

*'The most imaginative  
British novelist of his generation'*  
*The Times*

IAIN BANKS



ESPEDAIR  
STREET

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# SYNOPSIS

**Two days ago I decided to kill myself... Last night I changed my mind and decided to stay alive. Everything that follows is...just to try and explain.**

Daniel Weir used to be a famous - not to say infamous - rock star. Maybe still is. At thirty-one he has been both a brilliant failure and a dull success. He's made a lot of mistakes that have paid off and a lot of smart moves he'll regret forever (However long that turns out to be.) Daniel Weir has gone from rags to riches and back, and managed to hold on to them both, though not to much else. His friends all seem to be dead, fed up with him or just disgusted - and who can blame them? And now Daniel Weir is all alone. As he contemplates his life, Daniel realizes he has only two problems: the past and the future. He knows how bad the past has been. But the future - well, the future is something else.

'The great white hope of contemporary British literature'

*Fay Weldon*

'Engagingly told, cleverly constructed'

*Time Out*

'Glittering pockets of wit...Banks is undoubtedly a natural'

*The Independent*

'The most imaginative British novelist of his generation'

*The Times*

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# ESPEDAIR STREET

## ONE

Two days ago I decided to kill myself. I would walk and hitch and sail away from this dark city to the bright spaces of the wet west coast, and there throw myself into the tall, glittering seas beyond Iona (with its cargo of mouldering kings) to let the gulls and seals and tides have their way with my remains, and in my dying moments look forward to an encounter with Staffa's six-sided columns and Fingal's cave; or I might head south to Corryvreckan, to be spun inside the whirlpool and listen with my waterlogged deaf ears to its mile-wide voice ringing over the wave-race; or be borne north, to where the white sands sing and coral hides, pink-fingered and hard-soft, beneath the ocean swell, and the rampart cliffs climb thousand-foot above the seething acres of milky foam, rainbow-buttressed.

Last night I changed my mind and decided to stay alive. Everything that follows is... just to try and

explain.

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Memories first. It all begins with memories, the way most things do. First: making a cloud.

Inez and I made a cloud once. Seriously; a cloud, a real honest-to-goodness cloud up in the big blue sky. I was happy then, and doing something like creating a cloud just filled me with delight and awe and a delicious, frightening feeling of power and tininess together; after it happened I laughed and hugged Inez and we danced in the cinders and kicked up the black smoking debris which scorched our ankles while we jigged and swirled, choking, eyes watering, laughing and pointing at the vast thing we'd made, as it gradually drifted away from us.

The sooty lengths of straw smudged our jeans and shirts and faces; we made each other up as commandos, painting dry streaks on the other's brows and cheeks and nose. The smell clung to our hair and stayed under our nails and up our noses after we changed and only washed quickly, did not shower, and at dinner with her parents we kept glancing and remembering and grinning at each other, and when as usual I crept along to her room that night just as usually feeling foolish;

*if my fans could see me now; tiptoeing like some scared kid* - the smoke smell was in her hair and on her pillow and the taste of it on her skin.

Now, making a cloud would doubtless depress me. Something to block the sun, cast a pall, rain soot, rain rain, and cast a shadow...

That was... long ago. We'd just finished working on

*Night Shines Darkly*, or maybe it was *Gauche*; I can't remember. Inez always kept a diary and I used to ask her things about the past sometimes, but I grew too used to that, and now... now I'm sort of lost without her to tell me what happened when. Maybe it was '76. Whenever. I was there that summer. End of summer... September? Is that when they harvest? I'm a city boy so I'm not sure; a country lad would know.

Her parents were farmers, in Hampshire; Winchester was the nearest big town. I only remember that because I kept humming 'Winchester Cathedral' all the time, which was pretty ancient even then, and annoyed me almost as much as it annoyed Inez. The harvest had just been gathered and the fields shorn and the stubble lay about in long raggedy lines (

*Blonde on Blonde*, I remember thinking), and crows flew about, twirling and dipping and bouncing when they landed, and strutting and jabbing at the hard dry ground. Inez's dad usually burned off the stubble by dragging a petrol-soaked rag behind his tractor, but Inez asked if she and I could do it that day, on the top field, because the wind was right and anyway it wasn't near a road.

So we walked sweating through the fields on a beautiful bright day; the fields were either crew-cut, still waiting to be set alight, or burned black-flat, so that from above the whole countryside must have looked like some haphazard, anarchic chessboard. We sweated up the hill with rags and jerrican, past a rusty old half-fallen building, all corrugated decrepitude, through a copse of tall trees (for the shade) and then to the field, where the passing shadows of small clouds moved slowly.

And we set fire to the stubble. Soaked the rags with gasoline and then dragged them on lengths of rope and chain down two sides of the huge square field, until the fire had caught in a pair of long crackling lines, and the bright orange flames surged through the dry straw, rolling yellow-red inside the dark grey bank of smoke while we stood, breathless, wiping sweat from our brows, kicking dust-dry clods of earth over the guttering flames of the rags we'd towed.

The blaze moved over the field, leaping down the rows of desiccated stalks and flinging them burned or burning to the sky; flames flicked curling against the wall of grey smoke like broad whips, leaving the scorched ground smoking greyly, tiny clumps still burning, miniature whirlwinds dancing madly, while the wall of fire crackled and flowed and leapt beyond. Smoke flooded the sky, brown against the blue; it made a shining copper coin of the sun. I remember shouting, running down the side of the field, to keep pace, to see, to be part of it. Inez followed, striding down that smoky margin, arms crossed, face gleaming, watching me.

The piled stubble burned quickly, and the fierceness of the blaze made me squint; the heat of the flames hurt my eyes, and the smoke when it swirled, backing up momentarily, filled my nose and mouth and made me cough. Rabbits ran away from the wave of fire, white tails bobbing into the woods; fieldmice scampered for ditches, and the crows circled away and swooped for the tree tops, croaking distantly over the sizzling voice of the fire.

When the flames began to die, reaching the barren edges of the field, Inez looked up, and there was our cloud; a thunderhead of white crowned the vast fist of grey-brown smoke we'd sent up. It towered over us, slowly drifting away with the rest of the puffy white clouds, its white-capped head plain and perfect above the lumpy stalk of swirling brown smoke. I was amazed; I just stood and stared, mouth open.

I thought even then it looked like a mushroom; it was an apt description, and as the cloud and the last of the smoke drifted off, casting its shadow over a village in the next valley, you couldn't help but make the obvious comparisons... but it was

*beautiful*; and it hadn't hurt anybody, it was part of the way country life was run, part of the seasons' cycle, glorious and sublime.

Normally, I'm sure I'd have thought there must be some way of

*using* the experience; there had to be an idea, a song in there somewhere... but I didn't, maybe because we'd just finished the album and I was sick of songs, especially my own, and this whole rustic thing was supposed to be a complete holiday from work. Can't fool the old subconscious, though; if it sees fast buck to be made out of something that's happened, it'll use it, whether you like it or not, and - much later - I realised that that was just what had happened.

One of the ideas for the 1980 world tour came from that sight, that day, I'm sure. We called it the Great Contra-flow Smoke Curtain. It cost a fortune to get right and ages to set up, and it was only because I was so insistent that we persevered with it; nobody else thought it was worth the trouble. But Sam, our manager (and, for a manager, remarkably close to being human), couldn't see past the columns of figures, never mind the columns of smoke; total apoplexy; just couldn't understand my reasoning, but there was nothing he could do except shout, and I have a gift for listening quietly regardless of the incoming decibels. Listening quietly, but not at the right time.

Story of my life, or a sub-plot at least. Either I know I ought to do something but I just don't get round to it, or I keep hammering away furiously at something I end up profoundly regretting later. The Gre Contra-flow Smoke Curtain was an instance of the latter. We got the damn thing to work eventually, but I wish we hadn't. I wish I'd listened, and I'll blame myself to the end of my days for being so determined to impose my own will on the others. I didn't know what was going to happen, I couldn't have guessed the eventual, awful, result of my expensive pig-headedness, and nobody ever said they held me responsible, but... The point here is, however, that the cloud Inez and I made

*was* used; money was made out of it. Exploitation will out. It has its own survival instinct.

Now that's something Big Sam

*would* have understood.

There you are, though; story of a day in the country. If anything like that happened now, the comparison, the accidental creation of the image of our deathcap threat, would upset me, plunge me into some crushed state of absolute dejection, reflecting that no matter what I did, regardless of my actions and whatever good intent lay behind them, emblems of chaos and destruction dogged me; my personal shades.

But not then. It was different then. Everything was different then. I was happy.

And, God almighty, it all seemed so easy; the living, the playing, the songs:

Why do you bite me on the shoulder,

Why do you scratch me on my back?  
Why do you always have to make love  
Like you're making an attack?

Liza-bet, do you love me?  
I asked her one fine morning  
Yes indeed I do said she  
And loved me without warning

I am old, my thoughts get blown like ash  
By the winds of grief and pain,  
Young minds only do not fear such blasts,  
Which but serve to fan the flame.

Three of the better examples there. Bits I'm almost proud of. I could have chosen... but no, I'm too embarrassed. I still have some pride left.

And now there's a new song, anyway. Something else to work on, after so long. I need a few new words, but the beat and the music are already there, a framework; a skeleton.

A new song. Is this a good sign or a bad one? Wish I knew. Never mind the consequences, just get on with the work. ~~Try not to think about the past twenty-four hours or the last week, because they've been~~ too fraught and traumatic and ridiculous; pay attention to the song, instead, play to your strengths, such as they are.

*I thought this must be the end...* Well, it's not.

Jeez, what a day. From the brink of likely death to genuine financial suicide; not to mention an insane and doubtless doomed new scheme, a last crazy chance to grasp whatever the hell it is I really want; happiness maybe, absolution certainly.

I'd love to put everything into the one song, to sing a song of birds and dogs and mermaids, hammerheaded friends and bad news from far away (again, like confirmation, like a lesson, like vengeance), a song of supermarket trolleys and seaplanes, falling leaves and power stations, fatal connections and live performances, fans that spin and fans that crush... but I know too well I can't. Stick to the one song, verse and chorus, sing the music, tap the beat, fit the words in... and call it 'Espedair Street'.

That's what it's called. I know what the ending of the song is but I don't know how this ends. I know (think) what the song means... but I still don't know what this means. Maybe nothing. Maybe neither is meant to mean anything; this is always a possibility. Nothing always is.

Three-twenty in the morning according to the watch I bought this afternoon. My eyes are sore and gritty-feeling. The city sleeps on. Maybe I should make more coffee. Funny how quiet Glasgow gets this time in the morning. I can hear, quite distinctly, the engine of a truck on the motorway, its engine echoing in the concrete trench, then fading under the bridges and tunnels, finally sounding distant and small as it reaches the Kingston Bridge and arcs over the Clyde, heading south and west.

Three twenty-one, if the watch is right. That means two and a half hours to wait. Can I bear that? I suppose I have to. I've borne the waiting so far. Two and a half hours... five minutes to get ready, then... how long to the station? Can't be more than fifteen minutes. Total of twenty minutes. Call it half an hour. That leaves only two hours to wait. Or I could leave even earlier and spend more time in the station. Might be a café open, or a hamburger van in George Square (though I'm still too nervous to be hungry). I could just go for a walk, waste time wandering through the cold streets kicking at the litter, but I don't feel like that. I want to sit here in my preposterous stone tower looking over the city thinking about the past twelve years and the last week and the day just gone, then I want to get up and go and maybe never come back. Three twenty-two and a bit. Doesn't time go quickly when you're having fun?

Where is that train now? Two and a half hours away; or less ... yes, less. Two hours and a bit; Carlisle. A bit further south maybe; still in England definitely. Perhaps hauling itself up to Shap Summit, through the thin drifts of starlit snow, hauling its load of rocking, sleeping passengers northwards. If it comes that way; I didn't ask about that when I went to the station. Maybe it comes up the east coast route, stopping at Edinburgh before heading west. Damn, I should have checked; it seems very important to know now. I need something to keep me occupied.

Three twenty-three! Is that all? Doesn't time - no, I've already said that, thought that. I sit and watch the seconds change on the watch. I used to have a limited edition Rolex worth the price of a new car but I lost it. It was a present from... Christine? No, Inez. She got fed up with me always having to ask other people what the time was; embarrassed on my behalf.

I grew up - I ended

*grown-up* lacking so many of the standard props; a watch, a wallet, a diary, a driving licence, a chequebook ... and not just the props, not just the hardware, but the brain-implanted software to make use of them, so that even when I did end up with all that gear I never really felt it was part of me. Even after Inez bought me the Rolex I'd wander up to roadies and ask them how long we had to the start of the gig. The record company gave me a Gucci wallet, but I'd still stuff pounds and fivers into various pockets - I'd even cram them into the pocket where I'd put my wallet, absently wondering why it was so difficult to squeeze the crumpled bits of paper in there.

Hopeless. Just a hopeless case; always have been.

Inez kept a diary for me because I never could; I always started faithfully every second of January (I think Scots require some sort of special dispensation to admit to doing anything organised on the first of January), but by the second week I always found that - somehow, quite unaccountably - I'd already missed out several days. Those blank spaces, accusatory, filled me with a nervous dread; my memory instantly locked up; I could never remember what had happened during the missing days, and felt too ashamed to ask anybody else. The easiest thing was to throw the embarrassing diary away. I still don't have a driving licence, and I kept losing chequebooks ... nowadays I stick to cash and plastic money which, if you're sufficiently well off, is wonderful.

Always hated telephones, too. Don't have one in the house (not that you'd call this a house, but never mind). If I had a phone I could call up Queen Street station, to find out what route the train takes, and where it is now. But I don't have a telephone and I can't be bothered looking for an undamaged public phonebox. No television either. I am screenless. They have that Ceefax or Prestel or whatever they call it, these days. I might be able to find out from that where the sleeper train from Euston is now.

Oh, God, what am I doing? Do I know what I'm doing? I don't think I do. I don't think I'd be asking myself this now if I did know what I'm doing. Not that this confusion is my fault, really it isn't; just a troubadour with a very limited attention span; a technician in the machine where the industry standard is the three or four minute single (

*single*, you'll notice; as in *track*, as in *mind*. Of course, if you'd prefer a three record set concept album...). Hell, I never claimed to be an intellectual, I never even thought I was clever. Not for long, anyway. I just knew what I was good at and how good I was compared to everybody else, and that I was going to *make* it. Oh, the ambition was there, but it was a helpless, stupid sort of ambition; blinkered.

Talent. That's what I had, all I had; some talent... And even a small amount of talent can go an appallingly long way, these days. I'd love to claim there was more to it, but I can't. Being honest with myself, I know I was never... driven enough to be more than just talented and lucky. I didn't

*have* to do what I did, I just wanted to, a lot. If they'd said I couldn't ever write a note of music or a

word of lyric for the rest of my life, but there was a secure job waiting for me in computing, or (to be more realistic) a distillery, then I wouldn't have minded that much. And everything would have been hell of a lot simpler.

So I tell myself, now.

Three twenty-five and a quarter. Dear God, it's slowing down. Check out the surroundings. A mostly clear sky; sharp little stars and a sliver of moon.

Silence in the city and no one to talk to.

A car drones down St Vincent Street, stops at the Newton Street traffic lights, idling in the mixture of darkness and yellow sodium-vapour light. Its exhaust curls, the left indicator winks. The trough of the buried motorway, cut through the city like a deep scar, lies beyond, on the far side of the lights, beneath the St Vincent Street flyover. No traffic on the motorway. Little green men become little red men; the main lights change, the car moves off, quiet and alone.

Wish I could drive. I always meant to learn but - like a lot of things in my life - I never got round to it and went too quickly from not being able to afford a car at all to having a chauffeuse for my Panther de Ville, and seriously thinking about going straight from pedestrianism to learning how to fly (a helicopter). Well, I never got around to that either.

Crazy Davey; he did all that. He had the fast cars and big bikes and the planes, and the mansion. And he

*was* crazy.

I may be stupid but I'm not - I never was - crazy.

I left that to Balfour. Our Davey

*collected* dangerously insane things to do. Like the Three Chimneys tour; a case in point. Mad bastard nearly killed me, and not for the first time. That was one of his more dramatic escapades. Made what eventually happened even more ironic. And hard to bear.

But then a lot of it seems hard to bear, at the time. You get good at it, though, with sufficient practice and the right attitude.

And Christine, shall I probe that wound?

*Angel*, I thought when I first saw you, heard you. That mouth, those lips, the voice of silk and gold; I lost you too, I threw you away, turned my back and condemned you, worshipper from the first, Judas to the last.

I always knew it would amount to nothing. Somehow I expected that. Right from the start I accepted I was a misfit and I'd never really be comfortable anywhere, with anyone. I just decided that if that was the case then I might as well try to be as successful a misfit as possible, make as big a noise about it as I could; give the bastards a run for their money. I suppose every society has its escape routes, ways that not-normal can be themselves without hurting those around them, and (more importantly) without



harming the fabric of that society. I was lucky that the time I was born into actually heaped riches on misfits who could more or less behave themselves... providing they had something to offer in return, of course.

Ah, Jesus... Davey, Christine, Inez, Jean... all of you; what did you see when you looked at me? Did I look as stupid and awkward to you as I looked to myself? Worse, maybe. Deep down I never did give damn what other people thought of me, but somehow I still worried like hell about it. I never expected to be loved, but I never wanted to hurt anybody either and that meant trying to be nice and generous and kind and supportive and generally behaving as though I was desperate to be loved, and for myself not for my work.

Here I am, one of the few people awake in Glasgow, sitting in Mr Wykes' absurd, blasphemous tower looking out over a churchyard that is not a churchyard, full of gravestones that are not gravestones, staring at the sky and the ever-changing traffic lights that tick and change and cycle through their simple programme regardless of an audience or cars or anything else short of a power failure, and I'm waiting for a certain train and thinking about - very possibly - doing something really stupid.

Anna Karenina?

No. Though I may well go west.

My hands are shaking. I'd kill for a cigarette. Not a person, of course; I wouldn't kill a human for a cigarette. I'd kill... a minor plant maybe, or a flatworm perhaps; nothing with a proper central nervous system... no, come to think of it, I'd kill a woodlouse for a cigarette (not that many woodlice carry fags), but that's only because I hate the horrible little crawling bastards. Inez said that she always used to stamp on them too, but then one day she started to think of them as baby armadillos and found she could suffer them to live.

Baby armadillos; good grief.

Gave up smoking years ago but I'd love a fag now; maybe I should go out; find an all night petrol station and buy a packet of straights.

No; this is just nervousness. I suffer terrible guilt pangs after smoking. Better not to. God, I'd like a drink, though. That's a lot more tricky. Drink. Drink drink drink. Trying to keep my mind off it, trying to keep my hands off it. I have the continual temptation of knowing there are several dozen large wooden crates stacked on the ground floor here and crammed with drink; red and blue label Stolichnaya, Polish vodka, Hungarian brandy, white and red Georgian sparkling wine (méthode champenoise), real Budweiser and East German schnapps. Cases of the stuff; gallons and gallons of commie booze; sufficient alcohol to provide a lethal dose for every stockbroker, judge and priest in Glasgow; a small swimming pool's worth of genuine Red Death. The ground floor of Mr Wykes' Foll - my home - also holds a Yugoslavian dumper truck, a Russian tractor and a Czechoslovak bulldozer, not to mention a quantity of other Eastern Bloc products sufficient to fill a small and probably rather unexciting department store.

There is a perfectly logical reason for me having all this.

... More words for the song. I scribble them down on the back of another man's card, like a thank you

for information received. Just please let that news be true, let it not be false or wrong or incomplete. Let it be right if the song is right, and I'll try my hardest, honest.

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Scribble scribble. There.

Another time-check. Three-thirty; thank goodness. An hour and fifty minutes left. Time to think clearly, time to review, reconsider.

Let's try and get all this into some sort of perspective; let's put it in context, shall we? Order it.

My name is WEIRD, my name is Dan or Danny or Daniel, my name is Frank X, Gerald Hlasgow, James Hay. I am thirty-one years old and old before my time and still just a daft wee boay; I am a brilliant failure and a dull success, I could buy a nearly-new Boeing 747 for cash if I wanted to but I don't own an intact pair of socks. I've made a lot of mistakes that paid off and a lot of smart moves that I'll regret forever. My friends all seem to be dead, fed up with me or just disgusted and on the whole I can't blame them; I'm an unholy innocent and wholly guilty.

So come on down, roll up, come along, come in, sit down and shut up, calm down and listen up... join me now (hey gang, let's do the show right here!) ... join me now as we journey into the past down the teeming thoroughfare that is... (you guessed)

## TWO

Frozen Gold: I hated that name right from the start, but I was so damn sure of myself I was perfectly confident I'd persuade them to change it.

Wrong.

A wet Tuesday in November, in Paisley, in 1973. I was seventeen; I'd left school a year earlier and started work at Dinwoodie and Sons, a light engineering works carrying out component work for the big Chrysler car plant at Linwood (the Chrysler factory had been a Rootes factory, would later become a Talbot factory, and finally end up a Closed factory; a car plant that withered).

I spent most of my time collecting swarf from around the lathes, making up songs in my head and going to the toilet. In the toilet I smoked, read the papers and wanked. I was bursting with youth then seething with semen and pus and ideas; bursting spots, pulling myself off, scribbling down tunes and words and bad poetry, trying every form of dandruff control known to Man save cutting all my hair off, and wondering what it was like to get laid.

And feeling guilty. Never forget the feeling guilty; the constant bass line to my life. It was one of the first things I was ever aware of (I don't know what I'd done; peed on the carpet, thrown up over my dad, hit one of my sisters, sworn ... doesn't matter. The crime, the misdeed, is the least important part of it; what counts is the guilt). 'You bad,

*bad boy!* 'You wicked child!' 'Ye wee bugger ye!' (*skelp*) ... Jesus, I took it all in, it was my most formative experience; it was part of the fabric of reality; it was the most natural thing in the world, the

principal example of cause and effect; you did something, you felt guilty. Simple as that. To live was to feel, 'Oh, God! What have I *done?*' ...

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Guilt. The big G, the Catholic faith's greatest gift to humankind and its subspecies, psychiatrists... well, I guess that's putting it a little too harshly; I've met a lot of Jews and they seem to have just as hard a time of it as we do, and they've been around longer, so maybe it wasn't the Church's invention. but I maintain it

*developed* the concept more fully than anybody else; it was the Japan of guilt, taking somebody else's crude, unsophisticated, unreliable product and mass-producing it, refining it, finetuning it, optimising its performance and giving it a life-time guarantee.

Some people get away from it; they honestly seem to just shuck guilt off like a backpack as soon as they leave home; I couldn't. I took it all too seriously, from the start. I believed. I knew they were right; my ma, the priest, my teachers; I was a sinner, I was dirty and soiled and horrible and it was going to be a full time job saving me from the fires and the torment; real professional work was going to be needed to rescue me from the eternal damnation I felt forced to agree I so thoroughly deserved.

Original sin was a revelation to me, once I understood it properly. At last, I realised, it wasn't necessary to have actually done something to feel guilty; this dreadful, constant, nagging sensation of wracked responsibility could be accounted for just by being

*alive*. There was a logical explanation! Hot damn. It was a relief, I can tell you.

So I felt guilty, even after I'd left school, even after I'd stopped going to church (oh, Jesus, *especially* just after stopping going to church), and even after I'd left home and started sharing a flat with three atheist prod students. I felt guilty about having left school and not going to university or college, guilty about not going to church, guilty about leaving home and leaving my ma to cope with the others alone, guilty about smoking, guilty about wanking, guilty about skidding off to the bog all the time and reading my newspaper. I felt guilty about not believing in guilt any more.

That Tuesday evening I'd called in to see my ma and whatever brothers and sisters happened to be in the house. Our flat was on Tennant Road, in the Paisley suburb of Ferguslie Park, the roughest area in Paisley at the time, a wasteland of bad architecture and 'problem' families. It was a toss-up which were the most broken; the families or the houses.

Ferguslie Park lay in a triangle of land formed by three railway lines, so no matter what direction you approached it from, it was always on the wrong side of the tracks. The streets were full of glass and the ground-floor windows were full of hardboard panelling. The only thing holding up the walls was the graffiti.

Spray paint was something of a status symbol amongst the local gangs then, like owning a Parker pen a sign you'd arrived as a menace to society and could afford to devote some of your valuable time to the theory and practice of artistic despoliation as well as the more strategically effective but less aesthetically satisfying forms such as smashing holes in walls, wrecking cars, and carrying out al fresco, enthusiastic, but usually non-improving amateur plastic surgery on the faces and bodies of rival gang members.

The closes in the squat, ugly, buildings silted up overnight with empty bottles of fortified wine and drained cans of strong lager; it was as though people put out wine bottles instead of milk bottles, waiting for a morning delivery that never came.

I didn't stay long at my ma's; the place depressed me. That made me feel guilty too, because I felt I ought to love her so much it would outweigh the bad memories the place held for me. Our flat always smelled of cheap cooking; that's the only way I can describe it. It was the smell of old chip fat, reheated cans of cheap Irish Stew, too many cans of baked beans and burned slices of white sliced bread, and the greasily solidified remains of fish suppers, take-away Chinese meals and curries; all overlaid by the smell of cigarette smoke. At least my youngest brothers and sisters were past the age of regular vomiting.

My ma, as usual, started trying to persuade me to go to church; at least to go to confession. I wanted to talk about how she was, how the kids were, whether she'd heard anything from da ... anything but the one thing she wanted to talk about. So we didn't talk together; we talked apart.

It washed over me, I felt guilty and inadequate and hopeless and nervously out of place. I just sat nodding or shrugging or very occasionally shaking my head, and concentrated on trying to put one of my wee Andrew's toy cars back together for him (he was crying). It was cold in the flat, and damp, but I was sweating. My ma was smoking her usual number of fags and I had always promised not to smoke, so I couldn't take out my own packet. I sat there, scanting for a cigarette and trying clumsily to mend my wee brother's toy car and wanting to get away...

I got away. Left a fiver on the ledge beside the little container of holy water by the front door, and got out, but not without promising that I'd come back after the pubs were shut with some fish suppers, and not without promising to think about going to chapel again or at least to go and see Father McNaughtan to have a talk, and to be good generally and work hard... the faint smell of urine in the close was almost a relief; it was like I'd just started breathing again.

It was raining; I turned my collar up and tramped across the street, feet crunching on the broken glass that was Ferguslie's equivalent of a gravel drive, then marched over the muddy grass, past half-burned sheets of hardboard and sodden chip pokes and half-crumpled aluminium take-away containers holding little greasy puddles of rainwater, until I was out of sight of the flat. I ducked into a close on Bankfoot Drive, and lit up, sucking at the smoke like life itself. The close stank, there was illiterate graffiti carved into the tiled wall opposite, and I could hear a man shouting in one of the upstairs flats. The flat nearest to me turned their telly up, presumably to drown out the noise from upstairs. I smoked my sawn-off Embassy and looked out at the damp dreariness of Ferguslie Park, shivering a little as some water ran down my neck.

Dear Ferguslie; my cradle, my adventure playground. I'd moved away from it, but only a mile away. It still held me. Christ, what a dump, what a sorry mess it was. They should make a documentary about it; it was ideal material. Urban deprivation?

I wanted out of this. I wanted away.

I reached into my jacket's inside pocket and took out some folded sheets of paper. One of my flatmates had let me use his typewriter to print out a few of my songs. I'd bought real stave paper from a music shop, carefully transcribed all the quavers and hemi-demi-semiquavers from my old exercise

jotters, and then typed in the words underneath.

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I knew I'd never make it as a singer-songwriter, so I was currently looking for a band to make rich and famous. I had a third or fourth-hand bass guitar I'd almost learned to play, and knew the most basic rudiments of writing music. I'd started out with my own system of musical notation; at the age of eight I'd invented a way of writing down music based on the use of graph paper and twenty coloured pens I'd been given for Christmas. Curiously enough this system, though complicated, did work. It became a sort of personal institution, something I was proud of, and I'd spent the last eight years stubbornly resisting the inevitable, refusing to learn the system everybody else used and trying to persuade anybody who'd listen that my way was better. I honestly, fervently believed that the musical world would see that my system was superior, and change over. It would be like going metric, it would be like decimalisation ...

Insane.

Anyway, I had, with much ill grace, finally bought myself a teach-yourself music book, and grudgingly learned about the basic arithmetic of staves and time signatures, even if diminished minnows and sevenths and chord progressions still seemed like higher mathematics (I wasn't worried; I knew what the songs sounded like in my head, and they were brilliant. It would be a minor matter to transfer them into the real world. Any fool could play a guitar or a keyboard and notate; the real talent lay in thinking up the tunes).

And tonight I was off to the Union of the Paisley College of Technology, where a band called Frozen Gold were playing. A lad I'd known at school, who now worked as an assistant on one of the lathes in Dinwoodie's, had seen the group play in some pub in Glasgow and recommended them. I was sceptical in the extreme.

*Frozen Gold?* Pathetic. I had lots of far better names. In the unlikely event this lot turned out to be the ones to go with, I'd let them choose from those I'd come up with.

I tramped through the rain, shoulders hunched, hands as deep in the shallow pockets of my corduroy bomber jacket as they would go. I kept the Embassy Regal between my lips and smoked it down to the filter, staring down at the sodden ground, protecting the fag from the rain with my head. I spat the dog-end into the gutter as I walked under the railway line and out of Ferguslie Park.

The Union was warm and noisy. The beer cost twenty pence a pint and it was only fifty pence to see the band. I knew a few people in the bar, and nodded, grinned, said a couple of hellos, but really I was there on business, so I was trying to look serious and distracted and generally as much as possible like a man with more serious things on his mind than standing around talking and drinking and enjoying himself. I would probably have been like that even if there hadn't been any women there, but to be honest it was mostly for the chicks. I was a man with a mission, a young fellow with the future history of the popular song resting next to his breast. I was going places; I was important... or at least I was very obviously going to be important, and soon.

I took my pint of lager down to the Union's modestly proportioned lower hall, usually used as its snooker room. The Union building, an off-grey edifice on the side of a hill facing the Gourock-

Glasgow railway line, was Paisley's old Social Security office, and had - consequently, apparently - been designed in an appropriately depressing blind-cubist-with-a-hangover style. The low-ceilinged room where Frozen Gold would have their unwitting appointment or near-miss with Destiny was already smoky and warm. I could almost feel the steam coming off my wet clothes; I could smell my own body, too. Nothing too offensive, quite comforting in fact, but I was standing beside a couple of girls for the set and I wished I'd gone home first and put on some aftershave.

Frozen Gold were a five-piece band. Lead, rhythm and bass guitars, drums and Hammond organ. Three mikes, including the one for the drummer. The equipment looked surprisingly new; the amps and speakers were hardly battered at all, and the Hammond was in mint condition. They even seemed to have their own two roadies, who were finishing the setting up. No sign of the band themselves yet. It puzzled me that a fairly well-off band should be playing this small, hardly publicised gig. Somehow it made it even less likely they'd be what I was looking for. If I hadn't just started my pint I'd have left then, drained the glass and swept importantly out of the building, into the rain and back to the flat. Another evening in, sitting in front of the one-bar electric fire, watching the black and white telly with the lads, or reading my library books, or messing about with Ken's acoustic guitar, or playing poker for pennies, and maybe a pint or two in Bisland's before ten... but instead I stayed, though I felt a sense of incipient hopelessness.

The band; four guys, one chick. The two girls standing nearby clapped enthusiastically and shouted; the band smiled and waved; the girls seemed to know them by name. 'Ayyy,Davey...!' they yelled; a young blond guy, about my own age and carrying a Les Paul, winked at them, then plugged the Gibson in. He looked like a male model; perfect hair and teeth and skin, broad shoulders, narrow hips. He took off a black leather jacket that looked too soft to be real leather and too expensive to be anything else and revealed a white shirt. Silk, my brain told me, though I didn't remember ever seeing a silk shirt in my life before, not in the flesh. Faded Levis. He adjusted the mike. He was a little smaller than I'd thought at first. He grinned out at the gradually gathering audience. I caught a glimpse of a guy's watch in front of me; good grief, they were starting on time!

I didn't notice the other three men; by then I was looking at the chick. Blonde too, quite small, semi-acoustic guitar, dressed very similarly to the bloke; white and faded blue, reading from the top. Again about the same age as me, maybe a little older. A looker, I thought. Bet she can't sing and the guitar's not even wired up properly. What a face though. Just on the plump side of beautiful, if you were clutching at straws to find something to criticise. Nobody could look that good and have a voice too.

Jesus ... and what a smile... I was left metaphorless before the warmth of a small, shy grin. She looked from the audience to the Les Paul Adonis and gave him a smile I'd have killed a higher vertebrate for.

I didn't know what this lot were doing here, but they weren't for me. They hadn't played a note but they just

*looked* together, already set up. They gave the impression they already had a recording contract (though I'd been told they hadn't). I was looking for some hardly formed, rough-edged squad of rockers who could more-or-less play, didn't have any original material, and would do as they were told, musically at least; play the goddamn songs and the absolute minimum of flash solos.

I was wrong about the girl. She and the Greek god led off together; lead and rhythm, both singing. 'Jean Genie'; recent Bowie. She could sing and he could play. In fact, she could play too; perfectly

decent rhythm guitar, steady and energetic at the same time, like another storey on top of the bass line. The bass was a factory; big, regular, efficient... the chick's rhythm guitar was an award-winning office block, glossy but human. The blond guy's lead was... Jesus, a cathedral. Gothic and Gaudi; by the Late Perpendicular out of the NASA assembly building. It wasn't just speed; he didn't just play fast, like there was some sort of world lead-guitar-playing sprint record waiting to be broken; it was fluid, it just flowed, effortless, natural, perfect. He made all the local board merchants sound like lumbering Jumbos, and this guy was an F1-11 doing aerobatics.

They didn't stop at the end of Bowie's song; they launched straight into the Stones' 'Rock This Joint', then Led Zep's 'Communication Breakdown' ... played a little faster, if anything, than the original.

I came to be cynical, and for the first thirty seconds of the Bowie song I was, just because I was a hopeless musical snob and Bowie was too 'commercial' for my taste; they were on more credible ground for me with the Stones and the Zeps ... but that feeling didn't last long. I ended up stunned. They were doing just by playing what I wanted to do by writing. There were rough edges, sure enough, they weren't all that tight, the drummer was more enthusiastic than his skills would let him get away with, the guy with the Hammond seemed to want to show it off rather than play with the rest of the band, and the chick's voice, though it was technically good, and powerful, sounded too polite. Classical training, I decided immediately, trying hard to find something analytical to hold onto.

Even the lead guitarist occasionally tried riffs he wasn't quite capable of, but watching his face as he twisted and screwed the notes out of the Les Paul, I got the impression he'd get there one day, before too long. He would give a little grimace, even a small smile and a shake of the head as he lost his way in a torrent of notes heading for a climax and had to back off, settling for something a little more conventional, as though these were partly scripted little exercises he'd worked on and could play in rehearsal and get right most or some of the time but hadn't quite managed tonight.

In short, they were good. Their choice of material was about the only thing I really took issue with. They didn't seem to know where they were going; the first half of their set was a mish-mash of stuff from sources as far apart as Slade and Quintessence, some of it obviously chosen to let the lead player show off (including a couple of Hendrix tracks he did no injustice to, just followed The Man's line a little too closely), and some chosen just as your average stomping good-time dance music.

Messy, but good fun. Rather like sex had been described to me by my older brother. By the end of the first half I was sweaty, my feet were sore and my ears were ringing. My lager was warm and I hadn't drunk more than another two mouthfuls since I'd entered the room. A fag I'd started during the first song had burned right down and singed my fingers; my head was throbbing and my brain was vibrating with crazy possibilities. These people were all wrong, not at all what I wanted, not really... but; but but but but but...

I don't know what my face must have looked like, but one of the two girls I was standing beside looked up at me and was obviously so carried away with the band her enthusiasm overcame her natural and understandable reluctance to have anything to do with the tall, ugly, staring-eyed loony at her side. 'Magic, aren't they?' she said. Both girls were looking at me now. 'Whadjey think, eh? Good eh?' The second one said. I was so knocked out by the band I didn't even register that I was in conversation with two quite attractive chicks, and they had started talking to me. I nodded rapidly, swallowing on a dry throat.

'V-v-very good.' Even my stutter didn't put them off.

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'Ah think they're fuckin brilliant,' the first one said. ' Absolutely fuckin brilliant. See them? They'll be bigger than...' she stopped, searching for an adequate comparison. 'Slade.'

'Or T Rex,' her friend said. They were both small and had long dark hair. Long skirts. 'Bigger than T Rex.' She nodded vehemently, and the other one agreed, nodding too.

'Bigger than T Rex, or Slade.'

'Or Rod Stewart,' the second one said.

'He's no a band, he's one guy,' the other said.

'But he's goat a band; the Faces; ah saw themm at the Apollo an ...'

'Aye, but...'

'D-d-d-' I began.

'Bigger than Rod Stewart, defnitly,' the second girl announced.

'B-b-b-' I said, changing tack.

'Well bigger than hum

*an* the Faces then, okay?'

'B-but d-d-don't they have any original m-m-m-m-material?' I managed.

They looked at each other. 'What, their own songs, like?'

'Mmm,' I said, drinking my warm lager.

'Don't think so,' the first one said. She was wearing an ankh on a leather thong and lots of cheap India jewellery.

'Na,' the other said (tie-dye vest under a heavy fake fur jacket). She shook her head. 'But ah think they're working on some. Defnitly.' She looked at me in a sort of assessing way; the other one looked at the small stage, where one of the roadies and the drummer were adjusting the bass drum pedal. I got the impression I'd said something wrong.

'Cumin' fur a drink?' the first one said to her friend, tapping one empty glass against another. They drifted off while I was still stuttering over 'Can I buy you both a drink?' Awful lot of hard consonants in that short sentence.

The second half wasn't so good. They had problems with the equipment, and broke a total of four strings, but it wasn't just that. The material was the same mix as in the first part of the set, which I



found a disappointment in itself, but the songs were less well put across anyway, as though the first half was all stuff they'd learned fairly thoroughly and the second made up of songs they were still learning. There were too many bum notes, and too many times when the drummer and the rest of the group were out of synch. The crowd didn't seem to mind though, and stamped and clapped even more noisily than before, and I knew I was being very critical; Frozen Gold were still streets ahead of anybody else I'd heard on the local circuit... Jesus, they weren't just streets ahead, they were in another town, heading for the city and the bright lights.

They finished with 'Love Me Do', encored with 'Jumping Jack Flash', and wound up finally - with the Union janitor making pointed signs at his watch from the doorway, and the roadies already starting to disconnect the equipment - with an acoustic version of 'My Friend The Sun', by Family. That was just Adonis and the chick together with one guitar. They were as near perfect as makes no difference to anybody but the most bitter rock journalist. The crowd wanted more, but the janny was turning the lights on and had already switched their power off. I joined the fans clustering round the front of the low stage.

The two girls who'd talked to me earlier were talking to the guy; a couple of drunken students were telling the blonde girl she was the most incredibly beautiful female they had ever seen in their lives and would she like to come out for a drink some time? while she smiled and shook her head and dismantled the mike stand. I could see the blond lead guitarist watching this from the corner of his eye while he talked to the two lassies.

I sidled up to the girls and tried to look serious but interested, like a man who has important things to discuss and doesn't just want to say 'Great, man,' or whatever, while still making it obvious how impressed - though with certain criticisms - I nevertheless was. What my resulting expression actually looked like I'd prefer not to think about; probably the message that came across was more like 'I am a best a dangerously drunk sycophant, but more likely a clinical psychopath with an obsession about musicians'. The guy glanced at me a couple of times, but I wasn't able to catch his eye until the two girls had found out where the band were playing next and one had secured a ballpen autograph on her forearm. They left happy.

'Aye,' the guy said, nodding at me, giving me a little smile.

'You're v-v-very good,' I said.

'Ta.' He started winding up some cable, then accepted an open guitar case from one of the roadies and put the Les Paul into it.

He turned away.

I cleared my throat and said, 'Emm ...'

'Yeah?' he looked back, just as the girl came over and hugged him round the neck, kissed him on the cheek, then stood beside him, arm round his waist, looking frowning down at me.

'I was w-w-w-wondering ...'

'What?' he said. I watched as the girl's hand stroked his waist slowly through the silk shirt; an absent,

unthinking gesture.

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My nerve failed. They looked so good, they looked so together and happy and beautiful and talented, so clean and well groomed, even after that energetic set; I could smell some expensive scent off one other of them and I just knew I couldn't say any of the things I wanted to say. It was hopeless. I was me; big ugly stupid Danny Weir, the mutant of the household, the big lanky dingbat with the acne and the lank hair and the bad breath... I was some cheap pulp magazine, yellow and dog-eared, and these people were parchment and leather covers; I was some cheap warped EP made from recycled vinyl and these people were gold discs... they lived in another world, and they were heading for the big time. I knew it. I was doomed to Paisley and grey walls and chip suppers. I tried to speak but couldn't even stutter.

Suddenly the girl's frown deepened and she said, nodding at me, 'You're Weird, aren't you?'

The guy looked at her then, a little shocked, certainly surprised; his brows and mouth trembled somewhere between a frown and a smile; he looked quickly from her to me while I stumbled out 'Y - yes, yes, that's m-m-me.'

'What?' the guy said, to me. I held out my hand but he'd turned to her again. 'What?'

'Weird,' the girl told him, 'Danny Weir; D. Weir... Weir, comma, D, in the school registration book, so, "Weird". It's his nickname.'

The guy nodded, understanding.

'That's me,' I grinned, suddenly jubilant. I gave a sort of stupid half-assed wave with one hand and then fumbled for my cigarettes.

'Remember me?' she said. I shook my head, offered them both a fag; she took one. 'Christine Brice. I was in the year above you.'

'Ohh,' I said, 'yeah; of course. Yeah; Christine. Aw yeah, of course; Christine. Yeah. Yeah; how are you then, emm ... how's things?' I couldn't remember her at all; I was ransacking my brains for the vaguest recollection of this blonde angel.

'All right,' she said. 'This is Dave Balfour,' she added, indicating the guy she had her arm around. We nodded to each other. 'Hi.' 'Hello.' There was a pause, then Christine Brice shrugged at me. 'What'd you think?'

'Of the b-band? The gig?' I said. She nodded. 'Aww ... great ... aye; great.'

'Goo...'

'B-but you need your own m-m-material, and the second half stuff needs more practice, and you could be a lot t-tighter, and the organ could make more of a c-c-c-c-contribbb ... ution, and the drums need to be a lot more disciplined... and of course the name just w-w-won't ... umm ...' The expressions on their faces told me this wasn't going down too well. I buried my mouth and nose in the plastic pint glass to pretend I was taking a drink, and received a warm dribble of totally flat lager.

Jesus God Almighty, what was I saying? It sounded like I hated everything they'd done. What was I thinking of? I ought to be courting these people, not kicking them in the teeth. Here they were, nicely turned out middle-class kiddies having good fun with their wee band, turning out the best music in town and probably all set for greater things if that was what they really wanted, and no doubt used to praise and plaudits and each other's glamorous company, and here was this huge, shambling, babbling maniac telling them they were doing it all wrong.

What must I have looked like to them? I was six foot six in my (holed) stocking soles, but hunched over, head almost buried between my shoulders ('Vulture' was just one of my many school nicknames I had dozens, but the one that stuck was the best). My eyes bulged, my nose was huge and hooked, and my hair was long and thin and slick with its own grease. I have long arms and huge mis-matched feet one size eleven, one size twelve; I have big, clumsy strangler's hands with fingers which are too thick to let me play the guitar properly, no matter how hard I try; I had no real choice about taking up the bass; its strings are further apart.

I'm a monster, a mutant; a gangling ape; I scare children. I even scare some adults, come to that, though the rest just laugh or look away, disgusted. I'd been a funny looking kid and I'd blossomed into an ugly young man who didn't even have the common courtesy to be ugly on a small scale; I was *imposingly* bad-looking. I was exactly the last thing these beautiful, exquisitely paired, nice young people needed to see. I felt guilty about just being in the same room as them. What had I *said*?

The keyboard player passed behind just then, pushing the Hammond in front of him; he must have heard some of what I'd said because he muttered, 'Fuckin music critic, eh?'

Dave looked at me like I was some very low form of life, then gave a sort of hissing laugh through his nose. 'Apart from that though, all right, aye?'

'Awww...yeah,' I said quickly. 'Brilliant. I...I...I think you c-c-could go ... you know...' I wanted to say 'to the top', but that sounded silly. '... you could do whatever, emm ... you know...' I was not, it occurred to me, at my most articulate just then. And my most was the average punter's least at the best of times. 'Oh f-f-f ...' I almost swore. 'Look, I'd like to b-b-buy you all a drink sometime, and talk b-b-business.'

'Business?' Dave Balfour looked dubious.

'Yeah. I think I've got the songs you need.'

'Oh, aye, have you?' Dave Balfour said, and looked like he was choosing between just walking away or cracking a mike stand over my head. I nodded, drew on my cigarette as though it contained some self-confidence drug. Christine Brice was smiling humanely at me.

'Ssseriously,' I said. 'Just let me have a t-t-talk with you. I've got the tunes and the words; everything just needs somebody to ... g-get interested. You'd like them, honest. They'd be just right for you.'

'Well,' he began, then the janitor started hassling them. The roadies had opened a side door to the rain-filled night and the cold wind and were lugging the gear out. I picked up one end of a speaker and helped a roadie carry it out and down some steps to where a Transit van sat waiting in Hunter Street.

My normal clumsiness deserted me momentarily and we made it down the steps without me dropping it. Dave Balfour was putting his guitar case into the back of an old Hillman Hunter standing just behind the Transit. Christine sat in the passenger seat. I went up to Balfour, my shoulders hunched against the rain and the fresh cold of the open air. 'You really got some material?' Balfour said, pulling his glove-leather collar up.

I nodded. 'No shit.'

'Is it any good, though?' I let a few seconds pass, then said, 'It's so good it's even better than you're going to b-b-be.' Shit! Fluffed it on the home stretch!

That was a question I'd been waiting for somebody to ask, and a line I'd been waiting to deliver, for the past two years. The line didn't sound half as serious and intriguing and encouragingly ambitious as it always had when I rehearsed lying in bed at night, fantasising, but at least it was out. Dave Balfour took a second to digest it, then laughed.

'Aye, okay then; you buy us that drink then.'

'When?'

'Well, we're practising tomorrow night; come along then if you want; have a pint afterwards. Okay?'

'Fine. Whereabouts?'

'A hundred and seventeen St Ninian's Terrace. We'll be in the garage. 'Bout eight.'

'See you there,' I said. He got into the car as the roadies slammed the door on the Transit. I could see a couple of pale faces inside, staring out.

I started walking down the slope of Hunter Street, heading for a chip shop and then ma's. The Transit coughed and bounced past me, then the Hillman. It stopped, and Christine Brice stuck her head out.

'Want a lift?'

'Ferguslie Park for me,' I laughed, shaking my head. 'Yer t-ttyres would never get out alive.' She turned back to Dave Balfour and they talked. I got the impression stopping had not been Dave's idea.

'We'll drop you nearby.'

'Ah...' I shrugged. 'Ah've got tae p-pick up some chips first, like; you'd...'

'Aw, get in.' She opened the rear door. 'I'll have some chips too.'

We stopped at a chip shop off Gilmour Street; she gave me the money for their chips. Nobody talked much, and they dropped me on King Street.

Dave Balfour only livened up at one point, when we were waiting at the traffic lights on Old Sneddon Street; a car drew up alongside us, and Balfour did a double-take when he looked over at it. He nudged Christine, and reached down to take something small and black from a door-pocket; something

clicked, and he looked anxiously at the back of the small device, glancing up at the traffic lights a couple of times. I thought I could hear a high, whining noise. Christine shook her head and looked away. A little orange light shone on the back of the machine; Balfour held it up against his side window, tapped it against the glass, and sounded his horn. The driver of the car alongside ours looked round.

Balfour waved with his free hand, and was immediately surrounded by a blinding flash of light. I sat trying to blink the harsh reflections away, trying to work out what had happened, as Balfour laughed and sent the car powering away from the lights. 'God, you're so childish sometimes,' Christine breathed. Balfour was still giggling, looking into his rear-view mirror as he drove. 'Give me that flash gun,' Christine said, holding out one hand.

'Sammy Walker,' Balfour said, ignoring her. 'Did you see him? That's the second time I've got him this week!' He shook his head and kept chuckling. Christine looked back at me, raising one eyebrow. I smiled uncertainly.

I walked through the drizzle with the slowly cooling brown packages leaking grease and vinegar onto my jacket, wishing I hadn't agreed to go back to my ma's after closing time. Just what I needed, to go wandering about Paisley all night.

On the way back to the flat I did remember Christine Brice, from my schooldays. She had been fairly good looking even then; one of the well dressed older girls, self-assured, collected, and properly uniformed; very much not a product of Ferguslie Park itself. She'd been in the year above me all right and I recalled that three years ago, when I still thought my looks could pass for dramatic rather than just horrific, I'd invited her onto the floor at the school's Christmas dance; of course she was older than me and so it was hardly the done thing, but I thought being tall might give me the edge...

She'd blushed and shaken her head; her friends had giggled.

I'd crumbled with shame and left the hall and the school. I'd wandered through Paisley - wretched, cold, humiliated - in my tight new shoes and my thin old jacket, waiting until the dance was due to finish, so I wouldn't arrive home before my ma expected me; she'd only have asked embarrassing questions.

When I had got back, I'd told her I'd had a great time.

## **THREE**

They don't seem to have telegrams any more; they have something called telemessages instead; fake telegrams that come with the ordinary mail. One dropped onto the pile of mail behind the small back door of St Jute's vestry six days ago, on a Wednesday. The pile of mail is three years deep; probably enough to fill a couple of postal sacks. It's junk mail mostly, so I ignore it, just go down there every now and again and kick it around a bit, looking for anything remotely interesting. Important mail gets sent to my lawyers; the people who matter to me know that trying to get in touch directly is usually

futile.

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Rick Tumber ought to know that, but he must have forgotten. The telemesssage skidded across the tile floor when I kicked the pile of mail and I picked it up, wondering whether I should open it or not. That was unexpected, and unexpected things tend to turn out badly, in my experience. What the hell; I opened it.

ARRIVING YOUR PLACE LUNCHTIME SUNDAY 21st.

IMPORTANT. BE IN. PLEASE. THIS IS GOOD NEWS.  
KINDEST REGARDS. RICK T.

Good news. I was instantly wary. Rick Tumber was head of ARC, our record company. When he talked of good news he meant there was lots of money to be made somewhere, somehow. I started making plans to be out of town there and then, though I suspected something would happen to stop me; I wouldn't get round to it.

I put the message back in its envelope and replaced it on the pile, as though pretending I hadn't read it. It hadn't come, nothing was going to change, then I went back up the spiral of stone steps to the choir. I hadn't had any breakfast yet, and what passed for my kitchen and dining room lay in the south transept.

St Jute's, also known as Wykes' Folly, looks exactly like a church, but it isn't. It has what looks just like a graveyard, but it has no graves.

Ambrose Wykes, 1819-1898, was the only son of a successful Dundee jute merchant; he built up the business, turned a small fortune into a large one, and moved to Glasgow to oversee the establishment of another commercial empire in the early 1850s, shipping tobacco from America. He had always been mildly eccentric, dressing his servants as ship's crew - the head butler was the captain, the maids were cabin boys - and equipping his villa in Bearsden with a small lighthouse which attracted the wrath of his neighbours and considerable numbers of migratory birds, but by Victorian standards his oddities were not extreme, and he was a devout Catholic, a responsible husband and a loving father.

At least, he was these things until May 1864, when his wife Mary and their only child were killed in a train crash. The boy was only two weeks old, and unbaptised. Ambrose's grief was deepened by the knowledge that the infant's soul was forever denied entrance to the kingdom of heaven; he began to drink too much, and couldn't sleep; his doctor prescribed laudanum.

Ambrose's mourning went beyond the bounds of good taste; he had the whole of the Bearsden house, and his villa at Hunter's Quay on the Holy Loch, draped in black canvas. The furniture was reupholstered in black, the carpets replaced with black felt, black canvas was placed over all the pictures and portraits, and the servants were suddenly required to dress as undertakers. Most of them left.

Ambrose paid frequent visits to his priest, accompanied by an embarrassed but well paid lawyer, apparently trying to find some loophole in the divine legal code which would let his dead son's soul gain everlasting peace. The priest, his bishop, and several Jesuits all tried to reason with him, but

Ambrose refused their comfort. He stopped going to church, he refused to confess.

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His business affairs began to deteriorate as he spent increasing amounts of time writing letters to priests, bishops, cardinals, and even the Vatican itself, urging that some sort of special dispensation be found which would allow the soul of his son to rest in peace; he published pamphlets advocating the reinterpretation of certain Biblical verses. Then he began to picket his local chapel; sitting outside the church in an undertaker's carriage he'd purchased, while some of his warehouse workers paraded round with placards urging reform.

These workers, themselves Catholics, were persuaded by their own priests that taking part in such unseemly demonstrations, even at triple time, was bad for their souls, and would do no good for the dead child. So Ambrose hired drunks from the Glasgow slums instead; they swore at the churchgoers and pissed against the church and fought with the police.

Ambrose had ignored the increasingly stern warnings and frosty advice of his few friends, and soon found himself without any at all. By this time his neglected business empire was on the verge of collapse, so he sold out. Injunctions eventually prevented him from picketing effectively, and he withdrew, broken and bitter but still obsessed, a rich but almost powerless man.

His frustration turned to hatred. The pamphlets began to vilify the church on every possible ground, until they too became unsupportably scandalous, and the printers refused to print them. Ambrose bought his own printing company and kept going for a while, until that too was buried under a blizzard of injunctions and prosecutions. He was excommunicated in 1869.

Ambrose remained determined to get back at the church somehow. His solution, after much thought and more brandy, was to make use of one of the few pieces of property he still owned; an empty site on St Vincent Street, between Elmbank Street and Holland Street. He sold almost everything else he owned, paid a great deal of money to an architect who has remained anonymous to this day, and - the rumour goes - an even larger sum to at least one member of the City Council to make sure there were no problems over building permission.

He built his own church. A Gothic design one architectural guidebook calls 'a bastardised blend of truncated Pearsonesque Normandy Gothic and facetious, ill-proportioned Lombardy'. The church was correct in almost every detail: nave, transepts, choir, vestry, crypt, pews, altar; even bells in the tower (Ambrose had them cast cracked so they sounded awful, but another injunction prevented them being rung).

The spare ground at the rear of the plot he turned into a mock graveyard, hiring Protestant stonemasons to turn out gravestones for each of the many enemies he'd made during the previous decade. Each stone gave the correct date of birth, but the following date recorded the death of Ambrose's friendship with whoever the stone purported to commemorate; the time when Ambrose had decided this person wasn't fit to live. His priest, a bishop, two cardinals and a variety of Jesuits seemingly lay beside a collection of lawyers, businessmen, judges, newspaper journalists, city councillors and building contractors, all apparently wiped out in some terrible, class-conscious plague which swept the city from 1865 almost to the end of the century.

The place was known as Wykes' Folly, or - in memory of Ambrose's original business - St Jute's. It became famous, a Glasgow landmark. Guidebooks mentioned it, people wrote to newspapers

demanding it be torn down, a small group of free thinkers formed a Friends of St Jute's Society, and various bits of stonework were chipped off - and various insulting words scrawled onto - those parts of the church accessible from the pavement.

Ambrose retaliated by having a madonna and child statue made which showed his own Mary as the Blessed Virgin, and his unchristened son as the baby Jesus.

Ambrose was later to claim - in a pamphlet published privately, long after his death - that his son had indeed been the result of a virgin birth; in attempting to consummate his marriage on his wedding night, Ambrose had suffered a premature ejaculation while just inches from his goal; he retired in confusion, and claimed that he was afterwards too embarrassed to try again. His seed, however, had proved to be made of sterner stuff; it survived its short airborne journey and found what must have been a rather tenuous hold within the flower of Mary's womanhood; just a dewdrop within the heart of the rose, but sufficient to provide one sperm which must have wriggled past Mrs Wykes' maidenhead and connected with an egg. Ambrose thought this little short of a miracle, and it had been one of the reasons he had wanted his child given special treatment in the afterlife... but it was also a detail of such an exquisitely personal nature that he had felt unable to mention to the relevant theological authorities.

Ambrose died after his collection of papers, pamphlets and tracts went up in flames on Good Friday 1898, seriously damaging the north transept. Ambrose suffered extensive burns, and despite holding on - and even seemingly improving - in the Royal Infirmary, finally died a few weeks later, on Ascension Day.

Ambrose had left enough money in his will for the folly to be maintained; this money proved sufficient to repair the fabric of the building, though slowly. The ownership of the place was turned over to the still surviving Friends of St Jute's, who used it as a storehouse for atheist publications. They abandoned it in the early 'twenties but couldn't sell it; a term of Ambrose's will had been that the place was not to be demolished or significantly changed from its original plan. I bought St Jute's in 1982, when I decided to make my own retreat from the world at large, and have felt thoroughly at home in it ever since.

The door bell rang about lunchtime, as I was making some ideologically sound Nicaraguan coffee; I don't just have jars of coffee, I have crates of the stuff.

I'd spent the time since breakfast working in the studio in the crypt, just fiddling about with the synthesiser and reading the manual on my new sequencer. I still write tunes; jingles, TV themes, the occasional film score, just to keep my hand in. I don't need the money but it passes the time. The jingles and the themes are two of the reasons I hate watching television or listening to the radio. Haven't been able to stand my own stuff since the band broke up, not once it's out there, public, no longer mine.

I thought it might be Blythswood Betty at the door. Betty is a whore who visits me every couple of days or so, just to keep me from getting too attached to my hand I guess. Nice woman; no nonsense type. I didn't think she was due today, but I lose track easily. I went to see who it was.



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