

# Missorts Volume II



# MISSORTS VOLUME II

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a novella

Tony White

**SITUATIONS**

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**Bristol Legible City**

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For Sarah Such



‘Right then, for those of us still remaining – us  
maniacs, assorted oddballs, eccentrics, folk who still feel  
that school is worthwhile, I suggest we keep trying.  
All right, everyone?’

David Hare, *Wetherby*



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April 2006

Ronnie Urchfont turned the corner onto Cattle Market Road and walked down and under the bridge, just as he'd done most days for the past thirty-odd years. It was quieter than it used to be, of course, just him and a pigeon that was flying through the underpass in the opposite direction, but still he could hear the sounds of the trains idling at Temple Meads and the station Tannoy announcements. The Cattle Market Tavern hadn't survived the office closing down. It used to be full of blue shirts: the end-of-shift postmen, knocking back a few pints; the long-tea-break skivers, popping in for a quick hand or two of cards; the night-shift guys, fuelling-up before they started work. It was boarded up now.

He slipped off the street onto the old dockside. Tiny brown birds flitted around in the willows. There was so much litter that it looked as if someone had just up-ended a skip-load of junk: hundreds of empty beer and soft drink cans, an unbelievably filthy denim jacket, Lucozade bottles and an empty Rampant Rabbit box. The ground underfoot was covered with the broken green glass and wire stoppers of lager bottles that had been lobbed over from the bar on the opposite dock. Something shiny caught his eye beside a clump of grass. It was a teaspoon with a

bearded figure at the end of the handle: an apostle spoon. Might come in handy.

Ronnie stepped over some indescribable heap of what may once have been clothing and God knows what else, all cemented together with a kind of grey-brown mulch, then he squeezed through his usual gap in the fence and onto the forecourt of the old sorting office, which now looked like a strange garden. Tall weeds and rockery plants were breaking through the concrete and the Tarmac. There were traffic cones and reflections of the ragged grey sky in puddles, clouds rushing from the east. He dodged quickly across to the cover afforded by the locomotive-sized bulk of an emergency diesel generator.

It didn't seem so long ago that the place was heaving at this time of the evening: lights burning in all the offices upstairs, a constant stream of lorries driving in and out, forklifts and tractors trundling around. Now there was just stained and crumbling concrete and stark, glassless windows framed with a decorative filigree of aerosol paint, a lace of looping calligraphy in blacks, reds, blues and silver. A string of seemingly nonsensical words were painted in broad, cream brushstrokes on the dark grey panelling along the upper storeys of the 1960s extension, one letter per panel. It reminded Ronnie of writing on the squared paper of a school maths book. 'ENAK!TAME!ENAK!TAME!'

One tag seemed to be repeated hundreds of times, at all heights, all around the building: Oreo. Also Cola, Demo, AWOL, This, Downz, Prom, Cue, Rax.

From here, some weird acoustic effect seemed to amplify the sounds of the diesel engines at Temple Meads.

Ronnie passed scaffolding poles, discarded buckets and a coil of blue hosing that littered the area around the fire escape by the old tractor workshop. Weeds were flowering in the lee of the building. He stepped up and inside, into the cavernous dark space where the old BS1s and 2s delivery office had been before it got moved out in '91. More recently, interior walls had been knocked down to expose the old letters loading bay. Silent and deserted where once it would have been choking with the exhaust of dozens of vans, a steady flow of cages and flatbeds being brought down from the second floor in the lifts.

There was more graffiti inside. Not just the curlicues and jagged longhand of tags – sprayed up in black, white and green across the chipped concrete, from floor level to a tip-toed full-stretch, all exclamation marks, asterisks and underlining – but pictorial blocks of yellow and red. These seemed to be details of some larger design, but it was impossible to zoom out far enough or to be in enough places at one time to take the whole thing in. Here, a bug-eyed, gangly-legged robot wielding a scimitar. There, a large line drawing of a bobo dread – locks bound in a tall turban – staring out from a first floor office into the ragged well of the interior above the legend, 'NUFF MANS DON'T KNOW.'

Some nights, Ronnie would be dodging the graffers and junkies all the way. Other times, he'd find needles in his sorting frames, hear the familiar crunch as he stepped on another. He kept himself out of the way till they'd gone. Didn't trust them. Didn't know who they might be working for.

Above the sorting office floors was a long, low-ceilinged

gantry, accessible by just one door. This claustrophobic, black-painted space was where the old IB – as the Investigation Branch, the Post Office’s internal police force were known – had watched the workers, making sure that CDs weren’t dropped into bags or pockets, birthday cards torn open for the fivers and tenners they contained. If or when letters started to go missing, credit cards or cheque books not arriving, the IB would track back through the system to find the culprit. Closing in, they would send out plants: a not quite sealed envelope, containing hundreds of pounds in marked notes, or a fake credit card, then they’d turn all the cameras to follow its progress through the system until someone either handed it to a ‘JV’ (right) or pocketed it (wrong). Now with no mail to protect and the IB long gone, this old observation platform, with its one-way mirrored windows and single lockable entry point, was Ronnie’s home.

Safe behind his locked and barricaded door, this was where he could sit and watch Oreo, Cola, Demo, AWOL and Crust do their thing without being seen. Graffiti? The word didn’t do some of this stuff justice. Throughout the building were a series of painstakingly painted frames of some vast and fragmented comic strip. Action heroes who had escaped from the page into the horror of the real world. After stumbling upon the first of these, he’d started following the story, and would get excited waiting for the next site-specific instalment. The speed of black and white, the heightened chiaroscuro, trumped the luxury of colour in this adrenaline art studio. The artists never knew when they’d have to make a run for it.

Turn a corner up on the fifth floor, by the old Quadrant

canteen, and a man looks back in terror, blood running from the side of his mouth, scar running across his eye, forehead to cheek. The speech balloon is obliterated by constant over-painting and a collage of photocopied paper. But this one's got credits: Drawings – Crust. Scenarios – Sheba. Photo – Sam. Guests: From demz, One up. And next to it, a little Valentine: 'Crust loves Pauline.' A stack of old filing cabinets – real ones! – are incorporated into yet another frame, again by Crust. The same scar-faced man reaches into a drawer: 'Where is my fuckin' gun!?!?'

This is sophisticated work. Speech balloons emerge, painted on the sides of the cabinets: 'I need it NOW. To fight with . . . Dr Ponk!!! I have to succeed!! I must!!'

Meanwhile, from deep shadow, a white-bearded man stares impassively, through hooded eyes that always took Ronnie by surprise. He wondered if this was the face of Dr Ponk. No one said this was fiction.

The smell of fresh paint lingered for a day or so near the larger works, but everything else, everything that was not a message, was decayed, prematurely aged, left where it stood. As if the Neutron Bomb had been transformed from Cold War propaganda myth to reality in this little corner of Bristol. Dr Ponk's weapon of mass destruction. The high frequency flash. Chalk tallies abandoned mid-shift:

OPS Missorts:

1 COLLECTION BAGS: 2

2C METER FROM 1730 ON: 3

2C METER PRIOR TO 1730 & ALL 1C

METER MAIL: 4

A panel of blackboard paint against a green background. The last job still scrawled on it: '2/3 Mail Sort Mixed 10 CAGES' and an arrow pointing to nothing. Above it, faintly: '28/11'

There were Special Notices still stuck to doors leading nowhere. The old Royal Mail typeface along the top, white out on red. Signed by the Area Personnel Manager or PCO Administrator.

As from Saturday 27 November 1993 these toilets will be locked shut from 01.00 Saturday until 06.00 Monday. Should access be required please see Central Control on 2nd Floor.

Or:

This is a fire exit and as such, must be left secured, i.e. the glass tube **MUST NOT** be broken except in the case of a fire or similar emergency. Serious disciplinary action will be taken against offenders.

Letter sorting frames were stacked up on their backs. All blind. The fillets – interchangeable green strips that were once labelled with each pickout – were long gone. Not that anyone needed them. A disconnected Code Desk keyboard, also blank, but deliberately so. No letters on keys that were once used for typing postcodes in the days before computers and 'video coding.' Learning to touch-type without the distraction of actually needing to look at the keyboard.

Facing tables, bag frames, chutes: all rusting, thick with muck.

A broken auto-level trolley was abandoned in the centre of the floor. Its rubberised green concertina sides and sprung base were jammed down as if the air it contained was denser than the rest. A new kind of micro-gravitational effect that was centred on, generated by, or contained within this one broken auto seemed to be attracting the dust of an entire city, dragging everything in, and Ronnie with it. The trolley and the ultra-massive pit it contained would have been impossible to move even if it did have wheels.

The whole place was littered with furniture, latest generation gear, stuff they'd still be buying in new at Filton, but which here looked as if it had been fished out of the New Cut. Massive old control desks for machines long obsolete. Everything rusting and dented, seized up, disconnected, antiquated. Amazing how quickly the contemporary surfaces – the laminates and plastics, the stainless steel – could take on the look and feel of ancient dereliction from nothing more than discontinuation of use; the absence of human touch.

Amongst all this, Ronnie felt like a ghost in his own life, like a restless soul cursed to wander around his old haunts, but in some far-distant future, while the rest of the city – the world, the universe – fell away on an accelerating entropy curve. This building was the epicentre. Everything around him was disintegrating as if in a time-lapse film.

Ronnie had a plan though. To impose his own order and claw his way out from this psychic black hole. He thought again of the big yellow letters painted around the outside of the building, all along the fifth floor.

'ENAK!TAME!'

He got it now. These weren't just tags, they were instructions. Enact and tame. It was another message: a plan of action, of resistance.

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February 2010

Jessica Wells took the box from her drawer and opened it. She was looking for a particular horse-shaped brooch that she hadn't seen for a while, perhaps not since finishing college, but fancied wearing today, or at least finding. The problem with looking for one thing is that you usually find something else, she thought to herself, taking a small bundle of letters from the box, no more than a dozen, tied with a ribbon. A slightly grubbier envelope sat on top of the pile. She could remember the day it had been delivered as if it was yesterday. Seeing it there on the doormat, the then eighteen-year-old Jessica had recognised the handwriting on the envelope immediately. She'd known who it was from without having to open it. Why now, she had thought. Why not back when it mattered?

Before that, she hadn't heard from her father – not a squeak! – for years. The birthday and Christmas cards with ten- or twenty-pound notes tucked inside had carried on for a while after her parents split up. Then they'd tailed off too.

There had been something else funny about this letter, though. It had looked – what? Just odd, she'd supposed. The envelope had been filthy, covered in dust and what looked like oil that had been ground into the paper.

One corner had been concertinaed into a series of impossibly tight and narrow folds like the pleats pressed into a skirt.

Another oddity was that it had come an hour or so after the main post. Not unusual in the old days, when there were two deliveries a day, but there hadn't been a second delivery for years. Maybe, as sometimes happened, it had gone to a neighbour's house by mistake, and they'd popped it round when they realised the mistake. But she'd opened the door and looked up and down the street, expecting to see someone letting themselves in a few doors down, and there was no-one there that she could see. Certainly not a postman.

Her mum had already left for work by that time, which was maybe just as well. She'd have freaked out. Frankly, Jessica had been a bit freaked herself, and hadn't even been sure she wanted to read the letter at first; hadn't known if she was ready to open all that up again. So she'd put it down on the table and gone to wash her hands in the kitchen sink, to try and get the oily dust off her fingers. It was only after that, sipping a cup of green tea at the table, that she'd noticed the postmark. She couldn't read the exact date because of all the muck, but she'd seen the year and nearly knocked over her tea in shock.

1996? She'd looked again to make sure – 1996 – but still couldn't believe it. How could it have taken, what, ten years to arrive? It didn't feel like a card either, despite the Christmas stamp. It was impossible; completely. Not just the time-delay, but that her dad had actually written her a letter. She had felt sorry for her younger self, because she'd known what a letter like this would have meant to

her back then. It had seemed so unfair to have received it all these years later.

The next day, she had kept an eye out, and shown it to their regular postman, who had just laughed and shaken his head – ‘Wow!’ – but knew nothing about it. He’d told her that if it *had* come from the Post Office, it would have been wrapped up in one of those clear plastic bags, with an official message printed on the side, saying (he put on a posh voice): ‘We are sorry that the enclosed item has been damaged . . .’

Now it lived in a box that she kept in the left-hand drawer of her dressing table. The place she put the kinds of sentimentally valuable, semi-talismanic possessions that any twenty-two year old woman a year or two out of college and still living with her mother might have accumulated. There was an old Lett’s diary from 2006, the same year the letter had arrived. She daren’t throw that away. Too embarrassing. She’d have to burn it. There were some photographs she wouldn’t mind burning, too. Tickets from gigs, from the days when she kept that kind of thing. One or two theatre programmes from school trips, and flyers from a couple of student productions that she’d been in. A Remembrance Day poppy. A small pile of letters tied up with a piece of ribbon.

Jessica hadn’t meant to read it again. She was supposed to be getting ready for a job interview. It could be a nice little gig, too. A lot of actors did it, and comedians, apparently. Fresh air, and you could work at your own pace. Plus it was for a good cause. Causes, anyway. You might be raising money for one charity one week, another one the next. She had seen them in the street: trendy-looking, smiling

and confident, with their clipboards and their leaflets.

The only question was what to wear. She laid a few things out on the bed, but couldn't decide between the grey wool dress over a black shirt with black tights and her black lace up boots, the black shift dress from French Connection with the black and cream shoes, or the black straight-legged trousers with her mint green chiffon blouse and black and white striped jacket.

While she tried to work out what would make her look like exactly the type of person they thought they were searching for – and she was erring towards the mint green blouse and black trousers – Jessica fancied listening to some music. She knew exactly what would hit the spot. Cocking her head slightly, she ran a finger along the spines of the records that were stacked on top of her chest of drawers until she found it, then slipped the fluorescent yellow 12-inch single out of the covers: 'Hiding and Seeking' by Pam Nestor, from 1979.

It was hard to believe that something so fresh-sounding had been made before she was even born! There was a slightly chaotic, all-over-the-place quality to Pam Nestor's voice. An unusual combination of a slow vibrato and a wide vocal range that lifted it out of the ordinary. Those wilder fringes of early Lover's Rock were not so different to her mum's old Slits records. Jessica had kept a lookout for other records by Pam Nestor but never found one, except for when she saw her name on the credits of one of Gina's CDs – *Whatever's for Us* by Joan Armatrading – and it turned out that they had been co-writers for a time.

Jessica had bought that too.

'God, Jess,' her mum would say, 'this stuff is so con-

servative! We used to go to Pop Group gigs when I was a teenager.'

'Oh yeah? Which one?' Jess asked.

'Which what?'

'Which pop group?'

'No, *The Pop Group*.'

'Whatever!'

On the back cover of the Joan Armatrading record, there was a great picture of two young black women. When she had first seen the photo, they'd seemed so sophisticated and mature, though they were probably only around Jessica's age now. They're sitting on the floor, leaning back against a heavy dark-wood sideboard or dressing table. They look like they're having fun. She'd wondered if they were lovers. In the picture, Joan Armatrading is wearing massive denim flares and platform boots, while the woman sitting next to her has short dreads and is wearing turned-up pedal pusher-length jeans over black and white horizontal-striped socks or tights, a patterned jacket or shirt – it was hard to tell – with a white silk scarf around her neck. Jessica figured this was Pam Nestor, and, for a while at university, she'd copied the style, but it wasn't a look that would get her a job now.

Jessica settled for the black trousers and the mint green blouse. She slipped on the jacket – minus brooch – and was just leaving the bedroom when she thought better of it and took something else from her wardrobe – a white silk scarf, which she knotted loosely around her neck. 'Perfect,' she thought. 'Thanks Pam.' A quick spray of perfume, then she gently lifted the needle off the record and clicked the arm back into its cradle.

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February 1996

Paul Johnson took the stairs up to the second floor two at a time. No need to stop off at the locker room. No time to nip into the Sports and Social for a game of pool. As he pushed his way through the door that opened onto the vast space of the sorting office floor and the great cacophony of voices and machinery that echoed around the huge space beyond, Paul let out a quick, snorting laugh. He couldn't help it. Once upon a time, the notice on the wall outside had read 'ALL STAFF ARE REMINDED THAT PASSES MUST BE DISPLAYED AT ALL TIMES . . .' Now, with the strategic removal of a few Ps, it finished with the stern warning that, 'failure to show your \_ass on request is a disciplinary offence.'

Almost everywhere you looked, various combinations of men and machines were engaged in shifting or sorting post; and vast quantities of it at that. This was something – a 'function,' in the kinds of jargon that postmasters dealt with, which occasionally trickled down to the floor – that Post Office management were currently trying to dignify with the collective term of 'processing.' But it didn't matter what you called it or how you carved it up, the bottom line was that someone or something, man or machine, had to read the address on an envelope or a packet and route

it through a series of ever finer selection points until it got to where it needed to be: your doormat. Noisy work and everyone seemed to be shouting at the top of their voices in order to be heard above the collective din.

The Inward section, where, night after night, post coming into the city by lorry or train got unloaded and processed, and where Paul worked his usual duty, was deserted and wouldn't start filling up until later. First of all, as bags started coming in from the lunchtime and afternoon dispatches around the country, one or two people would go over to bag-opening and start tipping. More bodies would follow when there was something to sort. And once you got to 22:00 hrs, that – broadly speaking – was when Paul's and the rest of the night staff's official shifts would start. Bags would be transferred from platform to cage and the contents tipped out. Letters and 'flats' boxed up or stacked in long, wheeled 'coffins,' while the packets would be tipped into the ubiquitous Post Office donkeys that were known as 'auto-levels' or 'autos' for short. These trolleys were designed to contain the tipped-out contents of five or six full mail bags at once. They had concertina sides made of a green, rubberised fabric and a sprung wooden base that automatically raised or lowered depending on the weight of its contents.

Packets, letters and flats would get wheeled off to Inward Primary, to be sorted down to postcode areas and the bigger firms, then they would be subdivided further until they reached the 'Walk,' the individual postman or postwoman's delivery route out at the 'subs.' Some of the mail that came in from the Travelling Post Offices – or TPOs, as the great red trains that pulled in and out of Temple

Meads were known – would have already been pre-sorted by hand, en route from Derby, Plymouth, Paddington and so on, so the labelled bundles could go straight into the relevant sub office or firms bag. Sometimes the TPO men would even ‘walk-sort’ it, so that each bundle of letters was already in the right order for the postman doing the walk. Management tended to speak of the TPO men’s skill and speed in hushed and respectful tones.

Jonesy looked up and nodded as Paul walked past: ‘Right, P.’

‘Yeah, Jonesy. How you doin’ man?’

Jonesy was fine. He was bagging up the Inward packet frames for the night duties: loading them with empty mail bags. Each of the eight or more packet frames consisted of three horizontal grid arrays, arranged in the shape of an elongated H. The frames stood table-high on sturdy legs and base units all made from the same welded, grey-painted 3-inch steel bar as the horizontal grid on top.

Looked at from above, the two uprights of the H were formed by a unit of twelve square cells, or ‘pickouts,’ in a six by two formation, while the central unit – the horizontal bar of the elongated H – comprised twenty-four pickouts arranged in a grid that was four deep by six wide. Each of the forty-eight total pickouts could be labelled on all four of its internal faces for easy identification from any angle. A stout steel hook, about the thickness of a pencil, was set into each of the four corners of each pickout, and it was on to these hooks that the four eyelets of each mail bag would be attached, gravity and the weight of the bag’s contents holding it in place.

Later on, four men or women would stand facing each

other over the frame, each pair 'throwing off' the packets from an auto-level placed between them, reading the address and literally throwing it across the frame into the correct pickout. As an auto emptied, its sprung wooden base would gradually rise, minimising the need for bending and so reducing the risk of back injury and maximising sorting speed.

Jonesy had a rhythm going as he bagged-up the frames, but it was like watching someone move in slow motion. He would take a mail bag from the top of a pile that was stacked in a bath-sized plastic trolley, filled to the brim with sacks that were layered like the pages of a book. Generally, these days, it would be one of the new pale grey nylon mail bags, although occasionally you'd still see the old-fashioned hessian sacks. Then he would shake it out, drop it into one of the packet frame's square-mouthed cells or pickouts, then reach in to fasten the four eyelets that were evenly spaced around the opening of the bag to the relevant hooks in the frame; give the bag a bit of a tug from underneath to see it tight and make sure it wasn't twisted. Then the process would start again: take a bag, shake it out . . . The whole job, bagging up all the frames, could probably be done in forty minutes if your life depended on it. Away from the eyes of a JV – the management – it could take a couple of hours or more. Well, there had to be some payback for fifty years on the post, Paul had always figured. And if that meant you got a duty which mainly involved changing light bulbs throughout the building, or collecting and checking off a random list of incoming bag labels every night, then so much the better.

'It's 'ard life, P,' Jonesy said, winking.

Paul didn't break his stride or stop for a chat as he normally might. For one thing, he was running a minute or two late, so needed to get to the Book Room sharpish to pick up his overtime docket. He didn't want to lose an hour's pay or risk losing the docket altogether. For another thing, and for today at least, Paul was a man with a mission. Just thinking about it put a bit of a spring in his step. The plan was watertight. It just took a bit of brains, that's all. Confident in his understanding of the ways of the heart, he started singing a song called 'You can get it if you really want' that he'd had running around his head all morning, since taking his turn to drop his little 'un off at primary school. *Man!* he thought, that Jimmy Cliff knew what he was talking about!

Paul was in love. Simple as that. And tomorrow was Valentine's Day.

He'd be glad of the bit extra in his pay packet next week. There could be bottles of wine to buy or an evening out, and counting the pennies never impressed anyone.

It had been a while since he'd felt so sure of himself, but suddenly life had a new purpose. And tomorrow . . . Well, tomorrow might just take care of itself. He grabbed his docket from the 'J-K-L' pigeonhole, turning quickly to check his reflection in the Book Room window and make sure his collar was straight. Not quite quickly enough, though.

'Oi! P, you vain bugger.' That was Shifty, the Book Room PHG – Postman Higher Grade. 'I didn't think you was comin' in.'

'Don't worry about me,' Paul shot back, 'I was with your Mrs. Seen Robbo?'

Shifty laughed: 'You wish, mate, you wish. He'll be on Outward.'

'Next time, *on* time, right?' said Robbo a few moments later as he signed Paul on. He looked around: 'Give Mr Urchfont a hand clearing in the missorts, then back on Outward Primary. Letters, packets, anywhere you can.'

If the Inward area of the sorting office was concerned with post coming into the city, the Outward faced the opposite way. By now the Outward would generally be packed, but today it was heaving. Paul went looking for an empty auto that he could use for clearing in.

The Outward packets section was beyond the Outward letters, which consisted of half a dozen or more back-to-back aisles of letter-sorting frames. Each frame was a near-square, vertical grid of forty-eight pickouts, and all were set side by side along benches that stood at about table height. At this time of day, there was someone standing at each of the sixty or more frames, or sitting on a sprung and cantilevered stool-like contraption that swung out from the underside of the bench. Each person was sorting letters: picking up a handful from the bench in front of them, glancing at the address and throwing them into the appropriate pickout.

The pickouts on a letter frame were arranged in an eight by six grid: A to H across, and 1 to 6 down, and, on the Outward, each pickout was labelled with a different part of the country. Outward Primary pickouts included Beds/Essex (A2), Cheshire (A3), Kent (A4), Notts (A5), Lancs (A6) . . . The busiest pickouts tended to be clustered along the bottom two rows, for speed of sorting. Experienced sorters would toss the letters into these pickouts as if they

were dealing cards, and just as quickly. Do this for a few years and your arm would make the movement without you even needing to register what you were reading on the envelope: Irish/ Scotch (G4), Yorkshire (E6), Merseyside/IOM (C4). If you didn't know the sorting off by heart, or hadn't been taught it, an idiot board listing the main post towns was set along the top of each frame. The casuals and temps would be forever looking up at this, taking ten minutes to throw off each letter. Everyone would be chatting, glancing down, throwing off. Arms moving independently of the conversation. If someone was seen slacking, as Dave happened to be when Paul walked past, then the JV – Robbo in this case – would say something like, 'Talk and sort, Dave. Talk and sort.'

JV stood for 'Job Value,' and designated the different management grades. Job Value One being the district Post Master. Robbo was a JV5.

Dave was a bit of a laugh, but he never stopped bitching and moaning. He was also a right gossip. If something happened anywhere in the building, he'd be the first to know, and he couldn't keep anything to himself.

'Oi! Dave!' Robbo repeated. 'You listenin'? I said, "Talk and sort," please.'

Dave turned around, 'Listen Robbo, mate. Don't pick on me you tosser.' He pointed his bundle of letters at another postman who was standing and laughing at the end of the row. 'Look, bugger over there isn't doin' nothin,' so why the hell should I?'

Paul smiled to himself and walked on. Dave could be arguing the toss with Robbo for ten minutes now, and what Robbo never seemed to get was that he was playing

right into Dave's hands: the longer he tried to make the point, the less work Dave would do.

Everyone had their little ways of shaving off a bit of time or conserving their energy. 'Steady on, son,' Jonesy had said when Paul had first started and was eagerly sorting away at training-school-speed. 'You'll make us all look bad. You gotta pace yourself, understand?' Clearing in the missorts was an opportunity to do just that: to pace yourself. It was a chance to wander around outside the flow, looking busy.

Beyond the letter frames were the Outward packets. These were a number of the same kind of bag frames as on the Inward, and identical in every way except that they were labelled with the same country-wide pickouts as the Outward letters. There was a degree of science to how the grid was arranged, too, which was based, like the letter frames, on traffic analysis. Lighter bags, pickouts for destinations statistically less likely to receive post from Bristol and the South West, would be in the centre. While heavy bags, the ones likely to fill up more quickly, were arrayed at the corners and along the outsides of the frames. On the Outward packets, these would be the Bristol subs, the central London postcodes and the so-called 'Capital Letters', cities around the country that got the most mail.

Over on the Inward, the heaviest bags would be the big Bristol firms, NTVLRO or the National TV Licence Records Office, the BS99 PO Box addresses and the city-centre postcodes.

In theory, the placement of pickouts made lifting the bags off the frames to tip or tie them – by reaching in and unhooking them from underneath – a little quicker and

easier. The training school dogma was that when a bag was about three-quarters full, it would either be cleared in – taken onto the next stage of sorting by someone working on that ‘Road’ or ‘Division’ – or tied off, labelled and put on a flat-bed so that a porter could take it to the Division later or when all the packet frames were tied off at the end of the Lates. Capital Letters went straight to the platform; Bristol codes to the Inward. That was the theory, but, in practice, there was a kind of unspoken competition to never tie off a bag, to stuff and shoehorn ever more into all the bags until they were fit to burst. It was as if tying a bag off was an admission of defeat. If you could make it to the tea break without tying off, you’d won.

Over at bag-opening, there were cages of unopened bags that had just come in by rail or road, and a line of about twenty more autos, each of which was heaving with the tipped-out contents of several more bags’ worth of packets, waiting to be taken over to the Outward Primary and thrown off. Other autos were full of letter bundles or red and green nylon zippered Meter bags, for first or second class post that had been franked in-house by whichever firm, all of which would be taken over to the Facing Table where it would either be loaded onto the CFCs or put the right way round (‘faced’), then boxed up for cancelling and sorting by hand on the Outward letters.

A ton of work, and no sign that this was the last of it. With a wink and an outstretched hand, Paul intercepted an empty that was being rolled back over to bag-opening, ‘I’ll take that. Cheers mate.’ He rested two hands on the fat rubber bumper around the auto’s lip, and turned to wheel it slowly back towards the packet frames.

As long as he was more or less on the move at any one time, Paul could make this little job of clearing in the missorts last for ages *and* right under the JV's nose.

Missorts – or sometimes 'Vague' – was the forty-eighth selection on both letter and packet frames, all the way down the line. Missorts was a way of putting things that had been wrongly sorted back into the main stream; setting them right.

Paul may have liked clearing in the missorts because it was a doss, but Ronnie Urchfont loved it. He loved the puzzle of it; each missorted item was its own little mystery waiting to be solved, which was why he had picked missorts duty in the last-but-one re-sign. This was when everyone in the main building and the subs had to sign for a new duty, in order of seniority. Sometimes you'd stay put, but other times you just had to see what you'd get and hope it wasn't a really duff one because, if it was, whether you liked it or not, you'd be stuck on that duty for the next year or two. Ronnie was not as senior as real old-timers like Jonesy, but he was still senior enough – he'd started as a cadet in the '70s – that he would probably be able to keep the duty until he retired, if he wanted to.

The missorts section had its own letter and packet frame, each identical to the regular Outward equivalents with one exception: instead of a missorts pickout, they had one for the Dead Letter Office in Belfast, where all the ultimately undeliverable items ended up. Ronnie prided himself that hardly anything was sent to Belfast on his watch.

Armed with a blue crayon, a copy of every telephone directory in the country, the official Royal Mail postcode

directories and his own extensive knowledge, Ronnie could set most things back on the right track in a matter of moments.

Sometimes an item would be more of a challenge, and, at those times, he'd reach up to the top of the frame and pull down an ancient foolscap notebook with cracked covers and marbled end papers that was labelled 'The Wisdom' in Gothic script. Contributed to by different hands over the years, this occult book of postal arcana contained a hand-written alphabetical list of hamlets all over the country that were too small to be recorded anywhere else. There were other oddities: villages with the same name situated only a few miles apart, buildings that, through some geographical quirk or planning dispute, didn't have a postcode, as well as a list of what historians would call 'field names.' Ronnie loved the sound of these words. Names like 'the Butts' or 'Cuckoo Pen.' Old names, hundreds of them, which had been attached to areas of common or agricultural land since long before the 16th- and 17th-century enclosures.

'Plashets.' 'Catsbrain.' And sometimes still, even now, these old field names would turn up as the main or only part of an address. Some of these old names had survived in Bristol, too. The Dings, just across the Floating Harbour, was supposedly a corruption of the local term for a common field where willow stems, or withies were harvested. The willows that now grew along the water's edge outside the office were probably the direct descendants of those days, too. And there was even a Catsbrain out by the new site at Filton. That one was supposedly something to do with ploughed earth, not as grisly as it sounded.

Or they'd survive in a street name: Broadways Drive in Broomhill, or Lilymead Avenue in Knowle.

The Wisdom also contained the names of places that might or might not actually exist. Places that only appeared at certain times or in people's imaginations or if looked at in a certain way. Brigadoon was in here, the Australian and Texan versions at least. And 221b Baker Street, London NW1, the residence of one Sherlock Holmes, who, despite never having existed, received a surprising amount of correspondence from all over the world. The North Pole was here too, for all of the seasonal letters to Santa Claus.

Heaven, though, or the afterlife, was more complicated. What do you do, for example, with a letter in a childish hand that's addressed to 'Daddy, in heaven with the angels.' That one would have to go straight to Belfast. What was the alternative? Return to sender?

Ronnie would tackle the missorts with the single-minded gusto of someone doing the cryptic crossword. And he'd nearly always solve the puzzle. Sometimes it was easy, like cracking a straightforward substitution code. Such as when, as often happened, someone seemed to have touch-typed an address while the fingers of one or both hands were out of register on the typewriter or computer keyboard. It's easily done, rest fingers on the wrong keys and suddenly 'Padleigh, BA2,' on the southwest edge of Bath, becomes '[ad;eohj. NA2.'

Some of these errors came up so regularly that Ronnie had added them to The Wisdom, drawing a second column to the right of the alphabetical list which he labelled 'AKA (typing accident).' He'd even drawn out a Qwerty

keyboard and stuck it to the inside front cover to make deciphering them easier. Ronnie knew it was daft, but he sometimes wondered – and only half-jokingly – if someone, or something, *out there* was sending these through just to test him. ‘Nice try, nice try,’ he’d sometimes mutter to himself after successfully decoding yet another of these puzzles and chucking it in the correct pickout with a flourish.

Sometimes, late at night or up too early, it made Ronnie’s head spin. The mathematics of sorting post. Each pickout routed a bundle of letters to another frame – either here or elsewhere in the city or country – where each of *those* forty-eight pickouts routed a bundle of letters to another frame where each of *those* forty-eight pickouts, in turn, routed a bundle of letters to another frame . . . So here you had the forty-eight pickouts of the Outward Primary, and those that didn’t get tied off immediately would be cleared in to a particular Division (Scotch/Irish, say, or West Mids and Staffs) and be sorted down to another forty-eight pickouts, each of which would then be bundled up, chucked in the relevant bag, tied off and dispatched, at the specified time, to travel by rail or road to whatever destination, where the bag would be tipped, the contents sorted through Inward Primary, and so on, until it reached the walk. It was mind boggling, a fractal sequence. You didn’t have to multiply forty-eight by forty-eight for very long before you got into the millions and hundreds of millions: a near infinite number of selections or possibilities for where to put any one letter. No wonder a few of them went astray and ended up on the desk in front of him as missorts.

It didn't do to think about this too much, the scale of the machine. Ronnie brought himself back down to earth by reflecting that the simplicity of the postal system meant that nothing more than a chain of postmen and women standing at a small number of bag or letter frames down the line could negotiate those millions of choices in four or five moves.

Ronnie took great pride in being a fast worker, getting the job done. Paul, on the other hand, was pleased with himself for taking *just long enough* to collect everything in. By the time he'd been round the Outward and then cleared the missorts (letters and packets) from each of the Divisions and stopped for various chats along the way, it was nearly break-time. He rolled his auto alongside the packet frame: 'Right, Ronnie,' he said.

'Yeah, ta,' said Ronnie. 'Tutankhamun's tomb was opened today in 1924. Bet you didn't know that, eh?'

Paul shook his head, but didn't laugh: 'Well I do now, Ron mate.'

'Got any cans?' Ronnie asked, habitually, pointing over at the bin bag of empties he'd filled on the way in – picking them up in the street – and then up in the canteen. He had all kinds: Coca-Cola, Guinness, Nutriment. 'They melt 'em down, for charity.'

'Yeah. I know, Ron. Don't drink the stuff.'

'Posted yer Valentine's cards?' Ronnie asked after a few seconds of silence.

'Oh, yeah,' said Paul. 'Don't worry 'bout that.'

## IV

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May 2012

By now, Oliver O'Hara was aware that, to certain sensitivities, there were some slight cultural and political contradictions inherent in his name. He had developed a stock answer, quoting Morrissey – “Irish Blood, English Heart,” you know what they say!’ – with an apologetic shrug whenever a familiar, slightly askance look seemed to signal someone’s intention to question his historical loyalties. In most walks of life it probably wouldn’t be an issue, and it was hardly as if Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland, the sieges and the Settlement, a century or two of murder and slavery were Oliver’s fault! It was an unholy mix-up and he knew it, but was still reluctant to blame his stupid bloody idiot of a father, a man who wouldn’t have known his own history if it had come in at 20-1, patted him on the back, bought him a pint and lit his cigar.

His late father. It was going to take a while to get used to that one. ‘To lose one parent is unfortunate,’ he thought to himself, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, ‘but to lose two seems like carelessness.’ The poet – the Irish poet! – had come to mind an hour or so before, when Oliver’s train back from the funeral in London had drawn close to Reading station. Oliver had become accustomed to craning his neck for a fleeting glimpse of the redbrick Victorian prison that was

infamous for Wilde's incarceration following his conviction on charges of indecency, and made famous by a poem he had written following his eventual release: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. This was a poem that Oliver had never actually read. He knew the plays by heart, of course, and knew, and occasionally used, one or two of the ballad's more famous lines: 'Each man kills the thing he loves,' say, or the bit about, 'that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky.'

It had been a strange couple of weeks, but his father's death had not been entirely unexpected, as people seemed fond of saying. It was just that it had probably come a bit sooner than Oliver had anticipated, and, consequently, he hadn't really been prepared for it; not consciously anyway. However, given the long period of illness that had presaged the inevitable – the special leave cover won for visits to the paternal bedside and the hours of silent hand-holding, face-wiping and pillow-plumping – it was only when the unwelcome phone call had come at four o'clock one morning that Oliver realised that having a Morrissey track, entitled 'The Father Who Must be Killed', as his ring tone for the past few months might have been neither a complete coincidence nor the best intro music for such a traumatic rite of passage.

Morrissey! That was a good one.

Back in his London days in the early '90s, Oliver had worked in Camden Town for a bit. To save money, he used to cycle there every day from where he lived in Bethnal Green, a route that took him along the Regents Canal towpath, over the Angel and down Pentonville Road. It was nice enough when it wasn't raining, but a bastard if it

was, and that was without the climb back up Pentonville Road on the way home.

At that time, there had been an old row of shops up at the top of St John Street, right by the Angel; not quite derelict but closed down. One of the shops was a newsagent's, and Oliver knew exactly to the month and year when it had shut for good, because posted up in the window and visible behind a security grille that hadn't been opened since was a poster for *The Face* magazine from March 1990. The reason Oliver knew the date was because the cover story of that issue was an interview with Morrissey.

This had been only a couple of years after Mozzer's first solo album, but the interview was a strange affair and one that Oliver, a loyal and abiding Smiths fan, had taken a bit personally. Not least because the journalist, Nick Kent, seemed to be presenting Morrissey as a bit of a sad loser; a deluded fool. 'Morrissey,' the strap line asked: 'Has he lost his grip?' Inside, it was all hunched shoulders in a suburban back garden, and doubts that his second album would ever be released.

In the interview, Morrissey talked about some of his new songs and working with guest vocalist, Suggs. He raved about the by then long-defunct Madness. Did Nick Kent approve of Madness, he asked at one point; that North London Kinks thing? To an increasingly dismayed Oliver, who had bought the magazine specially, the implication had been that no, Nick Kent didn't approve.

Later in the piece, Morrissey had said that, with the right band and the right support, he knew he could be huge in the United States, a proposition that his interlocutor seemed to find hilarious. 'Do you believe in divine

intervention?’ Kent immediately asked. As if this might be what it would take!

Seeing this old poster preserved in the window of a closed-down newsagent’s shop near the Angel as he had cycled past on his way to Camden had taken Oliver aback, but when he had re-read the interview later, it had been with a kind of vicarious delight. ‘Nick Kent was wrong!’ he had thought, triumphantly, while everything that Morrissey had said had come true!

From then on, with each day and week that Oliver cycled past the old newsagent’s, it seemed that Morrissey’s career would go from strength to strength, just as, month by month, his poster in the window was fading.

The second album had come out and it was great, even if it had been padded out with a couple of greatest hits! *Bona Drag* was followed by a third, a fourth and a fifth album! Nick Kent was wrong! Even Madness had reformed, and not only that but now *everyone* liked that North London Kinks thing! To top it all, while the now-faded cover photo glared increasingly weakly from the window of the closed-down newsagent’s, Morrissey really had become huge in the States.

One day as he cycled to work, Oliver had turned onto St John Street and been shocked to see that some of the long terrace containing the newsagent was being demolished. A crane and a digger were eating their way through the shops a few doors down. Already the roof had been taken off of the whole terrace, exposing the buildings to the elements. By now, five years after publication, five years since it had been sealed up in the window of the closed-down shop and five years in which Morrissey had gone from

Nick Kent's deluded loser to a US superstar, the poster was not only faded, it was stained and water-damaged. Photographer Anton Corbin's beautiful inky browns and blacks had turned into washed-out blues. The colours were running. The paper crinkled.

Over the course of the next week or so, the demolition ball worked its way steadily closer, and skip after skip-load of rubble was removed, until, one day, Oliver cycled past and was horrified to see that the shop had gone. There was not a trace of it left. It had been destroyed, and with it Corbin's by now painfully faded portrait of Steven Patrick Morrissey on the cover of *The Face* magazine from March 1990. All that was left was some corrugated iron fencing lining the pavement on the left hand side of St John Street.

When he arrived at the office a few minutes later, not a word of a lie, his friend Bill, a former Camden Town punk and fellow Smiths fan came running over. 'Olly, have you heard?' he asked, ashen-faced. 'Morrissey's in hospital!'

He wondered where Bill was now. The Angel, Islington. Camden Town. If it seemed a lifetime ago, that was because it *was* another life. In those days, you could even smoke at work, or in pubs and on trains!

Now Oliver pushed his ticket into the exit barrier and shouldered his way through the congested ticket office of Bristol Temple Meads and past W. H. Smith's, rolling a cigarette as he went so that he might be able to light up all the sooner. He stumbled out of the side entrance, through the old shed and down the narrow path, dodging the wheelie-case brigade and cyclists coming the other way, before finding himself sitting with the sun on his face and

his rucksack flung down on the grass beside him, smoking only his second cigarette of the day. Thirty seconds later, he was thinking, as bereaved offspring usually do, that he really ought to give up. Two minutes later, he realised that what he actually really needed was to go to the loo. Luckily, there was a newish Starbucks nearby.

It felt good to be back in Bristol, even if he was still wearing his funeral garb, and not just because the sun was out, although that certainly helped. He had moved here more or less on a whim – someone at work had suggested it! – in order to put as much distance between himself and his ex-wife as he could. That was a dozen or more years ago now, and it had been surprisingly straightforward. Oliver had applied for a job in those glory days of Higher Education expansion, when there seemed to be plenty of them to go round, and to his surprise he had got it! He found somewhere to rent, hired a van and moved down here, all in the space of about two months.

It had been easier to achieve ‘escape velocity’ than he was expecting it should have been.

Easier than he deserved, probably.

He hadn’t expected Angela to turn up at the funeral after all these years, and, perhaps foolishly, when she did, he had given her his new mobile number, although he hadn’t expected her to call quite so soon, if at all. When she did, the other people queuing for coffee looked around. He thought that they were probably wondering who would be so naff as to have a Morrissey ring tone, and, if so, they were probably right because he certainly felt naff as he took it out of his pocket. Performing this simple action angrily, as if it were the phone’s fault, only compounded

things. It made him look even more stupid as he fumbled the button in an unsuccessful attempt to answer the phone more quickly: 'Hello?'

Their respective curiosities satisfied, those other customers now turned back to their conversations and books, their newspapers and smartphones, their buckets of coffee.

'Sorry about your father. I came to find you and say cheerio, but I think you must have already gone,' she said.

Too bloody right, he thought, but said, 'Ah! Sorry about that.'

'Sorry, you're breaking up a bit,' she said. The line wasn't very good. While they were talking, he paid for an iced coffee and found a free chair at one of the tables that were set up outside the cafe.

'Yes, I had to get back,' he lied. 'Couldn't stay for long. So, you looked well. Are you well?'

'What?' she asked.

She had looked well, too. The intervening years hadn't taken too much of a toll. He wondered if the same could be said of himself, but then, taking a sip of iced coffee, he decided not to go down that particular path. 'I said I had to get back,' he repeated. 'I couldn't stop! If I had known you'd be coming, I might have suggested a coffee, but there you go. I had forgotten that you used to get on quite well with my father. Anyway, it was nice of you to come,' he was babbling now, and he knew it. 'I had to get back for . . .'

'Sorry? I can't really hear you. It's a bad line,' she said. 'Anyway, just wanted to say that I hope you're OK. Bye.'

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February 2010

There was plenty of time. Young though she was, Jessica understood herself well enough to know that she would rather arrive somewhere early than rush in at the last minute, creating a drama. And a job interview was no exception. Her mum with her self-declared, free-spirited nature certainly never understood this side of Jessica, saw it as somehow uptight.

‘You’re just like your father,’ she’d say. ‘You should relax a little bit.’

But Jessica had grown up watching her mum rushing around and always being late, always being distracted by this and that, freaking out about what to wear, suddenly deciding to tidy the front room or to open her post on the way out of the door. ‘What’s relaxed about that?’ Jessica always wondered, as she potted around in her mother’s chaotic but well-intentioned trail. Maybe that was why she always preferred to have a little time to collect her thoughts. A nice slow stroll always seemed to recharge her batteries; even a walk through the city. Sometimes she barely noticed where she was and would often find herself day-dreaming, singing some song softly to herself, and realise that she’d arrived.

The way in which Jessica definitely did take after her

dad was in her love of music. Unlike most of her friends, Jessica was not into contemporary R&B or pop, and she couldn't stand *X-Factor*. Like everyone, Jessica took a kind of civic pride in the Bristol sound of the '80s and '90s. She'd heard her mum's Massive Attack CDs more times than she could count, and *Maxinquaye* was like the soundtrack to her childhood. But Jessica had had a revelation when she was about eighteen and accidentally rediscovered the music of the very early part of her life.

At that time, she had been wondering whether she should move her bedroom up to the attic for a bit more privacy. So she had got the step ladder out, found the torch and had a look. It was way too messy, though. It had been nothing like the roomy loft she had imagined – a stage set for her burgeoning bohemian identity – far from it. With all the beams and joists holding up the roof, there was no clear space even to put a bed. What she had found, though, as she poked around in a few boxes, was a dusty, but basically sound, old Technics turntable and amplifier, two speakers and a couple of boxes of records.

She'd recognised some of the album covers immediately, although it had probably been ten years or more since she'd seen them. In particular, there was a series of reggae compilations, in creased and battered cardboard covers, called *Creation Rockers*. These all featured the same, fantastic picture on the cover. A painting of a Jamaican street market peopled by some finger-snapping gent in a pork pie hat and dark blue suit, women carrying baskets, a baby girl dragging a blanket and some guy bragging to a Rasta on a motorbike. Faces so familiar they could have been family.

She'd sat up there in the loft for hours, trying to marry

up song titles with the sounds she used to hear around the house as a little girl. 'A Place Called Africa' by Junior Byles.

Man! Jessica could remember her dad singing it to her, almost feel his breath on her cheek. A consciousness-raising reggae tune like that would never have been intended as a lullaby, but that's what it had become in their house when Jessica was a baby. Maybe just because it was a song her dad knew well, and, if she was restless some nights, he'd have to go through every song he knew to get his little girl off to sleep! And that one song had stuck somehow. She could remember being ill in bed, and her dad coming upstairs with a cold flannel for her forehead. Him sitting with her for a while and singing a few songs, his voice cracking at the high notes.

If she'd had a way to get the hi-fi or the boxes of records down out of the loft, she might have spent the rest of the day actually listening to these songs, but, for now, looking was all she could do. She'd have to get someone to help, and she knew that her mum was maybe not the best person to ask.

Arriving in the city centre, humming something or other as usual, Jessica found she had half an hour to play with before her interview, which was in one of the many anonymous office buildings off Broad Quay. Perfect. She bought a banana from Martin's to keep her energy up – one of her mum's little theories.

Jessica walked up to Woodes, and, once she'd paid for her pot of tea, found a chair on the pavement outside and re-read the interview letter. Jessica had an idea that this job might be more about appearances and attitude than

experience, so she was preparing for the interview as if it were an audition for a play. She hoped that she looked the part, rehearsed questions and answers in her mind, and practiced a friendly, open expression, a smiling, 'Hello! Nice to meet you!'

Extrovert and chatty was how she would play it. So she would need to look for something that could be the object of a quick complement as soon as she walked into the room. She imagined shaking hands with her interviewers, making a good impression, then: 'Oh, what lovely earrings! Where did you get them?'

High overhead, the late morning sun glinted on the golden unicorn. It was only February, but there was a freshness to the air, a whiff of new growth which gave her a familiar 'spring' sort of feeling. This half-thought was as delicate and fleeting as the faint promise of a breeze that she felt on her cheek, and moved on just as quickly, to be forgotten until another morning next year when the sun would again seem just that little bit warmer.

She regretted her choice of table for a minute. The man and woman seated next to her wouldn't shut up. Just kept banging on about this and that: 'managed funds' and RDAs and which AV supplier to go with. 'He doesn't seem to realise that it's not *about* time-scales,' the man said, and they both laughed at such foolishness. They seemed too young to be having such a boring workplace conversation. To Jessica's mind, if you'd escaped from the office for long enough to have a cup of tea, you'd talk about something other than work. *Anything* else. What was on telly last night, perhaps. As it was, Jessica had the feeling that they were like children dressing up, wanting to impress each

other with their earnestness, trying the mannerisms of the modern office on for size and not noticing or caring that they didn't really fit.

Something about the weather seemed to be putting everyone in a good mood. A car driver flashed his lights at a van driver who had stopped to let him pull out of St George's Road and turn up the hill. Three men wearing suits and bow ties came out of a yellowish building on the opposite side of the street, locking the door behind them and laughing. She'd never noticed it before, but, above their heads, beneath a classical looking porch (for some reason the word 'portico' popped into her mind), was a carved stone frieze of toga-wearing characters. It looked like the pattern you'd get on a box of soap or something. The men turned and walked down the hill.

Round the side of a dark-windowed bar called the Java Cafe, a tall, blue plastic commercial refuse bin was chained to the wall, while, on her side of the street, a pile of rubbish bags and empty cardboard boxes were taped together in a tidy pile next to the lamp post.

A scruffy-haired man with a great yellow nicotine-stained beard was walking up the hill and wearing an impossibly greasy-looking padded coat that may once have been dark blue. Over his shoulder was a kind of improvised duffel bag that had been made from an old grey sack, tied diagonally from top-corner to bottom-corner with dirty yellow string to create a kind of strap. She wasn't going to stare; she'd been brought up too well for that, but she did discreetly watch as he walked purposefully up to the bin and, after a quick glance up and down the street, opened the lid. After carefully examining a couple

of yellow Styrofoam fast food containers, he put them into his sack, then turned and walked quickly back down the hill towards the Council offices.

Jessica drank the last of her now-cold tea then topped up her lipstick. She quickly scanned the table – mobile, mirror – then stood up to walk the short distance back down to the centre. Hearing a familiar trundling rattle behind her, she turned and had to step aside quickly to avoid a rucksack-wearing mountain-biker, who, in turn, narrowly avoided being broadsided by an elderly man on an mobility scooter. As he wobbled off past the Falafel King kiosk, a bunch of over-confident office boys in velvet-collared geezer drag – too-big shirt collars, too-fat tie knots; the kind you’d avoid in a bar – pointed at the cyclist, laughing and jeering, before one of them turned to eyeball her. She pretended not to notice and looked instead at a double decker bus that was parked on the pavement, advertising some government scheme to do with getting people back to work.

‘Are you on board?’ the sign asked.

‘Let’s hope so,’ Jessica thought to herself.

## VI

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February 1996

Paul could barely concentrate all night. It was busy, of course. Not quite up there with Christmas, but Valentine's Day did mean that the system had to cope with extra traffic. All those cards meant that there was plenty of docket there for the taking if you wanted it.

Luckily, one of the senior men was off sick, so Paul got shifted to cover his duty out on Station Service, while his own got put out for someone else to cover on overtime. It was hard work, especially from midnight to 01:00, and cold sometimes. But there was something about this duty that he loved. Being out in the air, working at your own pace. The sight of a train rounding that bend and drawing into the platform. The Temple Meads soundtrack, idling train engines, so persistent that you stopped noticing it after a while. The smell of diesel fumes in the cold night air.

Being up here was infinitely better than his usual night shift duty of sorting the Inward. It felt like a bit of a release, even if a lot of it involved nothing more than getting bags onto the conveyor that took them from the platform across to bag-opening. At least it got you outside. And when it was quiet, you could nip over to the kiosk by the taxi-rank for a cuppa or use the station buffet when it was open.

The other thing was the added bonus of 'clear up and go.' Management were always trying to kill off this 'Spanish practice,' but the beauty of 'clear up and go' was that it gave you an incentive to work just that little bit harder, because once you had finished your particular duty and there was nothing left to sort, you could go home even if it was half an hour early. It was as if management hated the idea that something they didn't – couldn't – control, might actually be of benefit to the workers. But without it, why would you really bust your balls to get everything done? Some official notion of 'quality' or 'everyone's a customer' was way too abstract to make you blast through a massive pile of work. Why stress yourself if all it meant was that you got transferred to some other duty right up to the end of your shift? Robbed of that incentive, you'd just end up dawdling and clock-watching.

When he was up on Station Service, 'clear up and go' meant that Paul wouldn't need to hang around the Inward for the last tie-up at 05:45, when everything got bundled up, the bags tied and labelled and sent out to deliveries. Instead, he could disappear as soon the last lot of bags had been got onto the conveyor and across to the office. By 05:20 tops he'd be on his bike. Offski.

Being part of the station crew, Paul felt in touch with the wider world, as if these great red TPOs connected him with the rest of the country. You could lose sight of that if you were stuck inside all night, sitting on your arse and throwing-off hour after hour. A letter is a letter is a letter. Being up here, he could practically feel the shape and size of the country through the actions of this great machine that, for all its scale and complexity, was

hidden from most people's sight. All the things that happened to a letter between the pillar box and the postman on your doorstep were out of sight and out of mind. It wasn't just the TPOs either. There were the 'steamers' – it sounded so old-fashioned – that linked up all the Scottish islands: Stornoway to Kyle; Brodick to Ardrossan; the Isle of Man to Liverpool. The flights from Scilly to Penzance, Campbeltown to Glasgow.

Paul had been up in the Postmaster's office once, on Remembrance Day the year before. He'd been the only 'trained first aider' on duty that Sunday morning, so, on behalf of the office's St John Ambulance branch, he'd had to lay the wreath at the memorial. Full uniform, Jonesy had said, and Paul had wondered if he even knew where some of that stuff was.

Paul hadn't worn full uniform since his first day out of the six-week training programme, when he and all the other new recruits had been taken to the stores to get their uniforms. He'd walked away with a mailbag full of clothes: four pale blue shirts, two short-sleeved, two long; two pairs of trousers, one heavy, one lightweight; jumper; jacket; thermal coat; shoes. The next day, he'd worn everything: tie, jacket, coat, the lot. He didn't do that again. But the Remembrance service was different. What are you going to do? It's a respect thing. Even the union reps wore their ties, and that never happened.

The service was pretty formal. Everyone standing quietly in the foyer, where the plaque to fallen postal workers was installed, and, after the Chaplain had said a few words, they'd taken turns to each lay their respective wreaths. There was him, someone from management,

someone from the union, a cadet and a couple of other suits. There were bugles and everything. The 'Last Post.' And afterwards, upstairs, there was a glass of sherry and a plate of sandwiches.

On the wall outside the Postmaster's inner sanctum on 2M, the second floor mezzanine, were black and white photos of the office, with old-fashioned vans and stuff. There was also a huge map of Britain that showed all these routes; the steamers, the TPOs, the planes. Paul had been staring at it in a kind of wonder. Like a kid looking at a train set.

'Good, init! Bit out of date, that one, but I like it,' the Postmaster had said, clapping him on the shoulder. 'Pride in what you do, son. I like that.'

Paul had grinned, but the Postmaster had steered him towards the window and looked out towards Totterdown, saying, 'Ever thought of switching to management, Mr Johnson? Could be a good future, you know. Good officer like you. Get you on training at another office. There's prospects in the Royal Mail, you know.'

Eh? Steady on a bit, thought Paul, looking to see if anyone was in earshot. If this kind of talk got out, his mates would rip the piss out of him for years.

'Come up here anytime you want to talk, Mr Johnson.'

'Okay, I'll 'ave a think,' was all Paul could say, but he couldn't really see himself as management. It didn't fit his easy come, easy go philosophy. It would be too much like hard work, having to do battle every day with bastards like Dave. Everyone taking the piss. Fancy that though, he'd thought, as he ran back down the stairs two at a time.

After that Remembrance Sunday, the map on the Post-

master's wall, Paul saw the TPOs in a whole new light. He was amazed that such a complicated system could ever work.

The trains had always set a kind of rhythm for the office. A pulse. It was hard to believe that this was all going to disappear. Around the clock and regular as, pulling into Temple Meads with a sigh. Door slams, diesel rasps and guards' whistles as they pulled out.

First, at 19:00, came the Plymouth to Bristol – with pick-ups from Penzance, Camborne, Redruth, Truro, St Austell, Liskeard, Plymouth, Totnes, Newton Abbot, Exeter, Taunton, Bridgewater and Weston-super-Mare. The Midlands North pulling out at 19:30.

Then a quiet spell before the 'Midnight Miracle,' which began when the Derby to Bristol came in with a hiss of brakes at 23:50. It would be all hands on deck then till 01:00, and the office would be more or less deserted as everyone had to muck in to turn around all the TPOs. There were mail bags to get off the trains, bags to put on the trains, bags to transfer from one train to another. Organised chaos it was, or simply chaos. You couldn't organise it or supervise it, the whole thing simply relied on everyone knowing what to do. The South Wales TPO Up at 00:10. Then the Great Western TPO Down at 00:35 crossing over with the Great Western Up at 00:36, both idling there for a while, the Down pulling out at 00:57, the Up at 00:58. Friendships were forged in that twenty-odd minute stop. The last of the late duties getting off home at 01:00, but barely time for everyone else to draw breath before the South Wales TPO Down pulls out at 01:05; the Bristol to Derby at 01:10 ('except Saturday

night and Sunday night preceding Easter, Whitsun and August bank holiday'), dropping off at Gloucester, Cheltenham, Worcester, Birmingham, Tamworth, Burton-on-Trent. Then, slowly clearing the platforms of work, getting it over to the conveyor, loading on the bags, until that moment of silence when the platforms were deserted. The empty cages tidied. Time for a quick fag or two, pencil out from behind the ear, ticking off the paperwork. Looking out at the Bristol night. Smelling the sea if the wind was right. Sheltering from the rain or looking at the stars.

The Midlands TPO South would pull in at 04:40. Then there would be a little lull before the last flurry at the end of the night, but that was generally left for the earlyies. Paul would be long gone by the time it came to loading up the last TPO: the Bristol to Plymouth, which left on the dot of 06:25 with deliveries and direct bags, enclosure bags and labelled bundles for Weston-super-Mare, Bridgewater, Taunton, Exeter, Newton Abbot, Totnes, Plymouth, Liskeard, St Austell, Truro, Redruth, Camborne, Penzance and all the towns, the subs and the walks beyond, and then, thrown on top, a single bag – light as a feather most mornings – containing the few Plymouth missorts that had missed the Great Western TPO Down earlier in the night.

Working nights suited Paul, at least for now. Even if the best part of it was the dawn cycle ride home on the battered old racer he'd had since he was a teenager. Some people hated nights. They couldn't hack it. Ronnie always went on about the spookiness of it. He talked about ghosts and rats, or conspiracy theories about the Knights Templar. An ancient Jewish graveyard that had been discovered

when the office was built on the site of an old cattle market. With Ronnie, it was hard to tell if he believed all this stuff or was just trying to wind you up. Mind you, Ronnie was a trivia nut. Always reading something, memorising another useless fact. Spent his mornings in the reference library, apparently. Or the museum. He was the kind of bloke who'd be great in a pub quiz team, but you'd never actually want to go for a drink with him.

But, now the office was moving, it wasn't just Ronnie that was at it; there was loads of this kind of talk: pre-emptive nostalgia, talking it up, rehearsing the stories you'd tell once this place was emptied and everyone was working out in bloody Filton for God's sake.

When the office moved out there, things would have to change, Paul felt. For one thing, how the hell would he cycle all the way to Filton? Maybe he wouldn't need to. Maybe he'd get transferred to a nice city centre walk or one of the subs; it was all up for grabs. Ten years' seniority had to count for something, and he knew a lot of the real oldsters would sooner take early retirement than move.

The year before, there'd been two lunar eclipses. Two in one year. Paul had never seen anything quite like it. It had been a clearish April night, and they'd all stopped work for a bit. Paul had stood and watched with a child-like kind of wonder as the shadow of the Earth had slipped across the face of the Moon. The Moon had turned a deep, dark red for some reason. It's no wonder people were superstitious in the olden days.

Come to think of it, it had been a bloody awful year.

Nothing as exciting as a lunar eclipse tonight. But at 05:00, with a few bags still left to shift, Jonesy gave him

the nod: 'Don't worry son, I'll get these. Go on, piss off!'

It was all part of the give and take, and Paul knew that the return favour would be called in next time Jonesy wanted to skip off and play an early morning round of golf. A lot of the senior men seemed to live for that 05:00 dash out to the courses at Knowle or Ashton.

His arms and back ached a bit from chucking so many bags and from doing the docket on top of a full shift. On other mornings like this, he might go down to the gatehouse, where there was a kettle and a box of teabags. Paul didn't envy those guys. It was a pretty quiet job most of the time, raising and lowering the barrier, but they never knew if tonight was going to be the night that some hardnut would turn up at the gate with a sawn-off shotgun and they'd have to press the Bandit Alarm and be off sick for six months from the stress of it. Paul stowed his own mug down there. It'd come with an Easter egg. He would sometimes make some tea and then go and sit on one of the old capstans on the quayside next to the office. Stir his tea. Have a cigarette. Spot a fox or two. Feel the city waking up around him. It was nicer in the summer, when the sun was up and he could listen to the dawn chorus and watch the ducks or swans. See the coots build their nests and the odd cormorant wobbling gracelessly through the air, or standing and stretching its wings. It felt like a precious bit of his own time that he had carved out. He'd watched the seasons come and go for a few years like that. Enjoyed the feeling of a job well done.

Hard to imagine that this leafy little wharf and the Floating Harbour itself was once teeming with industry and life. Lives were what was being bought and sold a lot

of the time, too. And, in a city like Bristol, this might mean that, only a few generations back, your ancestors were growing rich off the backs of mine. And this wasn't just a black and white thing either. Plenty of white people, British and Irish, were shipped off to the colonies from here before they brought Africa into the mix. It was all pretty well hidden these days, but you didn't have to scratch the surface too hard to find a reminder. What was it? Half a million people traded by Bristol's Merchant Venturers alone. One of the more conscious union men had told him this. He had said that eighteen per cent would die on the boats. 'Politricks' wasn't Paul's thing, but a man needs to know history like that. Eighteen per cent! Paul tried to work it out. Half a million. OK, divide that by five so you get a hundred thousand . . . What's eighteen fives? Seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five: ninety thousand. Jesus! Ninety thousand bodies thrown overboard. The real backdrop to all that Georgian elegance. You never see that in your *Prides and Prejudices*.

Like most people you could ask, Paul hadn't intended to work for the Post Office, but the job had come up at exactly the moment he needed one: Sooz pregnant with their first, their only, child. He'd figured he might hold it down for a few months, get some cash in the bank; but here he was, ten years later and no better off really. Actually that was an understatement. Far, far worse off was more like it. Working sixty, seventy hours a week for money and a family – that was a laugh – a family that he didn't even see, apart from the odd day when he'd pick his daughter up from primary school and walk her home before coming in to start his docket. Boy did he resent that.

While the family, his family, had once been what he was working for, he had started to feel that Suzanne was taking him for granted. She had taken to calling him a 'postie' because she knew he hated it. Then she started getting up before he got home. Talk about ships passing in the night. No wonder they'd split up. You can't conduct a relationship with scribbled notes and five minutes here and there. Suzanne had never even seemed to be that bothered that they spent most nights apart. He'd crawl into an empty bed, a still-just-about-warm bed, after leaving a present for his daughter on the kitchen table: a box of Variety Pack cereal that he'd buy from the staff canteen for her breakfast. Nice little touches, but not a real partnership. Nothing's ever that simple, but that had been the start of it. Paul was sure of that. Then came the arguments and accusations. The doorstep confrontations. Finding himself a flat. Moving out.

On other mornings like this, Paul might disappear for a bit, sit there and think to himself, sing a song or two: 'Natty Rebel' by U-Roy. The Gladiators on the vocal, bettering the Marley original. Man, those Gladiators. Albert Griffiths, what a voice! When was it he saw them live? '85? '86? It may have been the 'erb, but man, they were hard: *electric!* There was nothing soft about some tough and rootsy reggae. He used to bring in tapes on his bust up old Walkman, but spending a fortune on batteries every week was not high on his list of priorities these days. And why pay for a machine to hear music when a man can just sing? Cycling home after a hard night, the sun picking out the coloured backs of the houses along Totterdown, a song like that could make it all seem worthwhile. It went deep,

and, like the man say, who feels it knows it. The mighty U-Roy cutting in, scattin' along: 'Said I'm a living man and I got a lot of work to do.' Paul would just nod his head. So simple but true enough.

He was a working man now because that's what a man has to do, especially a loving pauper like him. But a song like that gave Paul a kind of connection, with his father maybe, God rest his soul, and all those other generations of men going out to the fields or whatever. Working for the man, but taking a moment of rebellious pleasure from being up with the sun and seeing a robin singing in the tree. Just looking up for a moment from whatever thankless task they were labouring on.

There was no time for that today though. No cups of tea at the end of this shift, because Paul was a man on a mission. He had to get home and shower for one thing. Fresh himself up. Splash it all over. Wake up a bit.

'Nothin' in this world they could a-never do,' he bawled, grabbing his bike and swinging his leg over the saddle. Yes, today was the day. If all went according to plan, there'd be a knock on his door in two-three hours that could put paid to all this worry about the past.

'Nothin' in this world,' he sang, 'they could a-never never do a-never do / to stop Natty Dread from stepping up higher and higher . . .'

## VII

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September 2012

Perhaps Oliver was a bit more vulnerable than usual. It was still only a few months since his father had died, and everyone said that the grieving process took a couple of years. But that wasn't what had just made him, this room and possibly the entire world seem to shudder on their collective axes for a second. Nor even the habitual fear of autumn which meant that, every year, no matter how great a summer he might have had, the recognition of September's signs always felt like an admission of defeat. This summer didn't really count, for obvious reasons, but, even so, it had probably been as good a non-holiday as a single man in his fifties, who has recently lost his father, was likely to have in his own flat.

The non-surprise of darker evenings or the sudden calculation that the equinox was only weeks, or days, away – conkers! – such things always made him feel as if he had blinked at the beginning of June and somehow summer had vanished before it had begun.

But, worse than that, his September blues always seemed to be less about the regret of something passing and more about the fear of what was to come. All of which manifested itself as a familiar feeling of *déjà vu* that he knew was fleeting and would be forgotten as soon as it

arrived, but which, while it lasted, made him feel as if he was doomed to get back on some terrible roller coaster ride from which there would be no escape until the final assessments were finished the following June, at which point the machine would spit him out, exhausted.

The seasonal cycle also meant that these precious few weeks of 'research' – the term used to dignify his personal reading habits – would have to be put on hold in favour of a return to that dreaded, and seemingly endless, round of course handbook updates, clarifications of marking procedures, recaps of processes, deadlines for hand-ins, filling in of feedback sheets, assessment criteria, timetabling, faculty meetings, external examiners, research groups, management training, flattery and on and on. All of which was, of course, a full time job in its own right, never mind the actual job in hand, which was the creation and delivery to a punishing timetable of beautifully crafted modular learning experiences to students – customers! – whose indifference could be astounding and sometimes even seemed to be directly proportional to the staggering personal liability that they might not yet have quite realised such learning now incurred; debts that were generally bigger, these days, than Oliver and Angela's first mortgage.

If such thinking seemed a little overwrought, and the loss of his father notwithstanding, Oliver was, of course, more than qualified to make a drama out of a crisis. And it wasn't that he didn't love being a lecturer. He absolutely did. He loved it with a passion, with a thoughtful attentiveness to matters academic and pastoral, and with a substantially wider repertoire than most of his colleagues of

the kinds of obliquely illuminating apocrypha – and, if all else failed, flat out gossip – that could make a three-hour seminar on practically any aspect of late twentieth century dramaturgy or the History and Theory of Performance seem almost fun. Oliver was doing his dream job, and how many people could say that? But the slightly sad truth was that Oliver was becoming increasingly aware that he would really rather not be speaking himself hoarse in seminar room or lecture theatre, but sitting in the studious, ‘pencils-only’ calm of a library reading room, perusing the catalogues and filling in request chits. Oliver loved waiting to see what might emerge from behind the counter. Which new, old book would be handed to him this time? What treasure – its spine and boards protected from gravity and wear, perhaps, by its being placed on a rare book support pillow with accompanying rosary of lead beads – would appear some half-an-hour to forty-minutes later? His ‘research’ then was pleurably aimless. There were no outputs required – thank God! – no research questions to address, nor methodological leaps expected. It wasn’t really *going* anywhere as such, not in that way. There were no essays or conference papers in the deadline-pipeline, but then, wasn’t that the whole point of research? The journey rather than the destination? Art for art’s sake? All the better for not being instrumentalised into research impact case studies! But his catalogue searches and his reading were certainly obeying some sort of pattern, even if it was only a gravitational one, since he was circling a particularly dense corpus and it seemed that this was pulling him into an ever lower orbit, expanding correspondingly to fill his horizons. The location was not

entirely coincidental either, since the object of Oliver's summer holiday reading for some years now had been the Bristol poet, Thomas Chatterton, for information relating to whom Oliver had, by now, developed an insatiable appetite. In common with most people, perhaps, Oliver's sole awareness of Chatterton had, for a long time, been a superficial familiarity with Henry Wallis's painting of a knickerbockered youth lying dead in a garret, known from reproductions that had been Blu-Tacked to a couple of the teenaged Oliver's friends' bedroom walls. While a relative newcomer to the city and still oblivious to his future obsession, Oliver had bought an ex-local authority top floor flat in Redcliffe, liking both the view and the island-like nature – the 'slightly out of place vibe,' as he would put it – of what seemed to him that odd little hill. And even once he'd moved in and the evidence was right in front of him, it took a year or two of hurrying along Portwall and Redcliffe Way before Oliver actually noticed that the stranded house – with its adjacent, oddly-angled false façade, which stood alone by the side of the dual carriageway as if washed there by the tides – was the very place where Chatterton's short life had begun in 1752.

Moderately excited by this discovery, he had been somewhat surprised by what felt to him, in his ignorance, to be local complacency on the subject. It seemed as if people were so inured to this fact, that far from celebrating it, they seemed embarrassed by the fleeting presence so long ago of a poet in their midst. Worse, they were too quick to condemn Chatterton, to parrot received idiocies about 'Chatterton the forger' in relation to his early 'Rowley' poems, which were, Oliver discovered, a series

of strange and bafflingly complex metafictional works – writing about writing, elaborate fantasies about courtly poets – written pseudonymously, in a simulated Middle English, as if in anticipation of Jorge Luis Borges or J. R. R. Tolkien, by the barely teenaged poet. It was far easier to repeat a sound bite, he supposed, than to actually *read something* for yourself!

Inspired by what he saw as a puzzling collective ignorance, Oliver had made it his business to do just this, initially as a casually stated and minor act of defiance, as if Chatterton were a pop group he had attached himself to because they were ‘so bad they’re good.’

He had decided to read *everything* by or about Chatterton, starting with the first thing that came to hand – which just happened to be a dog-eared, second-hand copy of the novel by Peter Ackroyd – but heading quickly for what the university lecturer in him would have referred to as the primary texts. He had been reduced to eating pasta for a month when he’d forked out a few hundred pounds for the bicentenary edition of Donald S. Taylor and Benjamin B. Hoover’s two volume *Complete Works*.

It was this growing fascination that saw Oliver carefully photocopying cuttings from the *Times* newspaper of August 1938, which he had found tightly folded in an architect’s notebook in the Bristol Record Office collection. The cuttings were as brown and delicate as pressed flowers, and as Oliver had carefully unfolded them he wondered if anyone else had ever done so.

The first cutting, from 12 August 1938, reported that ‘the house in which Thomas Chatterton, the tragic boy poet, was born’ was ‘just about to be demolished’, and

‘the destruction of the old school building will follow’.

A further story, entitled ‘Chatterton’s House Saved,’ reported on 13 August 1938 that, thanks to the intervention of the Vestry of St Mary Redcliffe, ‘the house is to be saved’, and that the front wall of the school was, ‘to be re-erected on the lines of the new Western Road, some 47ft from its original site’. The article ended: ‘The corporation have made a sacrifice in preserving the cottage, the site of which, if they had pursued their scheme, would have afforded them a useful piece of salvage land.’

The third cutting was a letter to the editor, published in the *Times* of 17 August 1938, from a Mr G. W. Wright of Stockwell, London, which pointed out that, far from being moved from its *original* position, the wall had already been moved some fourteen years earlier. The school building had needed to be extended, by building over the ‘small but pleasant plot of grass in front with two trees,’ bringing the front wall up ‘to the edge of the public pavement on Pile Street, to create a new Parish Institute’, that was itself intended by the authorities to ‘form “a memorial to the poet”.’

In his same letter of 17 August 1938, Wright goes on to describe visiting the house (as distinct from the school) in 1921 and meeting the then aged tenants, a certain ‘Miss Kent and her sister, one of whom had had the interesting experience of visiting the garret in Brooke Street, Holborn, where Chatterton died, shortly before it was demolished’. Wright concludes by underscoring that his purpose in writing is to preserve – and correct – such records, which are, he suggests, ‘redolent of the city that produced the gifted Charity Boy’.

Oliver spent his holidays poring over 19th-century photographs of Pile and Phippen Streets for sightings of that same school building in its earlier condition, when it had been bounded not by a dual carriageway and a Pay and Display car park, as now, but by a tight jostle of shops and houses, what looked like a cherry tree in bloom, and, in 1902, tight up to its eastern wall, a shabby-looking fun fair. He attended events organised by the good people of the Thomas Chatterton Society, and would sit there scribbling notes, shaking his head or nodding in agreement with eminent guest speakers.

It was Oliver's acknowledgement of the boy poet's genius that saw him agree with Donald S. Taylor that the fictional Rowley's, and thus Chatterton's, aesthetic statement of intent in one of the prefaces to his great tragedy, *Ælla*, was, yes, 'a general protest against cautious plodding in poetry.' Oliver then turned this protest into his own personal motto of radical creative transformation!

'Verse maie be goode,' he would shout at his slower students, 'botte poesie *wantes more*.'

Or, 'For God's sake!' he might say, in exasperation, to the student showing over-reliance on theoretical commentary. "'The thyng yttself moste bee *yttes owne* defense"!'.

Now Oliver had put filial grief to one side in order to spend every possible hour of this, the last week of his summer holiday, here in the Record Office, where he was slowly wading through an enormous bound folio of so-called Chattertoniana, hundreds of items of ephemera relating to 'the marvellous boy,' that had been collected in the mid-19th century by one Richard Smith, an infamous Bristol surgeon, town councillor and patron of the arts.

And it was this, something he was reading in Smith's folio, which had caused Oliver to almost cry out in shock!

Or, more correctly, something that he was transcribing, copy-typing, into an open document on his laptop.

Had he understood that correctly? Surely it couldn't be right! Oliver went back to the beginning of the letter from William Blake and carefully re-read each word. He found it amazing, thrilling, to think that Blake was – in contemporary terms – a Chatterton fan! That London's great 'rebel angel', Blake, had been influenced by Chatterton! Incredible that here, from 1790, just one year after the first limited publication of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, was a letter from the great political radical and non-conformist, the visionary poet and artist, to none other than 'My dear friend', George Catcott of Bristol, who had been one of Chatterton's earliest sponsors and promoters.

In the letter, Blake, writing from his then residence in Poland Street, Soho, in London, decries a certain 'Mr Cooke'. In fact, the Rev. George Cooke of Oriel College, Oxford, who had been another actor in the Chatterton controversy. Cooke was an ancient manuscript specialist who had initially thought that Chatterton's Rowley poems really were medieval artefacts, and who would later write about this in documents that Oliver had been to inspect in the National Archive.

Blake's handwriting was not the easiest to read, but, after the initial introductions, he again calls Catcott, 'My friend,' then qualifies this with a parenthetical note of high praise, followed by a short exposition of Cooke's ingratitude:

My Friend (for whom I shall ever claim the applause of the Literary World for His own discovery) has not had even a Letter or Hint from Mr Cooke altho' from Him Mr Cooke is solely oblig'd for Directions where to examine & how to discover the Facts and Circumstances relating to Our Immortal Bard – I think then I need not say why I have not written to you – For we have been long in expectation of information from Mr Cooke (which gratitude ought to have dictated)

Catcott's discovery being, of course, Thomas Chatterton himself: 'Our Immortal Bard', as Blake puts it.

Oliver felt as if he could hear Blake's voice! The curl-icues and cadences of 18th-century colloquial rhetoric were simply delightful! It was so gossipy and emphatic, nearly every other word underlined!

'My Dear George,' Blake continues, and then entreats Catcott to secrecy with what he is about to say, 'I will give you rather a narrative of my Friend as you have mistaken him, & called Mr Cooke such – but It must not be given [. . .] to any one[,] You will hold sacred also the Comments I may make thereon.' Blake then claims to 'doubt the Capability of Mr Cooke', because, 'the perusal of Antient [*sic.*] & Modern Writings are different things – He appears to be an anti-Rowlean, I am sorry for it.'

A more detailed discussion of the whys and wherefores of Cooke's 'inattention' – and how such behaviour within an Oxford college is surely only compounded by the vested interests of 'The Principles & Fellows of such Societies' – is followed by Blake's commitment to communicate again

as soon as he gains more information on the subject.

It was while reading Blake's subsequent paragraph, the closing lines of his letter to Catcott, that the small bomb went off in Oliver's head. 'I am anxious,' Blake writes, 'about this struggle of the Dissenters. I trust in God they will not succeed – (You have always mistaken my Politicks). I was made happy yesterday to hear Mr Pitt was using every exertion to resist it.'

Yes, it really did say that! Oliver had not been mistaken! Here, in his own hand, was William Blake, the visionary rebel genius! William Blake, the dissenting son of dissenting parents! Small d maybe, but, yes, William Blake, the great republican poet! It was scarcely believable, but here, in response to some now long-forgotten presumption on Catcott's part, was the great Blake *denying* the very politics for which he would always be remembered!

There was no mistaking what he had written.

Could it be that it was not only the Bristol pewterer, George Catcott, who had mistaken the 'Politicks' of the great William Blake, but posterity itself?

## VIII

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February 1996

Where normally he would be asleep by now, Paul was buzzing, had stuff to do. There was a bottle of something fizzy in the fridge. Not only had he showered and shaved, he had tidied up and vacuumed the flat. He had washed a couple of glasses, which were now drying next to the sink, thrown away the empty cans and takeaway containers that had been cluttering up the side for more than a few days, put the rubbish out and cleaned the loo. He had picked up the unopened post, the free sheets and the pizza flyers that littered the hallway floor, put the bike on the balcony and even done the bedroom. He had hung up his uniform, picked the dirty shirts up off the floor and actually put them into the bag for the launderette, together with the dirty sheets. He'd drawn back the curtains for the first time in weeks, and thrown open the windows. Got rid of the smell of sweat and beer.

Paul's place was pretty basic: the TV and the CD player, a folding leaf dining table with a couple of mismatched chairs, a sofa and a patterned rug. That was about it. But tidying up always made it feel and look a bit better. It made him feel better, too. The curtains wafting in and out with the breeze. A bit of daylight to make the place seem brighter. Maybe he should do it more often. Let the sun in a bit more.

He'd been lucky to find the place. Although, if his daughter was going to come and stay more often, he'd probably have to get somewhere with another bedroom. As it was, the few times she had been over, he'd given up his bedroom and spent a back-breaking night on the sofa. Not ideal, and it gave Suzanne plenty of ammunition too, but what did she want? Money mainly, it seemed. Well that was taken care of, half of his pay packet disappearing the moment it landed in his bank account every week. And where once he'd made a bit of an effort – strolled the few streets over to what, for a while, he still thought of as their place – he quickly realised that the doorstep had become their own little Eastern Front. That it wasn't worth it. He'd go round, she'd read him the riot act. It didn't help.

He put on a Slim Smith CD. Loved that smooth, late '60s early '70s sound, and the soulful, Curtis Mayfield-style falsetto: 'Just a dream.' He turned it up a little and thought about how he should play it. Invite her in? Say, 'No, actually it's for you. I'm serious! Open it!'

Nah – too heavy. Easy, would be the answer. Just open the door and play it cool. Take stock of the situation. You don't want to overplay your hand, he thought. Don't want to scare her off.

Paul had first seen Julie when she came in to do some docket in the run-up to Christmas. He was stoking up one of the CFC – the 'Culler-Facer-Canceller' – machines, huge things the size of steam locomotives. You'd tip the bags onto a conveyor that took the post up to this massive revolving drum, which would then sift and grade or *cull* it, before turning it to *face* the right way, then franking or

*cancelling* it, spitting the letters out the other end. Rejects and odd-shaped items would drop into an auto from a slot on the side.

Paul's job was to load all of this into boxes and stack them up to one side. From here, the odd-sized letters, flats and packets or whatever would go off for manual sorting, while the standard-sized letters would go for Coding, which meant a postman or woman sitting at a Code Desk and translating each letter's postcode into a system of fluorescent blue dots that the OCRs, so called because they were one of several generations of postal mechanisation to use optical character recognition, could then read and so sort the items mechanically to their destination post town.

Running the OCR meant forever dashing up and down, pulling out bundles of sorted letters, wrapping them with two rubber bands and throwing them into an auto. This meant the letters could bypass the Outward Primary and be chucked straight into the pickout on whichever Division's packet frame. Simple enough, in practice, but the rubber bands were the bane of Paul's life. The kinds of quantities you had to use in this job, for bundling up this and that, did something funny to his skin. He couldn't tell if it was the rubber itself, or the strange talc-like substance that so many rubber bands had to be dusted with, but, after a night on the OCR, Paul's hands would be red raw. In the old days, everything would be tied up with yellow twine – there were still big spools of it under every letter frame – but they didn't bother to teach anyone the proper old knot these days, a kind of looped slip-knot that only the really senior men ever used.

That night, Julie was loading one of the rows of Code Desks, tipping boxes of letters onto a belt at the top of each machine so they could be fed through to another conveyor that brought each letter to face the Code Desk operator, who would then type in the postcode and send it on its way. Loading the Code Desks was not the most interesting or social of jobs, because the postmen or women doing the coding usually had their headphones on and would just be nodding away and typing frenetically in a kind of trance. One or two might say hello or have a bit of a chat when the machines got jammed, or when they were checking the clock to see how many thousands of items they'd coded in the two-hour stint. Some of them swore by it, said that time flew past, but it looked like Paul's idea of torture; the long row of 'cabbages' sitting there silently typing.

Watching Julie wandering back and forth, tipping out her boxes of letters and having the occasional chat with one or two of them, Paul was instantly smitten, thought she was gorgeous. Dark skin, fine features, a shiny black bob and classy makeup, just a bit of lipstick. Not many people actually looked good in a Post Office uniform, but – man! – she certainly did! He couldn't remember seeing anyone so glamorous in years. He wasn't the only one either. Half the guys on coding were following her every move.

It could be a bit macho in the Post Office sometimes. You'd think some of them had never seen a woman before, the way they stopped and stared at pretty much any member of the opposite sex that walked past, the chorus of Woulds and Wouldn'ts.

Paul was having to restart the CFC every few minutes. Because he was trying to catch Julie's eye, he'd keep forgetting to empty the piles of letters it was disgorging, and the whole thing kept grinding to a halt. Khan, the JV, was nosing around – 'Sort it out, Mr Johnson! What's going on?' – but even he did a double take when he saw Julie. Paul could see him pulling in his gut a bit and puffing out his chest, slyly looking over.

This happened a few times in the weeks that followed. Julie would be loading up the Code Desks and Paul doing the CFC. He started to engineer it so that he'd be carrying something over in the same direction she was, wheeling a full auto from one place to another, anything, so long as it gave him a chance to exchange pleasantries. They seemed to hit it off a bit, too. He hadn't been this excited about a woman for ages, not since Sooz in the old days.

Paul thought he'd gone to heaven after the last re-sign. He knew that, when she wasn't on the docket, Julie's main duty was on deliveries out at one of the subs – and, like many from the sub offices, she was able to sign up for overtime on so-called Scheduled Attendance or SA – but he couldn't believe it when, one morning, just stepping out of his front door on the school run, he'd bumped into her as she wheeled her trolley down his street. 'Hey Julie, man!' he said, 'What you doin' here?'

'Oh, hi . . . Paul, init? Nah, I just picked this up in the re-sign.'

'Is it? Ah, safe, safe.'

She looked up at his door, 'This where you live?' Looked down at his daughter, said, 'Hi! What's your name?' with a smile.

Paul was kicking himself. Of all the days to bump into Julie, why did it have to be when he was with his little 'un! Next time he saw her, he'd have to explain that they didn't live together anymore, that he did the school run a couple of mornings a week. He'd have to pick his moment and drop it into the conversation casually. The old, long story. In the event, she'd actually taken it in her stride: 'Bet you miss her, your daughter.'

That was when he'd hatched his plan, though. He didn't know where she lived, beyond that it was somewhere in Montpelier. And he'd never send her something at work. But why do that anyway, when *she* was already coming to him?

So this morning, Julie would be knocking at his door. She would have to because there was a registered item – a 'stir' – for him in that morning's post. The thing about stirs was you had to get a signature for them; you couldn't simply drop them in the letter box. So she would have to knock on his door, and he'd have to sign for it.

He knew that the stir was coming, because he'd posted it himself yesterday and it was guaranteed next day delivery.

Pure genius.

He changed the music. Wanted to get more of a jazz funk thing going, flicked through his cassettes till he found what he was looking for. A great tape with some gorgeous mellow sounds. The L.A. Boppers, Marvin Gaye, man like William DeVaughn. Again – oh, man! – that Slim Smith-style, rich falsetto. Perfect. He'd got a nice shirt on, opened the bubbly and dried off the two glasses.

William DeVaughn was singing 'Be thankful for what

you got,' when the knock on the door finally came. Paul was wondering if Slim Smith could have heard the song before he died so tragically in '73. Probably not, but what a great version *that* would have been!

'Safe, yeah. Comin',' he said, checking his hair in the mirror. He walked from the kitchen down the hall, stepping and humming along with William DeVaughn: 'Baba-daba-dah, dap-dap-dah, da-da da-da, ba-dap-bah-bah. Ooh *hoo-oooh.*'

Holding the bottle and two glasses in one hand, and with expectation in his heart, he opened the front door.

## IX

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February 2010

Jessica was on the way to the first day of her new job. There were a few of them starting apparently, and the confirmation email said that she should go and meet the team leader outside the main entrance to Temple Meads at a quarter to nine to begin training.

When she was at college, it had seemed like there were lots of jobs. Her older friends, the ones who were graduating when Jessica was in her first and second years, got jobs at all the new buildings that were going up all over the city. There was great demand for drama graduates who could play the estate-agent-cum-host in retail units or show apartments. It was all architectural models and espresso machines in those days. It was easy money, her friends used to say, handing out brochures and signing people up. Getting their details, making teas and coffees, stroking the marble-effect work surfaces! Now a lot of the buildings stood empty. The recession had put paid to all that.

She was looking forward to the new job in the way that she always enjoyed the first day at a new anything. Like when she had started college, she had known it would be good, but had not had any idea what it might be like beyond that simple expectation. This was slightly different.

It was the excitement of doing something new *and* knowing that she would be getting paid for it.

Smart casual, the email had said, but be prepared to spend at least part of the day outside, so dress warm. Jessica had decided what she was going to wear the night before, plumping for black jeans and a kind of French-y blue and white hooped, knitted top, with a black sort of pea coat over that and her black patent leather DMs. She had wanted to have plenty of time for a leisurely breakfast and a coffee with her mum before putting on her coat and plugging in her headphones.

As she stepped off the kerb to cross St Thomas Street, Jessica narrowly avoided first stepping on and then tripping over a one-litre plastic soda bottle that appeared to be full of piss which was lying against the cobble-stones in the gutter. That was a close one. It wouldn't do to turn up on the first day at work with that splashed all up your leg. She felt her phone buzzing in her bag.

The first message was from her mum: 'Gd luk w DAY 1, LOVE mum x.' And there was another one from Gina. 'Have fun babe ;-),' it said. Then, 'Just see this. What u reckon? fancy it? Gx'

Gina had sent a photo of a poster in a pub window.

DJ DEREK  
Valentines Dance  
10PM – LATE  
FREE B4 11PM / £2 AFTER  
THE PARK

Jessica was in a good mood already, and while some girls

might be upset not to have got any Valentine's cards, she didn't mind. She had this job for one thing, which might last a few months, who could tell! She'd been looking forward to it. 'When can you start?' they'd asked, smiling, at the end of the interview. And now, thanks to Gina, there was a good party to go to tonight as well, and that man, DJ Derek, was a Bristol institution.

She texted back: 'Nice! x'

She'd been to see him a few times over the years, ever since she'd got more into the older style of music. Jessica wasn't totally retro, not like those stitch-perfect Lindy Hoppers at college, but something about the songs seemed to take her closer to something that felt authentic. And no-one played that stuff like DJ Derek.

They'd seen him in Renato's one night, a few years ago now, when a group of them had gone there to share a late pizza. Gina said, 'Hey Jessie, it's your soul mate: DJ Derek!'

Jessica had looked and looked, but she couldn't see a DJ there. Just some men with pint glasses in their hands that maybe looked like her grandad. She turned to Gina, laughing, 'Where?'

'Right there, init!' Gina had said, pointing discreetly. 'You see? Him! Man with that like light grey jacket thing and a tie . . .'

'You're windin' me up.'

'No I'm not! That's DJ Derek. Come . . .'

Jessica didn't want to, but Gina had grabbed her arm and they went over. She hated situations like this, never quite knew where to look, but Gina didn't care. 'DJ Derek?' He had turned and they shook hands. 'You should meet my friend

Jessie! She's bare into the old school stuff . . .'

'Jessie James?' he'd asked, laughing.

'Don't call me Billy the Kid!' Jessica had shot back, and pretty soon had found herself deep in conversation with the man, chatting about singers like Alton Ellis and Delroy Wilson, Pat Kelly, The Uniques, Bob Andy . . . Gina lost it when the conversation turned to who was Horace Andy's best producer: 'Nah, it's *easily* Tappa Zukie, man!' said Jessica. 'Du-uh!'

'Come on, Jess!' Gina was laughing and making a show of having to drag her the other way, 'Leave the man alone.' But, since then, Jessica and Gina had kept a look out for his gigs – gone to one or two. Said hello.

'Jessie James rides again!' he would say.

Waiting for the lights, Jessica looked at Gina's message again, then hit reply again: 'P.S. What time shall I call for you? Jx'

At college, they had watched a film that was set around here. Jessica couldn't remember what it was called, but there was a lot of David Bowie on the soundtrack. Bits of the film were shot in and around these two big derelict buildings by the pedestrian crossings. You couldn't tell now, but one of them was a hotel or something. She always thought about that film when she was walking down this way. She could barely remember any of it, but one bit was made when there used to be a big flyover here, a road bridge, she couldn't imagine where it came from, where the other end of the bridge was, but she could remember that it seemed to wrap itself around the curve of the hotel wall before dropping to Earth pretty much right here, at what was now a pedestrian crossing. Jessica was

aware of the sly sideways glances of a man on a mountain bike who was waiting next to her at the crossing, but she ignored him. She was trying to remember the film. Something about a lost child and a death. This one scene in the film was of a man and a woman, standing in the adjacent windows of a brightly lit room in this hotel, which must have been shot from the window of a car that was driving past on the flyover! You'd have to float past in mid-air to do that now, if the hotel was still open, that is. The actors in the film were all people she had never heard of. Mostly all. It was in black and white so it looked even more old-fashioned that it was.

At the time – in her first year of studying drama – it had seemed amazing that a film would have been shot over by Temple Meads! Perhaps that was why they had shown it to a bunch of first years, to remind them – if they didn't already know, if they hadn't already made the connection – that *this stuff doesn't appear by magic!* Perhaps her tutors had wanted to reinforce the idea that films were made by people like them! That writers, actors, camera people can come from anywhere! The only bit she could really remember now was that scene with a man looking out of one window and a woman looking out of the one next to it, as if they occupied completely separate worlds even though it was clear from the previous scene that they were actually both standing in the same brightly-lit bedroom.

Jessica might not have been able to remember the name of that film, but she could remember coming to Temple Meads as a little girl. Her mum used to buy their tickets and then they would go and wait for the train.

Usually it was because they were on their way to see

her gran – her mum’s mum – in Chippenham. She could remember seeing the postmen working on the platforms at the far end, loading sacks onto big trolleys that had seemed fascinating because they looked big enough for a little girl like her to live on – about the size and shape of the double bed in her parents’ bedroom.

Whenever they came here and waited for a train, they would watch all the activity and she would half expect her dad to appear among the postmen on those far platforms. She would imagine him catching sight of her too, across all the platforms, and giving her a wave. That really must have been yonks ago, though, because, for most of Jessica’s life, the old sorting office building by Temple Meads had been derelict, as ruined as some old castle.

Near the kiosk, over the other side of the taxi rank, were three or four people who looked about the same sort of age as Jessica, and she decided – shoving her hands into the pockets on the front of her coat as she walked past the airport bus stops – that they looked as if they might also be waiting to start a new job, as if they, like her, were keeping an eye out for their new team leader.

Her mobile buzzed again.

It was a message from Gina: ‘Yay! Call for me at 9? :-x’

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May 2006

Around dawn, Ronnie Urchfont found himself staring out of the window of what had once been the old canteen up on the fifth floor. Pigeons were roosting everywhere, but he'd stopped noticing the sharp, ammonia smell of their droppings that lay knee-deep in some of the stairwells and machine rooms.

Most of the time, Ronnie was too busy to wonder how he'd got here. Why he'd stayed behind after the office ceased to function and everyone else had moved out to the new West of England Mail Centre in Filton. Too busy even to wonder why he'd stopped going back to the little one-bed-roomed ground floor flat in Redcliffe that had been his home for most of the previous twenty years.

The housing department workers knew. They'd had to force the front door in order to clear the flat after complaints from neighbours about the smell. Once inside, they'd found a huge drift of unopened post spreading down the hall. Rotting food and a mouldy fridge in the kitchen. A fly-swarmed bathroom that sent one of them puking outside. To them, it would have seemed clear that Mr Urchfont had stopped being able to cope with everyday life and had either done a runner or died somewhere, and that there had been no one left to care or notice.

It happened all the time.

Looked at another way – from across the road, for example, where Ronnie leaned on a bollard and watched the clear-up with a detached curiosity, unrecognised even by the former neighbours who were hurrying past his old front door with their hands over their mouths – maybe it was just that he felt he had more important things to do than simply sitting at home, watching telly and paying bills.

He saw his few bits of furniture being flung into the skip outside, then bin bag after bin bag of goodness knows what. He watched as shovelfuls of junk mail, freesheets, wage slips, bills, threats, bailiffs' cards, summonses, electoral flyers and the odd staff Christmas card were tipped into refuse sacks for incineration.

Somehow, he'd taken the move to Filton a bit more personally than most. Everyone else seemed to adapt to it and move on, but, for Ronnie, it had seemed that the office was like the real heart of the city, the thing that pumped life into the place, and you couldn't, shouldn't, simply cut that off. He'd watched as the move gathered pace, seen the engineers taking apart the first of the old Code Desks – a great long line of them – and then the OCRs. Most of these were scrap now. There'd be no need for mechanical Code Desks in the brave new world of Filton. All the operators had been retrained in video coding, and had been among the first to move over to the new office. Now, instead of actual letters being fed along a conveyor, they watched images of the letters come up on screen and typed the postcodes onto a normal computer keyboard.

For Ronnie, this seemed to take half the skill and romance out of the job. There was no more typing blind

onto blank keys. It also seemed to threaten the very jobs of the Coders. As far as Ronnie could tell, if they'd removed the actual physical contact with the letters, and these images of letters could now be beamed to a computer on the other side of the building, they might just as well be beamed to a computer on the other side of the world. It was only a matter of time.

When they finally unbolted the OCRs from the concrete floor, something funny happened: a mystery was revealed. In amongst the dust and burnt rubber beneath the machines, forced through tiny gaps in the metalwork he couldn't imagine, was a handful of letters. Some of them were mangled beyond recognition, oil and rubber ground into some impossibly torn and concertinaed scraps of paper. Ronnie supposed that it was something to do with the occasional jams that happened when hundreds of letters per minute were being fired down conveyor belts. The relentless pressure generated by the machines at those moments had literally forced these few letters through some joint into the narrow gap beneath the machines. No-one would have known they were there, and it wasn't as if you could dismantle several tons of machinery every time there was a jam to clear.

The JV had handed the letters to Ronnie and asked him to bag them up and send them on. There were little transparent plastic, self-sealing envelopes designed for just this purpose. On the back was a note from the Postmaster: 'We're sorry that the enclosed item has been damaged . . .'

Looking at the postmarks, Ronnie could see that some of these letters had been lying there, unseen, for years. They weren't simply 'damaged', they were hugely, obscenely

delayed. The disingenuous tone completely ignored this, and seemed to add insult to injury.

Who could say what was in these letters, or who might have been depending upon them? They could have been junk mail, but didn't look like it. Might have been the cheque that would have saved the business, or the invoice that went unpaid and broke it. Might have been the last letter from or to a grandmother. Might have been a wedding invitation or a birthday card. Might have been the result of some hospital test or the appointment for a long-awaited operation. Might have been the job offer someone had been waiting for, which would have turned things around or saved a marriage. Might have been adoption papers or exam results. Might have been a cheque for back-dated Income Support or Housing Benefit that would have kept someone off the street. Any one of these letters could have been about anything or nothing, but they might have been important, make or break, life or death.

Ronnie felt like asking whether there was a bag that said 'Sorry we really messed it up and this letter from your mother, God rest her soul, has taken three years to reach you . . .' but he knew the answer to that question. 'OK,' was all Ronnie had said as he took the letters from Khan and added the grubby envelopes and tattered fragments of oil-stained A4 to the stack of missorts on the desk in front of him. 'Right you are.' Flicking through them quickly, he could see that they were mostly for addresses in Bristol, and, by the end of the day, he'd made a decision: he was going to have to do his duty and make reparation by delivering these ones himself. There were several more mangled letters similarly hidden beneath the

base of the first row of Code Desks. Ronnie watched and waited for the second row to be removed, but it never happened. The base unit stayed where it was, firmly fixed to the floor. Ronnie was convinced that there'd be still more under there. There had to be. He just had to wait for the engineers to come back. They never did. But, in the meantime, this self-appointed task gave Ronnie a new sense of purpose. He'd set himself a target of delivering at least one of these letters every day, more if possible. Waking early in the mornings, he'd practically jump out of bed in his eagerness to get to it. While he drank his usual instant coffee, he'd check the addresses and plot them in his Bristol and Bath A-Z, designing new walks across the city that would enable him to call at one or more of the addresses each time. These were great looping walks, some of them, that saw him exploring parts of the city he hadn't seen in years, if ever. He didn't wait around to be thanked for this public service. It was enough for Ronnie to hear the satisfying sound of a letter landing on its rightful doormat.

After a couple of weeks of this, Ronnie had reunited all of the original letters with their intended recipients. Sometimes, on these walks, he'd find things too: more letters. School reports, bills, all kinds of things. Some that people might have thrown away or dropped as they ran for a bus, or perhaps that had been blown out of the back of a refuse collection or recycling lorry. Who could say?

He'd started adding these to the pile, too. Putting them in his bag and taking them back to the office at the start of his duty. He'd reintroduce these orphans into the main postal system, sort and deliver them. These pavement pickups were missorts with a capital M, after all. Items

that, as he saw it, had got so badly lost they'd either left the postal system or never even entered it: quill feathers, broken cigarette lighters, bottle tops.

He'd barely noticed when the office closed down and everyone else had moved. He'd barely noticed the first few weeks when management had laid on a bus to take people from Cattle Market Road over to Filton for the beginning of every shift. He'd barely noticed when the TPOs stopped calling at Temple Meads and started using the new multi-million pound interchange at Bristol Parkway, or when the TPOs were scrapped altogether and the whole system went over to road transport. All of this had passed Ronnie by because he had work to do. And in a hidden corner of the old office, he'd set up his own little processing and deliveries unit in which all the functions and duties, Inward and Outward, were covered by just one person: Ronnie Urchfont.

He'd dragged in one of the old letter frames, a packet frame and an auto-level, and simply carried on his duty as before. It didn't matter that none of the pickouts were labelled anymore: Ronnie sorted blind; always had, always would. He knew the sorting on every frame inside out and back to front. He'd kept The Wisdom, though; rescued it from a skip. He couldn't believe that anyone would be so stupid as to throw away the decades of accumulated knowledge that it contained. It was irreplaceable, and if they didn't want it, he certainly did.

How many years ago had that been? Hard to say. How many years sleeping in the old IB observation deck? How many times standing up here to watch the sunrise? It was his favourite time of day. At sun-up, the whole bruised

wreck of the building was quiet enough for him to wander around in it freely. The graffers and the dossers were long gone.

There'd been a new wave of invaders coming into the office more recently, though. He'd watched the developers arrive. Cars pulling up out front. Groups of men in hard hats and hi-vis vests, wandering around with clipboards and driving away. And then, one morning, a new team of engineers had appeared to dismantle the last of the machines. Trembling with anticipation, Ronnie had hid up in the observation gantry and watched them through the one-way glass. And there, in the dust and burned rubber beneath the last row of Code Desks, was one more letter, so filthy that the engineers didn't even notice it, but Ronnie did. As soon as they were gone, he had retrieved it from the pile of sweepings and wiped it off on his sleeve. Addressed to a place over Brook Hill way. The postmark said 1996. Ronnie had felt elated, vindicated. His long wait, this vigil of his, had been worthwhile. His hands had been shaking as he half-ran to find his A-Z, to plot this walk.

Looking down at the Floating Harbour, he could see a couple of swans on the quayside. One smaller and still greyish: a signet. From this vantage point, Ronnie felt in tune with the city's whole turbulent past. He'd been a history nut for as long as he could remember, but these new walks, his new duty, had brought the city back to life, so that now the past had seemed to come crowding out of the pages of the old books in the reference library and back onto the streets like commuters pouring out of Temple Meads at 08:30. But, to Ronnie, the past was an unrulier

mob than that. The past accosted him noisily at every corner and sometimes needed to be shouted back at.

The centuries of struggle were laid out for Ronnie as clearly as the panorama in one of those huge old Victorian narrative paintings, but with the sheer, teeming vibrancy of a Kandinsky battlefield, all bayonets and rainbows. The bright, pastel-coloured backs of Totterdown houses on the edge of the ridge at Richmond Terrace caught the early, orange light. So, too, did the green copper spire of the Holy Nativity church on the Wells Road. Beyond the jagged gables of Cattle Market Tavern and the platform ends, the same light reflected on the railway lines turning away to the south west in that great sweeping curve of steel, echoed in a different plane by the slant-built iron arch of the Bath Road Bridge. The high speed trains juddered at the platforms, engines ticking over, straining at the bit like cavalry horses before a bugle sounded the charge. Ready to rush the picture plane, to smash it and to splash through the centuries of mud and sweat and blood. The curves of Bath Road Bridge and the railway were repeated in the white arches of the iron bridges crossing the Feeder Canal and the New Cut. Echoed in tunnel mouth, vaulted brick cutting and river's turn. Sky reflected silver in the water and churned mud puddles on the banks. Heavy plant flattening bare earth.

Ronnie thought of the labour that had built this, that had fought this, that was subsumed by it, interred beneath the brick, beneath the blasted rocks, in landslides or flooded cuttings.

For Ronnie, all this was encrypted across this landscape, this cittie. A landscape he knew, by postcode, still, yes,

but also from his hundreds of great spiralling walks, deliveries on the way out and collections on the way in. All of them plotted in his A-Z with the sticky, blue-black ink of a Post Office ballpoint.

Walks that would take him out of the office and down Feeder Road, looping round Crew's Hole. Walks that would take him over Portwall to listen to the ghost rattle of cars around the former Grosvenor Hotel, to sling-shot around the Chatterton House then up St Thomas Street to the old bridge. Here, this town of Bostow was proclaimed a cittie and called Bristoll.

For Ronnie, the past and present collided in these walks. His walks over Windmill Hill to Hengrove. Here, the great rising of 1549 – hundreds of men breaking downe hedges, thrusting downe ditches, making insurrection against the maior and the counsaile. And there was Ronnie. Like the graffiti said: Enact and tame.

Walks he made up Cheltenham Road to the litter bins of St Andrew's Park.

Here, where the cittie made provision of resistance, the Castell armed with men and ordinance, the gates made new, with watch and ward every daie for fear of rebellion. There was Ronnie, weighing and sorting every fragment of text that he found; shifting them from one place to another. Cancelling them, delivering them. Making delicate adjustments to the psychic traffic of the city.

Walks he made out through Temple Way and Newfoundland Way, then off round Fishponds and Clay Bottom.

Here was the battle of the marsh, the rioting in Tucker Street, and Ronnie picking free sheets and flyers up off the pavement.

Here was the apprentice hung in chains at the hither end of Durdham Downe for murthuring his master, while Ronnie walked up Burghley Road putting the flyers under every nearside windscreen wiper.

Here was one Captain Spinosa with three-hundred soldiers, billeted here to beate the Rebels in Honiton, and there was Ronnie, collecting empty takeaway coffee cups and putting them on ground-floor, front-room windowsills along the sunny side of Green Street.

Here, a place of justice called the Towlsey near the High Cross was builded this yeare of 1550. There was Ronnie collecting the single gloves left on railings.

Here, the barracks built after the riots of 1831 and there Ronnie, posting another shard of broken CD through the slatted pavements on Broad Quay.

Here the fowre men were hanged drawne and quartered for quoining of money, and their quarters set on the gates. There was Ronnie, pulling out an old nylon mailbag that had been rolled up and jammed between pillar box and fence, which he improvised into a duffel bag with yellow bundle twine.

Here, in this yeere, two men suffered the fire for the profession of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Bristoll. And there, of course, was Ronnie, half-filling discarded mineral water bottles from the Floating Harbour and leaving them on the low brick walls outside petrol stations. Here was an insurrection this laste summer against inclosures and cutting down of woodes contrary to antient privileges long before granted which now was taken away from them, and there was a sweet wrapper pushed through a letter box in lieu of a 739. Here was one Vertie that led

a company in riotous manner, being arrested and committed by one Bonerag. Here was a female employee, undergoing disciplinary procedures in the 1950s for having a child out of wedlock – the notes filed under ‘Immorality’. Here, a suicide’s jump from the Trenchard Street Car Park. Here, the Hurricane of November 1703, when the citty awoke to find a fifty ton ship lifted fully onto Broad Quay. The only damage recorded. No mention, as usual, of the other casualties: the collateral damage, the lost at sea, the perished en route, the pressed, the spirited, the trepanned, the nabbed, the kidnapped, the barbadoed, the transported, the imprisoned and the dead.

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September 2012

Oliver had been chugged in Millennium Square. Isn't that what they called it? Chugging, as in charity mugging? And now he found himself struggling along a rapidly darkening street against the rain.

Damn! He could spot them a mile off normally, simply shrug a defensive, 'Sorry!' and walk on, but he had been distracted. His guard had been down. He had been fleetingly intrigued by the way a young woman, seen out of the corner of his eye, was sort of dancing on the spot. Then he had been further drawn in by the corresponding choreography of passers-by. He found this sequence of attraction-realisation-repulsion fascinating, and wondered if she had trained. No, she must have. The way that she played this flow of faces, pulling them in, time and again, letting them go, teasing their attention, pulling them in and letting them go; waiting for the right one. This was what actors did, in a way, and that was his speciality. So there had been no excuse. Was this what his job had come to? Training chuggers? He was aware of all of this, and yet suddenly he had become part of her audience too! Not only that, but he had met the gaze and been suckered in.

The right one, this time, had been him.

He was, he supposed, the ideal demographic: a distracted, middle-aged man in employment. And, right now, his own particular distractions included bereavement and the continuing impact of funereal and other expenses associated with his father's death and his usual September blues – yes, all of that – but, actually, right at the moment when he got chugged, it was mainly that he had been trying to remember a line from a film.

Something like, 'Okay, those of us who still believe in education, let's . . .' *something*.

Now he was heading to the Tesco Metro and still trying to remember the scene, which was spoken by a school teacher character named Jean in David Hare's *Wetherby*. He had the script at home, but, no matter which way he approached the problem, he couldn't get past, 'Right then, those of us who still believe in education, let's . . .' *Christ!* What was it? And then, just as he'd got to the Open University building on Portwall, the clouds had unfolded. It was too late to turn for home; he was committed now. Vanessa Redgrave would have to wait. Buttoning his jacket and improvising a carrier bag shield, Oliver tried to walk more quickly.

He had immediately agreed to the charity fundraiser's suggestion, sucker that he evidently was. What a great idea, he'd thought, that you could donate by text! Five or ten? Well, she had seemed nice, or had he just been showing off? Was it that base? Damn. It really was. Oliver's skin ran cold with shame. The chugger had really played him. She had pushed his buttons *just* enough; flattered him into coughing up. *Christ!* He had been caught out, and not just for the twenty. It wasn't Oliver's distractedness

that had made him such an easy mark, but his loneliness. It stuck out a mile.

He wondered who employed them. Almost certainly not whichever charity it was whose generic logo had been emblazoned over her bright yellow tabard. How much money would whoever it was get from selling on the phone numbers of people who made text donations? Which phone farm and which computerised call-rotations would it be, ringing him half a dozen times a day from now on, leaving moments of digital silence to clog his and countless others' answering machines?

Oliver cut down this way frequently, because the Tesco was nearer than the Sainsbury's on Broad Quay. The street was deserted. These old brick industrial buildings with their grand Deco-ish frontages were at least a couple of decades past their prime. Once, hundreds of people would have worked down here, with sirens to mark the beginnings and ends of shifts, but, these days, the sliding metal gates of the Pilkington glass works' three central access ways were resolutely shuttered closed, the runners long since seized up in their tracks.

The buildings of St Thomas Street, he had thought once or twice, when he was able to make the journey in a more leisurely manner than he was doing now, could have been the plates in an illustrated history of Bristol's industrial architecture. From the medieval right up to the present, in the shape of the Bristol HQ of contemporary mega-engineers, Arup, and the twin service industry bunkers that stood on either side of the junction with Portwall Lane. There was Pilkington's mid-twentieth century pomp and the opportunistic leasing and sublets of the 1980s, but

even the modestly signed Nova Wholefoods was no longer operating out of the shell of the former Miles Druce steel stockyard.

Each street number took you further back in time, from flash Art Deco ashlar and Victorian brick and terracotta, through rusticated stone to the decorative garlands and simulated columns of St Thomas the Martyr's delicately drawn Georgian neoclassical, while, beyond the church, a hand-painted sign on the jettied terrace that now housed the newsagent's and the sandwich shop on the corner claimed construction 'circa 1456.'

Coincidentally, and Oliver knew this because he had visited the grade II listed church on an architectural 'open house' day one summer, James Allen's rebuild dated to more or less the same year – 1790 – that William Blake in Soho had been writing to George Catcott in Bristol, the seemingly endless permutations and ramifications of which event were still resounding full-peal in Oliver's mind, not least that Catcott's shop, to where Blake's letter would have been delivered, was just up the road here, on a part of St Thomas Street that had since been demolished to make way for the broader Victoria Street, but which used to form the prominent corner facing Bristol Bridge. Was it a coincidence? It was enough to make your head spin.

How *did* it go? 'Right then, those of us who still value education, let's . . .'

Dressed in the kind of sockless garb that, even after this drenching, he would try and get away with, again and again with varying degrees of success, until at least the beginning of October, Oliver battled past the steps and

the recessed entrance that led up to the Dynasty Chinese Restaurant. Quickly squinting into the rain, he could see the long rows of octagonal false windows, set behind the larger plate glass panels that ran the length of the first and second floors of what otherwise looked like a typical 1960s light industrial or administrative block. The Kin Yip Hon supermarket on the ground floor was closed, the shutters pulled down. The supermarket was one of the factors that, to Oliver's mind, made the Dynasty a great restaurant, meaning that the fresh ingredients were always, as they should be, fresh. A tautological pun perhaps, category vs. adjective, but not something that it was always possible to say. He carried on past, but suddenly a Tesco steak pie with frozen peas and a bottle of something seemed less appealing than the steamed-up windows above, the red and green lighting that shone through the condensation, because, like anyone who has ever lived in a city that is possessed of a Chinatown, Oliver loved the bustle and chatter of a good Chinese restaurant, and Dynasty was just such a one.

Could he afford it? Probably not. Did he deserve a treat? Definitely! Singapore noodles and a pile of steamed choi sum drenched in oyster sauce on the side? That'll do! It was hardly haute cuisine, but what could be better comfort food on a night like this?! He turned back and stepped in out of the rain, suddenly eager for the sharp and sour smack of hot jasmine tea, the gritty warmth of a good chilli oil. That would take his mind off the twenty quid text and a direct debit agreement that he was already regretting but guessed might take months or years to cancel.

With the last splash of the now slightly stewed tea into his cup, and with oyster sauce and chilli oil all over the tablecloth, Oliver, revived, felt the shape of the line that he had been reaching for. The teacher, played by Vanessa Redgrave, is back in her classroom. She has somehow found the strength to carry on. Discovering that one of her pupils has left school to run away with a boy, she asks if anyone else wants to go, but no-one does. This is the moment that Oliver had been trying to remember: what she says next.

It's a great line. One that is addressed as much to herself as to her students. But just as he had it, the line, right there on the tip of his tongue, Oliver was momentarily distracted by not one but two pieces of paper falling out of his fortune cookie.

Two fortunes? Never mind *Wetherby*, it was a bit like that film *Sliding Doors*: a sudden fork in the road of fate!

One fortune said, 'You will inherit a large sum of money.'

Well there was clearly no chance of that, but the other said, 'Soon life will become more interesting.'

## XII

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February 1996

It started as soon as Paul got into the office for his docket, just as he knew it would. Shifty in the Book Room could barely contain his laughter. Everyone let out a great whooping cheer when he turned up on the Outward to get signed on. Even the JVs were at it. Khan, arrogant twat that he was, couldn't stop himself coming out with sarcastic comments when Paul went over to do an hour on the CFC. Every insignificant person in the building seemed emboldened by it. People he'd never even seen before were coming up and making eyes, saying, 'Oh! Julie!' in lovesick teenager voices, or whatever.

Paul wished he could turn back the clock. That he hadn't got so excited. If he'd just signed for the damn thing and played it cool, then no-one would be any the wiser. Why had he thought it was a good idea to be holding two champagne glasses? When he'd opened the door, Julie's bag had been there on the doorstep, so he couldn't believe it when Dave had suddenly loomed into view.

'Got stir for you here, P,' he'd said.

Then, catching sight of the bubbly and the glasses, and hearing the soft soulful sounds on the CD player, Dave's eyes had suddenly lit up with the joy of the situation. Being the old gossip that he was, Dave knew that Paul was

single. He also knew full well whose duty this normally was.

‘Expecting someone?’ he’d asked, stifling a giggle. Paul had tried to bluff his way out of it, to pretend that he was already entertaining, but Dave was having none of it. ‘I would join you mate, but I’m already spoken for.’

Even then, it wouldn’t have been so bad. What would be wrong with that? For God’s sake, everyone fancied Julie. Why not take a chance? But the cogs in Dave’s brain kept on turning. He looked at the stir, then at Paul, then at the stir: ‘No, P! Tell me you didn’t!’

Then he looked at Paul again, and burst into a rasping howl of red-faced, smoker’s laughter: ‘Oh, you did an’ all. You daft bugger!’

Paul thought Dave might have a stroke or a heart attack, he was coughing and gasping that much. No such luck, though. For God’s sake, of all the people why did it have to be Dave that had picked up Julie’s walk when she was off sick. Mr bloody Chatterbox. Now – within a day – it seemed as if everyone in the building had been fully briefed. Had they been holding staff meetings about it?

He lost count of how many people he’d told to get lost, but Paul knew he’d never hear the last of it. It felt like the longest night of his life. And then, as if that wasn’t bad enough, when the docket was finished and his actual shift started, he had to go through the whole thing again. To rub it in further, he couldn’t even go out to the platform and do the TPOs, but had to stay inside and endure hour after hour of piss-taking.

By about 04:00, he’d had enough. He’d got away from the sorting for a few minutes and was collecting up the

empty autos to take them back to bag-opening, but inside Paul was simmering with shame and fury. So when Jonesy and Rourke – one of the night-shift JVs – walked past and Jonesy gave him the usual wink and, ‘Right, P?’, that was it. He exploded. Shouting and swearing with rage, he shoved the auto as hard as he could and stormed off.

Jonesy, who’d only just got in, was completely mystified. He stared at Paul’s back for a second then turned to Rourke, ‘What did I do?’

The auto continued off on its way. The boys on bag-opening were playing cricket with an empty cardboard tube and a scrunched-up ball of paper. They turned to watch it go past and nudge to a halt against a pillar. Way over on the other side of the floor, a door slammed.

A few minutes later, Paul found himself up in the canteen. The night breaks were over, and the earlies hadn’t started coming in yet. He could smell something cooking, hear the dishwashers going, but, apart from that, the place was deserted. He sat up there until he’d calmed down a bit. Probably would have ended up thumping someone otherwise. ‘Ah, fuck the lot of ’em,’ he said to himself eventually.

There was a tune he couldn’t get out of his head. It had been there at the edge of his consciousness for ages, he realised now. Bubbling away behind his thoughts. Not quite a song, but a bit of music: some chirpy and flamboyant keyboard licks sparring with a more disciplined horn section. A classic bit of give and take that pushed the song forward. He went with it, hummed it to himself until he got to the vocal part. Then he recognised it. Of course, it

was the Gladiators. A song called 'Write to me,' off their *Naturality* album.

He was stood with his nose against the window, so close that he could feel the early morning cold against the glass. How long had he been standing here? It was hard to say. He'd been miles away. Daydreaming. He noticed that it was getting lighter. The sun wasn't up yet, but it soon would be. He'd forgotten how great the view from the canteen was; saw the sky reflected now in the curves of water down below. Some of the lads used to go fishing in the morning, down under the railway bridges with their roach poles. Invited Paul along, but it never appealed to him. The fishing bit. He didn't need a fishing rod to go and sit on the quayside with a cuppa, but also he couldn't see the point, personally, of catching something you didn't need to eat.

He thought about Sooz and them. He couldn't see the house from up here, but he knew it was there. He wondered if he should go round for a cup of tea in an hour or so, take a little box of cereal like he used to.

A door squeaked behind him and he readied a quick excuse for skiving off, just in case it was one of the JVs, but he needn't have bothered. It was the Postmaster. Paul nodded.

'Morning, Mr Johnson. Admiring the view, eh?'

'Yeah, beautiful,' said Paul, pointing at the coloured backs of the houses along Totterdown. 'Especially when the sun's come up. Look at that.'

'Getting to you, is it? Did you think about what I was saying, then?'

Paul mentally kicked himself. It was bloody obvious.

What did he have to lose? 'Funny you should ask,' he said. 'Yeah, I've been thinking 'bout that. I was gonna come and see you.'

'Time for a chat now?' He was pouring two polystyrene cups of filter coffee from the jug. 'How do you take it? Milk and sugar?'

'Oh, yeah, one sugar, ta. Nice one.'

Later, as Paul walked across the sorting office floor, there was a bit more of a spring in his step. Sticks and stones, mate, he was thinking. Water off a ducks back. He took a stamp from his wallet – one of the Christmas freebies that all staff got sent every year – and stuck it on an envelope that he took from his jacket pocket. Might as well post it here as on the way home, he thought. It'll be halfway there, then.

'You still here?' Ronnie was clearing in the missorts at the beginning of his regular Friday morning docket.

'Yeah. Off home now, though,' said Paul. 'Had to see a man about a dog.'

'Could be worse,' said Ronnie. 'If you was a Royalist at Great Torrington, Oliver'd 'ave you!'

'EX38,' thought Paul, the postcode for Great Torrington popping into his head. But all he could say was, 'What?'

'English Civil War! Today in 1646!' Ronnie patted the battered paperback that was squeezed into the pocket of his dark blue dust jacket.

'Is it?' said Paul, laughing.

The early shift Coders were already hard at it. The long row of Code Desks clattered away; thousands of letters a minute stopping and starting, slipping down chutes, along conveyors, around rollers. The nearest desk had a nice big

stack of letters along the top, ready to go. The conveyor shuffled the letters along, dropping them into the machine one by one, while the PHG tapped away in a trance, headphones clamped firmly to his ears as he typed. Paul walked up to the desk, nodding when the PHG looked up. He made sure his letter was the right way round and found a place for it in the stack. It was like cutting a deck of oversized cards. He slotted the letter in, then patted the stack to make sure it was flush with the rest of them as they inched their way towards the chute.

## XIII

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November 2012

Of course! As the train burst out of the Broom Hill tunnel and past the edgeland industrial units, the retail sheds, bowling alley and Showcase Cinema, Oliver laughed for the first time in several months.

Lunch in Bath had been more than just a good idea. He had seized these few lecture-free days of November's reading week as if they were a life raft, setting up this meeting for one thing, and a couple of other jaunts. He had diarised a research day, too, and put in the relevant request forms at the Record Office. He would usually have been looking forward to falling back on Chatterton and Blake, but that prospect had palled slightly, as it now seemed that even Blake had let him down. Blake, whom Oliver had always been proud to have on his side, as Morrissey says of Wilde on *The Queen is Dead*. Or was his pantheon of greats, these deeply held affinities, Morrissey included, merely a kind of misguided loyalty to something else? His love of Blake, certainly, was not unconnected to his own biography. Day trips that Oliver had made in that earlier London life of his – what, twenty years ago? – to another pair of cemetery gates. Bunhill Fields, a nonconformist burial ground set on the west side of City Road. He could just picture their bench, or what he'd used to think of as

'their' bench, because it was where he had proposed, on a crisp November day just like this one! A bench from which you could sit and say – as indeed he had – that both Blake and Daniel Defoe, or their two grave markers, were very literally by Angela's side.

Perhaps what he had come to think of as this vital part of his personality – 'Oliver's Army' of literary rebels – was actually more to do with a lingering and misplaced loyalty to that past of his. Perhaps it was a kind of fetish: the thing at one remove. Could it be that his constant literary references, his almost heraldic use of Morrissey, Wilde and Blake was just a kind of carapace? Armour with which to fight the wrong fight? And, if so, what would happen if he let his guard down?

Keep the faith, he'd used to think, but whose faith was it and what business was it of Oliver's to keep it? He had enough on his plate as it was. And now, here was Blake, taunting Oliver from beyond that small stone in Bunhill Fields with this parenthetical bombshell from the Catcott letter: '(You have always mistaken my Politicks).'

Hence the trip to Bath from which – the train beginning that long, slow, spiralling turn to the south – he was now returning. Oliver had arranged to meet a historian colleague at the university there. Colleague as in fellow lecturer. He had tracked her down on the web, emailed over a copy of his transcript and they had arranged to meet for lunch and a chat.

The historical perspective that Dr Cowper – Siân! – had offered over their plates of canteen macaroni cheese and strong tea in large disposable cups had been a revelation, but before that they realised that they recognised

each other. Academia was a small world and, comparing notes, Oliver twigged that they had both been at 'Writing the Gothic', a conference held at the University of Aberystwyth the previous year. Although neither of them had presented papers on that occasion, Oliver thought he recognised Siân from one of the poster sessions or break-out groups. She was quite recognisable after all. A bit of a Goth herself, come to think of it.

Siân had brought along a printout of his transcript, which she placed on the table next to her while they ate, but first they compared notes on Chatterton.

Oliver told her about his ongoing quest to find what remained of the Chatterton memorial, a small stone statue that had once topped a large pentagonal plinth in the form of a Gothic cross, which stood some thirty feet high and had been sited variously on the north and the south sides of St Mary Redcliffe. It had been removed from church grounds in the 1950s, to be stored in a shed adjoining the Chatterton House.

According to one contemporary account, the memorial had been built on the cheap for "the paltry sum of one hundred pounds"! Here Oliver had to consult his notebook. 'The people of Bristol,' he read, with a dramatic flourish, 'have at last been alive to the claims upon them, but it is owing neither to their public spirit nor their generosity that the memorial is worthy of its subject. [. . .] it is fortunate that the performance was not as mean as its reward.' So wrote a correspondent to volume three of *The Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal, Scientific and Railway Gazette*, in 1840.

Siân seemed to be enjoying his story, and Oliver was

certainly enjoying the attention; rising to it even.

He had it on very good authority, he said, that the statue had long since disappeared.

Its current whereabouts were nothing short of a mystery. No, it was more than that. It was paradigmatic: a defining lack, a disfiguring absence! It was a wound, Oliver felt. There was no other word for it. A wound in the civic body that no slate sticking plaster – however elegant! – could ameliorate.

Oliver was enjoying himself.

And exactly where it had been moved to, by whom and when, were questions to which Oliver's repeated phone calls and emails, messages left and letters sent, had brought him no closer to finding answers. He had a whole file of fruitless correspondence on the subject!

'Oh really?' Siân had asked. 'So, no-one knows where it is?'

She was evidently delighted by the story, and her enthusiastic response cheered Oliver up no end.

'It would seem not,' he'd confirmed, 'no.'

'How fascinating!' Siân had said.

Yes, you are, he had thought. The train started to slow down as it began that long curve into the city. Re-entry. 'What's interesting about your letter,' Siân had begun. 'I mean one of the many interesting things about your letter, this Blake transcript, is when it was written.'

'Oh?'

It turned out that there was more going on in 1790 than Oliver had quite bargained on. For one thing, though there had been some postal systems in place for more than two hundred years; the postal system, as such, was still a

recent introduction, expanding swiftly to accommodate the distribution of newspapers and gazettes. The secure mail coach network that would have carried Blake's letter from Soho to Bristol would have only been put into place – by John Palmer of Bath, as it happened – some six years earlier, in 1784!

'When this place,' Siân had gestured at their wider surroundings, not the canteen but the adjoining Georgian mansion that was home to part of Bath Spa University, 'was only a few years old!'

Blake might, she thought, even have strolled up the road from Poland to Hanway Street, where the West End coaching inns were then located . . .

This was too much: 'Christ! I haven't been there for years,' Oliver had said. 'We used to go there all the time! Bradley's Spanish Bar has the best jukebox in London! Do you know it? Have you . . .'

Oliver's words suddenly stuck in his throat. Why did he keep doing that? Clarification needed!

'I say "we,"' he'd said, quickly explaining the decade that he had spent rebuilding his life in Bristol, post divorce.

Talk had swiftly turned to the French Revolution, which Oliver – aghast! – was more than a little embarrassed to admit he hadn't adequately factored in to his vision of a late 18th century universe in which William Blake, George Catcott and the Rev Cooke should find themselves in orbit around the work and legacy of a young Bristol poet already dead some twenty years. But, even then, Oliver wasn't quite joining the dots.

They had talked of centuries of English dissent – with a small d – and what Siân suggested, with the greatest re-

spect, might be Oliver's forgivable assumption that 'The Post' – she really had mimed the quotation marks – had primarily been set up as a public service, a kind of *black box* into which you fed your missive, through which it would travel, intact and untrammelled, before popping out of the other end and into the hand of your intended recipient!

'I take it,' Siân had said, 'That you haven't read Susan Whyman? Let alone Derrida's *Postcard*?'

Tell me about them, Oliver had thought. Please, tell me about them.

'Do you see where I'm going with this?' Siân had asked, as she walked him to a waiting cab, but Oliver really hadn't.

She had asked the question a different way as they said their farewells and good-to-meet-yous: 'To whom was William Blake writing?'

And Oliver had been puzzling over precisely this question for the past half hour.

Their lunch had been over far too quickly, but Oliver had been practically whistling with happiness for most of the taxi ride back to the station, and certain things were falling into place concerning Blake's letter to Catcott. For one thing, it had been written a decade after Blake's arrest on suspicion of spying. Blake had written to Catcott at a time when he was, in fact, writing the first of a planned seven-part poem cycle, entitled *The French Revolution*, a work that would never be completed because, when only one of the seven proposed parts had been written, the printer, Joseph Johnson, would be imprisoned and all copies destroyed. Only one set of proofs of that first volume would survive.

The fact that the modern Post was being set up at this time was not a coincidence, Siân had suggested, and it was not entirely the public service that it seemed. It was, rather, an engine of surveillance and censorship, a state defence against both internal dissent and the dangerous and destabilising forces of international revolutionary fervour. Centralising the various posts through a series of guarded mail coaches created a single system that could be operated on a new, industrial scale. Siân had conjured images of great steaming rooms in which targeted letters could be opened and read, transcribed, then re-sealed and sent on to their destinations. The inevitable delays caused by this selective opening of the mail would be excused, she explained, by marking such letters as ‘missorts.’

Now it was Oliver’s turn. ‘Fascinating,’ he said. ‘Do go on.’

Blake’s previous encounters with the authorities would have made it more than likely that letters addressed either to him or to his known associates – who would have identified themselves to those same authorities by the very action of writing to him – would have been targeted in this way. So, could it be that Catcott’s letter ‘of the 16th instance’ – which since it was addressed to Blake would surely have been opened – had itself contained some *gaucheness* that needed to be corrected?

Siân had asked to whom Oliver thought Blake was writing! Well, ostensibly he was writing to Catcott of course, but, by this reckoning – and it had taken Oliver most of the fifteen-minute train journey to think this through – he was also writing to anyone else who might read it. So if, in his reply, Blake was denying the ‘Politicks’ for which

he would become celebrated, wasn't it likely to have been because he *fully expected* the letter to be intercepted and read by other agencies before it reached Bristol?

Of course!

Oliver's new phone beeped as he took his coat from the overhead rack. It was a text from Siân Cowper: 'Thank you for very enjoyable lunch, Siân – P.S. I just emailed you something that may be of interest.'

Oliver was thrilled that Siân had followed up first.

Her email had three photos attached. The first one de-pixelated itself into a perplexing, and still very blurry, image of a skull-like head. Was it made of concrete or some coarsely grained stone? It seemed so crudely rendered that it might have been made of pastry. There was something funny about the eyes. Oliver couldn't tell if it was an optical illusion – some trick of light and angle, as happened with photos of lunar craters – but the sockets seemed inverted, reversed out into two convex bulges rather than concavities, and marked by some kind of darker and possibly crystalline efflorescence. Other facial features were more or less absent. An unidentifiable lump of the same material, broken off the main body, was laid on a folded sheet of pink A4 paper, a two-word title at the top of which read, 'ENTRY FORM'.

Very intriguing, thought Oliver.

The second seemed to be a photograph of the back of someone's garage. Industrial shelving that housed various items on forklift pallets. What looked to be a late 1950s or early '60s Parnell brand washing machine and a 1960s electric cooker. Between them, several items of indeterminate function: a chrome valve assembly, something in

red enamelled metal with chrome trim and matt or rubberised plates that could just as easily be a printing press or the footrests of a dentist's chair. There was a flywheel and a cardboard box on which the words 'sheet with piece No's from Orpheus,' had been scribbled out. Between them, on a pallet of its own, lay the strange pastry figure which Oliver was now able to see was a carving of a girl or woman in a long skirted dress, a flat-topped bonnet on her head.

Standing there on platform fifteen, tapping at his screen, it was the third photo that nearly made Oliver fall over. The pastry figure had been pulled clear of the shelving unit using a hand-operated pallet truck and now lay on the institutional grey-painted, concrete slab floor like an effigy in a church, like William Canynges in St Mary Redcliffe, recumbent on its wooden pallet. He could see the rubber sheeting and protective foam padding upon which the strange female form had been laid. Her right arm was positioned across her breast, but it was so eroded that the slender limb seemed handleless. From her left hand, or at the end of a similarly attenuated left limb, appeared to be dangling a large piece of skin or parchment, curled and nicked as a cartoon treasure map, which was longer than her skirt.

Her skirt? *His* skirt! The one partly legible word carved on the parchment told Oliver that this wasn't a female figure after all, but male. That the skirts were clerical rather than feminine. They were the uniform of an 18th-century charity school. For what he could quite clearly make out on that stone parchment was the Old English letter 'ash' – the ligature Æ – which could only, surely, come from

the capitalised name 'ÆLLA,' the title of Thomas Chatterton's masterpiece.

The attenuated 'pastry figure' was a statue of Chatterton. *The* statue. Oliver was sure of it! Here was the statue that had been designed by the architect Samuel C. Fripp Jr. in 1840, which had once stood at the top of a thirty-foot, pentagonal monument, built of Bath stone, a common enough material around here, but one that was particularly susceptible to erosion by the action of sulphur dioxide, as might be found in domestic coal smoke and industrial pollution. This was unmistakably the very statue of Thomas Chatterton that had stood next to St Mary Redcliffe Church, and which, in the 1950s, when it had become unsafe or unfashionable – or both, or neither – had been dismantled and, after being stored for a while in the shed of the Chatterton House, was now widely presumed lost.

Or not, it would seem.

'Perhaps I should have said earlier, but I couldn't resist winding you up slightly,' said Siân's brief email. 'You and your mystery! Tell you more next time I see you. Sx'

## XIV

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November 2010

Jessica was getting ready to go and meet Gina. A quick bath and change. Nothing too fancy. Jeans and her dark, loose-knitted top. She needed a necklace, so had a rummage in her box and found the plain little locket that her gran had left her; fastened it at the back of her neck. She cocked her head and ran her finger along the album spines until she found the soft grey cardboard of her battered old *Creation Rockers Volume 3* album. She slipped the record out of the sleeve, put it on the turntable and switched everything on. Lifted up the tone arm and gently dropped the stylus onto the lead-in groove on side one.

While her bath was running earlier, she'd got her dad's old letter out again. Now she opened the envelope and unfolded the paper inside. A lot of it was more about him feeling sorry for himself than anything else. That's what her mum had said when she'd read it, when Jessica had finally 'fessed up' to having received it. It was all a bit, 'Sorry I've been a rubbish dad.'

Some of it was sweet, though. He wrote that he always enjoyed their little walks to school. The way she'd sit on his bicycle saddle, holding his arm as he wheeled her along. He wrote that he and her mum had first met at a gig. Was it the Glaxo Babies? He couldn't remem-

ber now, but her mum would probably know. He told her that they'd bumped into each other again a few days later, both after the same record from the dub section in Revolver. Said they'd tossed a coin and bought one copy, the winner having promised to tape it for the other. They'd spent the other fiver on a few drinks, he said, and got talking. He told her that she would understand all this when she was older. He said that he blamed himself, but that he was going to make a fresh start. Told her that this letter was him turning over a new leaf, and just because he was moving didn't mean he didn't love her. Told her he was writing this from work, thinking about them sleeping in their beds at home. He told her to write to him at his brother's place up in London.

It was silly, she knew, after all the years that had passed since the letter had been sent, but Jessica had done just that. Didn't post it though. She'd written several letters, in fact, abandoning successive drafts when she realised that there was no point sending some angry rant to a man she barely knew at an address that was long out of date. It was surprising just how angry she was, and how even tiny incidents she'd completely forgotten about rose up to the surface and still had the power to hurt her. Not turning up when he'd said he would. The first time he didn't show for parents' evening. Not coming to her school play. Part of her still wondered why he hadn't bothered to write again and felt as if it had somehow been her fault for not replying, but how could she have replied to a letter that she had never received? Why hadn't he given her another chance?

She could have written all of this, pages and pages of it, but what would be the point? Other people might just

have breezed through it and sent a cheerful little note. Forgive and forget. There was enough news if anyone was interested. She could have chosen some pictures of all the times he'd missed. She could have told him that they'd been fine. That her mum had been fine. That they'd got lodgers in, drama students mainly. It had been fun. She could have told him that she'd got a place at university herself, thank you very much! That she had studied drama and loved it. That if he was worried he needn't have been. That it would be nice to catch up.

It was kind of true, too. She did want to catch up, of course she did. Why wouldn't she? He was her father. But she also felt that there was too much lost time to make up, and if he didn't care then, why would he care now? There'd been a few tearful nights, but ultimately she'd figured that he'd been no help when she'd really needed him, and she'd done alright, so maybe she should just let sleeping dogs lie. It was his loss.

'You've just got to get on with your own life, sweets,' her mum had said the last time they spoke about it, 'and don't take it personally. You're so lucky and you've got so much going for you right now, it's just not worth the heartache, hun. For Christ's sake, look at me! Took me bloody long enough to figure that out. I wouldn't want to go through all that again, and I don't want you starting now.'

She'd put the kettle on for another couple of herbal teas: 'If I were you, hun, I'd just take that letter as a little reminder that your dad wasn't always a total shit. And just be happy with that. It's more than a lot of people can say, you know.'

Jessica put the letter back with the others, re-tied the

ribbon and put them back in her drawer, then checked her lipstick in the mirror.

Quick spray of perfume. Time to go. Down the stairs two at a time. Shutting the front door behind her, she texted Gina: 'On my way. Jxx'

Sorted.



## Author's note on sources

*Missorts Volume II* is a work of fiction. All characters and situations depicted in this novella, with the notable exception of DJ Derek, are completely fictional and any resemblance to any persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

I have respectfully used a small degree of 'poetic licence' in depicting aspects of life and work in Royal Mail sorting offices during the 1990s. Mistakes or discrepancies resulting from this approach are my own, but insiders will notice that certain postman or woman and PHG duties have been merged. The Travelling Post Office timetable I've used in Chapter 6 is real, based on 1967 TPO timings at Bristol Temple Meads from the collections of the British Postal Museum and Archive. Ginkgo Projects Ltd and Media Office gave me unique and unlimited access to the former Royal Mail sorting office and Parcel Force depot adjacent to Bristol Temple Meads railway station. The graffiti referenced or described here – by Crust and others – is as found during my explorations of the building.

The historical events referenced during Ronnie's walks around the city are drawn from Samuel Seyer's handwritten notebook, *Annals of Bristol: Collected From Various Manuscripts*, Bristol, 1790. This document was accessed during 'Opening the Archives', an event held at Bristol Central Library on 7 May 2008 as part of Bristol Radical History Group's 'Down with the Fences' series.

The letter from William Blake to George Catcott, collected in Richard Smith's portfolio of Chattertoniana,

was transcribed by Julian Warren and Alison Brown of Bristol Record Office. The cuttings from the *Times* in 1938, concerning the proposed demolition and preservation of the Chatterton House and the front wall of the Pile Street School are part of The Street Collection, thirty-one bundles of historical and descriptive notes relating to sites visited by Mr P. E. W. Street between 1928 and 1947, also held at Bristol Record Office and identified for me by Julian Warren, whose insights and support throughout this project have been invaluable.

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Above all, special thanks and love to my wife, Sarah.

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## About the author

'White joins a handful of contemporary writers who are proving that the novel has never been more alive. He is a serious, engaging voice of the modern city.' *The Guardian*

Tony White is the author of novels including *Shackleton's Man Goes South* (Science Museum) and *Foxy-T* (Faber), numerous short stories and the non-fiction work *Another Fool in the Balkans* (Cadogan). White's 2012 novella, *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule* (Forma), was specially commissioned to accompany a series of works by the artists Jane and Louise Wilson reflecting upon the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. White wrote the interactive SMS-based drama *Ivy4evr* with Blast Theory for Channel 4, which was broadcast in October 2010 and nominated for a BIMA Award by the British Interactive Media Association in 2011. He has been a writer in residence at the Science Museum, London, and Leverhulme Trust writer in residence at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He has previously worked for Arts Council England and as a postman at the London NW1 and N1 sorting offices. Tony White is currently chair of London's award-winning arts radio station Resonance 104.4fm.

## Situations

Situations is a visual arts organisation which commissions and produces projects by contemporary artists for a range of different sites and situations. Based in Bristol in the UK and established in 2002, Situations has achieved international recognition for its programme of ground-breaking public art projects.

Working beyond the boundaries of a gallery or museum context offers a rich and often challenging set of conditions. Situations begin from a more dynamic understanding of place than a physical site, inviting artists to contribute to the lived experience of a place.

Find out more: [www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk)

# Missorts

*Missorts Volume II* was originally published in 2012 as a free e-book to accompany Tony White's *Missorts*, an immersive soundwork produced by Situations, the award winning Bristol-based arts producers. Delivered directly to your smartphone as a mobile app, *Missorts* is a permanent public art work that combines ten location-triggered stories by ten writers set to a newly composed soundtrack, and that promises to immerse you in a surprising, new experience of the city.

*Missorts* features ten original and interconnected short stories by Sara Bowler, Holly Corfield-Carr, Thomas Darby, Jack Ewing, Katrina Plumb, Jess Rotas, Hannah Still, Helen Thornhill, Isabel de Vasconcellos and Sacha Waldron. The stories are accompanied by Portwall Preludes, a series of striking new musical works specially commissioned from composer Jamie Telford for St Mary Redcliffe's Harrison and Harrison organ in its centenary year.

Inspired by Bristol's radical literary heritage, *Missorts* reflects the past and present of the Redcliffe area of the city and the diversity of writings, objects and architectures that are found there.

Download the app and find out more: [www.missorts.com](http://www.missorts.com)