

Lie, My Boy

fka Sunday Night Megalomania

by Dawid Tysowski

It all started with little lies. At first, they seemed petty and natural for a kid. Children all over the globe make up things just to get away with a broken vase, or an untouched sandwich dumped straight after leaving the school, or a chocolate bar they have eaten even though they were told not to. In adulthood it's more or less the same, it's only the stakes that differ. As life proceeds, we want to see our issues and ourselves as more serious, responsible, and fatigued. We try to make the impression of having a life in an orderly fashion, an impression of being calm, chilled, collected, and constantly busy. Sometimes it's easier that way, to omit the facts. We devote ourselves to making our existence seem or feel difficult. At the end of the day, it's only the stakes that change.

You wouldn't have to travel too far back in your memories to recall your last lie. Each day we struggle with the little liars inside us, and we make decisions, decisions that on multiple occasions are surprisingly *not in favour* of the glorious and praised virtue that truth is usually portrayed as. Therefore, humans, as we all know too well, are full of shit.

Adam was like every other preschooler, and his lies were like every other preschooler's. Alright, maybe they were a bit more frequent, and maybe he felt no remorse after committing such a woeful deed.

But honestly, who would pay much attention to yet another child crying in the corner of the playing room, who had been told that, looking at the bigger picture, he's, just like every human roaming this Earth, a meaningless evolutionary mistake and will probably die quite soon without having achieved a single thing worth mentioning. As a matter of fact, when Adam was saying those bitter words to that poor peer of his, he was not aware that he was more or less right, and the kid was soon be run over by a lorry, causing his family to mourn for him for a whole year and create a trauma

in the boy's mum's head, which would eventually put her in a mental hospital. In due course, she would only instil herself in her sorrow. Despite her spouse's best (though futile) efforts to help her come to terms with the sudden death of her firstborn, she would stay inside the eerie premises of the looney bin until she died of the gradually thickening self-pity and inevitable self-imposed madness. Of course, there was no way for Adam to know that. Years later the crying boy would blurrily cross Adam's mind for a little while, just to be forgotten forever a few seconds later.

And of course, Adam would never admit to having told such inappropriate things to his fellow preschooler, and the whole case would very quickly fade into oblivion, overshadowed by the following lorry accident.

But Adam was not the one to blame. He hadn't been born that way, no one ever is born *anything*. We're all just *made* into something. Adam Turner was made into a pathological liar, who in addition was indifferent to other's emotions and consciously ignorant toward people's inner, psychological lives. His life turned him into an insensitive outsider, incapable of ever getting used to the ambient world surrounding him. His mother, an almost-famous punk singer in the late 90s, a full-time drug and nicotine addict, and a booze connoisseur on the side, would later suspect it was after his father (whom she had known, say, briefly but effectively).

It was one of her first tours, back in the days when she dyed her hair red and black and wasn't on friendly terms with shower. The mic getting moist in her sweaty hands, her intestines twisting and crumbling from overexcitement and stress; and yet she was content. "That's my dream come true," she thought. Her career seemed so sure back then. An idea, talent, and effort would soon bring the long-anticipated outcome. Money and fame were close at hand and were meant to stay so forever.

The small but cosy underground club was inundated with cigarette smoke, spirits evaporating off young men's bodies and the never-leaving odour of sex. The life of a middle-of-the-road punk that night was a paradise. It was the last day of the local festival that was famous across the county and even made it to the small screen from time to time. The cellar was teeming with life and death at the same time, and that's what made the youngsters so thrilled. It was her third live show, which was basically about half an hour of belting out lyrics about smoking spliffs, fucking in the backseat and tripping downtown. However crude and simplistic that lyrics may sound, at least they were true.

While giving her show a distinguished young gentleman, dressed in a beige suit, black shiny shoes, sunglasses resting on his nose and golden ring shining on his left index finger, noticed the small and scruffily clothed yet pretty and physically attractive girl trying to do her best on the laughably small stage, surrounded by a myriad of worn-out leather jackets, dyed Mohawks and counterfeit Ray-Ban sunglasses. His Clubmasters were brand-name, his shirt ironed and his hair combed. He was sticking out of the crowd, and in the eyes of Adam's mum, he was somehow backlit by the blinding beams of the limelight. Once the performance was over, the refined lad followed her backstage and they quickly hit it off. Not only was he promising, but he also gave lots of promises. Promises that would make the young ambitious musician all ears: a world tour, a professional band and himself by her side was enough to convince her and spend the rest of the night accompanying him.

By accident the two of them happened to have just all of the aforementioned facilities: some weed, a car and the advantage of already being in the city centre. What they didn't have, were prophylactics.

When the young artist woke up the following day she glanced through the window. The morning was clear and sunny, the light was trying its best to reach her feet laying bare on the mattress but was vehemently stopped by the dusty curtains, leaving the interiors of the room in a mysterious shade obscuring the whole scene. She couldn't quite remember how she got to the motel, or whatever that was, but who would care. Had the man stepped out of the bathroom now, he would have noticed the sad unfinished cigarette butts in the glass ashtray on the windowsill, the window itself opened ajar. Through the curtains he would see the hungover city, slowly waking up to face its daily struggles and live another boring, routine day after a wild weekend. Had he turned his eyes to the love of his life (at least that's what he had told her) lying naked in the motel room's lousy bed, with goosebumps on her porcelain skin and her teary eyes opening both slowly and sensually he would have realized of what exquisite beauty she was, despite her smeary make-up.

He was already not there. Having left the motel about half an hour earlier, never to come back again, he lived the rest of his life oblivious to the miraculously pleasing scenario of that morning.

Only a month later did she realize that the unassuming evening left something more than a bad taste in her mouth. The news of a baby coming soon into her life, unexpected and, so to speak, undesired, made her anxious and tremendously outraged. She had no idea how to deal with that unprecedented situation. Change was coming as her belly was growing bigger. She gave up her singer/junkie career altogether and took a regular job at a laundry near the flat she was renting.

She would never truly forgive the handsome young gentleman for his ignorance and indifference toward her feelings and struggles. She also would never get over him or put so much trust in any other man. Furthermore, she would blame him for her son's

dishonesty and inability to face the truth, no matter how merciless and bitter it was until her last dying breath. The memory of his eyes, his clean-shaven cheeks and his manly jaw were to haunt her for the rest of her life, never making enough space for any other person to fill the vast nothingness and coldness of her broken and disillusioned heart.

But she would suffer in silence. She would take that burden on her shoulders without sharing it, without uncovering her vulnerable and damaged soul. She would cage those thoughts and emotions, letting them corrupt her from within, forever.

What she also couldn't say good-bye to was nicotine and she would continue to smoke on a regular (though not too frequent) basis, much to the baby's disadvantage. When her belly became noticeably protruded and her eating habits changed so fiercely that her fridge was filled with pickles, energy drinks and an occasional bottle of gin, she took a taxi to the hospital to give birth to her accidental child, Adam.

The baby was, much to the doctors' astoundment, safe and sound. After relatively short but rather painful labour, when asked if there was anything they could do for Adam's mum, all she could mumble were only two words. "Wine," she said under her breath. "Red," she added at once.

Tried as she might, being a single mother lacking in both experience and education was harder than she could have imagined. It was more and more difficult for her to make ends meet. She would sell her stuff regularly on the market – furniture, dishes, old CDs, occasionally herself. Paying rent on time was probably the most tiresome task of all, considering that she barely had money for food and necessary goods, such as diapers and weed. If that wasn't enough, the landlord, known as Wild Bill,

was an intimidating forty-something man, always with a three-day stubble and almost palpable lust.

By the time Adam turned three, Wild Bill was visiting them quite often. One night, after a few knocks at their door with no response whatsoever, he opened it with a strong kick that made the hinges break into smithereens, interrupting the neighbours in their evening routine of watching telly until late at night. The neighbours downstairs were in the middle of the latest episode of *Love Island* and were not inclined to leave their comfortable armchairs to see what on Earth caused that terrible noise. The show wasn't a good one, though. Creating artificial suspense, the series would go on what felt to be forever. Cheap entertainment, nothing more to it. Yet they were, much to their own surprise, interested in the convoluted pseudo-plot and unforeseeable affairs of the main characters. Anyways, they didn't hear anything else that night and in the nights to come. They continued to live their private lives unaware of the terror happening right above their heads.

"Well, well, Ms Turner," Bill began, "ain't easy living on your own, innit?"

Adam's mum only nodded her head slightly, anticipating what was about to happen, almost feeling the stench of the landlord's unsatisfied craving. She delicately dragged Adam into the wardrobe, from where he could see just a fraction of what was going on in their living room. However, he was still able to perfectly hear the noises, sighs, and groans, and smell the odour of fungi mixed with sweat.

She didn't even attempt to resist the crude. As a matter of fact, there was no choice, as her submission was some kind of a noble deed, required to let her and her baby

continue to live in, so to say, decent conditions. It was her martyrdom. For some time, at least.

As their financial situation wasn't getting any better and the abuser's visits were becoming more frequent, Adam got used to the cramped wardrobe and he grew accustomed to the cosiness of the closet. He learned to cut himself off from the outer world and fall into one of his own. Daydreaming was a way out, his own method of dealing with the soulless reality, devoid of any pleasure or happiness.

He was never given the opportunity to reach out to anybody, not only because he would be ashamed of his own life, but also because his mum told him not to do so. "What happens in here stays in here," she would say during one of her pep-talks. "Not a word will come out of your mouth about our private affairs, nor will you try to get help from anybody. I've got it all under control, Adam," she assured him. "And don't try to call the fucking police, ever. If they ask you, lie. Lie, my boy, for there's no room for truth in this world," she said, sad and melancholic. "We gon' be alright, darling. We'll be alright."

And so he would grow older in terror and fear of the truth that was both painful and inescapable. For the rest of his life, he would remember the drunken eyes of Wild Bill, his muddy, oversized shoes and his stained vest laying on the floor of their living room.

It only got worse when Adam went to preschool, when the other children started asking questions about his mum's unenviable reputation that spread like wildfire across the neighbourhood. Lies were inevitable.

“My dad says your mum’s a whore,” he once heard from one of his peers, Garry Ray. Never had Adam been so furious, but he didn’t really know what violence was back then, much to Garry’s luck. The only thing he could make up as a comeback was verbal humiliation of that little brat who dared to insult *his* mummy. What he felt when he heard of the terrible lorry accident a few days later was satisfaction, and seeing Mrs Ray’s tears made Adam even more content. “Karma’s back”, Adam thought.

Rarely does one meet a six-year-old familiar with the idea of *karma*, but not only was Adam an intelligent boy, but he also read a lot in his little hideaway. Books, newspaper articles, even phonebooks. Whatever let him get lost in the wandering of his restless mind was fair enough.

His mum was not the only one to make Adam avoid the truth, though. One time when Wild Bill paid an unexpected visit to their flat, he found Adam home alone, since his mum went out for a few hours to *get the groceries*. She was going out more recently, she wanted to see Bill as rarely as possible and, moreover, her good old marijuana addiction started to remind her of the sublime feeling of carelessness that drugs provided.

Bill told Adam to sit at the kitchen table, himself taking a seat at the opposite side of it. It was one of few occasions when Adam could be this close to the rotten landlord and behold the whole silhouette of the man, not through the gap of the wardrobe door. He was about to find out that dealing with Wild Bill through the gap of the wardrobe door was incomparably more pleasant than meeting him face to face.

“How’s life, young lad?” Bill started his intimidating chit-chat, “Good, innit? Doin’ good, ay?” His northern accent twisted his tongue and gripped his throat. Adam needed to focus on the man's words to understand him.

“Yes sir,” Adam responded shyly, his knees trembling under the table, his fists clenched and his eyes teary. He wasn't any good, that was a lie. Just like his mother, he was more or less anticipating what was about to happen. And just like his mother he wouldn't fight, he didn't want to make the man angry. Only God knows what Bill would do in his drunken fit of madness when faced with rejection and disobedience.

Adam was attentively watching the fat body slowly rise from his seat and approach him. He could smell the whisky, he could see the stains as closely as ever, but he didn't feel fear. He was brave and he wouldn't ever even attempt to victimize himself.

“You don't have to say a word to your mum, you know,” Bill whispered to Adam's ear. He could smell the intensive motorbreath of the crude. “It'll be our little secret.”

“Yes sir,” Adam said. “What happens in here stays in here.”

And the boy would say a word about it neither to his mum nor to anybody else, ever. He lived his life confident in his belief that truth was something not to be discussed with anybody. Lies were his form of self-defence. Making up a story was way easier than not answering a question at all, really. Because when a question remains unanswered, people tend to come up with a story of their own that sometimes happens to be a close relative to truth, and that only causes pain and ridicule. He wanted to avoid that by all means. Adam preferred to suffice people's desire for details with lies, and their desires were usually satisfied, leaving Adam to wander alone in that secret little world of his.

The state of affairs went south when his mum got pregnant for the second time. Only this time was worse, for she had no idea who the father was. She wanted to exclude the possibility of Wild Bill being the one to have impregnated her. Adam was ten at that time, almost eleven, thus their needs were growing bigger by the day. They needed more food, larger clothes, books for school (as Adam was a big boy by then) and the baby was to be born soon.

She didn't have much choice but turn to her cousin who lived in Lille, France. Much to her luck, Peter Turner agreed to help her, even though they hadn't been in touch for over a decade and he couldn't quite recall her face. However, Peter felt sort of obliged to put his cousin out of misery. They had met only a few times when they were kids because their mothers were sisters, but when Peter's family migrated to France, the two families lost any contact. Peter's mother, Theresa, made the choice to leave Britain after she miscarried a baby, Pete's would-be younger sister, Lucy. Disheartened and bitter Theresa left the country with her husband and their eldest, who, despite their trying continuously, was their only child. However, Peter's memories from England were joyful and every time he recalled his childhood a smile would appear on his face. Those reminiscents persuaded him to help his cousin out.

So he let Adam's mum stay at his place until she's back on track. Furthermore, he had a daughter, Alaine, who was about the same age as Adam, and Peter thought they may become friends. Later he would regret that decision, but at that time it actually seemed like a pretty good idea to introduce the two to each other.

In due course, they stayed in France for over two years. These were years of carelessness; with Peter's help, Adam's mum found a job at the post office. The beginnings were, so to say, uneasy. She didn't know a word in French, and to her mind, French and gurgling of a man choking on his own saliva sounded very much

alike. When a customer spoke too fast she would just call one of her colleagues to help her out, but she needed an interpreter more than she was supposed to. Eventually, her job narrowed down to segregating parcels and letters and dumping those without a stamp. After a few months, she knew the name of almost every city, town and village in France, she even learned how to pronounce them correctly. Her lack of knowledge concerning the geography of the country she was currently living in was no obstacle to her though.

Once on her way home, a Frenchman stopped her and asked her politely: "Excusez-moi, madame, comment se rendre à la poste?" What did he want? Something about the post office, that's for sure. Feeling a bit confused and doing her best to make the impression of thinking intensively, she scratched her head, smiled from ear to ear and replied confidently: "Bonjour, bordeaux le touquet amiens, clermont-ferrand carcassone marseille, monsieur!" The gentleman looked at her in the way people look at weirdos, with both disgust and pity. "Merci," he replied and went away as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, Adam and Alaine became, as intended, best friends. They were attending the same school, the same courses, and they lived in the same house. No surprise they wove such strong bonds of friendship. They often helped each other at homework - Adam was terrific at maths, which is universal and more or less the same in every country, so explaining fractions and roots to Alaine wasn't a burden for him. In return, Alaine taught her cousin the basics of French and often protected him at school when other boys were bullying or mocking little Adam. And let me make this clear, it was *often*. The boy was shy, separating himself from his peers, he was what one could call an outsider.

Conversations with classmates were nearly impossible. They only asked about his past, why he came to France, where his mum worked, where his dad was. What was he supposed to say? That he was a bastard? Or should he have kept silent and let their imaginations work on the highest gears? No, there was no choice but to lie.

The only person he felt comfortable with was Alaine, who played a significant role in the development of Adam's social skills. With her tutoring he quickly started speaking in French, hardly ever making any grammar mistakes. Logical errors were far more frequent. The greatest problem was pronunciation, sure, but how could any foreigner ever be ridiculed for mispronouncing a French word? Sometimes even the French themselves find it difficult.

A few months went by and Adam's mum gave birth to her second child, a beautiful baby girl, Lucy. (It was a tribute to Peter's would-be sister, though he was opposed to the idea from the very beginning, despite Adam's mum's insistence). Though Adam didn't pay much attention to his half-sister, who, he believed, was there only to make sure he couldn't sleep well, Alaine took good care of the girl. Her maternal instincts made themselves felt relatively early in her life, but, much to Peter's amazement and pride, she was an incomparable babysitter. She was delicate, she seemed to understand the child's needs and desires. One could say, even, that she was a better mummy to Lucy than Adam's mum had ever been to her eldest.

Lucy was baptised in Saint Maurice Catholic Church at Lille. It was mostly because of Peter's stubbornness. He was a conservative, Christian, outstandingly instilled in his beliefs and not accepting other mindsets, faiths, or points of view easily. Adam's mother had never been religious, not even spiritual. Having experienced life and seeing it from the worst perspective, she saw no deeper meaning in human existence, at least not in her existence. It was usual of her to laugh at people who felt

exalted and full of themselves, so certain of their own greatness and flawlessness, since she knew how much they were wrong. Furthermore, having spent such a significant part of her life either in the gutter or ecstatically high, she had a significant amount of time to commit herself to philosophical reflection and mind training. Peter, on the other hand, had always been a busy man, his mind was corrupted by work, the incessant race in search of success and money. In due course, he had spent little time questioning ideas and beliefs drilled home by his parents, or the Church, or the TV, let alone contemplating the deeper meaning behind one's existence, the never-ending excursion called life and the burdensome curse of a being's self-awareness. The questions we never ask ourselves are the ones we're too afraid to ask.

In the end, one of her children was baptised and was an official member of the Christian community, while the other was not. Either way, she was indifferent towards this matter. Her biggest concern was how the siblings would get on with each other.

And at the beginning, it certainly wasn't a healthy brother-sister relation. Another reason why Adam was not very fond of Lucy was that Alaine would spend increasingly more time with the baby and he felt pushed aside. He tried studying with her, or just talking on their way to school, at the same time exercising the newly acquired skill of speaking a language other than his mother tongue. Anything to be with her. Anything to be with somebody.

One sunny afternoon he managed to persuade her to go for a walk. They visited the local zoo and saw the monumental Citadel of Lille, but *where* they were was of no greater significance to Adam. Truly speaking, he didn't care at all. He felt safe with her, she was his new hideaway. The sole activity of being close to her made him feel

certain of his own value and gave his life meaning. It's a common practice in this strange world that people seek destiny in other people. Unable to appreciate their lifespan on their own, they try to fill the vacancies in their blunt souls with their fellow human beings. Basic human needs and evolution-backed behaviours are often interpreted as love and affection. That was exactly how Adam, now a teenager, felt. They didn't talk much, but their relationship was everything but talking. It was about help, it was about comfort, and it was the best period of Adam's whole life.

He never told Alaine about it. She never asked. Even if she did, he would lie anyway, so what would be the use?

When that afternoon turned into a dark night, they suddenly became aware that the next day they were supposed to go to school, and that they hadn't done anything regarding that matter throughout the whole past weekend. That wasn't their biggest concern though. What they did worry about was their current location, or, should one call it, their lack of location. Without a mobile phone, a map or any idea where the hell they were, their objective then was quite simple: find home.

They hopelessly roamed the streets of Lille, holding hands and assuring each other that everything would be okay. And, yes, everything was okay. Having meaninglessly strolled the streets for over two hours in a row they lost the perception of time. Had they known that their parents already set out in search of them, biting their nails stressfully and, moreover, that the local police department had already been informed about two kids lost somewhere in the city, they probably wouldn't have felt so careless. Just as they grew tired of the tedious blocks of flats that were ubiquitous in the area, they encountered a small passage between two main streets, an alley, where the homeless were rumoured to reside.

Unaware of this crucial fact they took their turn into the alley and walked straight into a Bohemian slum, and though it was neither spacious nor tidy, it was teeming with life. They could see children running around, chasing a football in order to prevent it from rolling onto the busy street. Beggars, lying on the ground, wrapped in blankets, trying to keep their body heat on a level that would assure their surviving yet another night without a roof above their heads. They could see old gipsy women, gathered around a lousy establishment, a mediocre counterfeit of a cafeteria, chatting loudly about the thrills of the passing day, and the opportunity that tomorrow was supposed to bring. The women were exalted among their people, their social status in their small community was clearly at its pinnacle, their senescence was undeniable proof of their lore. Every wrinkle on their faces, every grey hair on their heads and every look they would give to the passers-by was evidence of incomparable experience and unparalleled wisdom. The advantage of being a mother gave one the capability of thoroughly controlling the situation and assured superiority.

Men of various generations were sitting on dilapidated plastic chairs along the alley. They were silent. Having observed every little detail that was happening in that alley for decades, they grew accustomed to the evening routine. The loud chatter, the outbursts of happiness, the terrifying screams of fear and the omnipresent hustle and bustle were their bread and butter. They knew *everyone* who had ever entered that alley and *everyone* that was yet to step into this magical world, existing despite, or maybe because of the outside world that was stubbornly oblivious to the wonders taking place every night in that narrow passage. They would continue to smoke their cigarettes and sip their bloody-red wine quietly, trying to focus on appreciating the brief moment of leisure. Without any interference from the so-called civilization, the Bohemia in Lille thrived.

Seeing the two children, with their skin pale and with terror on their faces was an unprecedented event in that small alley, and came as a surprise to the gypsies. They welcomed the newcomers with sincerity and hospitality, contrary to the common belief that stated their hostility toward strangers. It was just another lie, rooted deeply in the minds of the people from outside the alley, corrupted with bias, bigotry and prejudice.

Their parents found them about half an hour after they had entered this wonderful, unknown world. However, they were unable to notice and appreciate the marvel of that place, maybe because they were so exhausted of the wearisome search for their children, or maybe their depraved brains filled with harmful stereotypes were hardwired to reject the beauty of this uncharted realm.

Adam and Alaine's friendship was supposed to last forever, and it would be so, had they not taken it a bit too far. They were both teens now, whatever their parents thought they were, and they were starting to have, say, different needs. Puberty took control over both of them and the would-be friends turned into the would-be lovers.

Their affection was easy to be seen and Peter quickly noticed that their relations had undergone a fundamental change. At first, he didn't say a thing. He refused to think the matter through and continuously pushed the thought away. Try as he might, it was simply impossible not to see the obvious bond between Alaine and Adam – going out together more and more often, chatting for hours and just staring into each other's eyes, smiling from ear to ear and daydreaming, succumbing into the void of love and excitement.

For Adam, it was heaven. Alaine wouldn't spend so much time with Lucy anymore. They would always come back home after school together, and every walk was

divine, comprising a few good laughs and conversations that seemed to last forever. One time Adam stopped and asked Alaine to do so as well. He got a bit closer and looked straight into her eyes.

“W-would you mind i-if I,” Adam began shyly, the distance between their lips was getting smaller by the second. “Would you mind if I kissed you?”

Alaine put her lips on his for a brief moment, then smiled, laughed gaily and went on to walking. To her, it was nothing, just a silly child’s play. To Adam, on the other hand, it meant the whole world.

Innocent as they were, Peter could not allow the situation to escalate. Incest (or even a possibility of it) would stain his good name forever, he would lose not only the respect of his neighbours and friends, but he would also be a lost cause in the eyes of God. The omniscient, omnipresent spirit that had always been judging and supervising Peter’s actions would never forgive him for letting such a blasphemy happen. Though often portrayed as the embodiment or even the definition of love, this time He did not approve of the two being a couple. At least, that’s what Peter was doubtlessly certain of, and was ready to save all of them from damnation and satisfy his Lord, thus adding another step to the ladder that was supposed to assure him praise and eternal life. He was more than ready to take action, step between the two souls that, though inextricably intertwined, were to be torn apart from each other. No excuses, no exceptions, no second thoughts. Peter had already made up his mind.

Years later he would still feel content and proud of his choice, seeing his daughter grow up in a normal environment, surrounded by honest people and establishing *healthy* relationships. He saved Alaine from ridicule, from the doom that would be

inevitable had he not interrupted the wicked love. She quickly got over her cousin and almost forgot the otherworldly time they had spent together.

Adam, on the other hand, was outraged and utterly disheartened. One day when he came back from school, this exceptional time by himself, for Alaine had to stay at home because of her *feeling unwell*, he saw a scene that was all but understandable to him. Three suitcases were standing on the porch, the car engine was running and his mother was exchanging kisses and good-byes with Peter, who noticed the boy's arrival and approached him rapidly.

"What in God's name is going on here?" Adam said through clenched teeth, trying to look bitterly astonished and making his mother smile just a bit at her son's elaborative manner of putting words together at such a young age. Obviously, he had already figured it out and knew exactly what was going on, he just wanted to hear it from his uncle in order make sure that Peter was acutely aware of how big a mistake he was making.

"Watch your words, son," Peter warned him. "Don't take the name of God in vain," and it was for God himself what Peter was doing. "It'll be better this way, trust me."

But Adam didn't trust him. At least he wasn't very much inclined to do so, since trust and vain promises were not what he desired. He craved for love. There was no other thing in that world that would matter to him more than Alaine, with whom he had spent the most careless and euphoric time of his life and he didn't want to give it all up. But who was there to listen to his wailing? Adam kept it all for himself, he hid his true feelings, dreams and expectations deep inside him, where no one could access those internal experiences. That was where they belonged, and that was where they

were safe from any harm, distant from the ubiquitous cruelty of the reality surrounding him.

Two months later their life seemed to be perfect. Adam, little Lucy and their mother moved back to the Isles and managed to find themselves things to do, responsibilities that would give their lives sense, something that made them move forward. Adam went back to school, whilst his mother took care of Lucy at the social house they were given in the outskirts.

Adam did a great job when it comes to studying, but his social skills and ability to function properly in a community had undergone a drastic process of retardation. Though he now lived in a friendly environment, amongst good-hearted people and quiet, middle-class neighbours, he couldn't forget about the moment they left France. Homecoming wasn't that traumatizing an event for him in itself – he would still be able to visit his cousin from time to time, or call her, just to make himself feel better or to confide in her. But shortly after receiving the terrible news, when Adam entered his uncle's car and was about to hit the road and get to the airport, he saw her through the rear screen. Alaine was looking down at him through the window in her room, her face more beautiful than ever, the waterfall of her meticulously combed hair of deep chestnut colour shinier than usual, her slightly protruded chin raised higher than it normally was. But in the middle of her gorgeous face were her small, round eyes, mirroring her soul. And at first, they seemed sad to Adam, as if she was mourning for him and for the life they were meant to spend together.

However, after a split second his interpretation was rather the contrary. What he saw was excitement and satisfaction, fulfilment triggered by the few moments they experienced accompanying each other. Then he decided it was probably both, a mixture of grief and passion. They exchanged looks only for a few seconds before

Peter put his foot down and the car moved, leaving everything behind – the house, the memories, the love. When they covered a quarter of a mile Adam forced himself to look back through the rear shield again, plausibly to remember each and every detail of the place, or maybe to hide the tears from his mum.

And just then, looking at the house getting farther and farther away, he realized that he had been mistaken. The last glance he had received from Alaine, which he thought was both suffering and thrill, was actually neither. Alaine showed indifference towards his leaving, as if she didn't even care if he was at her side or not, and that broke his heart. At least that was Adam's interpretation, and he would grow more and more certain about it over the years to come, analyzing it over and over in secret.

Had he known about the conversation that took place between Peter and his daughter, another parental pep-talk about following God's orders (without providing any logical justification that would actually make obedience to some superior being substantiated), sexuality and the nurtured ability to distinguish good from evil. Indeed, a weird compilation, but to Peter it actually was holding water. In that scenario, he played the role both of the judge and the jury, he was the authority, he was God. Having full control of the situation made him feel important, gave him duties that, though self-imposed, seemed paramount to him. It was also proof of his ignorant egotism and insensitivity, which was simply hurting people around him. This feeling of being more than one actually is may be interpreted as pure stupidity, taking oneself too seriously when there's neither any need to do so nor any reasonable pretext. Hence, persons who fall for this illusion are not aware of being under the spell of megalomania taking control of their naïve selves.

Heartbroken, with nothing but empty void inside him, Adam was excluded. Excluded from happiness, from joy and from life itself. He studied because there was nothing else to do with the long hours of leisure. Every day he would come back home after another mundane day at school afoot, it was a thirty-five-minute stroll to get from point A to point B, twice a day, no matter the weather. Fortunately, the maritime climate was kind with the Isles' inhabitants, never unbearably cold, nor exceptionally hot.

Coming back home on a cloudy afternoon, a bit more rapidly than he usually would because he could clearly sense the rain coming – the smell of the air and the dark sky assured him of the upcoming downpour. His neighbourhood was full of feline, and these animals of all colours and behaviours would terrify him. Cats roaming the streets, fighting, or mating took definite and unquestionable control over the place. They always looked at Adam with curiosity combined with hostility. Every time he would step up just a bit only to get home as quickly as possible and evade any unwelcome encounter with one of the beasts. But this time was different.

This time, he decided, he would fight his anxiety and fears and try to come to terms with those creatures; however the cats, usually inquisitive and craving for adventure, that afternoon were unwilling to approach him. Except from one little kitten, laying on the sidewalk right in front of him, paying attention neither to the raindrops falling nor to Adam crouching in front of it. The boy stretched his hand slowly in order to stroke that small cat, and he was getting closer by the second. In a brief instance of bravery and composure, he touched the kitten on its back; it felt nice.

Stroking its furry body and feeling its ribs underneath its skin, sticking out a bit, made him feel both content and self-satisfied. The only thing that bothered Adam was the bizarre coldness of the cat. One would expect a living creature to be warm,

especially in comparison to the ambient temperature of the air. He investigated the kitten and poked it on its head with no response whatsoever. A bit confused, Adam turned the cat around, only to see his rotting belly and its twisted neck. The cat was dead, he realized. Adam noticed the blood on the brick sidewalk and earthworms, slowly consuming the dead corpse from the inside.

Lightning flashed and the sound of thunder ringed in his head. Adam quickly got over his shock and ran as fast as he could, zealously observed by mobs of cats sitting on the fences and trying to grasp what caused such terror.

He thought about the dead kitten for days, again closing himself in that little world of his. The memory would come by when he was taking shower, eating breakfast or right in the middle of an important history exam, forcing him to, as his peers called it jokingly, *doze off*. Intensive periods of contemplation occurred repeatedly, giving boys from his class yet another reason to make fun of their friend, lost somewhere in the depths of his mind, wandering restlessly.

His poor mother found it uneasy to understand what was going on with her son. She did her best to give him proper living conditions and guarantee his getting some decent education. Most of her attempts to start a dialogue were met with reluctance and an occasional shrug. Try as she might, having a normal conversation with Adam was too far-fetched an activity for her.

“So how was school, Adam?” she began.

“As usual” he replied straightaway wearily and made her aware that it wasn't the best way to get in touch with her son. She couldn't give it up that easily, though.

"I was thinking we could go out today, you know, just the two of us. We can go to the cinema if you'd like or something." She was desperate to eventually spend some time with him.

"And what about Lucy?" he asked. His baby sister was almost five years old at that time.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll take care of that. Mrs Spencer will babysit her tonight." Mrs Spencer was the Turners' neighbour, living opposite the street. Adam's mum would drop Lucy off to her for the night from time to time. She would do so when she felt the need to go downtown and let her hair down, cutting herself off the daily routine, since having a four-year-old with her would certainly be an immense burden. Sometimes after coming back from France she felt like it was too much for her – the baby (not so much a baby anymore, but still a sweetheart in her mother's eyes) requiring lots of attention, running a household on her own and dealing with Adam's strange condition; she craved for a break. In those rare instances of carefreeness, she allowed herself to cry out all the insecurities regarding the future, traumas of the past and the never-leaving feeling of not being enough.

They did as planned, Lucy was with Mrs Spencer the whole night but it was everything but troublesome to her. Mrs Spencer was an amiable lady in her late 50s, a widow with no children of her own. She was always more than happy to care for her neighbour's little girl. They would spend time reading colourful books about rabbits in shorts and teddy bears living in the forest. It was a way of tasting the life she never had, filling the empty space rooted deep inside her heart for a little moment. When her beloved spouse, Geoffrey, died of a brain tumour a couple of years back, she inherited a huge sum of money. Actually she wouldn't even have to work, but what would she do with so much free time? She wasn't ready to retire and

she regarded unemployment as evidence of one's laziness. Moreover, with neither children nor grandchildren, there was nobody to turn to, nobody to call and nobody to take care of. Luckily, there was Lucy to console her.

Adam was riding shotgun. Looking mindlessly through the windscreen, he was able to see the lights turn green, then red, then green again. He was contemplating the complex system of traffic lights, preventing the havoc that would most certainly be wreaked, had the drivers been left on their own in deciding whether to stop their vehicle or not, when he was interrupted by both gentle and tense voice of his mum.

"Let me make this clear, darling," she started. "I know what we've both been through and I know how much you suffered, but believe me, please, believe me, that there was no other way. Things were as they were and we can't do nothing about it now. Just try to move on, love."

There was no response but silence. How could there be any response anyway? And, furthermore, what would she like to hear from Adam? Having lived inside his mind for so many years, remembering the horror of his childhood and still feeling his heart burning after the bitter separation from Alaine he wasn't capable of even breathing a word. Some may claim that maybe this would do him good, that letting it all out would solve all of his issues; well, it wouldn't. In some cases, it may be that easy, but with this overload of emotions and traumatizing experiences, a simple talk would be of no use.

And even if he did want to confess, he wouldn't turn to his mother. He would do that the way the drunkards do, to strangers in a pub. Or even to a random person, met in

the most strange of conditions - yes, then he would confess. Then he would say what had been playing on his mind. He would avoid the judgment, avoid the pain.

Adam clenched his fists, swallowed his pain and muttered: "I'm alright, mum. Don't worry." He wasn't alright. Adam continued to gaze at the road in front of them and turned the music up a bit. The tranquillizing tunes of *Nine Million Bicycles* made him smile just a little bit.

Years went by and the Turners' situation stabilized. Adam was doing his senior year, and due to the fact that now there was a bus from his school to his house, he was able to omit the feline gang effectively. Only the obnoxious screaming of cats would sometimes wake him up at night, but he didn't have to deal with them physically - regardless if they were dead, or alive.

However, he was incapable of avoiding *the people* using public transportation services. He had to deal with a much more intimidating group than cats: humans. He tried not to interact with the stinky drunks, loud teenagers and old ladies hunting for free seats to occupy, but he observed.

Painstaking observation and close examination of his fellow human beings both fascinated and overwhelmed him. Never had he seen such a captivating phenomenon; both unpredictable and easy to foretell. He could easily notice schemes and patterns of others, and yet it was beyond the bounds of possibility to fully comprehend the motives behind their actions and daily routines. Not interrupted by the outside world Adam came to realize that each and every passenger had a private life of their own. That every person he passed by, every person at the wheel

of their car stuck in a traffic jam, and everyone crossing the street had a secret agenda. They were someone else's grandmother or son or uncle and they were all on their way somewhere.

Adam would often imagine those people's lives, their backstory and their future. It was a nice thing to do, making up stories, adding at least some meaning to the crowd, devoid of any values or goals whatsoever. Though none of that was true, it also wasn't a lie, and that was fair enough for him.

One of the most interesting cases was the redhead teen, who would always leave three stops before Adam and, much to the beholder's amazement would start to run at once. And don't get me wrong, there's nothing weird or wrong about running; some find it liberating, others do it for sheer pleasure. Adam would also run from time to time, with his headphones on and his legs moving smoothly on the irregular surface of the road, occasionally passing other runners, who would greet him by raising their hands and showing their sweaty palms to him, a gesture he never grew fond of, and one which always made him feel quite uncomfortable.

The girl was different. She was Adam's schoolmate, however he never got to know her; actually he knew neither her name nor what courses she was attending. She was a sophomore, or even younger, Adam wasn't sure.

Adam made up his mind to investigate the intriguing behaviour. In his overzealousness, he quickly found out that the girl's name was Annie, that she was a freshman and that on Mondays and Thursdays she finished school at the same time as he did. Annie wore no makeup (which would undoubtedly be ruined after a few minutes of jogging) and wore branded, costly clothes, which indicated that she must

have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, which made it even more muddled why she exposed herself to such drudgery instead of just staying on the bus.

In the world full of lies, he was craving for the truth. Even something as peculiar as Annie's destination, or rather motivation, he wanted to know it. He wanted something to be real.

That afternoon Adam was desperate to find out more about Annie. He got his sneakers laced tightly and was holding a bottle of water, waiting for the bus to stop so that he could start chasing the mysterious girl. The door opened and Annie jumped out to the sidewalk and started pacing madly, and that was what made the whole incident strange in Adam's eyes. Annie wasn't walking fast to get somewhere on time, and it wasn't a trot just to exercise after a whole day of sitting at school. Annie was sprinting as if she was escaping a tidal wave or trying to outrun a creep who had tried to touch her. There was another thing that didn't hold water.

Annie never looked back, ever. An obvious thing to do is to check whether that *somebody* or *something* going after you is still posing a threat or not. It seemed to Adam that she wasn't running from anything, there were different reasons making her race for it, of which he had no idea. And he wasn't to find out quickly, for the girl in her everyday outfit, flat shoes and a backpack brimming with heavy books, notebooks, and yesterday's lunch was still a better runner than Adam. After a couple of minutes, he lost any sight of her.

Two days later he decided to follow a different strategy, one he was masterminding the whole night and that more or less guaranteed success. He deduced that there was another way of catching the girl red-handed without necessarily confronting her

at school, which would be both too easy and too stressful. He felt that the truth was at his fingertips, he could smell the realness.

He painstakingly studied Annie's running routine, and on Monday instead of chasing her (which would be futile anyway), Adam wanted to outwit the intriguing athlete. She went out of the bus and, as usual, started sprinting madly. This time Adam didn't even give her a brief glimpse, he knew her route to the very inch and so far everything was going according to the plan. The bus was speeding down the street and took a right. Adam, with his headphones on, was looking through the window, awaiting the inevitable. He already missed his stop and was getting farther and farther away from his home, which made him feel a bit uneasy, yet he knew very well it was worth it; a sacrifice for the greater good, giving up certainty and comfortableness to find out the true motive behind Annie's habit. Passengers were gradually leaving the bus and there were fewer and fewer people. "Five, including me," Adam counted. Without warning, a strange chain of thoughts appeared in his head, a feeling he knew well that took over his mind. Once again he started thinking about those persons' individual lives, of which he had no idea whatsoever.

Adam focused on the aged lady in mohair hat and flashy garment, something between a jacket and a coat, having the characteristics of both but at the same time being neither. He imagined she was somebody's grandma, she had decades-long experience in life and had been through a lot of things Adam knew nothing about. Furthermore, in that very moment, there was a cornucopia of conundrums, memories and ideas going berserk inside her head, hidden under scarce grey hair and the unfashionable piece of headgear. A waterfall of knowledge that to her was paramount (for it was her life) was meaningless to Adam, as well as to other passengers. She was just another stranger, of whom they had absolutely no clue.

Then Adam gave attention to the light-blonde girl sitting right in front of him, she was one of his schoolmates, probably, and yet she had no impact on his life, just like he was insignificant to her. Two people, only a few feet separating them, having so many things in common: they were both teenagers, going to the same secondary school, travelling on the same bus, they were both white and wore Nike sneakers. They presumably listened to similar music, ate similar food and lived in similar houses. They were both the same and substantially different.

Not only were all those passengers hollow, empty and insignificant to Adam, but he also was of comparable value to them. Over 7.5 billion people on the globe, 10 thousand years of human history, eight planets in the solar system and countless nebulas, stars and galaxies in the vast universe, and yet we cry when one of our relatives dies and can't get a grip of ourselves when rejected by the *one* person we're in love with. Yes, every one of us is the main character in their own story, but too often do we forget that there's a myriad of stories, where our part is either small or where we have no part at all. We want to call the shots, we want to find meaning in this vastness of time and space but cannot understand that there's none. We're all so full of ourselves and this makes it extremely difficult to take a step backwards and look at ourselves from a broader perspective. We're all just passengers on a bus, oblivious to one another's lives and inner worlds, focused solely on where we're going, but we are incapable of comprehending that the bus we took isn't going anywhere.

Adam looked around. On the other side of the bus he spotted a scruffy-looking bum and became captivated by the image. Somehow he couldn't but glare at the dilapidated figure of a man, who, with his intimidating appearance and unruly hairdo, reciprocated the stare. He must have found it a nice occasion for a chat, because

after a few seconds of uncomfortable gawking, the tramp stood up and approached Adam, taking a seat next to him.

“That *bitch*,” the bum started. It was apparent he was drunk and had troubles speaking his mind, but judging by how he started the small talk he sure had an important message to convey. “She didn’t expect me to come home *that early*, did she?”

The drunkard was looking at Adam, waiting for a response, so Adam just said: “She probably didn’t, sir.”

“Now listen, boy, it’s just between you and me, you get that, ay?” The expression on Adam's face wasn't persuasive enough for the man. "No talking about it, you get me?! If someone asks you, you lie, my boy! You get me, ay?" Adam nodded his head, so the man went on talking, relaxing a bit. “I suspected she was unfaithful but I was alright with it, you know. I’m not as damn sexy as I used to be, but I’m a working man, you see. I toil six days a bloody week and I ain’t got no time to take care of myself.” Of that Adam was sure, for the man’s brownish, crooked teeth undoubtedly required more attention.

“So I took the lift to the seventh floor, that’s were our flat is,” he continued. “I stepped into the bedroom and what I see? What do I see, boy?”

“No clue, sir,” Adam replied.

"Wait a minute, that couldn't have been the seventh floor... which was it for Christ's sake?"

"No idea, sir."

"Okay nevermind, forget that. So what did I see, boy?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Arse, boy, I see an arse!" the man shouted. "That fucker was banging my bloody wife, on my bloody bed, in my fucking flat! And I roared: 'What the fuck, Linda?' And you know what she said? It wasn't 'It's not what you think it is, honey,' or 'Oh, you came early.' No, none of that crap. You know what she said? She said: 'What the fuck, Tom?' Do you imagine? That *bitch*. And you know what I said?"

"No, sir."

"I said: 'What the fuck *me*? What the fuck *you*, Linda!' And you know what, boy? That twat, that wife-fucker, was trying to slip behind me and escape. So I grabbed his throat and looked at him. He was a twenty-something motherfucker, a young lad. I punched him in the stomach and he fell on the ground. And I could hear Linda saying: 'What the fuck, Tom, what the *fuck*.' I wanted him outta there as fast as possible, so I grabbed his throat with one hand, his Johnson with the other and lifted him off the ground, and wanted to take him to the corridor and leave him there, but Linda said something that pissed me off even more (and I don't even remember what it was exactly), and instead of taking him out through the door, I threw the fucker out of the window."

For his own luck (and the bus driver's perfect timing), Adam's stop was right there. He stood up, preparing to leave.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m afraid it’s my stop. Good day, sir,” Adam left the bus and looked right, the direction from which he expected Annie to come. There was no sign of her, however, so he looked around himself. It was the main station, rush hours, the city teeming with life and inundated with its ubiquitous hustle and bustle. Cars coming from all directions, people crossing the streets and birds screeching above the passers-by.

And then he saw her; a slim silhouette was getting closer by the second. All according to plan. He made a few bold steps towards her. When she was close enough for her to be able to hear him, Adam started talking.

“Excuse me, Annie, please don’t find me rude, but I have something quite important to ask you.”

“Sorry, what?” she shouted back.

“Why are you running, Annie?” Adam inquired in a rather straightforward manner.

Annie, still running, passed him by, and now walking backwards, looking at Adam with incredible disbelief and shock, simply said: “Fuck off.”

Unfortunately, while she was walking backwards, not paying any attention to what was going on around her, she didn’t notice that she was getting closer and closer to the pedestrian crossing and, much to her misfortune, she wasn’t able to see a police car, despite the fact its siren was on. She stumbled over a curb and fell right at the bonnet of the car and, because of the impact, fell on the tarmac a few metres farther, banging her head on the ground. One of the constables left their vehicle and got to

her as fast as he could to check her pulse, while the other one produced his phone. Adam could hear him clearly.

“Send an ambulance to the main station, a girl was run over. And a police cruiser. No, the car's alright, I want you to send another one. What do you mean "why"? Matt and I are going to the chap who fell from the building. Over and out.”

The cop (whose name was apparently Matt) looked at his colleague and shook his head. Before hitting the road, he approached Adam.

“You stay here, lad. The police are on their way.”

When he lost sight of them and the siren could no longer be heard, Adam got closer to Annie's corpse lying on the street, devastated and still. “Guess I'll never know,” he thought.

It was about two months later, in May, when Adam's nasty classmates made themselves felt. He was sitting on a bench in the school's yard, eating a tuna sandwich his mum had made for him earlier that morning. The sun was shining above his head, making it comfortably pleasant to lunch outside. Behind his back, there was a mob – a few dozen people chattering, making jokes and trying to impress each other, throwing cheeky comments and rough remarks at one another, as well as at each and everybody around.

It was Bruce Jablonski who started mocking innocent as a lamb Adam. Since there was no response, Bruce picked up a pebble from the ground and threw it at him. The small stone hit Adam right in the back of his head, bullseye. Whilst Adam was rising

from the bench slowly, Bruce shouted “Weirdo!” The victim put the remains of his lunch on the table on his right and started walking towards the bully. Madness in his eyes, rage in his mind, and anger in his clenched fists.

Two weeks later Bruce was still laying in the hospital, with both his legs in plaster, his left hand on a sling and his head bandaged tightly to prevent the broken skull from splitting in two. He was in terrible pain, an unprecedented feeling for a bully. He had never expected himself to be beaten up, especially by a guy as feeble and slim as Adam. Bruce would always find pleasure in violence, it just made him *feel* good, hence he never gave much thought to it, especially in the matter of how it would affect others. He remembered how a few years ago, when one of his friends from their happy-go-lucky oppressor circle, after an intense row, told him that he wished his ‘fucking mother’ were ‘fucking dead.’ Insulting one another’s parents was a common practice among the boys and maybe Bruce wouldn’t feel so touched and humiliated had it not been for his mum’s sickness. Everybody in the class knew that she had breast cancer and there wasn’t too much time to live for her, and it was Bruce’s weak point.

Much to the guy’s benefit, on that particular occasion Bruce didn’t use direct violence. Instead, he came up with a cleverer vendetta, which gave him an equal amount of self-satisfaction, at the same time sparing the guy’s pretty face. Bruce vented his rage by breaking the guy’s cat’s neck and afterwards leaving him on the sidewalk before his house. He also planned to piss all over his front door but, according to the weather forecast, as well as his own observation, it was about to rain heavily, so he decided he would be better off if he just went home.

While Bruce was immobile and dismayed in the hospital, Adam was having a rather difficult conversation. The juvie’s executive sitting at the massive mahogany table

opposite Adam was interrogating him thoroughly, trying to assess the juvenile delinquent's mental state and decide whether or not he should spend the next couple of years on the reformatory's premises.

"He started it," muttered Adam under his breath.

"Sorry, I didn't quite get that. Speak up, son!"

"HE STARTED IT," said Adam angrily. "He wanted to punch me, I only protected myself!"

"Listen, boy, lies ain't gonna get you anywhere. We've got the CCTV, we can see how you stood up and beat the hell out of Bruce. Even when he was on the ground..."

"He threw a pebble at me!" Adam couldn't restrain himself. "He started it!"

"That's it, we've heard enough from you," the executive started collecting his things and intended to leave, but stopped at the door when Adam said:

"You're not looking for the truth, sir. You're just looking for proof to put me in here."

The executive looked at him in disbelief. "If a pebble is worth a broken skull," he said, "then I don't think you *deserve* the truth, son."

The conclusion drew itself: Adam was about to stay in the reform school for at least five years, provided he behaved in a civilized manner and caused no more trouble henceforth.

For Adam, contrary to everyone else's belief, isolation was bliss, a blessing even. He very much enjoyed solitude, for it gave him freedom from all the irritating people he would inevitably come across in school or on the bus. No more questions were asked, no more answers were required, no more lies followed. Nobody disturbed him there, most of his fellow offenders were afraid of him and didn't approach him if it wasn't necessary. Not only was Adam always alone and 'dozing off,' but he was also the psycho who had bludgeoned a guy, clearly stronger and bigger than himself, all on his own. That wasn't a good thing to put on his 'Hi, I'm Adam' plaque. Can you imagine how ludicrous it would be?

"Hi, I'm Adam. If you dare to speak to me, I'll break your arm."

"Hi, I'm Adam. Approach me, and you'll spend the next month in a wheelchair."

"Hi, I'm Adam. I once bit my classmate's finger off."

Few weeks went by and Bruce was attending math lesson, learning how to write equations and inequalities without his middle finger. Having tried some calligraphy exercises while on the hospital bed he was slowly getting used to it.

Alienation entailed days that Adam could devote to contemplation and mindfulness. He would sit with his legs crossed on the floor of his room, or on the grass outside, or even in the loo – the place didn't matter at all – and he would just *be*. Not in the usual way, like when walking, or reading, or talking, no. Once he closed his eyes he became aware that he is and that his being is much more complicated than it seems on the first glance, since it comprised not only the present but also the past and the future. Ever since he'd been born, or maybe even earlier all his life was inundated with coincidences, strokes of good and bad luck, random people he came across

and those he had actually met. Every breakfast he had ever eaten, every song he listened to and every choice he made had brought him to where he was *now*. To that little moment of consciousness.

This state of being extraordinarily focused on breathing, controlling every inhale and exhale and being able to feel every muscle, bone and organ in his body liberated his mind, which had always been quite mysterious, but almost tangibly calm and collected.

Adam set out on a journey through his memories, starting with humiliation, abuse, poor living conditions, violence, lonesomeness and artificial affection. It was the reminiscence of Alaine that made him uneasy. It was the only thing that both freed and traumatized him. Was it love if it didn't last? Or was it an illusion, a playful game of his mind? He never found the answers.

When it comes to the rest of his life, the events were rather straightforward to classify: either good or bad. Depending on what triggered a particular event, what was the event itself, and what happened in the aftermath, Adam was able to divide his life in a black-and-white manner. Not that it had some deeper, philosophical meaning to group one's memories, but it was just easier for him not to agree with the 'grey' outlook on life.

Having consoled in ambiguity, he decided once and for all: henceforth memories of Lille were to be abhorred, as well as the times before France, while all the reminiscences that resulted in some kind of pleasure were to be seen as positive. Pleasure was a crucial factor to be sought after in one's existence. Deriving

happiness from small things is the prerequisite of living successfully in this world with no aim and no purpose.

Being locked in juvie, in a room that resembled a prisoner's cell, was way easier when one didn't pay so much attention to his surroundings. The intimate world inside Adam's head was spacious enough for him not to worry about his stay in the reformatory.

As opposed to Adam, his mum wasn't on good terms with the status quo. She put all the blame on herself, causing her hands to tremble continuously and making her suffer from chronic insomnia. Disadmiration of her own self and feeling dreadful guilt for what happened made her remind herself of her miserable, unsuccessful and pitiable life. She clearly recalled their stay in Lille at her cousin Peter's, the abominable time of her life living as Wild Bill's tenant and her dreams of becoming an artist. "David, you dick," she thought. "It would all be different if you hadn't left me that night. You should see what our son is now. Are you happy, you prick?" She was still able to see his shades and his smile with her mind's eye. His smell was still somewhere in her nostrils, and the bitter feeling of disappointment after he'd left was still in the front of her mind. It was quite predictable of her to say "Guess who's back?" to weed and waste most of her savings on this cheap emotional anaesthesia, allowing her to enter the long-forgotten nirvana (or it's derivative, at least).

She was getting intoxicated in order to run away from the sad, grey and unenviable reality. Rarely was she visiting Adam in the juvie; first of all, she wanted to avoid looking at him – cold and distant – by all means. It would only let her down and upset her even more. Second of all, she felt like she was the one who failed Adam – not having given him careless and memorable childhood, not having been able to communicate with him properly. She felt like it was she who was the nail in the coffin

of Adam's alienation. Getting high or drunk was the perfect remedy for her pain and the best way to push her conscience out of sight from time to time. As her body reminded itself of the old habit and got gradually more used to marijuana, she felt not only willingness but also need to get some more. Naturally, she quickly ran out of cash, which was disastrous both for her and for Lucy, who had been going to kindergarten for three years or so.

Once again in her lifetime, she couldn't pay the bills. This time around, however, it wasn't Wild Bill whom she was most afraid of, nor any other sex offender. The person who terrified her and made her feel distressful and uneasy was the man who would roam the streets eerily a couple of times a week, seemingly to no avail. He would always stop at her front door, look around and, after a few seconds, continue his mad stroll. From time to time he would even knock on the door or ring the doorbell, making her cringe. After his silhouette faded away completely, she would step out of the house, only to notice the mailbox stuffed to full capacity with notices, notes, complaints, bills and letters kindly informing her about the money she had to pay, her mortgage, other debts and an occasional postcard from Lille.

It was in November when her dead body was found lying face down, all covered in vomit mixed with blood and urine. Apparently weed wasn't enough. She held a syringe in her hand, the most disgusting of all needles.

When the police showed up in Adam's room, he thought it was because of the toilet he had destroyed a few days earlier. Actually, he didn't do it on purpose, let alone in some crazy burst of madness, like everybody else believed (or wanted to believe, since though he tried to defend himself, no one would believe him; another failed pursuit of truth). Adam just slipped on the wet floor (some inhabitants of the reformatory had found it difficult to hit the target while doing their business) and fell

right onto the toilet, breaking the porcelain into smithereens. Unfortunately, no one was inclined to deem his version of the story legit, since it was too dull and too ordinary. Furthermore, Adam was already seen as some kind of lunatic by virtually everybody on the juvie premises.

So Adam not only gave up trying to prove his 'craziness' wrong, but he also coloured the story up a little bit, just to make it more dramatic. During the conversation (or the interrogation) with the facility director, he said (or maybe testified) that when he went to relieve himself he felt nauseous and felt a dire need to let his emotions loose. He swore that once he entered the tiled room he destroyed the toilet but then, having realized that he still needed to pee, he urinated on the floor.

"Ha!" the director shouted at once. "I knew it, I told y'all he was lying!"

However, much to Adam's surprise he faced no consequences of his actions and the police officers visited him only to tell him the terrible news. Showing neither sadness nor hysteria, Adam asked the constables "How did it happen?" but the only response was silence. Yet he continued to inquire and wanted to know "How did she look like?"

"Pathetic," said one of them and shortly afterwards the men left. Brutal, but honest. But isn't all truth brutal? If so, should it be like that?

A week after the dreadful incident one of the city's officials made a personal call to the man who was to take care of Lucy after her mum's death. It was 11 PM sharp when the landline phone in Peter's house in Lille rang.

"Oui?" he answered. "Yes, it's me. What's that? What do you mean, did something happen to Mary?" Peter was listening to what the man on the other side of the phone

had to say with terror materializing on his face and tears gathering around his wide-open eyes. “Oh mon Dieu.” The official went on to talk for another few minutes before he replied, stuttering. “Y-y-yes, yes of course. Alright, in touch. G-goodbye, sir.”

Without his mum and with his sister abroad, Adam was left all on his own. And he was kind of good at it. Living on his own, I mean. When after a few more years he was ‘rehabilitated’ and released from the reformatory he quickly found a job at a local pub where he was a bartender. Serving drinks, pints and shots was enough to cover the costs of his modest life – it was just enough to pay the rent, to buy food and even, rarely, but still, grab a bite to eat in the city, a nice distraction from the every-day pasta with toasts and tap water served over ice.

Working in a pub gave him the luxury to behold first-hand the broad variety of the city’s nightlife. People would come in groups, usually ranging from three up to seven or eight people, and they’d usually come looking or feeling a bit under the weather and out of sorts, exhausted after the whole week and wishing they’d stayed at home in their cosy beds, watching some stupid TV shows or scrolling through their social media feed. Instead, they had once again proved their assertiveness useless and said ‘yes’ to the proposition of spending the night with their acquaintances, friends they didn’t truly know or like, in a city they were already fed up with. After a few shots of vodka, alcoholic drinks, or beers their attitude would change, however. The pub was a place where people could cut themselves off the daily struggle, forget about their problems, their jobs, their dignity even. And that would make them happy. Or, at least, happier than they had been before getting slightly intoxicated. Some customers preferred to stay the whole divine night in one location, while others were

more in favour of the *tour de bar* strategy, moving around pubs and other places that offered hospitality, warmth, and booze.

Either way one could truly enjoy the carefreeness of the night, which would later be recalled in the form of funny stories, memories bringing a smile upon one's face, colourized anecdotes and painful hangovers. Nevertheless, we cannot be sure whether or not all these people sipping their beverages had any clue why they were doing all that. Rationally speaking, it was just wasting money and causing harm to one's organism, yet people were somehow drawn towards pubs and similar places. It was the need for a break, the craving for saying "See you later!" to routine and the desire to free their minds that was driving these men and women of various ages to order another drink.

Rarely could Adam encounter individuals, loners sitting at the bar, who would be willing to get involved in small talk with him. The culture has it that being alone – whether it's while having a meal, or drinking another glass of Guinness in solitude – is seen as strange, as a sheer sign of weakness or incapability to properly function in the nowadays society. Regardless, meeting them in person was always a captivating experience for Adam, since people coming in groups showed the tendency to close themselves in the boundaries of their tribe. The loners, on the other hand, were always inclined to speak with Adam assuring him entertainment for the evening. He didn't even have to answer them too often or too much, they were mostly willing to speak for hours and hours about the girl that had dumped them, the job they'd lost, the money they were planning to make or the bitch who had refused to give them a pay rise they so clearly deserved.

The loners were the ones who left last and got most drunk. And let me make this crystal clear – some of those losers got so shitfaced that Adam had to drag them out

of the pub and leave them on the sidewalk. Sometimes it was difficult not to make fun of them, so Adam, going with the flow, would tell them stories about the girlfriends he'd lost, the futile job interviews that had made him question his own skills, and the fingers he'd bitten off. Of course, most of the stories were fake and totally made up (excluding the one about fingers) but it was sublime to watch the guys' reactions, because they were usually *guys*, especially those who found life troublesome. Some of those men were terrified after hearing a grotesque anecdote, others would cheer up a bit after finding out that other human beings have similar issues and that they actually were not complete suckers. Most of them were.

"Anything else you'd like, sir?" Adam asked the man wearing a suit sitting stranded at the corner of the bar. It was almost 2 am.

"A waiter..." he mumbled.

"Well then, you've got the right address. I'm a bartender, but it's more or less the same."

"... tomorrow."

"I beg your pardon? I'm afraid I didn't quite get that."

"I said I'd like a fucking waiter for tomorrow. Can you get me that, man? Can you?" The man's words were soaked with anger and helplessness. The guy was the owner of the city's most renowned restaurant that was said to throw a huge banquet the next day. Politicians, celebrities and entrepreneurs were to show up to talk business, drink expensive drinks from far too small glasses, and eat innumerable amounts of snacks, sandwiches and tartines, whose taste they would praise and which would

eventually turn out to be one of the most popular topics to chat around the pub's visitors.

"Well, how about you posting an advertisement online? There must be some virtual community of people craving for a job, you might find somebody *competent*, even." Adam had a head full of ideas. "You could go to another establishment and 'borrow' a waiter for the night. Or you could hire somebody you already know, someone who could help you. Do you have a nephew, sir? Or a niece?"

"No, no, and most definitely *no*." The man finished his beer and continued to sit there, hopeless and discouraged.

"I'm very sorry for you, sir, but I'm afraid there's no way I could get you out of this mess. However, I highly recommend you at least try, since there's still some time until tomorrow." Adam responded in his flowery manner. "Would you like anything else to drink, sir?"

"How am I supposed to find a bloody waiter in the middle of the night, ay?" The man went on to pitying himself, ignoring Adam's question time and time again. "I could even do with a bartender, goddammit!"

"Then you could do with me, couldn't you?" Adam proposed with a delicate smile on his face. He saw the opportunity and was more than ready to seize it. Anyway, the next day was his day off, so the lucky chance to make some extra money was right on time.

It did take a while before Adam was made privy to his decision. The man was judging Adam's potential and abilities: how and what he was saying, how he was moving, how he presented himself. Eventually, taking into consideration how Adam

showed he had balls and came up with this bold and unexpected move, the man agreed to hire him.

On Saturday at 3 PM sharp Adam stepped into the gates of the refined, country-known *Plains of Abraham* restaurant. He was an hour early, just to take a look around the place and see how one ought to behave in such an establishment. The pattern was quite easy: walk with your back straight and your chin higher than it's natural, walk a bit faster than necessary to prove how busy you are, and smile. To everybody and everything. Literally. Show your teeth to every object that moves, or breathes, or both. For the fact that such a gesture is not caused by happiness, or sincerity, or even sheer respect, but because it makes others cheerful. For real, try to grin at anyone and I assure you, no matter their mood or their attitude towards you, in most cases that smile shall be reciprocated. And that is exactly what such establishments are aiming at – making their customers smile. The workers' state of mind, or the food, or whatever the establishment comprises is secondary. Smiling is the key to people's hearts.

Having roamed around for quite some time he more or less got accustomed to the place. While he was contemplating the various artworks hung on the walls in the main hall he was approached by a lady, possibly in her late 20s (early 30s at most), dressed in a modern and elegant way.

“Hi there, I'm Meghan. You must be Adam?”

“In the flesh,” Adam responded with a twinkle in his eyes and they shook hands.

“Mr Johnson told me everything. Let me walk you around the place.”

“With all respect, ma’am, but that won’t be necessary. I have already got to know *The Plains of Abraham* and I’ve figured it all out. Furthermore, I must say, I am extraordinarily impressed by the picturesqueness of this very establishment, and I am more than happy to be able to be of assistance during tonight’s banquet.”

“Umm, alright, brilliant! Let’s get to the backroom then, shall we? I’ll tell you all the details on the go.”

Once in there, he was given a black apron, black bowtie, black shiny shoes and a snow-white shirt. Meghan also gave him a little advice concerning the evening to come and the guests started coming. Oh, and for the record, Adam utterly disliked *The Plains of Abraham*. Not only did it feel artificial, but also it looked somewhat tacky to him. The paintings on the walls were everything but genuine and the whole place was disturbingly asymmetrical. But that wouldn’t be an appropriate thing to say about a restaurant which was seen as so immaculate and exquisite, of which he was acutely aware.

Adam was doing really good, despite the feeling that, contrary to the common belief, the place looked devoid of any taste or sense of beauty whatsoever. Serving drinks wasn’t a hard task, really, and both the guests and the staff were indeed friendly. Bringing cold mojitos, martinis, whisky served over ice and beers to the tables was a piece of cake. What Adam wasn’t prepared for was the key part of the evening – the Spanish pernil. The huge, hairy and slimy pork leg arrived at 8 PM sharp. Adam was given a pair of black latex gloves and a long, sharp knife and was told to carve it so that the guests would be able to appreciate its outstanding taste.

“You know how to handle this thing, don’t you?” asked Meghan with the sincerest and hopeful smile possible.

“I sure do,” Adam nodded his head.

Needless to say, he had no clue how to do it, so he said he just had to answer the call of nature and he would be right back.

In the toilet, he quickly typed *how to cut a pig* in Google search engine and watched a three-minute video on YouTube. Once he came back, he did everything he could to look self-confident and, slowly cutting the meat, he realized it wasn’t that hard. Actually, he was quite good at it. While he was carving the meat he realized how much trust was put in him. And it wasn’t that he, an amateur, was given such an important task on his first night, but that he was given such a dangerous tool. The long, sharp blade in his hand granted him an advantage and full control of the situation. The people in the room were unaware of what was going on in Adam’s head and how superior he felt. He knew that he had power over life and death, just by holding the knife in his hand.

The guests couldn’t expect anything, since rarely do people give much thought to others’ sanity, and tend to underestimate the dangers and hazards of their kin. Adam stopped what he was doing and dreadful projections took over his mind – he visualized slitting the throat of the man sitting on his right. With his mind’s eye, he could see the scarlet blood covering his ironed, white shirt and the terror in his dead eyes. Adam imagined stabbing an attractive woman’s stomach once or twice, and he was able to hear the screaming people all around him. It was quite loud in the room

anyway, the place was a bit crowded, so, he reasoned, maybe it would take some time for them to even notice something like that.

These whimsical thoughts entered his mind and totally corrupted it. Adam was craving for gore and turmoil. He somehow wanted to let go of his insecurities and fear rooted deep inside him by taking the role of God and deciding who should live and who should perish. There was no place for pity or contemplation; Adam knew he was ready. His fist clenched, holding the blade even harder. He started sweating and focused on his prey – his redemption. The moment he wanted to make the first step towards his target, somebody poked his arm from behind.

“Excuse me?” said the feminine voice, full of joy, sincerity and defencelessness. Adam turned around and saw a pretty face smiling from ear to ear. He couldn’t breathe a word, for his teeth were so clamped. He was just staring at her with such awe and astoundment that his eyes looked like they were just about to pop out of the sockets.

“I’m Hope, nice to meet you,” she said stretching her arm towards him with her hand open and ready for a handshake. Adam looked at her hand, but didn’t shake it. He was still holding the knife in his left hand, while the other one was all covered in grease after having dealt with the fat swine’s pernil resting behind him. Hope was piercing him with her light-blue eyes, and after a few uncomfortable seconds of silence and exchanging glares, she pulled her hand back. Adam tried to mutter a few words as an explanation for his behaviour, but it all ended up as inaudible gibberish.

“Anyways, can you bring me a glass of sparkling water? Cold, if possible,” she asked and briefly glanced behind her. “I’m sitting right there, with that gentleman in glasses”

Hope said, pointing her finger at the glass coffee table in the corner. Adam nodded his head, which Hope took as a yes. She smiled and returned to her seat.

Adam had no idea how it happened, or why it happened, but he was in love. It wasn't the same gradual attachment and affection he felt for Alaine. This one was like a sucker punch, right in the face. How come it hit him whilst he was contemplating premeditated murder in cold blood? He was truly puzzled. The thing is that both love and hate are driven by an inexplicable, unreasonable passion.

After about five minutes Adam returned to her with a glass full of cold, sparkling water, as ordered. On his tray he was also carrying three shots of vodka, as had been asked by a slightly intoxicated man while he was on his way to the back room where he was preparing the beverages, and where he left the blade and the black latex gloves on the tabletop.

Adam approached the table at which Hope was sitting. It was a low, transparent glass table and there were some papers and documents scattered all around it.

"Your water, ma'am," Adam grabbed the glass with his right hand and leaned a bit to put it on the tabletop, but it was not enough. He couldn't reach it, so he had to lean over it more. While he was doing that, the vodka shots on the tray he was holding in the other hand were leaning as well. They eventually lost grip and fell. And if spilling luxurious alcohol wasn't enough, they all fell on Hope. She was covered in spirits all over, her nightdress was ruined and Adam was just standing there, boiling inside, with embarrassment on his face and his knees trembling out of the stress of what was about to happen.

Contrary to his concerns, nobody started shouting at him and, what was even better, the witnesses of his failure started laughing. Both the gentleman in glasses on the other side of the table and Hope were in stitches. She slowly stood up with a grin, still chuckling, and explained that, having anticipated such course of action, she took an extra dress, and that Adam shouldn't take it too seriously.

Having cleaned the mess, Adam retreated to the back room in order to dump the moist paper towels he used to wipe the floor and armchairs. Once he entered the room he froze in awe. By huge mistake and even bigger coincidence, he entered while Hope was changing her clothes.

And there she was. Her black underwear was in stark contrast to her pale skin, almost as white as pure porcelain. Her feet were delicate, her calves were so exquisite he had the impression as if they had been sculpted. On top of her long legs, there was her flat belly and her soft and subtle breasts. The shoulder-length, red hair was something between curly and wavy, or maybe it was both. Her face was gentle, the curves of her chin, cheeks and forehead refined. Her nose looked perfect in the middle of that delightful face. And finally, her eyes. Oh, there was something in those eyes, something that pierced right through Adam's soul, something he had never feel in his life before. These two blue diamonds comprised every feeling and every sensation there is in this world.

Adam felt his intestines crumbling and twisting from emotional overload. He was aroused and his jaw dropped a little bit, which undeniably caught Hope's attention.

"Never seen a naked woman before, have you?" Hope asked the question and instantly knew the answer to it. But Adam didn't say a single thing, he didn't even try, for he knew such attempts were futile and would result at best in an inaudible mutter,

or maybe something worse than that. Hope smiled from ear to ear and continued to put the other dress on, one that was dry but equally formal and one that probably highlighted her unimaginable beauty even more.

"Can you help me?" she asked, turning her back towards him. Adam pulled the zip of her dress up, all the way from her buttocks to her blades. His hands were trembling, and without looking at him, she turned around again and walked to the door.

Before she left, she approached the stunned Adam and laid her fragile hand on his torso with something that he interpreted as a clear sign of affection, which only made him more excited.

"Do you like me, boy?" she said in a whisper. "Do you like my body?"

Adam was looking into her eyes, those precious stones. He was hypnotized.

Seeing no response, she wasted no time. "Do you love me, boy?" The way Hope said that wasn't something that lovers tell each other. It sounded like a challenge.

"Yes," said Adam surely. He couldn't beat around the bush with her, he wasn't strong enough for that. Hope shook her head. She took her hand back and was about to leave the room.

"That's too bad," she said. "That's not something you should say to a woman."

"But that's the truth," Adam started to explain himself. "It's true, I love you! I think I do... which means that I do!"

"Hm... But that's not something you should say still."

Adam was feeling lost. He couldn't understand, though he tried. "What should I say?" he asked. "What should I do?"

She laughed melancholically. "What should you do?" she wondered. "Lie, my boy. That's all you can do," said Hope dreamily. "I'll see you around..." she whispered and stopped for a split second as if she was waiting for an answer.

"Adam," he said under his breath.

"Adam," she repeated and silently left the backroom. Not a single person had been able to say his name in such a touching and voluptuous manner.

Adam couldn't even move his finger, his eyes were nervously scanning his surrounding while his mind was trying to figure out what on Earth had just happened. It was unlike anything else he'd ever experienced. Dead cats, dead people, people beat up and broken, raped people, intoxication, humiliation, masturbation. Incomparable. It wasn't even like his incestuous relationship with Alaine, which at the end of the day turned out to be just a teenage fantasy. There was nothing sexual between Adam and his cousin, and eventually he would feel uneasy and bitter when recalling his days in Lille, rather than ecstatic. Those memories didn't *move him* inside. Furious anger and borderless contempt made themselves felt each and every time these images crossed his mind. He sorted it all out during his stay in the juvie and tried to reject such thoughts.

The close encounter with Hope was the exact opposite. It was more than hours of meditation and contemplation, it was an instantaneous revelation that dawned upon him. Time was flying by and Adam lost both his train of thought and the perception of time.

When Meghan entered the backroom she was angry. Extremely angry.

“Where the hell have you been, we’ve been looking for you the last half an hour!”

Adam opened his mouth to respond but she interrupted him violently.

“Get your bloody ass back to the lounge, now!”

Adam got a grip of himself and rushed back to where he was supposed to be. With his perceptive eyes he scanned all the guests left there but, much to his disappointment, he could see no track of Hope. Had she been there, he would have definitely noticed her, especially then, when there weren’t many people left. Only some people stayed, those who had got too drunk to be able to leave the restaurant on their own, or entrepreneurs who hadn’t been drinking at all and were actually doing what they were meant to do. There was almost no food or snacks left and empty glasses on the tabletops abounded. Adam wondered how long he was in the state of trance.

He asked one of the less hammered men what time it was, and it turned out it was almost midnight. The party was about to come to an end, and his job now was to clean the lounge from spilt drinks and unfilled plates and glasses. But he didn’t give a damn about his duties, he had something to do that was of greater significance.

“Sorry, have you by any chance seen Hope?” he asked Meghan, interrupting her flirt with one of the guests.

“Don’t you have things to do?” Meghan replied with almost palpable irritation.

“Please, just tell me. I’ll get to that in a second, but please tell me. It’s tremendously important to me.”

“Ms Spencer left about half an hour ago. She has some meeting in two days and she had to catch her plane.”

“Her plane? Where?” Adam started to sweat.

“Belfast, as far as I’m concerned.”

It took him exactly one hundred and twelve seconds to get to the main entrance of *The Plains of Abraham*. He left the establishment in a hurry and, still in his apron and bowtie, made it to the street. He started running in the direction of the closest station of the Tube. On descent, he realized that the underground won’t take him where he wanted, for it was so late at night, so he got back to the surface and took one of those black taxis.

He stumbled across a rather talkative cabby, who just kept on talking. Adam had the impression that he could hear every whimsical thought that came to that man’s head. First, he would complain about how much he hated his job and how he had always wanted to be a pilot. The non-sensical stream of consciousness had no end. In, give or take, 45 minutes of looking through the cab’s window in silence he was at the City Airport, buying a ticket for the fastest flight to Northern Ireland.

Out of excitement, he wasn’t capable of getting any rest on the aeroplane and kept his eyes wide open for the entire journey. Once he reached Belfast it was around 4 AM. Now, having simmered down a bit, his organism was giving him clear signs of exhaustion. Pushing back the sense of hopelessness and the thought of Hope being

somewhere there, unaware of Adam following her, he got to the first motel he came across and nodded off immediately after laying his head on the pillow.

Adam opened his eyes. It was seven in the evening. Again, pursuing his lunatic dream he left the motel without paying and started looking all around him, seeking posters and advertisements that would at least mention some meeting with somebody somewhere. He searched the internet so deep that he even got to the third page of Google search results, all to no avail. Then he started asking about Hope Spencer, but not a single soul in Belfast had even heard or read about her. Describing the subtleties didn't turn out to be successful as well, and the people Adam inquired about the inerasable image of a goddess in his head were not particularly talkative. The madness mixed with ecstasy and disenchantment in Adam's eyes would scare people off.

There he was – alone in an alien city, surrounded by hostile faces, with no clue whatsoever what he ought to do. Adam just kept walking. Walking and thinking, but not thinking about the walking itself. Actually, he was contemplating everything but walking. Where he was heading was of no importance. Having realised in what a dire situation he had got himself into, he began to blame himself for not thinking his actions through enough. Or for not thinking them through at all.

How reckless he was, what was he even thinking? What if he had found her there in Northern Ireland, what would he do? What would he say? All this brainlessness made him feel ashamed of himself. But he kept walking.

He had already left the city, now it was only a bright dot besieged by darkness. Borderless darkness of the night, the darkness of insecurity and love, the darkness of his mind. Step by step, it was getting darker by the minute. He could hear cars racing down the empty road and the hum of the bay, to which he was getting closer and closer.

Another hour went by and Adam was standing at the edge of a cliff, looking at the waves forcefully banging on the rocks over a hundred feet beneath him. The sea was raging as if it was trying to push the whole island away. When he looked up, however, gazing at the horizon, there was nothing. No waves, no anger, no life and no love. He could feel raindrops on his face and coldness in his limbs.

Having walked along the cliff for a while he noticed a small hut in the dead of night, not very far away from him. Through the rain, he could see it was a wooden house, and on its porch, the light was still on. Adam decided to get closer, why not? There wasn't much to do anyway.

At the porch, there was a senile man sitting in an armchair. Adam was standing there in the rain, only a few feet from the old man. They both acknowledged each other's presence and were staring at one another in silence. The man didn't move, but his eyes were full of lore. After a couple of minutes of tense quiet, the man spoke.

"Who are you," he said, rather than asked. His deep voice made Adam feel extraordinarily safe and secure.

"I'm Adam Turner, and I-" he was about to explain the whole situation, but the man interrupted him.

“I said neither: “What’s your name,” nor: “Why are you here.” Who are you.” The old man seemed not to be aware of such thing as intonation, so Adam wasn’t sure if he was asking a question or just saying something off the top of his head. Either way, having been thinking for a while, tongue in his cheek, Adam answered.

“Guess I just am. It doesn’t matter what I think of my existence or, should I say, what I think I think about my existence. What I’ve always been craving for is control – supervision over my emotions, my fate, my life. But, at the end of the day, I am nothing but a puppet who does not get to decide. Ever. Coincidence, it’s all that’s sure in this world. In this bloody universe, goddammit! Everybody I know or knew, or people I just met or saw once in my life, or those that matter a lot to me, and everything that ever happened to me, every minute, every second was coincidental. There’s no destiny, no predestination, no dharma. There is no truth! The sole fact that I was born is nothing but a fluke. The whole cosmos is a stroke of luck, which we still cannot fully answer and we probably never will. It’s all heading to nowhere, we’re all heading to nowhere. There’s nothing before we are born and nothing after we die. Actually, should we stop and think about it for a second, there’s also nothing while we live.”

“So I figure you are nothing,” the old man said calmly.

“You see, that’s where the fun begins! There’s no meaning, no goal, no sense in all this. There’s no God, gods or angels. No souls, spirits or magical forces that spur us to act. There are absolutely no demons, devils, no heaven or hell. It’s just matter, aimless matter devoid of any intent whatsoever. Henceforth, I *have got* full control of my life. I know it may sound contradictory to what I said earlier but hear me out. The flow of the universe, the way things are, the coincidences that happen cannot be controlled. No matter how powerful or intelligent you think you are, you mean shit in

comparison to the vastness of cosmos. So if there's nothing for us to do on the bigger scale, and the smaller perspective is quite out of reach as well, then there's nothing that stops me from doing what I want, living how I want and having full control of my vague existence. If the universe does not possess any intention in itself, then I am the one who establishes the rules. I am the centre of my cosmos and I am the one who gives it its goal. I just am, but I am everything. I can fall in love and then learn to hate that very same person a few years later, though that person used to mean a lot to me. I can tell people what I think and what I believe, because they're just a part of my story, just as I am a rather insignificant extract of theirs. I can bite a guy's damn finger off and find a job at a renowned restaurant just a few years later. And everybody can do that! Each and every one of the almost 8 billion people on Earth can take the bull by the horns and show how much they can change in their universes. There is no truth... there is no one truth. Each of us has (or searches for) their own individual truth, which is worth as much a lie. There are only two types of people: me, and everybody else. Other truths are lies to me, and my truth is a lie to others."

"Hm," the man hummed in his low, deep voice. "So you are the universe. But just your universe, am I right?" Adam nodded his head in response. "Alright, and though you haven't got any control, at the same time you have the power to change everything, is that right?" Adam nodded again, and the man went silent for straight two minutes. He was still sitting in his chair on the porch while the rain was pouring heavily. Adam was soaking wet, but he was both too exhausted and too confused to ask if he could hide under the roof.

"There's another thing," Adam didn't know why he was giving his testimony to a random old guy found somewhere in the middle of Northern Ireland's meadows (can

you imagine a more absurd situation?). It could be that he needed to talk to somebody, anybody who would listen. All the thoughts that stumbled across his mind and got stuck there, now were released. Maybe the old man was sent there by some mystical force to cleanse Adam of his sin, his blasphemous thoughts. Or maybe he wasn't even there.

"Let's take a closer look at death, shall we?" he continued. Had he become like the drunkard, confessing to whoever there was to listen? "So, what do you do when somebody dies? Well, that depends who that person was, doesn't it? You mourn for your loved ones, you laugh at your dying enemies, and you shrug when people you didn't know perish. Every now and then humans die – it's the natural circle of life, nothing to boast of and nothing to loathe. We still haven't learned how to outwit nature, which, in its coincidental way of being, is the best killer of all." Adam was drifting off, having a discussion with himself. He almost forgot about the man, though he was still sitting at his porch, listening.

"Yet, we are afraid of death, of not having enough time to succeed. Too often do we focus on such trivia, instead of just *living!* Get over it, you'll die, I'll die. Everybody dies. Period. Some of us are so afraid that they make up stories of there being something after this life, just to give themselves fake hope and fruitless dreams. All to no avail. All useless. All lies. And what's even funnier about this, is how hypocritical we are in this attitude. The ambiguity of this is almost palpable on graveyards. I mean, look at the gravestones of your dead relatives, or strangers, it doesn't matter. I assure you, that when one of the spouses dies, there's always a bit of space left on the stone, waiting for their loved one to join them in the ground and have their name engraved there. Hence, we anticipate death, we even foresee it and we think we're ready for it, yet when it strikes, it strikes unexpected."

“Well then, Adam Turner,” the man continued after a break to collect his thoughts.

“You say all is lies. Are you ready for the truth?”

They stared at each other tensely. What struck Adam was the look in the man's eyes. At first, he thought it was lore, but it was something else. It was love.

Without saying a single word, Adam turned around and started walking into the darkness. He reached the edge of the cliff and stood there, still lost somewhere in his head.

Again, he looked at the sea. This time it was different, like it wasn't the same sea. The water he was watching from above was tranquil and silent. There was no wind, no gales, and the rain was still falling almost vertically downward.

His feet were adjoining to the ledge.

His toes reached beyond the edge.

Adam looked at the horizon, again.

The fine skyline was blurry, tempting; rain.

He made one more step and disappeared into the abyss, the gutter.

Seagulls and other fowl screaming madly high above the water.

The sea itself graceful, raindrops falling on the ground.

A silent squeak of a chair, never to be found.

Lie, my boy, for you don't want the truth in this world.

Another made-up story, whom to be told?