a conversation with a stranger. He still praises Lord Darlington, but then states:

'He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something

worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really - one has to ask oneself - what dignity is there in that?" (TROTD, pp.255-6)

There is a trace of desperation and hopelessness that runs throughout Stevens's confession. Whereas he had previously defined dignity as a quality of maintaining professionalism until one is alone, he appears to use it in another context here, as if realising that his previous mentality was restrictive and damaging. To frame this in terms of Stevens's mentality, in a moment where his restraint dramatically softens, he mentally exchanges the dignity of his 'professional' (TROTD, p.43) self with the dignity of his 'private' (TROTD, p.43) self, finally acknowledging the crucial gap between his own wishes and desires and the ones that are required of his job. His extreme restraint in his pursuit of becoming an ideal butler has ultimately led to regret and isolation, and yet when it falters it leads him to a greater sense of self-knowledge and freedom from his former misconceptions. There might have been little dignity in Stevens's blind trust in Lord Darlington, but Stevens grasps at least the beginning of a kind of dignity when he allows himself to face the truth that he has been evading for years.

Ishiguro makes use of understatement and restraint in his prose style to convey the emotional restraint of his protagonist. As Howard points out, 'Ishiguro's personae address painful, fragmented experience in detached, equanimous tones' (2001:399). Stevens's language is nearly always formal and polished, even when he speaks with his father. In one scene he states: "I have come here to relate something to you, Father.", and "Principally (...) it has been felt that Father should no longer be asked to wait at table, whether or not guests are present." (TROTD, p.68). This businesslike, detached form of speech is a method for Stevens to avoid confronting the emotionally troubling situation in the scene, namely that he is removing some of his father's duties due to his poor performance. It is also worth noting how Ishiguro describes the father's reactions in this scene: Stevens relates that his father's face 'betrayed no emotion whatsoever', and that his voice was 'perfectly unhurried.' (TROTD, p.68). We only get a sense of his possible disappointment or frustration through his remark that he has 'waited at table every day for the last fifty-four years' (TROTD, p.68). The scene establishes a parallel between Stevens and his father; they almost seem mirror images of one another, with their emphasis on treating a delicate subject with a careful restraint and lack of intimacy.

It deliberately feels more akin to a talk between fellow employees than family members. As Shibata and Sugano state, there is a 'repressive sense of propriety' (2009, p.22) between Stevens and his father. My own protagonist also has a relationship with his father that is important for the theme of emotional restraint, in that Rayhan's father demands that his son perfect the art of presentation and social expression, but Ishiguro's approach differs. For example, another conversation that Stevens and his father have takes place shortly before the father's death:

“I'm glad Father is feeling so much better,” I said again eventually. ‘Now really, I'd best be getting back. As I say, the situation is rather volatile.’

He went on looking at his hands for a moment. Then he said slowly: ‘I hope I've been a good father to you.’

I laughed a little and said: ‘I'm so glad you're feeling better now.’

‘I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't.’

‘I'm afraid we're extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning.’

My father was still looking at his hands as though he were faintly irritated by them.

‘I'm so glad you're feeling better now,’ I said again and took my leave.’ (TROTD, p. 101)

This scene changes the dynamic between them. Stevens continues to reside within a professional mode, whereas the father senses the urgency of his situation and his failing health, depicted through the way he gazes at his hands, and so he deliberately attempts to engage Stevens in a personal, intimate manner. Stevens, however, cannot handle the shift in the tone of the conversation and the behaviour it would require of him in order to engage with his father's questions. This is seen in his constant mentions of how his father is 'feeling'. He can only bring up his father's health or professional concerns. He is also depicted as having 'laughed' in response to one of the personal comments his father makes, and such an unfitting reaction is perhaps a way of attempting to deflect the seriousness that he can feel in his father's remarks. Ishiguro often uses the device of laughter to signify Stevens's inability to handle emotional moments, such as when he attempts to converse with Miss Kenton after she receives news that her aunt has died: ‘I gave a small laugh’ (TROTD, p.186) and ‘I gave another short laugh.’ (TROTD, p.187). The scene between Stevens and his father, as a whole, presents two emotionally restrained individuals; while one has finally decided to relax this restraint in order to

express his feelings about their relationship, the other is still locked into behaving as he believes a butler must, concentrating on professional concerns and maintaining a formal air.

One of the critical scenes in *The Remains of the Day* is where Stevens is told that his father has most likely suffered a stroke. This scene works in such a way as to give Stevens one of the greatest possible challenges to his restraint and his determined belief of always remaining within his 'professional being' (TROTD, p.43) during his duties. In this sense, it can be compared to the challenge that Jane faces to restrain her passion just before her confession to Rochester; she is, as discussed earlier, unable to do so. Ishiguro explores Stevens's attempt at emotional restraint in the face of this situation through the use of other characters rather than any direct narration from Stevens himself. The reader has little idea that Stevens is in the process of crying until Lord Darlington points it out: "You look as though you're crying." (TROTD, p.110). Later, Stevens addresses the event in his narration by saying that he may well have displayed the kind of "dignity" that is his ideal, and that 'For all its sad associations' he remembers the day with 'a large sense of triumph' (TROTD, p.115). The crying scene and the reflective aftermath achieve different things; the reader is given a sense of Stevens's real feelings for his father, deeper than their earlier formal exchanges would suggest, and also the most powerful reminder of Stevens's commitment to emotional restraint. This restraint is so important to him as an ideal and a way of life that it can give even the day of his father's death a sense of triumph for him. When reading this scene, it is important to recall the earlier passages where Stevens elaborated on his concept of dignity, and used examples of people displaying this quality, such as a 'butler who failed to panic on discovering a tiger under the dining table' (TROTD, p.43), or an account of how Stevens's father briefly served as a valet to the General responsible for his other son's death, and did so without any lapse in his professional bearing. These unusual displays of a supreme level of emotional restraint serve as a guiding force for Stevens, as he believes that it is his responsibility to achieve a similar level of self-control and poise. Wall comments that 'The restraint his father exercises during the visit of the general (...) indicates a denial of personal feelings so extreme as to be disturbing-especially as a model for conducting one's life' (1994:25). It is not surprising, then, to note that, while Stevens seems proud of his ability to continue with his duties despite suffering such a shock, he doesn't

explicitly acknowledge that his restraint at the very least cracked under the severe emotional strain. To do so would be completely distasteful and even painful for him, as it represents the element of himself that he is least willing to confront and accept. Stevens says very little about his feelings during these scenes, and takes a more distanced approach in his account.

First-person point of view can lend itself very well to a direct exploration of a character's thoughts and emotional state, but in one of the most significant days in Stevens's life we are deliberately only given glimpses into his feelings. Even when his emotional restraint cracks it does so in an understated manner. There is no explosion of passion or dramatic shift in his behaviour. There is just a quiet sadness that, for a brief moment, leaks out through his carefully constructed role as the butler of Darlington Hall. In regard to the construction of the narrative, the real triumph of the scene is not Stevens's restraint, but the poignance that emerges from the cracks in this restraint.

The importance of Stevens's language in establishing his character is evident in his scenes with Miss Kenton, such as the one where she expresses frustration at his lack of communication with her on the topic of former employees, and he replies with: "Naturally, one disapproved of the dismissals. One would have thought that quite self-evident." (TROTD, p.162). He evades confronting the issue on a more personal level, softening it with the use of the more distanced, formal sounding term 'one' instead of 'I'. Walkowitz observes how "'One' negates the claim to personal feeling Stevens's statement would otherwise offer" (2001, p.1068). Wall also detects this, and she notes that, 'at those moments when distance from a feeling or judging self is operating, or when Stevens feels a need to erase some part of himself, his shift from "I" to "one" is unfailing' (1994:23). This concept of a protagonist attempting a form of erasure is something that is also seen in my own novel, although it is not communicated through the protagonist's language, but rather through his approach to school life, where he tries to avoid being noticed by the other boys. Unfortunately, this method backfires in regard to Scott.

Stevens refers to a particular moment with Miss Kenton as something that 'may have marked a crucial turning point' (TROTD, p.173) between them. In this scene, Miss Kenton unexpectedly enters Stevens's pantry while he is alone and reading, and

subsequently expresses a desire to see what Stevens is reading. The resulting behaviour, in regard to both characters, is unusual:

“Simply a book, Miss Kenton.’

‘I can see that, Mr Stevens. But what sort of book - that is what interests me.’

I looked up to see Miss Kenton advancing towards me. I shut the book, and clutching it to my person, rose to my feet.

‘Really, Miss Kenton,’ I said, ‘I must ask you to respect my privacy.’” (TROTD, p.174)

Stevens does not stop to consider telling her about the book. His instinctive reaction is toward concealment, by identifying it as ‘Simply a book’. When Miss Kenton isn’t satisfied with behaving within formal, distanced parameters, she takes action and moves toward him, which causes his alarm to build, as it prompts him to move defensively in response. The use of the term ‘clutching’ emphasises how important it is to him to keep it away from her. His reference to respecting his ‘privacy’ is an attempt to keep the situation within the realm of the formal and professional. As the events proceed, Stevens finds his ability to control the situation slipping away:

‘But Miss Kenton was continuing to advance and I must say it was a little difficult to assess what my best course of action would be. I was tempted to thrust the book into the drawer of my desk and lock it, but this seemed absurdly dramatic. I took a few paces back, the book still held to my chest.’ (TROTD, p.175)

Ishiguro depicts a superficially simplistic situation with an almost threatening quality. As in the previous passage, Miss Kenton is connected with moving forward, towards Stevens, while Stevens’s instinct is still to retreat. The body language is as if a tense encounter were about to take place. In order to conceal the nature of the book, the possibility he considers, to put it away and lock his drawer, would be at least a short term solution. He refuses to do it, however, as it would appear ‘absurdly dramatic’. By this, he implies that such extreme behaviour would fall outside the realm of the detached, professional air that he wishes to project. However, it would also serve to draw more attention to his desperation and urge to conceal. Such an action would keep him safe in regard to the nature of the book, but he would still lose the silent conflict, as he would have allowed his behaviour to reveal the emotion he feels, something he

cannot abide. His behaviour only seems to increase Miss Kenton's interest: 'What on earth can it be you are so anxious to hide?' (TROTD, p.175). It is not so much about the book as what the nature of the book can tell her about the nature of Stevens. He is so careful, and presents himself in such a detached, professional manner, that an opportunity to learn something about his own feelings and interests is one that she finds fascinating. In her forthright manner and desire to learn more of Stevens, she plays a similar narrative role to that of Rochester in his relationship with Jane; she actively challenges his restraint, but does so out of genuine interest in him. Stevens, however, is far more secretive and resistant to revealing himself than Jane, and so he reacts as if threatened, noting that Miss Kenton is 'invading' his 'private moments' (TROTD, p. 175) with her behaviour. This scene follows shortly afterwards:

'Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change - almost as though the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether. I am afraid it is not easy to describe clearly what I mean here. All I can say is that everything around us suddenly became very still; it was my impression that Miss Kenton's manner also underwent a sudden change; there was a strange seriousness in her expression, and it struck me she seemed almost frightened.' (TROTD, pp.175-6)

With the use of persistence and physical proximity, Miss Kenton momentarily bypasses Stevens's efforts to retain a professional tone to the situation. This moment signifies how both characters fully realise the possibility of their relationship developing to another level, and neither of them are prepared to deal with this realisation. The 'peculiar change' and 'other plane' he describes are Stevens struggling to describe the emotional quality of the moment in his narration, and it draws attention to his lack of experience with intimacy, the sense of being pulled out of the way he normally approaches the world around him and into a personal state of being, a state that leaves him feeling vulnerable. Miss Kenton shares that sense of vulnerability; she has a 'strange seriousness', and is even 'frightened' by this sensation. While she would seem to be more suited to dealing with such a moment than Stevens, Ishiguro implies that, in her stubborn desire to know more of Stevens, she had not realised where such actions would lead. If Stevens has become increasingly alarmed and defensive throughout the entirety of the scene, this is the moment where Miss Kenton feels the intensity and

tension that has resulted from her actions. It may be the moment when both characters are simultaneously aware of the undercurrent of romantic attraction between them. Miss Kenton, the one who is less apt to retreat from her own emotions, is naturally the one who, after this short but significant moment, acts first:

‘She reached forward and began gently to release the volume from my grasp. I judged it best to look away while she did so, but with her person positioned so closely, this could only be achieved by my twisting my head away at a somewhat unnatural angle. Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away, practically one finger at a time. The process seemed to take a very long time - throughout which I managed to maintain my posture - until I finally heard her say:

‘Good gracious, Mr Stevens, it isn’t anything so scandalous at all. Simply a sentimental love story.’

I believe it was around this point that I decided there was no need to tolerate any more.’ (TROTD, p.176)

As Miss Kenton disregards the type of polite, professional behaviour that Stevens wishes to engage in, he has no answer as to how to deal with her. As the nature of the book offers the possibility of insight into Stevens’s feelings and mentality, her urge to take it from him and know what it signifies becomes a symbol for Stevens’s emotional restraint and her wish to bypass it and see who he really is at heart. Stevens’s body language, however, indicates that he is not ready to reveal himself at all; he doesn’t even look at her while she attempts to take the book. His attempts to verbally fend her off have failed, and as she resorts to physical means of getting the book, he can think of nothing except to try and hold it to him while turning away, as if the entire situation will suddenly go away if he cannot see it. His actions are still utterly defensive. Miss Kenton downplays the revelation that it is a ‘sentimental love story’, but this is in fact an important detail for Stevens’s character. On the surface, it is one of the last things the other characters would expect him to be reading, due to its contrast to the polished and emotionally distant facade that he presents. His reaction to her words are also telling; he does not ‘tolerate any more’, and ends up ‘showing Miss Kenton out (...) quite firmly’ (TROTD, p.176). With his privacy violated and a clue as to his desires and feelings revealed, he can only think of getting some distance between himself and Miss Kenton and asking her to leave.

Stevens's own thoughts on the situation serve to further illustrate his character. At first, he attempts to explain his interest in such a book: 'There was a simple reason for my having taken to perusing such works; it was an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one's command of the English language.' (TROTD, p.176). McCombe observes that this is 'a pretext that reveals his reluctance to drop his professional façade and confront his emotions' (2002, p.93). Stevens also points out that 'such works' possess 'plenty of elegant dialogue of much practical value to me', and implies that such a work might assist him in 'the course of one's normal intercourse with ladies and gentlemen' (TROTD, p.177). There is a careful lack of any reference to emotional connections to the text he reads; Stevens attempts to present his interest as stemming from the desire for edification. He mainly refers to 'the English language' and 'practical value'. However, as he continues, his justification unravels:

'I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. (...) what shame is there in it? Why should one not enjoy in a light-hearted sort of way stories of ladies and gentlemen who fall in love and express their feelings for each other, often in the most elegant phrases?' (TROTD, p.177)

Even when he allows himself to admit that he gained a type of pleasure that went beyond improving his ability to use the English language or other practical matters, there is still the sense that he holds back in his confession and almost feels that he must apologise for his behaviour, with the reference to 'shame', and the way he refers to his 'enjoyment' being 'incidental'. It is as if he is defending himself from himself, that he feels such behaviour falls below his own standards. He is still careful to point out that he only enjoys the stories in a 'light-hearted sort of way', a description that carries the sense of emotional distance and a casual approach. It is significant that he describes the stories as being about people who 'fall in love' and are able to 'express their feelings for each other'. This is, of course, in direct opposition to the dynamic between Stevens and Miss Kenton in the time frame that Stevens recalls, when they may feel romantic attraction, but are unable to find a way to admit this to one another. In this sense, Stevens's reading can be seen as a form of escapism and a solace; the book offers him a different reality in which he can read about characters who are not restrained by considerations of dignity or detachment, characters who feel free to express love to one

another. He cannot allow himself to have such a life, and so he can only explore such situations in fiction, while excusing himself with the defence of his reading being for his own education and 'practical value' (TROTD, p.177).

Stevens goes on, still referring to the scene with Miss Kenton, and states that 'there was an important principle at issue. The fact was, I had been 'off duty' at that moment Miss Kenton had come marching into my pantry.' (TROTD, p.177). He repeats his belief that a butler concerned with dignity can only let go of his 'role' if 'he is entirely alone', and points out that 'in the event of Miss Kenton bursting in at a time when I had presumed, not unreasonably, that I was to be alone, it came to be (...) a matter indeed of dignity, that I did not appear in anything less than my full and proper role.' (TROTD, p.178). Ishiguro once again illustrates Stevens's struggle between his personal and professional sides. When Miss Kenton unexpectedly arrives during his reading time, he is caught between the personal (the nature of the book he reads) and the professional (his belief that he must always adhere to his role as a butler when in the company of another). This is why he reacts with such quiet panic; he understands the concept of a time to indulge in personal and emotional concerns, but he finds it extremely difficult to expand the barriers of his definition to include engaging with other people during these personal moments. His need to defend himself for reading such a book reveals the embarrassment that he attaches to such emotional concerns, and thus he instinctively regards the idea of sharing such a part of himself with another as distasteful. Ishiguro creates much of the tension between Stevens and Miss Kenton in the novel through this particular dynamic, with Miss Kenton being most interested in the element of Stevens that he is least willing to acknowledge or indulge in.

The last meeting between Stevens and Miss Kenton is particularly significant for exploring both emotional restraint and the release of this restraint between the two characters:

"Well, for instance, Mrs Benn,' I said with a laugh, 'at one point in your letter, you write - now let me see - "the rest of my life stretches out like an emptiness before me". Some words to that effect.'

'Really, Mr Stevens,' she said, also laughing a little. 'I couldn't have written any such thing.'

'Oh, I assure you you did, Mrs Benn. I recall it very clearly.'

‘Oh dear. Well, perhaps there are some days when I feel like that. But they pass quickly enough. Let me assure you, Mr Stevens, my life does *not* stretch out emptily before me. For one thing, we are looking forward to the grandchild. The first of a few perhaps.’ (TROTD, pp.248-9)

While Miss Kenton admits that ‘perhaps there are some days when I feel like that’, she initially denies it. In this scene, she is in fact reminiscent of Stevens and his elusiveness in regard to emotional concerns. She even laughs along with him, despite the seriousness of the line that Stevens quotes. This odd contrast is most likely used by Ishiguro to draw attention to the nervousness and pretence between them at this point in their conversation. There is a sense that Miss Kenton is attempting to convince herself as well as Stevens, as if willing herself to feel content with her life. Later, Stevens once again brings up the topic of Miss Kenton’s feelings:

‘I simply wished to ask you, Mrs Benn. Please do not reply if you feel you shouldn’t. But the fact is, the letters I have had from you over the years, and in particular the last letter, have tended to suggest that you are - how might one put it? - rather unhappy. I simply wondered if you were being ill-treated in some way. Forgive me, but as I say, it is something that has worried me for some time.’ (TROTD, p.250)

Earlier in the novel, it was Miss Kenton who seemed focused on trying to engage Stevens in a more personal, emotional manner, while Stevens always did his best to evade this and fall back upon formality. Here, Ishiguro has Stevens deliberately bringing up a personal issue, and even admitting that it has ‘worried’ him, while Miss Kenton attempts to avoid bringing up the negative aspects of her current outlook on life, which reflects her own form of emotional restraint. Miss Kenton does not really open up about her feelings concerning her life and marriage until she is confronted by Stevens once again questioning her, stating that ‘one is rather mystified as to the cause of your unhappiness’ (TROTD, p.250). When Miss Kenton begins to seriously consider this question, it changes the entire texture of the scene for both characters. She confesses to sometimes wondering: ‘about a different life, a *better* life (...) I get to thinking about a life I might have had with you, Mr Stevens.’ (TROTD, p.251). Stevens’s reaction is just as significant:

‘I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words (...) their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed - why should I not admit it? - at that moment, my heart was breaking.’ (TROTD, pp.251-2)

In keeping with Stevens’s uncharacteristic behaviour, this is a rare moment where he relaxes his emotional restraint and directly addresses his feelings, seen in his specific mention of ‘sorrow’ and then the more personal statement that his ‘heart was breaking’. Even in the midst of such pain, he still retains some semblance of control and an aversion to emotional expression, as his response is to ‘smile’ (TROTD, p.252) and offer consolation rather than give her insight into his current feelings: “You’re very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock.” (TROTD, p.252). It is noteworthy that here, and in the rest of his dialogue until Miss Kenton leaves, Stevens still refrains from touching on his own feelings towards her. While she is able to directly state her thoughts on what her life would have been like with him, he does not engage with this topic, other than in an indirect manner, when he agrees that the past must remain the past, and that they should both be ‘grateful’ (TROTD, p.252) for what they possess in the present. Continually the introvert, he must process his emotional distress and sense of loss inwardly. He has changed since the days when he worked together with Miss Kenton, but, as before, his appreciation for dignity means that he cannot externalise his feelings while in her company and must silently suffer while he paints an expression of optimism on his face. It is important to consider what Ishiguro himself has to say:

‘I thought I’d finished Remains, but then one evening heard Tom Waits singing his song “Ruby’s Arms”. It’s a ballad about a soldier leaving his lover sleeping in the early hours to go away on a train. Nothing unusual in that. But the song is sung in the voice of a rough American hobo type utterly unaccustomed to wearing his emotions on his sleeve. And there comes a moment, when the singer declares his heart is breaking, that’s almost unbearably moving because of the tension between the sentiment itself and the huge resistance that’s obviously been overcome to utter it. Waits sings the line with cathartic magnificence, and you feel a lifetime of tough-guy stoicism crumbling in the face of overwhelming sadness. I heard this and reversed a decision I’d made, that Stevens would remain emotionally buttoned up right to the bitter end. I decided that at just one point – which I’d have to choose very carefully – his rigid defence would crack, and a hitherto concealed tragic romanticism would be glimpsed.’ (2014)

It is interesting to note that Ishiguro retains the sense that he felt in the Tom Waits song for his novel, but does not bring the ‘tough-guy’ quality to Stevens. Stevens instead has an emotional restraint that arises from a more unusual, distinctive place; his belief in dignity and being a great butler. The ‘tension’ that Ishiguro describes can also be seen in Brontë’s novel; the moment where Jane is containing her emotions in the face of Rochester’s apparent courtship of Blanche, for example. It is not quite as powerful as the Stevens moment, mainly due to Jane being more expressive in general, but it still elicits a sensation of pathos. There is also perhaps a parallel to my own novel, where Rayhan refuses to tell Claire about his feelings, but that is diluted by the way that he decides that it is actually the morally appropriate option. Whether this is an accurate judgement or not is left to the reader.

Despite Stevens’s brave front for Miss Kenton, the emotional repercussions of their conversation and what it has meant to Stevens can be seen in the way his restraint continues to erode at the close of the novel. He finds himself releasing sentiments that he had pent up about his regrets and Lord Darlington to a stranger, and it is even implied that he is reduced to tears, as the other man offers him a ‘hankie’ (TROTD, p. 255). Despite the tragic quality in Stevens’s past mistakes, there is still the hint of optimism in the way the novel ends. As Ishiguro points out, ‘Stevens is struggling to come to terms with uncomfortable memories and finally admitting those things is very cathartic, the climax is when the narrator comes to understand something about himself.’ (2009, p.119). Part of what Stevens ‘comes to understand’ is connected to the impact that his extreme emotional restraint has had on his life. Just before the novel ends, Stevens observes other people around him:

‘I naturally assumed at first that they were a group of friends out together for the evening. But as I listened to their exchanges, it became apparent they were strangers who had just happened upon one another here on this spot behind me. Evidently, they had all paused a moment for the lights coming on, and then proceeded to fall into conversation with one another. As I watch them now, they are laughing together merrily. It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. It is possible these particular persons are simply united by the anticipation of the evening ahead. But, then, I rather fancy it has more to do with this skill of bantering.’ (TROTD, p.257)

When viewed in context of the conversation between Stevens and Miss Kenton, as well as Stevens's difficulty with conventional social interaction over the course of the novel, Stevens's confusion carries a sense that he is perhaps wistful, even if only to a small extent, for that kind of 'warmth' that other people have together. His relationship with his father felt very professional and detached, while his relationship with Miss Kenton held potential that was never fulfilled. He cared for Lord Darlington, but this was still essentially a relationship between an employer and an employee, albeit one that Stevens approached with strong loyalty. There are others that Stevens might call friends, such as Mr Graham and Mr Cardinal, but those relationships do not involve a significant amount of emotional exploration on Stevens's side. His observation of 'strangers' who can quickly engage with one another, 'laughing together merrily', reminds him of his own inadequacy in regard to personal human interaction. This is reinforced by him mentioning the 'skill of bantering', a social technique that, as seen earlier in the novel, he struggles with and cannot employ consistently. Stevens views bantering as an important part of human relationships, and thus his closing sentiments are a particularly important insight into how he might develop as a person going forward: 'Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in - particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth.' (TROTD, p. 258). While Stevens still lacks perceptiveness for relationships and communication (in that there is more to 'human warmth' than simply the ability to banter) this is a significant step forward, as the bantering in this context symbolises his desire to engage with others, even if he only specifically mentions that he intends to use such banter with his 'employer' (TROTD, p.258).

It is worth comparing Jane's narrative journey and resolution with that of Stevens; Jane is introduced as being far more open and obviously passionate than Stevens. She is shaped by the society around her into a more outwardly restrained, controlled figure, but one that always retains the strength of her passion. The novel ends when she finds a balance between her restraint and emotion, the narrative rewarding her with the relationship with Rochester that she had longed for. (Albeit, a development that carries loss and tragedy with it.) Stevens, however, spends much of the time deceived by his own emotional defences, and when he finally begins to understand the negative

repercussions that his obsession with restraint and dignity has had on his life, it is too late to change matters in regard to his most important relationships. Miss Kenton is married, even if she does not appear completely satisfied with her husband, while Stevens's father and Lord Darlington are both dead. Despite this, he learns to look forward and develops an appreciation for the personal realm of human relationships rather than his safety zone of the professional world of being a butler. In this sense, both novels end with a mixture of sadness and optimism. Both novels also essentially prize the emotional and personal over the restraint that seals it away, but they also remember to display the positive elements of restraint; there is indeed a kind of 'dignity' in the stories that Stevens relates about his father. It can also be seen in the depiction of Helen Burns in Jane's narrative. *Jane Eyre* celebrates passion tempered with sense and control. *The Remains of the Day* illuminates the crucial failings in emotional restraint taken to a damaging extreme, while still offering hope with the promise of character evolution.

Conclusion

This thesis has looked at emotional restraint and isolation in two different novels, with differing narrators. My main aim has been to show the different methods (and, to a lesser extent, the similarities) that Ishiguro and Brontë have used to approach the same themes of restraint, as well as contribute, through my novel and an analytic approach to the text, my own example with another different style. I have discussed all three novels in isolation; now I wish to focus on considering how these three works compare to one another. Where do they inspire comparisons, and where do they appear to contrast? As I mentioned earlier, I believe that all three characters share characteristics that Jung would label as ‘introverted’. All three works are also written in first person perspective, and I have shown that that all three works also explore themes of emotional restraint and isolation, mainly through the use of characterisation. All three texts, however, take place in different time periods in England; *Jane Eyre* is of course set in the Victorian era, while *The Remains of the Day* mainly focuses on the period before the second world war. My own novel is set in the contemporary, twenty-first century period. As a result, there are naturally differences between the way the texts approach the same themes. Ishiguro’s Stevens faces an issue of profession, in that he is fixated on the type of behaviour that a butler should exhibit, which in turn proves to be a crucial element in his emotional restraint. My own character’s issue partially stems from feeling distanced from what he thinks masculinity represents; confidence, strength and willingness to engage in violence. Jane faces challenges related to the Victorian perspective on women, alongside others.

Ishiguro himself states that ‘Charlotte Brontë of *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*’ was a part of his ‘firm foundation’ in fiction (2008:53). My own work, in turn, may also display the influence of Ishiguro and Brontë’s novels in regard to writing style. I would say that my approach is closer to that of Brontë than Ishiguro, but one particular area where I see my own approach in Ishiguro is when he points out that he came to a realisation about writing after coming across ‘*Jerusalem the Golden* by Margaret Drabble’, elaborating that ‘You didn’t have to write about Raskolnikov murdering an

old lady, or the Napoleonic Wars. You could just write a novel about hanging around.’ (2008:39). I came to a very similar realisation before embarking upon my own novel.

All three novels in this thesis feature isolated and emotionally restrained protagonists. I have shown how Brontë approaches restraint through Jane (along with Helen and St John), how Ishiguro explores the darker area of restraint through Stevens, and how I have attempted to depict emotional restraint and social isolation through the characterisation of Rayhan and Claire. However, I have not yet examined (in detail) the clash between the revealing quality of the narratives and the emotional restraint of the characters that offer them. For example, Westerman, in regard to Ishiguro’s Stevens, states: ‘In view of the beliefs and identity we come to know, it seems very strange that he writes to a “you” of his feelings, memories, and flaws.’ (2004:158). Wall makes a particularly interesting point in regard to this area when she observes: ‘it seems to me at least *possible* that Stevens in some way acknowledges his grief precisely through the reports of others, largely because such reports will not violate his sense of dignity and decorum’ (1994:28). This is a sophisticated device in the novel, in that Ishiguro adds another layer to the depiction of Stevens’s narrative; as I mentioned earlier, the narrative tends to function through absence and evasion, but this is a method where Stevens is actually choosing to reveal elements of himself while simultaneously avoiding any real confession. As Wall points out, by doing this he subsequently avoids any indication that he has broken his ‘sense of dignity’. Maybe, as Brontë has Jane observe, ‘Reserved people often really need the frank discussion of their sentiments and griefs (...) the sternest-seeming stoic is human after all’ (JE, p329).

Jane and Rayhan, however, do not have this same dynamic between confessing and restraining. They are both able to admit (mainly in the narrative, that is) things that they find embarrassing or emotionally significant. Rayhan struggles when it comes to confessing to other people rather than to himself, although there are small moments where he even seems reluctant to be truthful during his actual narration. Jane is more expressive, but she, too, struggles to confess to Rochester, before finally giving way to her emotions. She does not, however, appear to indulge in any significant restraint when it comes to her narration; she is thus less secretive than Rayhan and Stevens in this specific context. Knies points out how this is a significant part of how the novel

functions: 'This complete honesty, this perfect candor (...) provides a structure upon which the reliability of the narrative is built.' (1966:554), because the reader is then 'willing to suspend (...) disbelief about incidents in the novel which seem improbable.' (1966:554). As established earlier, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is one example of a novel that displays unreliable narration. *Jane Eyre*, I would argue, is not an example of this technique, while my own novel attempts to follow this concept of a more straightforward narration while adding a few hints of unreliability. Rayhan is inclined to be more revealing in his narrative than he is to the people around him; the narrative thus functions as his place for truth that is juxtaposed with his quiet, deceitful moments in his day to day life. Despite this, a deliberate choice was also made to add a few hints of unreliability in the narrative through his lack of perceptiveness in regard to Safia. This serves as a way to reinforce an essential aspect of his character development in the novel, in the way his views towards Safia change over time, from that of almost idolising her to taking a more objective stance. There is also a hint of unreliability in the way he discusses Claire in his narration, as he is initially hesitant to show his real interest in her. For example, at the end of Chapter Three, I attempt to communicate this sense of ambiguity in the final line: 'My reasons were perfectly clear in my mind.' The narrative thus does require moments where the reader can consider Rayhan's perspective and then discard it in favour of trusting to a character like Claire and her opinion. In contrast, Ishiguro's approach is much more slippery, as I have shown earlier. As Wall points out, Ishiguro depicts the unreliability in the narration of Stevens through the character's 'split subjectivity' (1994:23), later elaborating that 'conflict between the public and the private man, this vast split in subjectivity accounts, at least in part, for the conflict between Stevens's quite reliable presentation of scenes (...) and his questionable commentary on those scenes' (1994:26). There is no such 'split subjectivity' in the case of Rayhan, or Brontë's Jane.

Jane Eyre also takes an approach of sincerity in regard to the narrative. Jane is not an unreliable narrator. Zerweck, in fact, argues: 'unreliable narrators are generally scarce in realist and Victorian gothic literature' (2001:160). Lodge seems to express similar thoughts when discussing Victorian fiction, as he states, 'There is a kind of underlying confidence in this fiction that reality can be known, that the truth about human affairs can be told' (2012:763). Brontë uses a technique that I attempt to employ

in my own novel; Jane is truthful in her narration, but can be deceptive in her interaction with other characters, such as when Rochester is tormenting her with the idea that he will marry Blanche Ingram, and she attempts to conceal her feelings until she eventually explodes. If we agree with Lodge's perspective, that 'reality, and the representation of it in fiction, came to be seen as much more problematic' (2012:763), then I would say that my own novel is mainly Victorian in its approach, but is also influenced by the modern tradition of unreliability. Rayhan displays sincerity in his narration in a way that can be compared to Jane, but there are also times when he is unreliable in regard to Safia in particular.

Dutta points to the connection between Brontë's work 'and feelings of alienation' and also refers to the 'intensely lonely (...) Jane Eyre' (1991:2312). This sense of isolation is something that Ishiguro's novel and my own also attempt to convey. Dutta's mention of loneliness is particularly relevant to my novel, as both Rayhan and Claire suffer from loneliness to a strong degree. There is a point, early in my novel, where Rayhan specifically remarks that he didn't approach Safia out of the urge to find a friend; this is a deliberately misleading line, linking in to the hints of unreliability that I mentioned beforehand. In reality, Rayhan is actually intrigued by meeting another unusual person; note that he actually makes the effort to find Safia again after their first meeting. A sense of alienation is explored through his inability to understand most people, particularly other students, as seen in the chapter where he attempts to blend in with others from his university.

Westerman comments on how 'Uncertainty, revision, pretending, and lying figure prominently throughout *The Remains of the Day*.' (2004:159) The use of pretending and lying is another similarity between Ishiguro's work and my own novel. Rayhan lies more than once throughout the text, mainly out of insecurity and selfishness. In regard to 'pretending', he is also specifically connected to acting in a formal and informal sense.

I have shown how all three of the novels analysed in this thesis demonstrate emotional restraint and isolation in different (and also similar) ways, mainly seen in the use of technique and characterisation choices. Ishiguro makes use of slippery, indirect prose, Brontë approaches this area with sincerity and straightforwardness, and my own novel attempts to mix both of these strategies, but leans more heavily in the direction of

the Brontë approach. As I have noted, aside from the clear differences that can be seen between the three works, there are also surprising similarities. Stevens has common ground with both Helen and St John in regard to his approach to restraint, for example. Rayhan possesses small traces of the slipperiness of Stevens, but also the straightforward divulging of his emotions that is seen in Jane. There is also, however, the concept of restraint as something that harms the character. Helen's restraint is specifically linked to punishment, as is sometimes the case for Jane. Ishiguro's Stevens has a restraint that gives a sense of sadness to the end of the novel, as he is never as clear as he could be with Miss Kenton. Rayhan faces a similar situation to Stevens at the end of my own novel, but the decision he makes is intended to create more of an ambiguous, mixed feeling. Isolation seems to walk hand in hand with emotional restraint, at least in regard to *Jane Eyre*, *The Remains of the Day* and my own novel; Jane, Stevens and Rayhan are all introverted and connected, as mentioned before, with a sense of solitariness. While I intended to present the differences and similarities between the way Brontë and Ishiguro approach this area (as well as the way I do in my own novel), I also hope that I have shown how much dramatic potential is evident in the themes of emotional restraint and isolation, and that there are complex and multiple ways of approaching these concepts in fiction.

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