

MY NAME IS SHEOL

BOOK ONE

MY NAME IS
SHEOL
BOOK ONE

P. Julian

My Name Is Sheol - Book One
Copyright © 2026 P. Julian
ISBN: 9798268917185
All rights reserved.

For Jo, Nigel & Brigitte

We have no tradition of shamanism. We have no tradition of journeying into these mental worlds. We are terrified of madness because the Western mind is a house of cards, and the people who built it know that -

Imagine if you were slightly odd and the solution was to take you and lock you into a place where everyone was seriously mad. That would drive anyone mad. If you have ever been in a madhouse you know that it is an environment calculated to make you crazy and to keep you crazy.

- TERENCE MCKENNA

If a psychosis was just some synapses misfiring why wouldn't you simply get static? But you don't. You get a carefully crafted and fairly articulate world never seen before. Who's doing this? Who is it who is running around hooking up the dangling wires in new and unusual ways. Why is he doing it? What is the algorithm he follows? Why do we suspect there is one?

- CORMAC MCCARTHY

Through me is the way to the city of woe.
Through me is the way to eternal pain.
Through me is the way to a lost people.

- DANTE

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 - Meet and Greet

Chapter 2 - What Dreams May Come

Chapter 3 - Taken

Chapter 4 - In the Belly of the Beast

Chapter 5 - The People You Meet in Hell

Chapter 6 - The Interview

Chapter 7 - Look Down, Look Down

Chapter 8 - Quizzing the Quizmaster

Chapter 9 - My Name is Sheol

Chapter 10 - Before My Body Was Born

Chapter 11 - Letter Better Unsent

This book deals with themes of mental illness and suicide.

Reader discretion is advised.

CHAPTER 1

MEET AND GREET

HIS OFFICE LOOKS exactly the way I have come to expect such offices to look. Piles of paper stacked within pale manila folders, just chaotic enough to tell me how busy this man is. The other status symbols they accumulate to themselves: expensive lamps on desks with leather inlay, curios and sculptural pieces made out of bronze and clay. Heavy-framed artwork that might well be original, with everything carefully curated to say: I am a man of substance. And more relevantly: I am a man of power, a man who wields power over you.

I SIT QUIETLY as my mother tells the doctor why we have come. I thought she might talk about my lucid dreaming because that is the thing she really hates, or perhaps my lack of appetite or the anxiety that paralyses me whenever I go to leave the house. It quickly becomes clear though that she is here to talk about herself. How worried she is and how hostile I have become, how she fears that she might lose me and how she couldn't possibly cope with that. I sit quietly but the whole time she is talking I feel my usual resentment welling up inside of me, and I also find myself calling her - inside my head of course - something that I have never called her before and that is: *liar*.

HER WORDS SPEAK of care and concern but she sounds mostly as though she has been inconvenienced. As though she is primarily concerned about her own comfort, or how she might be judged by other people. Even her express fear of losing me doesn't sound sincere. I think she actually fears the guilt she would feel: how people would gossip about her, slandering her as a neglectful mother who did nothing to save her distressed child. She keeps on talking and I give up my efforts to reconcile the content of her words with the feelings that lie beneath them, I sit with the dissonance it brings and how dreamlike all of this feels. My mother's heart and mouth moving in such contrary directions without skipping a beat, all of her mixed feelings that I can never comprehend.

WE DO GET around to my dreams eventually. I was actually quite interested to get Doctor Samuels' view on them and perhaps even some interpretation as to what they mean. However the moment I ask after these things the doctor visibly recoils. I presume that he must have misunderstood me - that I was describing delusional experiences and not just my dreams - but as I try to explain myself better his disdain becomes more and more apparent. My mother follows his lead, sighing and shaking her head at me, tutting as her hand presses down on my thigh, saying: Che please don't waste what little time we have. The doctor nods in agreement and in his best condescending therapeutic voice he says: I don't think the content of your dreams is relevant to our discussion today.

I TRY ONCE more to explain how real these experiences feel. How I can't understand why my dreams should be textured like reality but the doctor shakes his head and says: of course they feel real to you Che. It could hardly be otherwise. I tell him that I keep meeting one particular person in my dreams and how important this person is, how I never hear his name but I feel destined to meet him in person one day. I struggle bravely but the doctor and my mother give me no air at all. I feel their disapproval begin to shut me down and any lucid explanation I could provide quickly shuts down as well. Leaving me to plead repeatedly: this man is real, I know that he is real. You look at me like I'm crazy but if you could dream my dreams you would think it was reality too.

THE DOCTOR SHIFTS in his chair and my mother's look grows darker and darker until all explanations fail me and the doctor cuts me off. Che, he says. I think this is a complete distraction, what you are talking about now. I understand how you feel about your dreams but you must see: we are not here to talk about your subjective experience. We are here to examine your real life, your actual life outside of these dreams. How you have been faring in the real world, what we can do to improve your functioning and restore you to some quality of life.

How do you know, I ask.

How do I know what?

How do you know this is the real world?

I can see by the pained smile he gives to my mother that this is exactly the wrong thing to say.

DOCTOR SAMUELS IS not exactly unfriendly but his words sound clipped and they carry an unpleasant feeling towards me. He makes me feel small and boxed in as he says: I have years of experience in these matters Che. Along with training that most would struggle to commence. All of that tells me that the texture of these experiences has no bearing on your treatment. I am here to evaluate you as a whole person, not to address the minutiae of your felt experience. And this question you ask about what is real? Philosophically this is a bottomless question. You could argue that none of us are really here, that we are all encased within our own sensory hallucination but how is that going to help you Che? How will that put your distress behind you and get your life back on track? I ask him how he knows my life is off track and he says: from every bit of collateral I have. And even that you would challenge me with these questions, Che. In the end you have no other option than to let me do my job.

THE DOCTOR DOES not seem nasty and there is some genuine feeling in his voice when he reaches towards me in this way. His subsequent questions do have some flavour of real interest about them, for example when he asks: is there anyone in your life who believes in these experiences?

I don't tell anyone, I say.

There's nobody who knows.

He holds out his hands to me and says: well there you are Che. That's your answer right there. That reluctance to tell people about your experiences always speaks volumes. We don't live in a demon-haunted world anymore and most people are quite glad of it. If I were to ask your mother for example what she thinks when she hears you say these things, how it makes her feel. My mother turns to look at me the way she always does when someone is watching and she says in her best loving-mother tone: I know these things seem real to you Che darling but that does not make them real.

DOCTOR SAMUELS INDULGES me for another minute or so as I talk about my dreams but he doesn't write anything on his notepad. He taps his pen against the top of his desk while I am talking and I know he thinks I'm crazy. Even I understand that these things are edging me towards something very dark, some borderland between psychosis and whatever the opposite of that is. Clarity, I suppose. Perhaps even certainty. My speech tails off for the last time as I see that the doctor will never be enticed towards taking an interest in my dreams. I stop talking in the hope that this will bring our meeting to an end but the doctor politely asks my mother to leave the room and the consult continues long after I feel that any point to it has been exhausted.

AS HE ASKS further questions Doctor Samuels stares at me with a strange kind of grin that occasionally morphs into a leer. Every time I tell him something that he seems gratified to hear, as he nods in approval when I relate facts agreeing with the textbooks and statistical manuals that live rent-free inside his head. There are some things that fall dead in the space between us while others arouse his interest, causing that leery grin to lift again, raising his greying eyebrows as he looks at me with interest.

Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Nodding as if to say: of course, of course.

A horse is a horse.

If it quacks like a duck.

Of course.

YOU CAN SKIP the rest of this account if you want to. If you have been in my place you'll understand the scene well enough by now, and if you have not sat in the same chair in a similar room then you are unlikely to understand. You may even accuse me: *this does sound a bit paranoid, Che, all these accusations against a man who is just doing his job.* And of course you would be absolutely correct. This man is just doing the job he has been given to do - at around a million dollars a year - to tag people who sit outside the range of normal functioning and medicate them back into line. He might even numb some of their pain as he does so, or provide a few lucky patients with some serious relief from their suffering. He is certainly not paid to indulge foolish girls like me who have retreated into a romantic dreamworld, he is not here to prop up my dream-led delusions about finding myself in love.

MOST OF THE Doctor's questions fail to make an impression on me. They seem obviously diagnostic, informed by his training and that peculiar rigidity of classical psychiatry that seems so disconnected from ordinary experience. And there are questions which feel informed by banal clichés about the nature of the world, a world free of strong emotion and populated with people who have lovely little sanitised souls.

Do you have thoughts of self-harm?

Do you ruminate on things?

Do you feel that life has no value?

These prompts suggest other questions that might have more value.

Do you feel as though you might disappear?

That would be a good one to ask.

If you disappeared would anyone notice?

Are you losing your place in the world?

Does your soul feel... thin?

Could I push through you even now?

I WANT THE doctor to ask me other questions.

Are you alive?

How do you know?

These kinds of questions.

I can cope with these kinds of questions.

If you were not alive, Che.

How would you find out?

How would it feel?

And I suppose what might be the ultimate question.

Are you dead?

Is everyone around you dead?

WHEN THE DOCTOR invites my mother back into the room she sits there trying to compose herself. She is by nature a jealous person and I know that she resents being excluded from our private conversations. No matter how professional that brief time was, no matter how relaxed the Doctor looks as he jots down various findings on his notepad. She looks at me with what is supposed to be an encouraging smile but it is all teeth and sinew and I do not feel very encouraged. The best I can do is remind myself that none of this is really her fault, as much as I like to accuse her. It's just that she never really liked me very much - right from the very beginning - and how can I blame her when I feel exactly the same way.

THE DOCTOR FINISHES his notes and looks up at us both. He flashes a broad smile of triumph over the chaos of my recent experience and the unpleasantness of my wayward life. He gets up and walks over to a cabinet and pulls out a couple of packets of pills after fishing around for a while. He calls them *starter packs* and my heart sinks when I hear those words, knowing this is the start of something that will never end. The doctor hands me the pills and says a few things about these being early days, promising that my illness will become clearer as time goes on. He says the word *undiagnosed* a few times although I don't at any stage hear him offer an actual diagnosis. He does negate a few suggestions that my mother put to him including Tourette's and some kind of multiple personality disorder. He mentions OCD and anxiety and cluster B symptoms but as he says to us more than once: diagnosis takes second place in modern psychiatry.

IT SOUNDS LIKE I might have a whole swarm of mental conditions or possibly no condition at all. I can't see how this is supposed to help me no matter how pleased my mother seems, how victorious the doctor's smile. The one thing I can see though is that my fate has been decided. My future will be a medicalised future with my soul being chemically constrained, and my future prospects depend on whether I can learn to love my newly medicated self. And I suppose whether anyone else might learn to love me too. *Would you just lay here with my synthetic soul? Could you just stay here now the pills are in control?* Whether someone might find it in their metal heart to love me, just as that sad singer says.

LATER I READ the densely folded sheets stuffed into each packet of pills, warning of terrible side-effects and other hazards from taking the medication. Even the mild ones sound horrible and I can't make it through the whole list. They include dry mouth, facial disfigurement, sexual dysfunction, anorgasmia, weight gain, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression, cataracts, skin disorders, tremor, and just about every other horrible malady that a person could suffer. What were once the misfortunes of the elderly now being visited upon the young, visited even upon children. When Doctor Samuels handed me the starter packs he mentioned some of these side-effects while laughing a jolly laugh and saying: there's really no need to read the full list, Che, or to take any of it too seriously. If everybody read the full side-effect profile of these medications nobody would agree to take any psychiatric medication at all!

AS THE CONSULT winds up my mother rushes to shake the doctor's hand, saying in her best fawning voice: thank you so much Doctor Samuels. It's just so nice to *know*. He nods sagely and tells her that insight is the major part of the battle, that when the patient develops good insight half the battle is won. But even as they shake hands on that I get a sharp stab of real insight, a voice that quietly tells me: *he has no idea what's going on*. Not even what medication to prescribe, not really, not even what dose I should start on. It feels strangely reassuring that his knowledge is so partial and preliminary, that there might be aspects of my current condition that this man with his primitive toolkit has no hope of comprehending.

I GET ONE final urge to argue the point but that urge sinks beneath a wave of resignation and acceptance that the doctor must be calling insight. I see that things make no sense to me because I am genuinely crazy, that I should be humble about my psychiatric condition and bow to this man's greater wisdom. I should take the pills he has prescribed and let them sink me down out of the delusional mess I have made of my life, towards some saner future that has been waiting for me. Or at least a less painful way to live just for a little while. There may even be some genuine healing in these pills, although my current distress makes it hard to imagine how that could be. I also see that the numbing effect of these drugs might be the deliverance I have been seeking, because to feel numb is to feel normal and I might even thrive in that steady sedated state. And let my anguished feelings fall away, if they will release me, to escape my suffering if it will let me be.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

IT ALWAYS BEGINS with looking down at your hands. That is the way it is classically taught and the only way it can be done. At least at the very beginning, just while you learn, the distillation of true space out of dream space by your hands which draw the line.

FOR THE FIRST few moments my fingers and palms always look very faint, in that gulf of uncertainty where they could be other things. But if I maintain focus my hands will suddenly snap into sharp relief, before receding ever so slightly as their outline becomes crisp and alive. Looking as though they have been traced around with a fluorescent pen or something very bright and sharp, their edges marked out with brilliant distinction against the surrounding darkness. It is always about the edges, as any edge-runner will tell you, that line where your dreams commence and reality begins to give way.

MY DREAM SIGHT never makes it any further than this brilliant outline of my hands. Their edges glow and grow until I think I might finally be on the verge of entering a truly visual dream but suddenly all lights go out and my vision cuts to black. I have come to expect this transition but my sudden blindness is always disorienting. Like the little Hyacinth Girl who walks out of the Garden with her arms so full of flowers, only to lapse into a dead dream where she cannot speak and her eyes fail and she cannot remember whether she is living or dead. I want to scream or try to thrash my way out of the darkness but I lack the strength to do it and any direction would be a false direction anyway. My only option is to submit to these things, to fall back against the surrounding darkness and let it take me down.

AS I SURRENDER to the darkness my panic abates and in the cool void I remember that this is just another stage of my dreaming. That thought opens me to another realm that also denies me vision but this other realm is far from void. It is occupied by one singular inhabitant who has become very familiar to me, turning gently towards me as I enter his space until his body stands directly in front of my body. The space between us is bridged and we start to move towards one another and then against one another and you may also have had dreams of this kind. I am certain this person is a man and although he is far from old I feel he has stored up many things. He feels full of strange qualities that I struggle to describe - like reckless decency and infinite sorrow - and these things make me glad of my dream blindness because they would be hidden from me if I could see.

THE PLACE WHERE I encounter this man has a definite subterranean feel. We are a long way underground where it feels calm and protected, the air is cool and we are hidden away from the sun. But all of these sensations fade from my consciousness as I begin to move against him. The pressure builds until I am bearing down hard against his body, knowing that I can press as forcefully as I like without causing him any harm. I cannot judge the height of this man but I can feel the breadth of him encompassing my body, and there are his tremendous depths that I can press against as well. He does not push back but neither does he recoil, he remains upright and calm as his strength calls to my strength and in a soft and laughing voice I can almost hear him say: go ahead and test me, Hyacinth Girl. Go ahead and test me for the strength of what I bring.

AS I CLOSE on him completely I am also enclosed by the beautiful way he smells. Our age of compulsive hygiene holds no sway in this space and so he has a radically complete scent that is impossible to describe. I would speak of wet earth and limestone and a very faint hint of cypress, and then a sudden rush of sweet violets crushed between calloused hands. I would describe the dark wine my father used to drink - all blackstrap and brambles and eucalyptus - sometimes subsumed in the scent of red berries, sometimes in the smell of a summer garden after rain. I would also describe smells much less civilised: all kinds of sweet dense animal smells, merging with other deeper notes before they themselves submerge into one another. And many other hints that would offend against good taste if I were to set them down but if you must know these are the scents I most urgently seek. The way he smells of sex at the same time he smells of candy, without which the rest of his scent would amount to nothing at all.

MY WAKING SELF would be happy to hold him and caress him but my dream self is much more direct. I always drag him in far more sensual directions and the more often I dream of him the more immediately I do it. He does not move in any perceptible way but I am completely shameless - pressing harder against him as he stands his ground - and no matter how wantonly I move against him he never, ever recoils. I push against him harder and harder until his restraint buckles and even then I do not take a backward step. My body pleads with his body and even begins to beg, until his shackles suddenly rupture and he surges powerfully towards me.

THESE EVENTS ALWAYS unfold in the same way but I never get used to that shift, from him pressing gently against me to him surging suddenly within me. His presence builds so subtly that I don't recognise it until I am completely subsumed by it, feeling his intimate presence encompassing every part of me at once. He comes at me from every imaginable angle and some angles impossible to triangulate and this is how loving a man feels in the grip of a lucid dream. Full of every kind of tenderness but also a strange absence of care, a careless abandon that comes to absolve me and if you could feel it then you would give anything to have such absolution too. The core of me tightens as I bear down against him, I want to say *yes* but I keep saying *no* because I know where we are headed. If we keep building and lifting up over the crest of this wave, if I let my desire build to a point where I cannot keep him with me.

I FORGET HOW short these dreams are until the horizon of the morning comes. I go to protest against the ending of the dream but nothing can suppress the sharp rising feeling that comes to heave me back up out of sleep. I try to plunge back down towards my dream lover but he surrounds me on every side, pushing me back up with his overwhelming strength. I try to bargain by saying *please* and *please just* and *just let me* even though I know that this must happen if my soul is to remain in the world. With a single gigantic thrust he dislodges me from death's permanent hold and I am jolted straight up out of sleep. Leaving me stranded and heaving and pressing against my bed, coming but also keening for having lost my dream lover again.

WHETHER I HAVE had this dream a hundred times or a thousand times I cannot say. But it seems important to tell you: there are many dream times when I do nothing but lose him, again and again, forever denied his singular presence that has become all things to me. And every time I do find him our encounter feels newly textured, as though we had been apart from one another for a very long time. These dream encounters have stacked up against one another until I have become wholly and completely his and you can see why I struggle to explain this to people in the outside world. What began as a guilty pleasure - going in his direction knowing that I really shouldn't, telling myself it could not do any harm - has escalated to the point where I find myself unable to think of anything but his touch, wishing that I could genuinely die to this world and join him forever in the next.

CAN YOU BE in love with a person you have never met? A man you have never seen although you are so familiar with his body? I know the sane answer to these questions but that does not prevent them from ruling the course of my life. I need no reminding that he only lives in my dreams but he is so much more real to me than anyone else in the world and I don't know what to do. The medication might block my way to him but I swear: if the pills do that I will choose his presence every single time, if the pills try to disorient me or send him back into the darkness. I know that the contact I have with him is in his best and most pressing interests, as strange as that sounds to say. The fact that he has given me no confirmation of this does not stop it from being absolutely true.

SO BE CAREFUL what you dream of. Especially if you dream of love that you are lacking in the real world. Because the moment you are ejected from your dreams there will be no fulfilment for you and no peace, just that contingent realm you will always pine for and a lover who only comes while you sleep. With no motive to seek relief from your dreaming even when it is crushing your life, denying yourself to any other embrace that you might find in the waking world. All the elements of life that cannot be dreamed, the shaped clay and the brilliant sun, the dexterity of your living flesh and the heat of your intangible blood. All of it denied by your most dangerous delusion: that your dream lover must be an actual man of flesh and blood, a man you could drag back into your waking life if you could only find a way.

CHAPTER 3

TAKEN

WHEN MY MOTHER yelled up the stairs that day I knew what was going to happen. I had actually expected it for a few weeks and there was something very particular about the way she called out my name, some hint of artifice or deception that telegraphed what was about to occur. I had a few thoughts about hiding myself or pretending that I had gone out for the day, perhaps even climbing out of my upstairs window if I could find a safe way down. But I knew these options would only provide a temporary escape and so I walked slowly down the stairs to confront what was waiting for me.

YOU PROBABLY ALREADY know: it could happen to you. If you have an intense inner life that plays out into the world, if you have caused enough concern by your resulting behaviour. If you insist on talking about things that your family won't talk about, if you get frustrated with them and yell and storm out of the room. If you restrict your diet in pursuit of purity and begin to lose weight, if you end up passed out on the street one night without anyone knowing where you are. If you are so repulsed by the cruelty of the world that you start to break things in protest, if you raise your voice at them every time they raise theirs, if you start to cut yourself so you can recover the power to feel: you might find out very quickly that it can happen to you.

THE ONLY THING that really surprised me was how much muscle they brought. For me there were two large paramedics in blue jumpsuits tucked down into lace-up leather boots, looking more like paratroopers than first responders, like people trained to take lives rather than to save them. There were four uniformed police officers decked out in full array, their webbing belts slung with tasers and pistols and extendable steel batons. I had just woken out of a wretched sleep and I felt like I had brought part of my nightmares into the room with me. I tried to dislodge these dream visions by shaking my head but nothing in the room changed. There were still those six officers standing in a loose ring between me and the front door, all pulling on blue latex gloves as I came down into the living room.

AS I REACHED the bottom of the stairs one female police officer stepped forward and introduced herself. Her name was Officer Gaby and although her name seems unimportant now it definitely mattered that she introduced herself to me. She had an air of kindness along with her trappings of force, she told me that people were very concerned about me and that an assessment order had been made. She said that an ambulance was waiting outside to take me to the hospital, where I would meet with a psychiatrist who could figure out what was going on.

I have a psychiatrist, I said.

Gaby nodded.

They will have his notes, she said.

But things have escalated, Che.

The doctors at the hospital will take care of you from here.

OFFICER GABY TOLD me that although the order was temporary at this stage it was still an involuntary order and I would be required to comply with it.

Do you understand that? she asked.

That you need to come with us?

I nodded before asking the obvious question.

What happens, I asked.

If I refuse to come with you?

She said: Che you have to come with us.

You don't have any choice about that.

It doesn't have to be difficult.

You can just get some things and we'll take you directly there.

I HAD BEEN sleeping very poorly and my mind was in pieces but I swear there was something weird about those officers who came to my house. Even Officer Gaby who spoke to me so kindly would not look me in the eye. She spoke as though she were reading her lines from a script, as though she would tell me more about what was happening if she were permitted to do so. I also had the distinct impression that despite their guns and batons they would not - as long as I stayed peaceful - put their hands on me or coerce me in any way. Even if I shouted, even if I jumped up and down. I knew this was from their training and the fact that I am small and female but for a moment it felt as though they were not really present in the world, or that they stood at an odd angle to some private world of mine that was only tangentially connected to reality.

I DECIDED TO go through the motions and resist for as long as I could. I knew what they wanted and where I was destined to go but I needed to buy myself some time. I thought of a few questions and I asked some of them, such as how long I might have to stay at the hospital, whether my medication would be changed. Officer Gaby remained very calm although she did begin to clear her throat before she answered my rapid-fire questions. It all depends on what the doctors think, Che. They might decide you need a little bit of extra medication, they might think that all of this can be sorted out at home. They might decide that you would benefit from a short stay as an inpatient. It all depends on their assessment.

Will I get to come home again?

Of course, she said.

It's not like that anymore Che.

They don't just lock people away.

You won't be there for very long.

I ASKED AGAIN what kind of medication might be prescribed and Gaby remained perfectly calm. That's way outside my area, Che. But I can tell you some things I have seen. I have seen people discharged with a little bit of Valium and some cognitive therapy to continue at home. Some people might need a bit more help than that and they stay in hospital for a while. But they can't keep you there for long. Beds are scarce and it is horribly expensive. Even if you do stay for a little while they will treat you assertively in order to get you a little bit better and then they have to send you home.

A lot of it is up to you, Che.

If you can stay calm and work with the doctors.

If you can do what you need to do to get yourself well.

OFFICER GABY STOPPED talking and I asked her whether she knew how it felt. She asked what I meant by that and I said: to have your home invaded by people you don't know. To be taken by police and whatever these other people are to somewhere you don't want to go.

I won't lie to you Che, she said.

I have not had that experience.

It's not something I would like to experience.

But we are not here to hurt you or punish you. We are just here to make sure you get to where you need to go. All of this is about you, Che, you must understand that. Your wellness, your welfare. That's the best way I can put it. We are part of a healthcare system designed to get you well.

And if I disagree?

You can do that, she said.

You can say anything you like to the doctor, once we get you there.

OFFICER GABY ASKED me whether I wanted to grab some things. I was about to run upstairs to pack a bag when my mother lifted one of her smaller suitcases on to the kitchen bench. This is everything Che will need, she said. I looked at her feeling surprised and then quite badly betrayed but she just walked over to me and hoisted the bag into my arms, immediately letting go of it so I had to grab hold.

But Mum...

You need to go with them.

But I don't want to...

I SAW ANGER flare in her then, along with the spite she had been trying to suppress for so long. She hissed at me and said: this is not the time Che. Stop being so bloody selfish. These people are here to help you and make you better and there's nothing either of us can do about it. If you could just see how much we all *love* you - how we are just trying to help - you might be able to think about easing our burden and getting yourself well.

I am well, I said.

Her tone turned saccharine as she said: Oh Che.

That you could even say that to me?

In light of all that's happened.

It just shows how unwell you have become.

I TURNED BACK towards Officer Gaby, who suddenly seemed to be my only ally in the room. I wanted to ask her more stalling questions but every single question I could think of had been answered and there was just one forlorn query I could think to make even though I knew how she would reply.

Is there anything I can do?

About what Che?

To stop this happening to me?

No, she said.

Nothing?

Nothing.

GABY SEEMED GENUINELY motivated to keep me calm and she kept volunteering positive ways of looking at what was happening. As she spoke a faint tunnel seemed to form between us to amplify and isolate our communication, so that the rest of the room faded slightly and had its volume turned down. Her words now reached me like some kind of secret speech as I heard her say: things are in train, Che. You have to believe that this is for the best. You will not understand, not yet, but you will look back and understand why we had to come for you. It will not be an easy road but things were never going to be easy, making the decisions that you have, to live your life in a courageous way. This is how things happen for good people, Che, the light sometimes reads like the darkness. And there is always some light in what happens no matter how little shines through.

IN THE END it wasn't all that traumatic. It almost felt like relief, to be honest, the relief of giving in when you know you have lost the fight, the relief of coasting down a hill you have spent so much energy climbing up. To escape those officers would have been impossible but to just go in their direction and let them take me was the easiest thing in the world. It felt strangely pleasant to have my choices taken away from me, with nothing to do but walk down the front path with them surrounding me. To get in by the side door of the ambulance and follow their directions to lie down, to let them belt me in with their nylon restraining belts, slotting home the heavy plastic clips with a very definite click. To let them ratchet me down until my limbs were tightly pinned and my body was held still. To lie there and breathe quietly while the ambulance threaded its way past the parked cars on our little street, out onto the congested roads leading towards the hospital.

OFFICER GABY RODE beside me the whole way. She did not look at me or speak to me but she did rest her hand on the front of my right shoulder, her touch very heavy and definite. I know I was unwell and probably in a bit of shock but it honestly felt as though there was some other power pressing down on me through her hand, something grave and powerful but lacking any sinister intent. Pushing down to comfort me and render me into a state of submission, like the Forefinger of Allah in those graphic novels although this power seemed much more feminine. Pressing down to hold me steady and also to instruct me: Che stand down. For the moment there was just that clear commandment: Che you will stand down.

CHAPTER 4

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

BEFORE WE GO any further you need to know: I am what psychiatrists call an unreliable historian. Although from the strangeness of this story so far you might already have guessed. Facts tend to desert you when you are teetering on the brink of psychosis, when you have not slept properly for months, when you are malnourished and confused and hemmed in by turbulence and paranoia on every side. In the best environment this is going to make you disoriented, even a beautiful natural environment with trees and sunshine and grass beneath your feet. But when you have been torn from your home and tied down in an ambulance and hauled through city streets towards a psych ward, towards what hostile staff and deranged patients you can't possibly imagine? You're lucky if you can separate fact from fantasy at all.

I WOULD SWEAR though: the day they brought me down to the hospital was a very strange day. We had endured a heat haze for many days across the city and months of dry weather in the wheat country to the north. As I looked out of the ambulance windows I saw the sky had turned a sickly shade of yellow, with darker reddish tinges skirting around its edges. It looked not so much cloudy as opaque and in that strange mustard sky there were whorls and vortices like you would expect to see in a swollen river, like storm-swirls closing on one another across the surface of Jupiter. It looked very much like the end of the world and that came as no surprise, as all life within me also felt like it was coming to an end.

WHEN THE AMBULANCE arrived at the hospital officer Gaby jumped out and stood there waiting for me. The female paramedic looked at me doubtfully and asked whether I felt well enough to walk into the ward. She said they could bring me there without freeing me from the gurney if that was what I preferred. I said that I was happy to walk and she looked at me directly and said: are you going to behave yourself? Because if you're going to act up we might just leave you strapped down. I told her that I would behave and she patted me and said good girl that's always for the best, as she began unclipping the soft blue webbing pinning me down to the bed.

MADNESS BLURS ANY distinction between your interior landscape and what should remain exterior. My emotions had broken open and the sinister look of that sky could not be differentiated from what churned within me, the overpowering terror you feel when everything gains access to your inner world and you retain no boundaries against it. And even that turbulent sky was nothing compared to what churned and spewed towards me from the inside of the ward. I felt energies seethe towards me as soon as I turned towards the entrance, I wanted to run back behind Officer Gaby but both paramedics were behind me and they completely blocked that way. There were nurses striding towards me and all I could do was stand and tremble and close my eyes against it. It still makes me tremble sometimes to remember that moment: being dragged into the maddest place in the world, knowing that I was probably just as crazy.

I WAS ESCORTED into the ward via a security station with a double set of electronically locked glass doors. The security staff asked me whether I was carrying any drugs or weapons and they patted me down in a half-hearted way. They waved me through and the nurses led me on to the ward, where despite all of my fear there came this strange anticlimactic moment where absolutely nothing happened. I was left alone in the chaos of the ward without any idea of what I was supposed to do, and it was a long time before another nurse appeared and ushered me into a consulting room. She told me to wait before pulling the door half-closed, and any time I got up to push the door shut another nurse would walk by and push it half-open again.

I SAT IN that room for a long time before someone came to sit with me. I have no idea whether he was a nurse or a doctor and because I never saw him again I suspect he was neither. He asked me a series of rapid-fire questions and I answered quite a few before I explained that I had already told these things to my psychiatrist. He peered at me and said: I know you are disoriented Che but you are in the hospital. This is a different time and place and I am asking you different things. He asked question after question without writing anything down and it all seemed incredibly repetitive and to this day I have no idea who this man was. He began to ask detailed questions about a situation I had encountered at work and about relationships within my workplace. I tried to tell him how anxious these questions made me but he just pressed on. These questions are important, he said. We really must get through these questions. If you would please just concentrate Che on the questions that I am asking. We cannot proceed if you refuse to answer my questions.

BY THE TIME the interview finished my anxiety had become unbearable. My interviewer flipped his notepad closed and rushed out of the room, leaving me there without any word of explanation. I plucked up the courage to walk across to the glass barriers of the nurses' station, tapping on the glass and asking for something to calm me down. After ignoring me for a while a nurse looked up and said: we can't give you anything until the doctor has reviewed you. In my rising panic I tried to explain how I was feeling, how I just needed a little something to take the edge off but the nurse shrugged and said again: your doctor needs to see you first. She said something about the doctor needing to retain a clear view of me and I swore and said: I am not some fucking rat in a lab. I refuse to suffer for the convenience of some doctor. I started crying and pleading and saying: you have to give me something. Please I know you have something that will help.

IT ALL SEEMED unnecessarily cruel. They had every conceivable sedative behind that desk and as I found out later they were only too eager to use them. Yet in that moment I was unable to get even the smallest bit of medication just to calm me down, when at the doctors' further convenience I could be shot full of every disgusting chemical you can imagine: overwhelming intramuscular tranquilisers that crash your body and mind, the horrors of Haloperidol and Acuphase. But never anything that might actually make a person feel better, never anything to provide some emotional relief, to give you some buffer against chaos in your mind or the tormented patients surging around you on the ward.

IN THE END my pleas came to nothing and I was left anxious and unaided in the chaos of the ward. As patients shuffled past me I could feel strange tendrils raking across my heart, the dark pressure waves they formed in front of themselves as they pushed through the space we shared. One man in filthy pyjamas kept staring at me no matter where I stationed myself, I tried to shoo him away but he just mimicked me by flicking his tobacco-stained fingers. I had to keep ducking out of the path of a gangly young man who staggered in random directions across the ward. He had been scalded with a kettle of boiling water that his grandmother had poured over him in a crazed act of self-defence, he lurched around shirtless with his improvised dressings barely covering the horrible burns on his back. He spewed generalised verbal abuse before collapsing into runaway fits of tears, which would then dry suddenly as he resumed his wild abusive ramble across the ward.

MY DISTRESS PUSHED me past any vague sense of unreality into a conviction that this was no longer the real world. Every last person on the ward seemed to be some kind of NPC, acting out simple looped routines that had been programmed into them long ago. I walked back to the nurses' station and shouted at the top of my voice, demanding that they give me Valium and threatening to kill myself or other patients if they refused. I began to scream out my demands but all they did was glance up at me from behind the thick glass of the nurses' station. I picked up a chair and threatened to smash the glass, warning that I was going to start killing people and in that moment I genuinely intended to do it. I wanted to smash these patients out of their governing matrix until it dawned on me that I was no different from them, that I was also an NPC as I weighed that chair in my hands. I saw how insubstantial my soul was and I knew that the nurses were not concerned about my posturing because I was merely an obsolete bit of code that would glitch ineffectively until some upgrade deleted me forever.

I LET THE chair slip slowly to the floor and I sank down to sit beside it. I remained slumped there until a nurse walked up to me and said: I can show you to your room if you like. I nodded and said yes and she said: why don't we do that. You'll be more comfortable there. She pulled me to my feet and led me down a corridor and as we walked she said: it's not really such a bad place once you get used to it Che. If you can just try to relax your way into it. We walked to the end of the corridor and then into a room set up with two beds and she gestured for me to lie down on one of them. I flopped down face first and grabbed the pillow and squeezed my arms around it and she said: the doctor will see you soon, Che. Things will get much better once the doctor conducts his review.

AS THE NURSE moved back towards the door the space in the room began to yaw strangely. She seemed a very long way away and I felt time slow rapidly to the point where I knew that the nurse would never quite arrive at that door. Time was grinding towards a halt that would inter me in this room forever. If you have ever experienced this kind of time dilation you will understand how much more terrifying it was than the energy swirling out on the ward. I had feared violence or spiritual intrusion from other patients but this was a much more visceral fear. Knowing that the doctor was never going to see me - that no doctor ever would - and that I was being interred somewhere blank and endless for the enormity of my sins.

I LAY THERE feeling condemned until a tiny hope built in me. Out of the fact that I was still able to feel even though I was feeling such hideous things. If I have one piece of advice for people who find themselves in that condition: even when you are sunk to the depths of hell you must remain open to your feelings. They will always move within you to prove that you are a genuinely living being, with all of the dignity of that condition that can never be undone. Just as my mind was convinced that my life was forfeit I was also empowered to feel into the texture of that self-accusation. And because feelings are never immutable - no single feeling can last for very long - to feel one emotion inevitably means you will feel further and further things. Dragging you past any particular conviction, relieving you from even the darkest accusation.

THE OTHER POWER that can never be unseated is your agency over the flesh given to you when you came into the world. It remains entirely yours to guide down any path you choose, even dark paths which lead towards dissolution and death. I lay on that bed and felt that same agency within me: the power to wiggle my fingers and move my toes and shift one knee up underneath my body. Confirming my bodily existence in a genuinely identifiable place, even if it were some corner of hell that remained entirely foreign to me. Lifting me out of the ghastly sense of being buried alive, even though it took enormous effort to shift my body. Breaking the spell of stalled time and dragging my body slowly out of its stuck frame.

IT TOOK A long time but I did eventually get to meet with my new psychiatrist: the doctor who had been allocated to me in the hospital, the one who had signed the forms to bring me in. I'm not sure how much I want to say about that meeting or indeed whether there is anything to say. It left very little impression on me although my memory of it remains quite clear. I can tell you that his attitude towards me was even more cool and distant than the attitude of my previous doctor, and like Doctor Samuels he was completely uninterested in hearing about my dream experiences. I do remember that he kept staring downwards at what I guessed were Doctor Samuels' notes, giving me the unmistakable impression that he did not come to me with an open mind.

ONE THING THAT did surprise me was that my new psychiatrist did not prescribe any additional medication. I knew that involuntary treatment in hospital was a clear medical escalation and I expected my medicine to escalate. I told the doctor how distressed I was to be on the ward and how I needed something to settle me down and he just nodded and hummed at me without much interest. And when I had finished speaking he responded with little disconnected speeches that I found hard to follow. He didn't want to muddy the waters, he said. He wanted to see how things progressed without adding complexity to the therapeutic picture. He mentioned some kind of team meeting where my case had been discussed and how the team were fully on board with this approach. I asked him about Valium or perhaps just some sleepers and he said: no Che this is not part of the plan. We need to keep you available to us in your lucid state. We certainly don't want to trouble the waters.

THE REST OF the consult went much the same way. The doctor directed most of his attention to my notes, occasionally making small noises of approbation or query or concern. I expected him to ask me about my relationship with my mother or how things were going at college but there was nothing even remotely like that. I tried to interject once or twice in order to tell him about my dreams but I had already learned that this subject would never get any air and my attempts to raise it were lukewarm at best. I tried to edge towards it by saying how poor my sleep had been - how hard it was to distinguish between my sleeping and my waking states - but the doctor just shrugged without giving me any response and went back to studying my notes.

THE DOCTOR HAD strange little slumps from time to time when he was reading or speaking, dipping down into tiny micro-sleeps or minor fits that sank his consciousness out of the consulting room. Until a slight noise would jolt him back up out of his slump, perhaps me clearing my throat or slightly shifting in my chair. He kept narrowing his eyes as though the glare of the room was dazzling him, the light angling down out of the harsh fluorescent tubes recessed into the ceiling, the phased LEDs twinkling from panels in the walls. I would guess that these were illusions created by my mental state but the more I watched the more contingent the doctor's presence in the room seemed. Even the way he hunched down in his white plastic chair, poring over notes which kept dragging him down out of the true texture of the world.

AT THE END of the consult the doctor said: well Che I think that's what we will do. We'll keep things as they are and treat you here for the time being and hope that things start to look up. I told him that the hospital was not a therapeutic place for me and that it was making me worse. I asked whether I could go home to recover there and he said: you know where that ended up Che. You are much too unwell to go home. When you regain a little more insight you will understand that. I told him that I had read the statistics on violence in psychiatric hospitals and he said: of course, of course, this is true wherever we keep human beings. Try not to feel too worried about it. The nurse prompted the doctor towards discussing discharge planning and he said yes certainly thank you we are always moving towards discharge. But to talk about it now would be to put the cart well before the horse.

THE DOCTOR GATHERED up his things in a distracted kind of way, saying he is overdue at another meeting. He exited the room without saying anything further and I am left there feeling dejected and dismissed. The nurse — who I have scarcely noticed — turns towards me with a quiet smile and says: Che thank you for letting me sit in with you on this meeting. I tell her there is no need to thank me and she smiles and nods as though she disagrees with me in the sweetest possible way. She asks whether I feel upset and I tell her how I had hoped to get some relief from the intrusiveness of the ward and she nods at me and says: there are some things that can't be helped Che. But I am here to help you if I can. And I can definitely promise: this is a safe place for you. A therapeutic space too I hope you will find. You will find your way out of here very soon, that is what I believe. If you are willing to let a few things go and focus on what you came here to do.

THE KINDNESS OF this nurse is unlike anything I have experienced in the hospital. I ask for her name and she tells me it is Ariel. I ask why she remained so quiet during the consult and she says: there are hierarchies in this place like any other Che. But there are deeper aspects to it as well. Will you give me a few minutes? Nurse Ariel gets up and walks over to the door, indicating gently with her hands that I should remain where I am, and in no time at all she comes back with a paper cup that steams very slightly as she puts it in my hands. I take a sip and I know this sounds ridiculous but it is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. It is thick like fine hot chocolate but there are spicy notes to it as well, the surface is perfectly foamed and the warmth of it floods the core of my being. I look at her in surprise and she smiles and nods and says: there are always good things in bad places, Che. And you must remember: in this particular place one of those good things is you.

THERE IS STRENGTH in the cup along with the sweetness and I thank Ariel for bringing it to me. It definitely makes things look different when I walk back out into the ward. The whole place shines a bit brighter and I can see subtle structures and constraints that make the ward seem much safer than it originally seemed. The tight routes that unwell patients are constrained to walk, by the same psychic strictures that condemned them to be there in the first place. I also see my own right to traverse the space in any way I choose without apology or deference to anyone. If I remain conscious of the work I have been brought here to do nobody can strip me of that entitlement: neither patient nor doctor nor nurse nor advocate nor visitor. As long as I remain true to the task I have been given, if I do not seek to leave before my purpose here is achieved.

CHAPTER 5

THE PEOPLE YOU MEET IN HELL

FORCING PEOPLE INTO confined spaces is a dangerous thing to do, and when those people are in the grip of severe mental illness things get downright insane. All that churning psychic energy, the confused reference and identity, the verbal aggression that breaks out so easily and the constant threat of violence. You hear such places being called zoos and you could no doubt sell tickets to voyeurs whose taste runs to the degradation of human beings. This is something that writers and filmmakers understand very well: you set stories in psych wards when you need to show a person completely humiliated and broken down. And the strangest thing? There is no therapeutic value in concentrating mad people into such places and there never has been. Nobody even tries to make that claim, let alone defend it.

THE WARD SEEMED hostile by design and it was particularly hostile to any connection between patients. The nurses continually reminded us not to make friends - *focus on your own recovery, be respectful towards the recovery of others* - and they would actively intervene if conversations became too intense or strayed on to therapeutic matters or discussions about what brought us here. I understood the point but we remained human beings no matter how damaged and there seemed something genuinely cruel about the efforts of the staff to divide us. How rapidly they swooped in when they saw intimate conversations, sometimes directly but more often by stealth: dragging patients away for a blood test or a blood pressure reading just when some genuine connection looked set to occur.

SERENA WAS THE first patient I really got to speak to. She was sharp and sarcastic and she was sceptical about the medical system in the same way I was. We spoke a few times and she seemed to really like me but she was difficult to engage for any length of time. She constantly shifted her feet and her posture, and her agitation would get worse the longer she stood with me and talked. She was always apologetic about what she called her *akathisia*: a side-effect of the intramuscular medication they were giving her. They had prescribed another drug to suppress it but it was only partially effective and she could not stop shifting and tensing her muscles and grinding her teeth. It looked really uncomfortable and I felt really sorry for her but later I heard that her main issue was not psychiatric illness but methamphetamine addiction and withdrawal, which I suppose might have been the real cause of her distress.

WHATEVER HAD BROUGHT Serena into the hospital it became increasingly clear that she was genuinely unwell. The more I spoke to her the more she seemed to be talking to something surrounding me, something to the exterior of my body and disconnected from my soul. Her words sounded sensible enough but they were always spoken past me and never directly to me, and the more we chatted the more I started to wonder whether she could even see me standing in front of her. One time she asked me whether I had been sent to the hospital to connect with her and without thinking I said yes, yes it does feel a bit like that. I didn't mean to sound threatening but she flinched and looked at me directly for the first time with her eyes wide open and from that moment she avoided all contact with me, moving whenever I moved to stay as far from me as possible.

MOST PEOPLE MAINTAIN some dignity even in a psych ward but there is also a kind of dignity in casting away all pretence to it. Jonathan had done that spectacularly. He was openly mad and he made no bones about it, although his brand of frank insanity began to look more rational the longer you were around it. While other patients shambled around in grubby pyjamas Jonathan was always dressed in style, in smart jackets with button-down shirts and more often than not he wore a tie. His dark hair was pushed back rakishly and he looked very strange and attractive and the whole impression was that of a brilliant, dissolute genius. Knowing things the rest of us could never hope to know, things we shouldn't even be bummed about not knowing. He kept a notebook and a few fountain pens jutting out of his jacket pocket, and whenever he was asked about them he would tap them with two fingers and say: uno dos tres cuatro cinco cinco seis. Which I felt had some deep significance although I could not imagine what it was.

JONATHAN COULD BE very civilised and charming but he was also prone to what he called Dangerous Arousal. This kept him confined to the High Dependency Unit except for those brief periods he was calm enough to come back on to the open ward. One evening I saw him being escorted out of HDU amidst his overspilling thanks to the nurses, promising to behave himself this time and to be no further trouble on the ward. I was sitting at one of the ward computers trying to send an email and it kept crashing and losing my work and I forgot about Jonathan until he tapped me on the shoulder and asked me very politely whether I would like a drink. I glanced at the luridly coloured liquid he was offering me in a plastic cup and I smelled booze and I looked at him in surprise.

Where did you get alcohol? I asked.

Hand sanitiser, he said.

Hand sanitiser and orange juice. Equal parts.

Would you like one?

I've had two and I'm really on my way.

I TOLD JONATHAN that drink was no good for me and after offering once more for politeness he smiled and nudged me and said: your loss chica. He drained the cup in one and over the next few minutes I saw him pumping away at the hand sanitiser a couple more times. I feel sure that at least one nurse noticed him do it but nobody tried to stop him. He soon broke into song and his singing got quite raucous before he shifted from singing to screeching and suddenly he was rampaging around the dining area. He started yelling abuse at a patient sitting in one corner of the lounge, a bearded man who always wore a keffiyeh and who seemed like some kind of sworn enemy to Jonathan. The two of them started yelling threats and insults and anyone who had seen their previous confrontations would know what was coming next. Jonathan screamed at the man that he was going to kill him, that he deserved what he was going to get, while the other patient laughed and repaid those threats with interest until Jonathan began to move against him.

AS JONATHAN MOVED time seemed to slow down, as nurses began to intervene by attaching themselves to him as he went. One grabbed his left arm and another attached herself to his right, nurses grabbed at the fabric of his jacket and his trousers as he moved more and more slowly across the room. He somehow remained upright despite the increasing weight, dragging his human cargo towards the man he was now swearing to kill. His enemy looked completely unconcerned and kept on with his laughter and his taunts, easing himself back in his chair with his feet raised to defend himself if Jonathan ever arrived. I had a strange flash that this man was in fact orchestrating the whole thing, that he was some kind of Lord of Misrule who had inveigled Jonathan into getting drunk and becoming aggressive and forfeiting his place on the ward.

EVENTUALLY ENOUGH NURSES got hold of Jonathan to drag him to the floor. They held him down until someone got a needle into him and his strength laboured and failed. He fell silent apart from his ragged breathing and they dragged him up onto his feet and back towards the High Dependency Unit. As they moved he started giggling wildly and then apologising profusely to anyone who would listen, saying that he was going to have a headache in the morning, a terrible hangover that would last him for days. Do not drink the hand sanitiser my good friends! As though any of us were planning to. O how I wish I had never found that demon drink in the first place! He winked at me as he was dragged past, going back into the hole he had escaped for less than an hour, saying: you made the right choice, chica! Apologies for not seeing that before. Your choice will always be the right choice no matter what you decide to do.

THE WARD WAS consistently chaotic but there were some deeply sane people there, including a sweet and earnest young man named Martin. He was a lived-experience support worker who had struggled with his own mental health issues, who had now recovered enough to support other people on the same path. He came in every second morning with pots full of brewed coffee and packets of chocolate biscuits, to sit and talk with patients about their experiences both in life and on the ward. There was nothing rarefied about the topics we discussed but Martin's presence made them feel significant, as though our stay in hospital was just a small part of a larger and more pressing story. He was always gracious and respectful and very generous with his coffee and when I approached him after the first meeting to say thank you he smiled and said: Che I should be thanking you. People have a lot to learn from the insights you generously share.

MARTIN DOES NOT hide the fact that he has endured severe mental illness, so severe in fact that he really shouldn't be here. And yet here I am, he says. He has resumed his former work in the outside world but he also feels bound to come back into this space to provide such help as he can. Through his basic kindness and courtesy but also his genuine ability to say: I know how that feels. I know that kind of hopelessness very well. He says that he has now discovered the opposite of hopelessness which he calls Love, he always says that Love is the major part of what he does. He also says: to care about people and bring them small comforts is not a trivial thing. We don't like to talk about Love in therapeutic settings but there is no therapy without Love, there is no healing without Love, there is no understanding or any other kind of help without Love. Unless interventions are done with real care and regard for the patient they can never be therapeutic. There is nothing that can heal us or redeem us that is not based in Love.

MARTIN WOULD CHAT to me briefly if I approached him after coffee although I could tell that one-on-one contact made him a little uneasy. I was curious to know whether the doctors supported his work and he said: there are some. Most of them remain quite hostile to the concept of peer-to-peer work. But there are definitely nurses who support it Che and I know you've seen them. They love the work we do even when patients get a bit rowdy, they swing by to chat and support us and even have a few laughs. They know that we are doing good things even if their colleagues deny it and that little bit is enough. Just a nod from those particular nurses, that genuine bit of encouragement. And of course when I encounter people like you Che. Learning from you and the things that you know, improving my own life every day out of what patients have to teach me.

I MET OTHER patients and talked with some of them but the vast majority seemed to be shut down. Muttering obsessively and walking in predetermined directions, arriving back constantly at the tea and coffee nook without ever making a drink. Nurses would redirect them again and again - perhaps to sit down in the art room with a puzzle or some paints - but after idly dabbing at their work a few times they would get up and continue their compulsive walking around. I still think of these patients as NPCs because that is the only way I can interpret their behaviour, their obsessions and their stock responses and the repeated questions they would ask without waiting for an answer. How they pawed impotently at the coffee machine or tapped continuously on the glass of the nurses' station until they were dispensed a cigarette, how they would circle back the same way every ten or fifteen minutes to beg for another smoke and then another.

THERE WAS ONE patient who seemed like the exact opposite of an NPC, a tall young man named Luc. He seemed terribly sad and withdrawn but he retained a feeling of being wholly animate and independent in his presence on the ward. He moved slowly but deliberately and when I came near him I felt as though I might be a guest inside a world built entirely for him. I will admit to his being quite handsome and you might accuse me of letting that alter my view of him but against the grey walls of this place he would shine even if he were the opposite of good-looking. I had never met him before but he struck me as intensely familiar, although many encounters in hospital do feel like reunions rather than fresh meetings. He is a few years older than me but there is a tenderness to him amongst all of his gravity, a slight lift to his presence that calls to me compellingly.

LUC WEARS GRIMY bandages wrapped around each one of his wrists. Although they look very worn I can sense that the wounds beneath them remain fresh. When he walks through the ward he half-cradles his hands in front of himself as though they were causing him pain and his bindings are so tattered that you can glimpse the livid wounds beneath. I don't know why the nurses won't help him: to bind up his arms with fresh dressings or even just keep them clean. They must notice the inflammation under the heels of his hands, the hint of livid scoring beneath the upper end of each filthy bandage. I would offer to tend them myself but I have no supplies and if the nurses refuse to help him I can't see how there is anything they would allow me to do.

LUC'S PRESENCE IS powerful enough to reach out physically into the ward. Any time I get close to him the constant smell of cleaning fluid starts to disappear. The staff are always spraying equipment down and wiping up surfaces and even the bedsheets and the lounge furniture stink of the same chemicals. It has the sharpness of bleach but it also carries a sulphurous undertone, rasping and burning in my nostrils as I breathe it in. My skin has begun to reek of it and I cannot get the taste out of my mouth and his presence is the only thing that keeps these smells at bay. He also clears the death smell that lurks underneath these chemicals: the reek of dead and decomposing things, like those horrible deodorising liquids that always smell so much worse than the decay they are supposed to mask, so much more revolting than just leaving the smell of death without trying to hide it away.

THE FIRST TIME I spoke to Luc was a genuine accident. One of the nurses asked me whether I would like a cup of cocoa and although I accompanied him to the tea station I did not notice that he was making two drinks. When they were made he motioned me to follow him and we walked over to a couch where Luc was sat thumbing through a magazine. The nurse set down one cup in front of him and asked: Is it OK if Che sits here?

Sure, he said.

She can sit where she likes.

The nurse turned to me and said: this is Luc.

He has a strange sense of humour.

But his heart is in the right place.

Isn't that right Luc?

Luc grunted out some kind of reply.

THIS IS THE first time I have spoken with Luc but it doesn't feel that way. There is no constriction in his soul and I am surprised at how little shyness I feel. His energy is a little intense but it does not make me pull back, I feel like I could never be repulsed by him as strange as that is to say.

I'm Che, I say.

I gathered, he says.

And we have met before.

When? I ask.

Before, he says. Before.

Waving his hand in the air.

He looks distracted for a moment before his attention swings back to me, creasing his brow as he asks me: why did they call you Che?

It's after some prophet, I say.

God will Strengthen, he says.

I look at him in surprise.

How do you know that?

CHE, HE SAYS. It is imperative for you to know that I am an absolute nutcase. I demolished my phone with my bare hands and I cut myself on the shards and instead of being dead I seem to have subsumed its contents into myself. When I close my eyes I can look up anything I want, and I mean: the whole repository of the knowledge of the world. And not one blank spot have I found. The whole world is now crammed inside of me and that is the opposite of what I wanted to happen. I keep asking the doctors to treat me for it but they just deny it is happening, I have shown them what I can do but they have no interest in it at all. The drugs they give me are the wrong drugs and I know they will never work and it is because of this curse that I know it. They have offered me ECT but that will just burn away the bright parts of my brain and leave nothing but the dross. Only the undertones that would never work for me, only the underscore which drags everybody down.

WHAT KIND OF name is Luke? I ask.

It's Luc, he says. L-U-C.

Short for...

It's just Luc.

It's not...

The fallen angel?

Luc leans his head back as he closes his eyes.

I understand your question, he says. Clever girl. But I really don't think that's me. Although wouldn't it be fitting: a trick name for a condemned soul who never really guessed that he was fallen. Who rebelled against a jealous God who was quite frequently a brutal God also. Perhaps he was the one who informed the prophets, who warned Mary about the violation to come. No, Che. I don't think so. He was never enfleshed the way we are, they could never have held him in this place. How could he be grounded with such terrible strength in his wings?

LUC FINISHES SPEAKING and then asks me again for my name. I tell him once more and he says: no I mean your full name. I say that Che is my full name but he shakes his head resolutely.

I doubt it, he says.

I doubt that's your full name.

Smiling as he asks me.

Do you know why I think that?

Your parents might be into radical politics Che but from the look of you I doubt it. When I feel my way towards your name it seems like some kind of placeholder. Something short that speaks of something longer with much more impact and effect. Some potential power that may become absolute in certain places although never the places you would choose. Obscured until the last possible moment and even within that moment. You should listen to me, Che. You must press on and find out. Until you know the meaning of your name you will never comprehend why you came here.

LUC SPEAKS SO intensely and intimately that I am encouraged to be intimate in return, in those spaces between his speech when he lapses back into silence.

Your arms, I say.

Your wrists.

What about them? He says.

He knows what I want to ask but I feel ashamed to ask it and he does not open up the discussion. I search for something off-hand to say about his wounds, hoping to direct the discussion in a non-threatening way.

Your dressings, I say.

They're so dirty.

Why won't they change them for you?

He narrows his eyes and tilts his head a little.

Who are you to notice these things?

What?

What is your interest in these things?

I DON'T KNOW what Luc is asking me and I have no idea how to respond. He must know that his poor wounds are barely covered, that their windings are so scuffed and tattered that they are peeling away from his arms. He has taken the ends of each bandage and stuffed them underneath other parts of his bindings but it hardly makes any difference, they keep unwinding and coming apart and he is continually loosening them a few turns so he can secure them again. He already feels suspicious of me but I cannot pull my eyes away from the livid wounds above and below those dressings. I want to wrap them tightly or give him some other comfort but I know he would refuse it so I just sit there quietly looking down at his arms.

I CAN HELP you, I say eventually.

With your bandages.

I know how to fix them so they stay tied.

I move towards him but he pulls his hands away.

Who said you could help me?

Who was it that sent you here?

These are strange questions but I do my best to answer them. I tell him that it is no problem for me to help him, that I am just another patient and I don't mean him any harm. He scoffs at that and lets out a hard laugh as he jumps up from where we are sitting. He gestures towards the room and says: trust me I'm a doctor. That's what every single one of you says. Especially when you are doing your best to pretend not to be one.

LUC IS OBVIOUSLY distressed and I don't follow him when he walks away. Just as I never press him on his strange accusations or any other thing that he says. I make sure to say hello when I see him and I have even offered to make him coffee, and although he never accepts anything from me I know that part of him would like to. Sometimes he seems convinced that I am some kind of doctor, and at other times he looks at me as though I am something more formidable than that. Most commonly I think he classes me with the nurses but what never changes is his watchfulness around me. As we see each other again and again on the ward I expect him to become less cautious but he seems to go in the opposite direction. The more he sees me the more reluctant he is to engage, and he is ever more watchful whenever I draw close.

I KNOW THIS all sounds unpleasant but Luc is not self-centred. In fact he seems quite self-effacing even though his sadness has consumed his focus to the point where he has little left to spare. With concentrated seeing I can discern a kind of energetic anomaly gathered just below his heart, a region which should be shining out but has instead collapsed into something like a black hole. An inescapable void with a visible event horizon that has consumed all of the light around him, along with any love that has ever flowed towards him. It is a terrible thing to witness - especially through the lens of my insanity - but I can also see how there might be some genuine promise in it. From the place where the material accreted by this singularity resides, how it might be reversed so all that love and light can come streaming back into the world.

I HAD MANY strange encounters on the ward but my encounter with Manic Jesus was by far the strangest. I first came across him lying rigid and silent across one of the couches, his arms outstretched and his head slumped forward with his chin resting against his chest. His legs jutted out stiffly in front of him with his feet crossed, his hands were held open and pressed back against the rough fabric of the couch. I was looking for something to read on a nearby bookshelf and although I tried not to disturb him his head suddenly jerked towards me and he said: is it you who says this of me? Or have others told it to you? His expression was so pained and bewildered that for a moment I just stared at him, before quickly apologising and stepping back a few paces. His chin slumped back down towards his chest and he lapsed into silence once more.

MANIC JESUS WANDERED around the ward in one of two distinct moods. The first I would call Delirium where he had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. He staggered around and held up his hands as if to fend off blows, calling out names I didn't recognise and questions that made no sense. At other times he would suddenly recover and snap back into the state I called Admonition. He would list every sin that each patient had committed, ranging even towards early childhood and sins that are usually overlooked. He cried out that any rebellious action is a matter of deadly sin, no matter how young the transgressor or how minor the crime. Every time we had thrown down food, every time we had cried, every time we had fought against sleep or rebelled against natural limits. Each one of these was a matter of mortal peril and for every sin there was the threat of eternal punishment. Manic Jesus raved about the strait gate and the narrow way, he ranted about the eye of the needle and how none of us would be passing through.

JESUS BORE OPEN wounds on his hands both front and back. They were never dressed or bandaged although the stretched sleeves of his hospital pyjamas usually hung down far enough to cover them. He shuffled around wincing as though his feet were wounded too, and although they were always covered by his pyjama pants they left the linoleum floor slightly discoloured as he went. I never saw a nurse attend to this shabby martyr or pay him any attention at all and I began to wonder whether he was only my own hallucination. He seemed utterly forsaken and would cry out to God in plaintive ways although with his accent I could never understand much of what he was saying. He gave sermons to empty chairs and rebuked the empty tables of the dining area between meals, and although he spoke with great fervour and intensity I could not shake the feeling that Manic Jesus was leading his invisible followers astray.

MANIC JESUS HARANGUED his absent disciples but he seemed completely disconnected from the actual people on the ward. For the most part he ignored me too, until one afternoon I walked past him holding a fresh-made cup of coffee. It may have been the smell of the coffee or me getting too close to him but he suddenly snapped out of his delirium and began gesturing towards me. He mouthed silent words and I did not know what he wanted until he cried out in a clear voice: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I was going to tell him this was not my name but he cried again: I know why I am here. Held for the harrowing and never to rise. I had no answer for him, although I felt this was a genuine complaint and that it was properly levelled at me. But nobody needs Jesus as their enemy and so I just set my coffee down on the table in front of him and walked away from where he stood. After I reached a certain distance he slumped back and subsided into his delirium and never spoke to me again.

CHAPTER 6

THE INTERVIEW

ONE SLOW AFTERNOON Ariel comes to find me and asks how I am doing. I tell her I am fine and she smiles a little sadly at me and says: not that fine though? I nod quietly as tears well up in my eyes. I presume she intends to offer me a hot drink but she bobs down next to me and says: we have a locum psychiatrist on the ward for a few days. Doctor Barrett is her name and she is a little bit... different from the others. Quite a bit different in fact. Would you like to meet with her? I try to think up a polite way to refuse before Ariel presses her hand down on the top of my knee and says: it's up to you Che of course. I just think it might be a positive experience for you to meet her.

I HAVE NO desire to be prodded or assessed, especially if I have to start from scratch with a brand new psychiatrist. But there is also the overwhelming tedium of the ward that I am always looking to escape. I think for a moment before telling Ariel that I would like to see the new doctor and she beams at me and says: good girl. She asks me to take a seat in the nearest consulting room before she walks off smiling broadly like she has achieved something momentous.

BEFORE TOO LONG an older woman enters the room, accompanied by a tall male nurse with a serene expression. She looks tired and her mood feels a little off but there is something about her that I like very much, a sense that she is free of the trappings of this place in a way that other medical staff are not. I greet her as Doctor Barrett but she waves that away and says: please Che call me Anne. She is polite in a gruff kind of way and she asks for a couple of minutes so that she can take a look at my notes. I am happy to wait and as she studies my file I can feel something emanating from her that I have not felt since I came to the hospital. A soothing feeling that I struggle to name until it comes to me in a flash: this is what I would call warmth. Humane warmth and a rugged sort of humane affection although Doctor Anne has not yet spoken more than a handful of words to me.

DOCTOR ANNE LOOKS up from my notes with a sigh of exasperation. I don't know why I am bothering with this scrawl, she says. You seem like an intelligent person Che and I might be better off asking you: what do you think is going on? What has happened in your life to bring you to this place? It's a nasty thing to happen to anyone and we both know you didn't come here freely. I go to agree with her and also to disagree but nothing comes out of my mouth to fill the silence. Her voice softens a little as she sees my distress and she says: let me put it this way. Is there any way you can make sense of it? How you came to be in this place, and more importantly: what you need to do to get yourself out of here.

I SHOULD BE more guarded but for some reason I just go ahead and tell her. I describe my dreams and how they are more textured than reality, how they escalated at a certain point and frightened the people around me. How they have completely eclipsed what I used to refer to as my real life, so that the events in my dreams are the only things that feel real to me anymore. I tell Doctor Anne that I have done my best to recover in the hospital but I know any abatement of my dreams will only be temporary, that no therapy or medication can dislodge their hold on me. I also tell her: I have no wish to be dislodged from them because entering back into ordinary reality would cause me grief that I would not survive. I even tell her about my most psychotic conviction, that the outside world - the literal space both inside and outside the hospital - is actually some kind of dream realm and not the other way around.

WHEN I FINISH speaking Doctor Anne nods sagely at me. She says that dreams often seem completely real to the person who is dreaming them, just as false beliefs seem real to people suffering from delusions. The difference is that most people do eventually wake up, she says, to find that their inner world was not actually real in any conventional sense. I tell her that I agree with her on one level but then I ask: have you ever genuinely believed a patient who reports this kind of experience? Not just the fact of having the experience but the substance of those realms? Could you imagine a case where you would take those beliefs seriously, or even be convinced by them? Doctor Anne goes to answer but I make her wait for a moment as I ask: what criteria do you use to dismiss them? Is there any room in psychiatry for genuine spiritual experience?

DOCTOR ANNE PAUSES and thinks for a little while before turning to the nurse and saying: I wonder whether you wouldn't mind leaving us for a moment. The nurse jumps up and trots briskly out of the room without stopping to query the doctor or ask for my consent. I am about to protest but Doctor Anne gently holds up one hand towards me and says: this is so I can be frank with you Che. I usually don't take that risk but you strike me as someone who might benefit from hearing some honest truths from a psychiatrist. And to be honest I have grown tired of doing things in the prescribed way. At this point in a medical career you cease to care very much what might happen to you, and of course any consequences would be greatly diminished. So if you would be up for it, Che. Shall we try it this way and see what happens?

DOCTOR ANNE BUSTLES on and says: anything is possible Che. There are whole religions where people believe the most psychotic things on incredibly poor evidence. Evidence that would be thrown out of a criminal trial, even a civil trial. That God was born into human flesh, that a virgin gave birth, that an archangel chose an illiterate man to receive a holy book. Groups who claim that they are the chosen people of God, even though when you read their history it seems as though they have been chosen for punishment and persecution. Like Job if you know that demented story. All at the whim of a vicious God who incites a father to kill his own son in obedience to the voices in his head, a God who installs that murderous schizophrenic as the progenitor of all His religions. A God who propagates endless war by whispering in every ear: I love you the most, you are my favoured ones.

DOCTOR ANNE IS just getting warmed up and I do not interrupt her. I was brought up by severe nuns, she says. They beat all taste for religion out of me along with any sensitivity to the spirit. When I see any hint of it in my patients I have to restrain myself from being cruel or domineering or ridiculing their beliefs. From beating them back towards sanity, at least in a metaphorical sense. The irony of it is that psychiatry resembles nothing more than a religion, an offshoot of the dogmatic scientific materialism which is the great modern faith of the West. The belief that number and measurement are the only true ways of accounting for the world. If you don't understand something: smash it and count the pieces, then take each piece and smash it again and again. Forgetting that a person who breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.

IN SOME WAYS though the psychiatry needs to be restrictive. Without some rational limits all sense-data would crowd in on you completely undifferentiated and that is the precise definition of insanity. The rigours of psychiatry allow the chaos of the human condition to settle as we agree - for example - that there is your body and there is my body with the barrier of empty space between them. But taken to an extreme this can become extremely cruel. We give distressed patients no air time at all, and by remaining completely unresponsive we wash their souls out until they lose all confidence in their spiritual experiences although we never call them by that name. The unusual becomes the delusional and this is perhaps the grandest delusion of all. This is why you feel so emptied out in this place. Your experiences were completely discredited long before we brought you in.

I ASK DOCTOR Anne why she would tell me all of this and she pauses before she says: Che the honest answer is that I don't know. This locum stint has begun to look like one of my last and I have very little to lose. I do have a fair bit to regret though. Actions of mine that were well-meant but which I could have done much better, things I failed to do that I knew I should have done. I have come to believe more and more that being honest with patients must be the central part of any cure. To admit the limitations of our drugs, for example, while explaining how much they can really help. Truthfulness puts the onus back on to the patient to take responsibility for their own lives, to take charge of their own reality and not let any other person dictate it. What a good and satisfying life might look like, how to identify its opposite and find ways to steer clear.

I AM OLD Che. Older than I ever hoped I would become. I knew my numerical age would keep mounting but the consequences of that were hidden from me. The way age shuts you down against the reality of the living world. My memory I can coax along but the bodily failures are humiliating in a way you can't imagine. I go to bed not knowing whether I'll wake up and not feeling too bothered either way. Some days I can't shake the feeling that I am already dead and this feeling persists and persists. I have no religious affiliation but that does not preclude my belief in an afterlife and I do worry about being judged. I have never deliberately harmed anyone but I have caused severe harm unwittingly and perhaps not so unwittingly. Patients who told me that their medication was pushing them towards suicide, patients I kept on medicating because I had no other option. Some of my interventions were the exact opposite of therapeutic and that's just scratching the surface of the harm I have done.

DOCTOR ANNE SITS up and looks at me suddenly, and with her eyes soft like she is looking at her granddaughter she says: Che I'm going to recommend some simple and practical things. I know you feel angry at this place and the psychiatrists who run it but there is one sure way to get yourself out of here. If you can manage to smile and be polite and agree respectfully with your doctors, if you can bite your tongue and keep yourself quiet and occupied on the ward they cannot hold you. If you get up at a reasonable hour and dress yourself neatly, if you shower and put your hair up and do all of those things that ordinary people do. You could read a book for an hour or even just pretend to read, you could watch a little television or have a pleasant visit with your mother no matter how much she tries to needle you. You could go to morning coffee with the aim of listening more than you speak. Even if they try to keep you on an order after discharge the same thing applies, Che. If you pretend to be sane and agree with what they say you will be free of all restriction in no time.

I ALSO WANT to recommend something else, she says. There are plenty of medications that are dangerous and come with side-effects that I now consider to be unacceptable. But there are also good medications when used at proper dosages and there are powerful synergies when certain medications are combined. They can genuinely heal a person and I have seen them completely transform patients' lives. If you keep trying different combinations at different doses you should find something that not only suppresses your negative symptoms but actually gives you a boost in the way you want to live. Medications that might enhance your engagement with your dream states, for example, giving you more control over them and supporting deeper exploration.

IF YOU WOULD be agreeable Che I would like to write you up for a little dose of something that I think might really help. It's not a perfect drug but for some people it comes as a miracle medication and a little touch of it might boost you into places you can't even imagine. I would like you to try it just for a little while Che but only if you agree. Only if you think you could use a bit of a boost. And if it doesn't help we can always taper it off and try some other things. I believe in incremental decision-making and this is a very small increment, a very modest and temporary adjustment that has the power to redeem your life. To redeem many lives Che although it may currently be hard for you to hear that.

THESE WORDS FROM Doctor Anne keep pushing me towards tears. I thank her profusely and ask why she would bother to help me and she says: firstly because you are a human being, Che. But I also feel that there is something particular about you. Something momentous, even. I can't write that in the notes and I would probably deny saying it but it's true nonetheless. My instinct is to reach out to you with whatever help I have to give but you must remember dear that I am hardly Saint Anne. I get paid very well for what I do and all I am suggesting is a small augmenting dose of a common medication. She shrugs but I know this is not the full explanation. I want to jump up and hug her but I know that would be an awkward and backward step, the sort of crazy-person behaviour she has counselled me to avoid.

WHEN THE CONSULT ends I get up and thank Doctor Anne again. She smiles very warmly at me and tells me that it's nothing. She tells me to take care and to think about what she has told me and I assure her that I will. I head out of the room feeling brighter than I have for months and I decide to go looking for Ariel. When I find her she looks at me with a strange wicked smile and says: Oh Che I seem to have quite forgotten to come back into your meeting! She seems very pleased with herself and I get a strong impression that she would tell me so many things if she were permitted to tell them, secret facts which might assist me greatly but remain solely for me to find out.

ARIEL HAS SOME tea already steeping and it is as strong and soothing as her brews always are. I thank her and she says: of course darling. I hope Doctor Anne had something positive to tell you. She is one of the good ones, that is what they say. I could swear I see her wink when she says that, this strange silver-haired nurse who always seems so far ahead of me, knowing what I should ask for before I ever thought to ask. She tells me that my new medication will be dispensed immediately and this causes her to smile even more broadly, and although I don't know what is happening I am comforted by her enthusiasm even if my own feelings about it are not particularly enthusiastic.

CHAPTER 7

LOOK DOWN, LOOK DOWN

I DON'T KNOW why my mother hasn't come to visit. She failed to arrive yesterday and the day before that, however many days have passed since they brought me into the hospital. I have spoken with her briefly on the phone but each time she sounds more sullen and unresponsive. I have told her I would like to see her and that I have important things to tell her but she just goes quiet or mumbles about things better left unsaid. She has asked whether I need anything but when I give her even short lists of things she makes hostile noises and tells me none of them are appropriate. What I really want is my down quilt with its soft sateen cover. The cotton blankets here are rough and uncomfortable and I never get any decent sleep. I remind her how much emphasis the doctors put on good sleep but she just huffs at me and tells me not to be so dramatic, that I will just have to make do.

THIS MORNING I came back from coffee to find one of my old backpacks sitting on my bed. When I unzipped it I felt incredible gratitude to see some clean clothes. They had been ironed and they smelled very fresh and most importantly they were my own clothes - even my own underwear - with that fresh linen smell of our laundry at home. There was even a little packet of dark chocolate that came as a welcome surprise. I rushed back to the nurses' station to ask whether my mother had been in and they shook their heads and said: I don't think so. I don't think we've seen her. I told them about the clothes that have appeared in my room and they just shrugged and said: well perhaps she was able to pop in for a minute or two. I looked anxiously around the ward as they called out to me: Che. If she did come in she is certainly not here now.

WHEN I FIRST came to the hospital I was happy to wear the soft flannelette pyjamas that were always folded in piles on trolleys parked in the hallways of the ward. They were warm and comforting as I shambled around the place in my shoes that had been stripped of their laces. I had seen many new patients do the same thing but when I saw those clean clothes folded so neatly I knew it was time for me to dress like a regular person, just as Doctor Anne had suggested. In my backpack I found t-shirts and jeans and even a pair of my soft-soled walking shoes with their fixed elastic laces, and the thought of wearing shoes that would remain tight to my feet came as an absolute pleasure. I chose an outfit and set it out on the bed - right down to my favourite pair of socks - and just to look at it was enough to convince me that I was going to get out of here.

I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I had a shower. I might have had one or two early in my stay but that seems a very long time ago. I keep intending to have another but whenever I go to get a towel or some soap something intervenes and I never quite make it. A nurse redirects me and I lose focus and many hours pass before I remember what I was going to do. I have some body spray to stave me off from smelling too bad but I have increasingly noticed a weird rank animal smell surrounding me and that is not like me at all. When I look down at the food stains and the other smears on my hospital pyjamas, when I see those clean clothes and how I would like to keep them clean: it becomes obvious that I am in desperate need of a shower.

I SHOULD GO and find some soap and maybe a towel but I am desperate to feel hot water on my skin. I charge out of my room empty-handed and go directly to the nearest bathroom unit. Once inside I snib the door lock and drop my filthy pyjamas straight on to the tiled floor. I have been wearing them for so long that they keep some of their shape even after they drop down against the tiles and I smile to see those grubby flannel pants half-retain the look of someone standing in them, my pyjama top nearby only half deflated. As though I have mugged some poor pyjama person and pummelled them so severely that they have lost half of their air.

THE WATER RUSHES out of the shower head at good pressure and it quickly grows very hot. I have to mix in a ton of cold water to prevent it from scalding me while fighting the urge to leap under the stream no matter how hot it is. I restrain myself until I can bring the water down to a comfortable temperature but I can already feel the fine spray wetting my skin and it feels too delightful for words. Once I get under the shower it livens up my skin and makes me feel as though I am coming back to life. All the grime of the ward, all the stress and indignity I have endured are soaked away by the heat of the water and the feeling of being cleansed is the most irresistible thing.

AS THE HOT water flows across my skin I hear myself making small involuntary noises. You might call them sighs but they sound more visceral than that, little groans or moans of bodily pleasure as the heat seals and then infuses my body. I pull water through my hair with my fingers and my whole scalp tingles with it, I feel life coming back into my muscles and bones right down to the soles of my feet. The water still feels a touch too hot but even that slight searing flow gives me pleasure. These sensations block out every other sense including any sense of where exactly I am standing. I feel my body begin to shimmer until the heat on my skin is the only thing I know.

THEY MUST HAVE started knocking on the door some time before I hear them. The water is pouring over my head and through my hair and for a long time I can't hear anything but the rush of water as it pops in and out of my ears. I gradually begin to hear knocking and muffled inquiries from the other side of the door but I really don't feel like responding to them or having my shower interrupted. I guess they could open the door from the outside if they really wanted to, and surely I can't be sedated or put in HDU just for having a shower. I find a remnant scrap of soap on the shower rack and I swash it around my body, feeling intensely pleased as it dislodges the grime and the smell of the ward. It all feels so good that I make up my mind: unless they physically stop me I am going to stand under this shower for as long as I need to get clean.

AS THE NOISES outside the bathroom grow louder I stand very still with my head bowed. Water pours down through my hair, splashing on to the tiled floor in a semi-circular pattern. The noises grow louder and I begin to hear proper banging and I know that I should turn the water off soon. It sounds like they might break down the door and there is no need for that kind of craziness just for a bit more time in the shower. I look down at my hands and will them to go towards the large chrome faucet to turn off the water and there is this very strange moment when I stand there wondering what my hands are going to do. As though they are sovereign citizens somehow foreign to my body, as though the power over this decision lies within their strength and not mine.

I STARE AT my hands through the halo of streaming water and they begin to look very peculiar. I do genuinely want to turn off the hot water but I am held in place by some opposite instinct. My hands look intensely present before they fade very slightly, and when I see the familiar luminescence grow around the edges of my fingers my stomach suddenly drops. I feel as though I might vomit but as I stare down at my hands their luminous edges glow brighter and brighter and I know what happens next. In a moment everything will cut to black and I will be back with him again but under this shower at this time in this place that fails to happen. My hands snap back into ordinary vision with their halo slightly dulled and I am left trying desperately to determine how long I have been in this dream.

I MANAGE TO shut the water off at the faucet before falling to my hands and knees on the wet tiles, retching and spitting. I have always wanted to wake up within a properly visual dream but now I would give anything to be torn back out of it. To be sent back into what I would naively refer to as the Real World, or even to come back into this dream without knowing that it is one. I spit and curse but as my body cools down I realise that I am marooned here without any hope of rescue, without the slightest idea of how I should orient myself to this place or make my way out of it. As I cool down into this continuing dream that feels like my permanent reality, with no way to wake from it or to find my way home.

EVENTUALLY I PICK myself up off the floor and yell something to the nurses on the other side of the door. When they hear my voice they quieten down a bit and I have a moment to pull myself together. My hands still glow very slightly but the rest of my body feels dense and real and I see that this dream is not going to resolve itself any time soon. I grab a damp towel that is hanging from a rail and I pat myself dry with it, securing it around myself before opening the door to the throng of nurses outside. As soon as the door opens they fall silent and stare at me with surprise and also with a hint of awe. I gesture at them as I move towards my room and they recede on each side of me like the waves of a parted sea. I walk back to my room and shut the door behind me and not a single one of those nurses complains about it or tries to follow me into my room.

CHAPTER 8

QUIZZING THE QUIZMASTER

WAKING UP INSIDE a dream is a disorienting thing to do, especially when you are the only one who realises it is a dream. The persistence and texture of it bring me a strong sense of the consequences of getting this dream wrong, the way reality has consequences but even more pressing and intense. I also see how the intrusions this place makes on me work the other way: that I could bend and stretch the fabric of this dream space effortlessly if I were to be reckless about it. I could even tear this entire dream reality into pieces if that is what I chose to do.

AS I SIT on my bed trying to think up a plan I notice the plastic laminated page that sits on my bedside table. A statement of patient rights and responsibilities that I haven't bothered to read. I pick it up and my eyes are drawn directly to the section entitled *Right to Treatment* and the first paragraph tells me exactly what I need to know. *If you are distressed about your experiences please speak to a nurse or request an interview with your psychiatrist.* This is the one thing I can't be faulted for doing and I see how powerful that is, how this space actively calls for my honesty and the open expression of the way I feel. I see how this might be some kind of genuinely caring space, radically oriented towards my welfare and my dignity and liberation, even if that was not the original intent of whoever set down these rules.

I WALK DOWN to the nurses' station and tap gently on the glass. When the nurse looks up I could swear she is startled to see me, looking around anxiously as though she is distressed by my presence. She looks like she wants to get up and run but she just forces her eyes back down towards her paperwork. I tap a little louder and she shifts in her chair and I see how she is compelled to stay where she is no matter how insistent I become. I feel her hostility and how vulnerable she seems and I decide this is as good a time as any to test out my new powers in this place. But just as I draw back my clenched fist to smash as hard as I can on the glass I feel a slight brush on my opposite elbow. I glance sideways to see nurse Ariel looking at me with concern, her sweet smile easing my frustration as she says: Che sweetie I thought you might like to try this.

ARIEL OFFERS ME a fine bone china cup with both of her hands. It has a gilded rim and I want to ask her where she found it but she presses it into my hands and I take a little sip. For a moment I cannot identify what I am drinking but as it soothes and revives me I realise that this is the most beautiful cup of tea I have ever tasted. It is smooth and strong and has been brewed out of good leaf tea, it has just the faintest hint of raw sugar exactly as I like it. I sigh with the warming pleasure of it and Ariel smiles at me and says: Che you look like you're feeling much better. I tell her that I do feel different and she smiles even more broadly and says: I love that scarf in your hair it really suits you.

And if I may suggest, she says.

Now that things are progressing for you.

If you need anything, if you have any concerns.

Do please come and see me.

Or speak to Michael over there, or Stella.

We are here to assist you in whatever way we can.

I THINK FOR a moment before testing her on that promise.

Can I ask for something specific?

You can ask for anything my sweet.

Can I see my psychiatrist?

Ariel smiles as though she knows what I have planned and she says: of course you can Che. It might just take us a little time to locate him, and then convince him that it would be a good time to see you. It gets more and more difficult for us to get our hands on doctors these days but because things have shifted so rapidly he should be agreeable to meet with you. I will do my best and when I have him I will let you know.

IT IS A strange fact about psychiatric hospitals that actual psychiatrists are very thin on the ground. Even your own treating psychiatrist might only meet with you every fortnight or so. It is a matter of great frustration for everyone involved and in the end it comes down to money. Psychiatrists have accumulated such enormous salaries to themselves that the system cannot afford enough of them to give patients a humane amount of attention, and they construct their therapeutic models in the opposite direction of spending any time with us. But this hospital does not exist in the craven spaces of the real world and I know Ariel would never tell me lies about what she is able to do. Before too much time passes she glides up to me and says: Doctor Samuels is waiting for you. I think she must have made a mistake but when I query her she nods at me and says: yes Che Doctor Samuels. You know him quite well. I ask whether she has time to sit in with us and she smiles broadly and says of course I do Che it would be my pleasure.

DOCTOR SAMUELS IS perched on a plastic chair looking through my notes. He looks a little awkward, like he is unsure of what he is doing there, as though he might have woken abruptly from a dream even though it's just the opposite. He is however the consummate professional and as he looks up at me his ingrained superiority completely obscures his doubt, and any hint of uncertainty is camouflaged by his customary smile. The space around us has the appearance of ordinary space but I also see his image overlaid with metaphorical content from some parallel realm, faint runes and pictographs suggesting what this man really is. I see him sprawled on a pile of ill-gotten gains accumulated through his work, I see him bought and sold by his materialist view of the world and the wealth he has appropriated from the needy.

THERE IS A faint light surrounding the Doctor's heart that resembles compassion but as I look at it in this symbolic space it seems mostly made out of superiority and condescension. His heart harbours some small fraction of pity but never in its loving form, only in those corrupted declensions which confer power over the person he pities, serving to make them more and more pitiable. And it is with this kind of pity that he opens our consult today, asking me in his best concerned voice: how are you feeling today, Che?

I pause and then mimic his speech back to him.

How are you feeling, Doctor?

Pardon?

How are you feeling today?

His professional demeanour whips up to mask his surprise and he gives out a little chortle before saying: well I feel just fine Che. Thank you so much for asking.

HIS THOUGHTS BEGIN to intrude on my mind and my first instinct is to shut them down. Hearing voices is a cardinal sign of catastrophic mental illness but then I remember that this is just a dream, or something very much like it, and the only thing delineating the sane from the insane in this space is the ability to wake yourself back up. I relax and allow myself to listen to his thoughts and although they are scant and choppy I hear him well enough when he thinks: there is nothing of value in her experience. She should be thankful for medical intervention, which by universal application will rid us of this curse. To quarantine the right-thinking from madness and despair. Regulating the dysregulated without temptation towards credulity. Feelings follow thought and not the other way around.

AFTER A WHILE a pause comes into the doctor's thinking and I leap in quickly to ask: could I try you out on another question?

I don't see why not.

Do you know where you are?

In the hospital, he says.

Saint Mary's Hospital.

So it would seem, I say.

I guarantee it, he says.

He is smiling at me like I'm an idiot so I deliberately provoke him.

Do you want to bet?

THE DOCTOR LETS out a patronising mmm-hmmm and I know this one errant question has completely closed him down. He confirms it by saying: Che I am sorry but I feel obliged to tell you that when you ask me questions like these you are actually communicating some very concerning things. About how you are feeling, how you are perceiving the world.

Yes, I say.

I agree with you doctor.

These things are very concerning.

What you say is absolutely true.

SO WOULD YOU like to tell me about them?

The strange thoughts you are having?

I don't think so, I say.

Rather I would like to show you.

So that you can see what I mean.

Che I don't think...

I cut him off abruptly.

Doctor with respect I no longer have much interest in what you think. To be honest I don't really care what I think either. Certainly there seems to be little value in what either of us have to say. So instead I would like to show you how I currently see things, so you can see how they make me feel. But I should warn you: you might find yourself feeling some very unpleasant things.

The doctor shrugs and throws up his hands.

And I know exactly what will happen next.

AS A WAY in I ask the Doctor whether he remembers any of our prior consultations, or the way I ended up in hospital instead of getting well. Doctor Samuels says that he does recall the substance of our interactions but I can see in his heart that he doesn't. I ask him for one concrete example that he remembers and he says: well, Che. I remember you telling me about dreams haunted by some kind of... void. How you would be sucked into it, how you would fight to resist, how it sometimes escaped your dreams and leached into the real world. You waxed very poetic about it and I think you have a fine imagination but it runs away from you at times. So there you are: the terrible churning vortex at the centre of the room, that you once asked me whether I could see. He smiles in obvious pleasure at proving me wrong but I latch on to his very accurate description and say: Doctor I think I can show you precisely what you have described. Can you lock on to that image in your mind? Got it? Good. Now sit tight and watch this.

WHAT I DID next was surprisingly easy. I had been tugging pretty hard on the fabric of my dream state well before I knew it was a dream, and my new insight gave me almost unlimited power to pull it into any shape I chose. This dream was built like all dreams on that foundation of absolute void which lucid dreamers have to strain so hard against, to prevent their dreamscapes from collapsing in on themselves or blasting outwards into runaway expansion that explodes towards infinity. The vast whorling emptiness that is the beginning and the end of all things, the starry dynamo that threatens to rush in and obliterate every dream reality that has ever been.

I THRUST BOTH hands forward into the space at the centre of the room in order to split the illusion of common-sense reality. As I do that the room shudders violently. The gap I tear begins to rotate in every direction at once and as it yawns wider and wider it pulls everything in the room towards it. The file on the table in front of the Doctor is ripped open and page after page of it is torn out until the whole flapping mess simply vanishes into the chasm that I have created at the centre of the room. The Doctor turns deathly white and grabs desperately after his fleeing papers, and when they are lost he grabs on tightly to the sides of his chair and lets out a terrible forsaken moan. The front of his shirt is ripped open and his jacket is pulled up over his head, blinding him for a moment before it too is dragged into the terrible maelstrom heaving at the centre of the room.

NURSE ARIEL DOES not react to any of these events, or express any surprise at what is happening to the doctor. She watches on gravely as the room itself begins to fragment and swirl. I should feel horrified at this demonstration of my power but I have longed to teach this man a lesson and so the void grows to consume every inch of the room. The doctor starts openly wailing as his chair buckles and begins to give way, and as his soul gets sucked out of his body he emits pitiful screeches that I find intensely satisfying. His cries crescendo until they are the screams of a petrified child, holding himself against the terrors of the night as all pretence of adulthood is stripped away from him. The doctor stands seconds away from his utter destruction, his face lifting up into a mask of terror as his soul is brutally leveraged out of his body.

DOCTOR SAMUELS BECOMES a figure of impotence and pity and I am consumed by my desire to punish him. To demonstrate my power over him just as he wielded power over me. As his soul is torn in every direction I feel rage explode in me - along with the pleasures of revenge - but as I move to flay this man's soul I see Ariel looking directly towards me across the fragmenting core of the room. She holds up the index finger of her right hand and waves it backwards and forwards, pursing her lips and shaking her head and I know she is telling me: don't. Warning me against continuing down this barbarous path, counselling me not to sink to the level of harming a human being for my pleasure. She knows what he has done and what he deserves but she also knows that the reckoning of these things vests in a power completely beyond my own, some reckoner or judge invested with authority that I lack. *Vengeance is mine says the Lord.* And I am commanded once again to stand down.

I PULL BACK from my vengeance at the last possible moment and the chaos in the room begins to wind down. The doctor is safe although I was never motivated by mercy, but in showing him these things I have been merciful just the same. I see very clearly that this man still lodges in the material world outside of my dreams, although he was dragged down into this dreamscape to be warned about his fate. I have delivered that warning without doing him lasting harm, and as I pull back from my anger and vengeance the fabric of my dream world settles down. The yawning void retreats to a tiny point floating in the centre of the room before normality snaps back like a sprung elastic band and everything goes quiet again. The doctor has lost his jacket and tie and every button on his shirt but apart from that he is not injured, although his skin has a ghastly pallor to it and his eyes are the eyes of a hunted thing.

I PULL MY chair up against his chair and I put my face right in his face, and although he recoils he has nothing to fear from me now. He speaks in a much softer tone and with a quavering politeness that I have not heard from him before, having seen what I can do to him in a way that cannot be unseen.

What are you doing now? He asks.

His voice sounding close to tears.

I am warning you, Doctor.

Just one final warning.

Do you think you can listen to me?

Just for a minute?

Without talking?

He says yes in his new tremulous voice and I say to him almost in a whisper: this is your final warning, Doctor Samuels. You will not have the benefit of being warned again.

WORDS COME SPEARING out of me that sound nothing like my own. Pouring out of me in rebuke and warning as Ariel sits quietly averting her eyes. Words that say who is the true keeper of the world beyond, heaving her basket of grain continuously so the chaff may be separated and burned. And the terrible fate of any bad seed found amongst Her good grain, to be crushed between Her teeth and spat out on to the Threshers Ground. I tell the doctor that a choice still looms before him while he lodges in the world, when he wakes up to his home realm of which this place is a mere facsimile. That his comfortable living must be abandoned in favour of a search for real remedies for the suffering and the distressed, rather than the clichés of his diagnostic manuals which do nothing but blame the afflicted. He must find more healing ways to respond to the unwell than the blunt tools he knows very well do not heal. And just as he has been shown mercy he must know that mercy is wholly circumscribed, and that if he will not repent then he should not expect to be shown such mercy again.

THESE WORDS COME to an end and I put my mouth to his ear.

This is a dream, doctor.

As you may have guessed.

But you have seen one true future.

A future fate that is the opposite of a dream.

So when you wake up?

You need to do better.

He nods at me terrified as I hold my fingers in his face.

Wake up, I say.

Do better.

You have been warned.

Ready to snap my fingers.

Do better.

Wake up.

Snap snap.

The doctor goes slack in his chair.

I PUSH MY chair backwards with both feet and turn away from Doctor Samuels. I expect him to disappear when he wakes up but as I glance back I see him sprawled unconscious in the room with me. Ariel is smiling broadly and I realise that dreams and wakefulness may not be as straightforward as I supposed, that a man might dream in one place and simultaneously wake up in another. Ariel speaks to the Doctor as though he were still conscious and says: I think Che might be a little bit overwhelmed at the moment. If you don't mind I would like to take her for a few minutes and make her a cup of tea. She looks at me intently and just for a moment I feel her surge with admiration, for both the strength and the restraint I showed in dealing with the doctor. It erases any trace of my fury and vengeance and I nod gratefully at her, tears suddenly misting my eyes. She takes me very gently by the arm and says: come on Che. You've done really well my darling. Let's go and see about a nice hot cup of tea.

AS WE WALK out of the consulting room I look up through the glass on each side of the nurses' station into the High Dependency Unit. Jonathan is tapping on the far pane to get my attention, and as I look over at him he smiles his best maniacal smile and gives me the most enthusiastic two thumbs up you've ever seen. I lift my hands up to show him that I can't hear what he's saying but he just smiles all the more, tapping his hand on his heart and gesturing towards me, blowing me a couple of kisses while he dances there and sings. I don't know who this man is but I see how he shares this lucid dream space with me, how wild he is and how unrestrained and also how full of love. As I watch him capering about behind two stands of reinforced glass I can feel how much of his love is for me, that he genuinely feels great personal love for me. I give him a thumbs up back and he reaches out to capture it and hold it against his heart, closing his eyes in a beatific expression of ecstasy.

CHAPTER 9

MY NAME IS SHEOL

AFTER MY CONFRONTATION with Doctor Samuels I walk slowly back to my room. I sit on the bed and try to slow my thoughts down, my mind gradually settles in the silence and some realisations come. How long I have been suspicious of my dreamlike experience in this place, how long I have denied those suspicions and looked the other way. I have dealt with the doctor but I now understand that there is more serious work to do - and greater contact to be made - but I also see how much care I have to exercise as I go about that work.

ONE THING I know for certain is that I must take my time. I have to meet signal events at the precise instant they occur, and any rashness on my part could bring everything undone. I slow my thinking to the point where ordinary time begins to lose its meaning, the light in the room slowly sinks and rises a few times and I would guess that I sat on that bed for days. I build up a plan divided between things that seem permitted to me and other things that feel strictly proscribed. My mind starts to connect each node of the plan with every other, like those walls of pinned strings linking bits of evidence in films where the hero might be brilliant or crazy or some mixture of both. I sit there until I have connected every possible link between every possible node and when I open my eyes to find that it is twilight I know it is time for me to find Luc.

I WALK BACK into the ward to find Luc sitting in one of the lounge chairs in the far corner of the TV room. He is sitting quietly as though he might be waiting for something, flanked by two of his nurse-helpers who have taken up protective positions around him. As I approach they look up at me and their wings flare suddenly in protection. I should be surprised at how angelic they seem but I just stop for a moment to await their decision. After a brief pause his helpers take a step back from him and look away from me in deference, folding their wings tightly around themselves to signal I am free to approach. I notice Ariel standing in the opposite corner of the room and although her head is bowed she gestures very slightly towards Luc with her hands.

WITH ARIEL'S BLESSING I slowly approach Luc until I stand just a couple of feet away from him. He looks up at me in bewilderment and says don't touch me and I just nod and begin to sink down on one knee in front of him. Speaking to him in a low voice, saying: Luc you can trust me. He replies in a constricted voice I haven't heard from him before: why should I trust you? I don't trust anyone. Without moving towards him or away from him I say again: Luc you are going to have to trust me. If you want to get yourself out of here. You know me, Luc, you know you can trust me. My repeated reassurance seems to reach into him a little, calming him and opening his heart just that tiny bit that I need.

LUC RELAXES AS he sees that I do not mean him any harm. His nurse-helpers have the strength to soothe him very slightly, supporting him to feel less stressed and more open to the process that is unfolding. I have been smiling at him and he eventually smiles back and in that moment a tremendous wave of recognition sweeps over me. I no longer have any doubt who Luc is and why his soul seems so familiar, and there are vast waves of sorrow as the bleakness of his story is revealed to me. The shape of his suffering and how he came to be here, the jagged edges of pain and self-loathing that this man is beset by. I understand that I was born to be witness to these things - along with the means of their alleviation - and as I faithfully bear that witness a set of words is revealed to me, words to be spoken in a register quite unlike my ordinary speech.

I HAVE TO get these words out of the way before we can continue and so I speak to Luc in the strange cadences that have come to me.

You know where you are Luc.

There is silence before he answers.

I do, he says.

With a slight tremor in his voice.

He says nothing else and I have to press him on it.

You need to say it, Luc.

Before we can move on.

You need to tell me where you are.

And what you have done, Luc.

What you have done to put yourself in this place.

FOR A MOMENT I feel sure I am going to lose him. He moves to get up from where he is sitting and his nurse-helpers see him do it, he grips his chair to propel himself upwards as their wings flare protectively on either side. If he breaks from me now I will not find him again - no matter how many dream worlds I traverse - and my heart sinks to see him shimmer and begin to break contact with this world. But he does not break contact. He halts suddenly and lets out a cry of frustration and then all of his strength goes out of him and he slumps back into his chair. The tension within him breaks and with his head bowed he pushes his bandaged forearms towards me, turning them upwards as he says in a defeated tone: I know where I am. And so do you Che, you don't need to taunt me with it.

I SHIFT FORWARDS towards Luc and he does not recoil. He merely bows his head further as I say: Luc I am not being cruel. This is not some kind of game. I just need to hear you say it before anything can be done. Do you hear me Luc? He nods his head in tiny motions as he stretches his hands out towards me as far as they will go, holding them wrist-upwards so that I can glimpse the wounds on his arms.

I am condemned, he says.

But where, Luc.

You have to tell me where.

The way he shakes his head shows me that he knows.

And in a quiet voice he confirms that it is so.

I am cast down, Che.

For what I have done.

I have been sent down.

Down into the pit.

Is that what you want to hear from me?

I have damned myself and there is nothing to be done.

WHEN LUC SAYS these words all the fight goes out of his soul. He sinks down in his chair and although I would like to soothe him I cannot reach out to him until he makes a proper account of what he has done. By some stern edict he must make a full confession before I can retrieve him, and if he refuses to confess then he must be left where he is. In that knowledge I speak to him again, words that feel justified even though I am not the source of their content. Saying: Luc you know me from those times I came into your dreams. But I do not lodge there in the same way you do. And you know my name is not Che, Luc. My name is Sheol and you understand what that means for your position. If you are obstinate you will be confined to this place - in the depths of your eternal soul - and before I can do anything you are required to tell me the reasons why you came here.

LUC LISTENS TO my words and he responds almost immediately, calling me by my full name as he sets down exactly what has happened. He says truthfully that he does not know exactly what kind of place this is, although he feels sure it only represents some kind of makeshift reality. He describes his violence against his own life and the despair which brought him to it, he confesses to the destruction which caused him to come here even though he knew it was proscribed. I listen carefully as he ploughs through his confession but I also notice faint interweaving lines starting to form around his body, growing into tow points or fixing points for me to drag his soul out of here. Luc continues to speak gravely and sincerely long after these contact points have solidified, building an after-death vehicle that he doesn't yet have the vision to see. His sincere remorse shaping his uplift out of this realm, his way back into the land of the living although he has forgotten his way home.

WHEN LUC'S CONFESSION ends I move towards him very gently, as close as I have ever come to him in this dream reality we share. I reach out and take his hands in my hands, he pulls back ever so slightly but he does not break contact with me. I draw his hands towards me until his forearms are facing upwards directly beneath my eyes. I see the horrible tatty dressings and beneath them I can sense the terrible wounds that he made. I glance up to see whether he is willing for me to continue, he nods his bent head and so I continue to focus my attention on his arms. Eventually I come to the point where I have seen enough and can gently close my eyes.

AGAINST MY CLOSED eyelids I see a growing circle of light rotating counterclockwise against the darkness. It comes to undo the damage that has been done and I let it spin there while it brightens. When I open my eyes again I see his forearms being unwound of their bandages, the crepe fabric falling looser and looser as each turn of his wrapping is wound away. The gauze pulls and then falls away completely to reveal stained and half-adhered wound dressings peeling away from the lower part of his forearms. I have to look beneath these dressings and so I utter words to make it so and before my eyes each dressing flashes and curls in a cool fire before it is completely burned away. Luc sits there looking downwards and I must presume his eyes are closed. He does not cry out or protest as his bindings are burned away.

I EXPECT TO see dried or sutured cuts but Luc's wounds appear livid and freshly made. This place was never a place of healing and his wounds are just as lethal as the night on which they were made. I am also given clear sight of how he inflicted these wounds - although I would prefer not to witness it - the rough shards tearing into his hands as he rips gullies out of his own flesh. Letting his blood to escape the demons that had harried him in the world. And I also see the most terrible part of his actions: the condemnation of any person close enough to love him, the people who still love him desperately and will never recover from his loss.

BEFORE LUC'S REDEMPTION can proceed there are formal words which must be said to him, words of hope and validation that can surge between certain realms, like deep calling to another deep. These words come through me in my ordinary voice, saying softly to Luc that his transgression is forgiven, that his sin is remitted, that his iniquity is pardoned, that She has uplifted all burdens from his soul. I see his body quake as I tell him these things, as I continue to inform him that his prayers have been heard, that his petition has been answered, that simply to call on Her in his extremity was to have his petition upheld. I see tears begin to fall from his eyes as these words continue to stream out of me, and as I witness his relief I am moved towards tears as well.

She is your hiding place, Luc.

She will preserve you from trouble.

She will encompass you about with songs of deliverance.

She will strengthen you under the shadow of Her wings.

She will instruct you from a high place.

She will teach you in the ways in which you shall go.

THESE WORDS FLOW out of me for a long time as Luc weeps softly and bows his head. They speak of many things both just and merciful and every word that falls from me falls to retrieve his soul. Because upon every word is stamped the truth: you are Hers now, Luc. She has carved you on the palm of Her hand and in the shape of your heart is Her heart. She will never forget you, She will not leave you orphaned, She will guide you and protect you and in places beyond hope you will make your stand for Her. You will fight for Her, Luc, you will repay Her faith in you. You are entered into covenant with Her everlasting if you will only take your stand for the covenant. If you will glorify Her name and the marvellous things that She has done: so that whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose upon the earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.

MY WORDS FADE out as Luc's sin becomes history and I see how he will not suffer for it again. I also see growing ruptures and fissures in the dream space around us as I fill up with the love I feel for this man. His nurse-helpers step back a couple of paces and I grab on tight to his hands as the space of the ward perforates and becomes hazy and incomplete. That process reaches a critical point and we start to fall down, and despite his fear he doesn't pull away from me. We descend through layers and layers of provisional worlds and although it feels like we are going in the wrong direction I keep saying softly: stay with me Luc. You need to stay with me. He places his forehead against mine to show his assent, and with that contact made we punch down rapidly through these strata of liminal space. It also feels as though we are expanding outwards through layers on every side, towards some brilliance that beckons from just outside their limits.

AS WE BURST through many physical layers there also come layers made of memory and desire, and much stranger layers made out of expectation or belief. Some present as tightly stretched membranes through which we only pass by great effort, barely breaking through them as though they were made of some high tensile plastic. I try to keep us moving but in many levels we are slowed by all kinds of distractions, huge dragonflies and scarab beetles and illuminated insectoid creatures exploding from tiled palaces crammed with spinning orbs. Huge scintillating sculptural forms forever turning and turning inwards upon themselves, with the whole array designed to divert our attention from navigating our escape. I work hard to focus on Luc's presence and not these pulsating machine entities, with all of their hyper-reality especially around their eyes.

AS I WRESTLE with these distractions our progress slows. If I were alone I could crash through these layers without effort but now I am dragging Luc with me. It would be easy to let him go and I hear voices counselling me to do it, but as beautiful as these voices are I know that they are the very essence of deception. Along with their singing speech these sirens send out heavy tendrils that drape across us like sea-grass, weighing us down heavily and causing our progress to slow even more. I refuse to abandon Luc to these doldrums but as I hang on to him tighter and tighter we eventually grind to a complete halt. I was sent down to retrieve this man and I will not be thwarted in that attempt, I will cling to him even if our fate becomes hopeless and there is nowhere else to go.

AS I CLEAVE to Luc in that stagnant place some hint of new knowledge flows into me. Telling me that I might not yet have failed, instructing my heart in more direct means of redemption. I press myself closer to Luc and although he is silent and cannot hear me his body responds to the invitation of my body. This time I know we must yield to each other completely, that he must let me come at him as urgently as possible without recoiling or pushing me away. And he must come towards me too, bearing every ounce of his strength to me without restraining himself at all. I start to press against him as his body responds and he presses against me too.

I CLOSE DOWN against every distraction and I am surprised how easily I do it. Sinking back into the familiar darkness of those dreams I have held Luc within. Once again there is only him and me holding close in the formless dark and I know without any doubt that this is the way I will redeem him. I close off any sensation that might distract me from his presence and with my sight gone and my hearing faded I am plunged back into the scent of his body like I have been so many times before. But what differs from those previous times is how wholly and completely I am immersed in it, so that the best description I ever gave counts for nothing compared to the richness of what surrounds me now.

HIS SCENT IS so complete that it defies any effort to describe it. If I described raw sugar or licorice you would miss the spicy notes that come, like star anise unfolding its warm welcoming smell, like cardamom pods slowly softening in fresh hot honeyed milk. With each scent quickly merging into even more complex smells: from honeyed milk towards the aroma of wheat cereal waiting for milk to boil, on a wood-stove warming up a brisk morning and the comfort these smells can bring. If I mention wheat I must also mention wheaten bread as it bakes, giving way to the smell of charred crust and salted butter melting into freshly baked bread. And the smell of firewood merges into well-wooded bourbon before setting off a cascade of every alcohol smell you could imagine: heavy red wine that has been aged in bourbon casks, the vanillin spine that always links such aromas together.

THE ONLY THING that can distract me from Luc's scent is the sudden coming of his sensual body, spearing upwards towards me out of the deepest parts of Hell. I feel him rising and straining towards me, with all of the power he wields now he has been purified by his ordeal. As his strength explodes within me all scent of him recedes until it is relegated to protecting our flanks and outer boundaries. His power crashes through me and onwards to every side of me and I regain that beautiful feeling of being completely possessed by this man, held by him in an urgent and protective way that I will never be able to describe. He keeps coming at me until he is closer than he has ever been, until I know for certain that I will never hold him so close again.

LUC PUSHES ME towards ecstasy again and again but I cannot give in to it. I have to find some way to pull him up through the powerful resistance that is pressing down on us from above. I try to drag him sideways or out on oblique angles but every attempt I make to move him is thwarted. I go to lift us again in a rising panic but then I feel his firm hand upon me, directing me towards stillness rather than any onward movement. After resisting for a moment I fall back into his arms and I remain precisely where I am. Gradually the two of us start expanding in the same direction I was trying to pull us in and we also expand in every other direction. Like a new sun insistently pushing past the gravity of our embrace, a brand new star blasting out brilliantly in every direction at once.

OUR RADIANCE PUSHES us past the limits of our senses into the pure energy of our embrace. Blowing my emotions wide open as I teeter at the lip of that familiar chasm. But this time Luc's sorrow merges with my own sorrow and every space within us fills with the sudden consolation of tears. They come in streams but also as the softest imaginable mist and every tear falls to signify the deep fertility of Her soul, Her miracle of bringing life into the world and even bringing life back. With every fallen man reprieved by the constancy of Her love and Her sorrow, Her tears falling like rain to bring him back into the world.

AND THEN EVERYTHING becomes rain. Falling softly to make our jagged edges smooth, falling to ease our hard feelings against the neglect which built them. From Her vast Heart of Love that makes everything grow in its proper place and to its proper season. I can still sense Luc beside me and the deep repairs that are being made, I would cry out his name in love and encouragement but there is no need to do so. And if he would praise my mortal name he has already been ushered into silence. Leaving the subtle sense that this man is genuinely being renewed, that his soul has been held harmless but also forged into something long prophesied. All of the truths I saw gathered around him although they were yet to come. And I can feel Her relief at his rescue and redemption: powerful enough to overwhelm all of my senses, quieting me and collapsing me gently back into sleep.

CHAPTER 10

BEFORE MY BODY WAS BORN

AFTER A LONG passage through dreamless sleep I wake up to find myself in my own bed. Back in my own home, the place the ambulance took me from however long ago. I have no idea when my dreaming began or how long I have slept but it hardly feels like it matters. The important thing is that I have woken up to my pre-dream reality, in the same bed I went to sleep in God knows how many nights ago.

I DON'T REMEMBER the exact point I realised that Luc was beside me in bed. I do know that it began as a subtle feeling but once it got going I felt it starting to quicken. At a certain stage I felt his soul leap back into his body - one huge discrete jump - as I felt his presence begin to solidify beside me. I said a few quiet words to steady him until he took a sharp intake of breath that sounded like a man almost drowned, a man dragged back to shore against all odds. He gulped at the air a few times before I placed my hand on his chest to settle him, and as his heart slowed gradually I knew beyond any doubt that Luc lay in bed beside me.

THIS IS THE scene I will remember. When everything else is lost to me, when my memory and identity lie torn and strewn about. I will remember opening my eyes to see Luc resting beside me, the long silence as I listened to him breathe. How I held myself so still for fear of shaking his soul loose, how I could have watched over his recovery forever. These memories are so dreamlike that I can recall them at any level of resolution, seeing the scene from every point within my bedroom and from every other viewpoint as well. I don't try to hold him or orient him to the room, it is just him gently recovering and me guarding him while he does. I also have a strong recollection – no matter how recursive it seems - of deliberately preserving each layer of the moments he lay beside me, rendering the texture of every detail to give me a complete place to return to.

I WOULD HAVE been happy for the two of us to lie there forever but Luc does eventually stir. He seems a bit distressed and I can see - only very faintly, now that I am awake - that he has dragged back fragments of the realms we passed through on our way back towards reality. I see broken shards of scarabs and machine entities that he has to shake loose before he can properly exit that dream world. He brushes his body with his hands and all of these fragments shatter and he recovers to the point where he can sink back heavily against the bed. I know he can feel me there beside him because he calls me by my name.

Che, he says.

I'm here, I say.

I know.

But where am I?

You're back, I say.

You're back home.

He shakes his head confused and says: no.

No, Che, no.

This is not my home.

I go to say something reassuring but Luc is too distressed to hear anything I say. I try to project soothing images into our shared thought space but that space has been shut down. I don't speak about death or redemption because such talk might unseat him and I desperately want him to stay. I would reassure him that dragging him out of that place was not done of my own volition, that he owes me no debt as his redeemer but simply the recognition of a loving friend who found him in a place where she was also condemned. But anything I say to him would come accompanied by some shadow sentence, a truth which might entangle him back into the shadows until those shadows eventually prevailed.

AS HE LIES there beside me Luc becomes increasingly distressed. He gasps for air and his heart begins to pound and his trembling turns into intense shivering. Through chattering teeth he tells me that he is freezing cold, I try to pull him towards me and tuck the bedding around his body but he holds himself away from me, saying: Che that won't get me warm. I move towards him again but he flinches when I do it. He won't look at me or let me get near him and I can't think what I have done to deserve this kind of treatment. After a long period of silence he asks in an unsteady voice: do you think I could have a shower? I jump up quickly to grab a towel from the top shelf of my wardrobe and Luc shuffles unsteadily into my little ensuite. I hear him turn the water up as high as it will go.

LUC SHOWERS FOR a long time. I would like to join him but I guess it would be better to leave him to the healing of the hot water. I stay where I am even when I hear the shower shut off and the glass doors clank back and there is nothing but silence from him. I am worried about the direction his thinking might be taking, and as his silence extends I begin to feel uneasy and then genuinely concerned that all of our dream strangeness might lead him to believe that this is also just a dream. I slip out of bed and go over to the bathroom door and gently call his name and after a short pause he says: Che.

You can come in.

There is...

There is something I need to ask you.

I HEAD INTO the bathroom to find Luc staring into the mirror. His towel is slung low around his hips and I can see the stark outline of his hip bones pushing out on each side of his belly. He is tall and his shoulders are broad but his body is quite a few degrees past lean. His skin looks almost translucent as though he has been restricting his diet for a long time. As I look at his gaunt face I get a sense of the suffering he has endured and how much love he is going to need, how much re-feeding and sensual generosity and I have any amount of these things to give him. I walk up behind him and kiss him gently on the back of his left shoulder as we stand there together, seeing each other clearly for the very first time.

LUC IS PRESSING his fingers down gingerly on various parts of his body as though he were testing them for substance. Like he is assessing the body of some other person who has come to him in pain. He shakes his head with every press of his fingers before he starts to tremble again and sink back down into his distress.

Luc, I say.

Please talk to me.

You can tell me what's wrong.

What's wrong? he asks.

Everything is wrong.

Are you in pain?

No, Che.

Pain would not be a problem.

This is something quite a bit worse than that.

LUC'S HANDS RISE up to press against the sides of his face, and as he pulls back against the skin of his cheeks and the sides of his neck he looks at me through the mirror very darkly.

This is not me, he says.

I don't look like this.

What happened to my face?

What has happened to my body?

This... thing you made me into Che.

You have to fix it.

You have to change me back.

I STARE BACK at Luc through the mirror as a strange rising heat starts to build in my chest. I look at his body and I see nothing wrong. I think he must be complaining about how lean he is until suddenly I understand what he is saying. I am stunned for a moment, and then I shake my head before answering him with the obvious question.

What did you hope you would look like?

Like myself, he says.

I need to look like myself.

Like I used to look in the mirror.

He pulls at his skin more aggressively this time.

This is not my body, Che.

This is not my face.

It's not even close.

You have to fix it.

You have to change me back.

LUC'S PLEAS FEEL unfair and ungrateful and for a moment I don't know how to respond. He should be pleased to find himself in any living body at all, for him to accuse me of not putting him back in the right one doesn't make any sense.

I brought you back, Luc.

I got you out of there.

He goes quiet before he says more gently.

That's not what I mean, Che.

You know that's not what I mean.

It's just that I can't accept this body.

It doesn't look like me.

It does look like you, I say.

This is exactly how you looked, Luc.

This is how you looked before you were born.

LUC'S FACE SOFTENS as he hears these words.

Before I was born, he says.

And after I died?

My other body...

As he goes to ask the question he already knows the answer.

It's gone, I say.

You know that, Luc.

It is in ashes.

There is nothing left.

Luc visibly deflates and slumps his shoulders.

Of course, Che.

Of course it is.

Why would I think any different?

I DO FEEL sorry for Luc but I can't help feeling resentful. I even feel some genuine anger when he accuses me in this way. He picks up on that and says: Che please don't take this the wrong way. I am indebted to you in ways I can't describe, ways that would terrify me if I stopped to think about them. But you must see why I can't accept this. Why you have to make it different. If you could make me this way you can make me any other way too.

But you're beautiful, I say.

You look perfect.

But you must, Che.

Surely you must...

A sharp slash of realisation passes over his face before it collapses into horror.

O GOD, HE says.

O God you don't know.

What, I say.

What don't I know?

He creases his brow and presses his fingers against it.

Che I am...

I have...

I have people.

AS LUC SAYS these words a nasty jolt passes through me, making my ears ring and the world feel badly skewed. I know what he is telling me although my mind won't process it, the truth I should have anticipated when instead I was wilfully blind.

People? I ask in an unsteady voice.

People, he says.

I have a wife, Che.

I have daughters.

Two little daughters.

I try to keep my voice steady but I fail.

But...

But Luc you never...

I did, he says.

I always did.

You just wouldn't listen to me, Che.

You never wanted to hear.

LUC FILLS IN the details as my heart grows cold. He tells me his wife's name, he relates a few details about his life with her and their two daughters. Huge waves of unreality crash over me but I know this is no dream, and the worst part of it is knowing that Luc is not to blame. I should have made no other assumption than that this was a cherished man, a man with a loving family who would revel in his capacity to love. I feel so stupid and childish when I survey my hopes for the two of us but I also feel puzzled when I remember where I found him, the actions that landed him there. I put these things to him without thinking how cruel they sound.

But Luc you...denied them.

You left them.

I know, he says.

You don't have to remind me.

I find myself stumbling over my words.

But if you were...

Then how could you...

My questions are unfinished but the accusation remains.

IN THE SILENCE I can't find anything soothing to say and so I decide to say something true. You look really beautiful Luc. That has to be worth something. He purses his lips and dips his head and when he looks back at me through the mirror he says: Che if I need to say it? This is not on you. This body is so much more than I deserve but it leaves me completely stranded. If I could just get my old face back, just so they might recognise me. All recrimination drops out of his speech and he sounds genuinely contrite and I am moved to reach out gently towards him and say: Luc every part of it is gone. They burn the dead with due reverence and they scatter the ashes. I don't even know whether you remain the same inside. And you have changed me too Luc you should never forget that. I feel... fragmented from staying in that place too long and I couldn't get us back there even if I tried. I would not be surprised - when we escaped, however that happened - if every trace of it was scattered as well.

THEN CHANGE MY mind, he says. Change my soul. Make me forget everything I know, Che, make me believe anything you want me to. You would be the one to benefit, you must understand that. You would be able to hold me and love me just like you did when you came into my dreams. I wouldn't blame you for it. It's a natural desire and all you have to do is make me forget. Change my name, even, surely you must be able to change that one... He slows and takes a deep breath before he looks at me and says: even my name is different now isn't it. Then tell me Che what my name is. For God's sake that's the least you could do, to tell me my new name.

THIS IS A strange request that I cannot respond to in words. Instead an image comes which I can project visibly into the mirror for Luc to see. It shows a veiled woman rendered completely in white stone, her face downcast and her eyes hooded with grief at the death of the young man she holds in her arms. The body of a dead lover or a dead son. The man has suffered a violent death but his body is now in repose, as though his torture exhausted him to the point where he needs rest before he can journey on. He lies across her lap amongst the rolls and folds of her heavy garments and it is only slowly that we see how strange their proportions are, how much larger than the man is his grieving wife, his grieving mother. So that she becomes the eternal feminine supporting the soul of this man, grieving for him and for every man cruelly cast out of this world.

THE IMAGE TURNS hazy and soon a different scene appears. A slender young woman wearing a dress and a low crown, her auburn hair flowing over her shoulders in the glow of a stone room. A man bows to her in front of a few hushed onlookers, his squire holds his shield while he kneels there completely disarmed. The woman dubs him with a long sword that he has surrendered to her for this purpose. This is a man at the height of his powers, resplendent in a suit of mail and a red tunic emblazoned with an eagle clutching a golden crescent. As Luc stares into the mirror I place my hand on his shoulder and say: for the moment this is only my hand Luc. You may feel Her touch more directly in time. Luc sees how close the sword is to the throat of the kneeling man and how that is by design, out of the nature of such covenants and the way they must be fulfilled.

THESE IMAGES SEEM to calm Luc and when they fade he asks me very quietly whether we could lie down again. We go back to my bed and get under the covers and lie there on our sides facing one another, with no touch between us other than our held hands. Luc begins to tell me things that there is no need to tell me but I do find them consoling in a lonely kind of way. How he is bound to make contact with his wife no matter how slim his chances, how she is the only way back to his little daughters although he cannot imagine how she might let him through. I have to try, he says. To reach her without causing any more grief, without getting myself arrested although that would be no deterrent if I could somehow make her see.

LUC GOES TO express his gratitude towards me but I hush him by placing my hand gently over his mouth. I ask whether we could just lie together quietly for a while without talking, just holding hands like we are and taking some time to settle down. He nods and I close my eyes and I feel him close his eyes too and in the resulting darkness I get small hints of the way I used to encounter him in my dreams. I can breathe in his scent and feel his body the way I used to feel it even though he is no longer pressing against me. The connection between us is coming to an end and I know it must be severed but it is reassuring to lie there with him holding my hand in his hand, his warm body as close to my body as I had always hoped it would be.

THEN IT WAS done. Luc drew his hand back from mine and sat up on his side of the bed, looking around and asking me whether he could borrow some clothes. We quickly got him into my loose work overalls with the bib left hanging and his waist hitched around with an elasticated belt. I gave him a pair of oversized slippers and the largest of my baggy hoodies and although he ended up looking like a scarecrow it was better than nothing. I offered to make him some food but he said he wasn't hungry, I suggested he wait until it was light outside but he just shook his head. I asked him where he would sleep or what he would eat and he grinned: Che I don't think any of that matters anymore. I gave him what little cash I had along with a handful of junk silver jewellery and a little backpack for things he might pick up along the way. Then suddenly he was straddling the sill of my upstairs window, eyeing off the brick wall running between the house and the laneway below. I was not ready for him to leave but it happened anyway. I went to hug him but he just put one arm half around me and gave me a squeeze before he shifted his weight and was gone.

AFTER LUC LEFT I went back to bed without much hope of sleep. I lay there thinking and listening in the small hours of the morning, hearing what you might call voices although that is a very loose description. They were more like half-sentences or fragments of disembodied thought describing various things including what they called our Rules of Engagement. Saying that I was still bound to watch over Luc although my role in his redemption had finished, that I must hold the space around him harmless although I could not imagine what that meant. I saw how this role offered some compensation for the loss I had suffered, allowing me to draw close to him and watch over him especially in his sleep where I now had manifest superiority. And how this might grant me some solace no matter how incomplete, no matter how partial the comfort that was being offered.

AS I LAY there being instructed in these things I was also shown the poetics of the two of us. The same tragic tale that keeps getting retold, with Luc as the crazy one and me as the lucid lover who waits and pines like crazy. For a love too intense to be allowed, a love that would heap shame upon every other love that has previously come into the world. In this current reality no woman can know how it feels to love someone like that: without sanity, without guile, without calculation or restraint. A love empowered to redeem a man and rebuild his body and that is just the beginning. Bridging every chasm that has ever divided us, redeeming every grief-struck lover from their pain and condemnation. If there could ever truly be a love like that, if we could somehow become capable of recognising it when it comes.

AS DAWN LOOMED I set down some prayers for Luc and I also made supplication on my own behalf. I confessed that I had loved him from the first time I encountered him, and regardless of what flesh the world clothed him in I would continue to love him body and soul. I confessed to knowing that Luc would never be mine to hold, but to be denied any instant to hold him - no matter how brief - would have been intolerably cruel. I declared that if Luc had ten wives and a hundred children I still would have gone down there to save him: even with a broken heart, despite my broken heart. And I guessed at the deeds She must have ordained for him because She does not lightly tolerate the heartbreak of Her women. I also swore - on my life this time, whatever life I had left - that if every man I rescue turns to wound me that will only prove that it is my destiny to be wounded, my destiny to remain alone.

CHAPTER 11

LETTER BETTER UNSENT

SAVE AS DRAFT

Dear Sicko,

I know you will take this as some kind of victory over me. Or some other kind of superiority depending on what is wrong with you. But there is more than one purpose to any written piece and I don't care if you feel superior. My friends and family have told me to ignore you and I will do that but I also have every right to set down this email and even to press send if that is what I choose to do.

Your cruelty and your sickness need to be called out for what they are. Even if that is only in my own mind. I feel free to say things that might shock my family and friends because I do not feel bound to treat you with any humanity at all. Or any concern for your life after you have sent me such life-hating things.

How deep must be the sickness in you. To mock the grief of a wife and two little girls, to dishonour a lost husband and father especially with how that loss occurred. I feel sure that

no human being could act in this way although I suppose this is not the truth but I will cling to that feeling to keep your viciousness at bay.

You were some kind of friend to us in the past, that is my best guess. Or you got past his firewall to read his personal correspondence. These are the only things that can explain how much you know about our lives. Even those intimate things that nobody else knows. Disclosing these things no doubt made you sound convincing but really you just sounded sordid, you sounded putrid and insane.

I did not believe in Hell before this disaster but now I have no doubt of it. It is hard to believe in evil before you see its face. I know there will be a reckoning of the deeds of every person and if you understood that you might seek to atone for what you have done. To seek the comfort and well-being of people rather than taking pleasure in their loss, mocking the family of a departed man while they are mired down in their grief.

And if this is you Luc. Against all hope if this is you: I never want to hear from you or speak to you again. I would never let you come near the girls or allow you to touch me or speak to me or have anything to do with me. People would call that cruel but I could never let you back into our family again. In the billion to one chance that you have genuinely returned and this is some miracle then I want no part of it.

No matter how badly you were suffering, Luc. Once you

made that choice you could never come back to us again.

Because there were other choices. You never cared to know them or seek them out but they were there. You never stopped to take any care of yourself or take proper care of the people who depended on you. You dreamed of healing the world by taking its sins upon yourself and I hope you have learned: this is a hopeless road. Bringing nothing but your destruction and our devastation in every single lifetime until the world comes to an end.

Because you were the one to suffer Luc. To suffer so pointlessly no matter how much you would hate to hear that. You robbed yourself of any pleasure in this life because of your dreams, your reckless abandon of your own interests and the needs of the people who loved you. I fell in love with you because of that abandon but it made our marriage completely unsupportable and your poor life so afflicted.

You cannot love the whole world, Luc. Not at the same time as you love individual people. When you have a wife and children you cannot keep dreaming childish heroic dreams, hoping for some general eruption of Love that will never come to pass. It has to be one or the other. You could not love us and the entire world, it has to be one or the other.

The last thing I want to do is to burden you further. If I met you now I would have no choice but to immediately set you free, to die for the world in the way you seemed born to do.

Hoping that if you did succeed you might find your way back to me, to love me with an undivided heart after achieving those other things. And much more importantly: to love our girls in the way they need you to. Instead of the horrible solitary death that loving me brought upon you my darling.

This is why they told me not to read your email. I no longer know who I'm talking to and I cannot decide what to say. I know who it is though that I do desperately wish to speak to and confess: when you left whole parts of me were dragged with you and I have no hope for their return. I gave them to you freely and it was your free choice what to do with them. Do not return to me without bringing those parts that died with you, the best and most loving part of my nature and probably my only unflawed part. The part that knew what giving really meant, that generosity of spirit you always praised me for.

I have dreamed that when I enter death I need only to focus on those parts of me you have taken in order to be guided straight to you. And if you do make your way back to the land of the living I will know you by the replenishment of the light you left behind. The light living on in Biddy and Rose, which could have been a light unto the world in some different time and place.

You see how I have lost myself. To false hope and the love of lost things that I am reciting. Do not think that I am some angel Luc because if you genuinely returned I would heap

endless shame upon your head, for the sorrow you have caused to us I would bury your head in shame. Just as though you were some predator creep, the same shame and vengeful wishes and of course violent speech. Even plain violence as shocking as that is to say.

I have learned many things since you left and they give me some comfort even though you would scoff at them. What happens in those liminal places where all must pass through. Where the unjust and the filthy find themselves condemned to remain. What things come to people in those after-death realms, how that owes directly to their living choices and the merit they have heaped up in this world.

So go and fuck yourself, Sicko. Or rise and shine and redeem the world Luc so you can make your way back to me. I was nothing before I met you and I never will be and that's the very worst thing you have done. To show me such intolerable things only to abandon me here, without your light or your true compass and without even stopping to say goodbye.

El xxx