



Not Home

a novella

Sarah Butler



Meet the residents of 'a shit B&B in a half-forgotten bit of East Manchester' – Ken's words, and he ought to know, he's lived in room 1 for twenty-two years. Angel's in room 3 – she's got herself clean and has a plan to get her little boy back from social services. Room 4 is Jimmy, who's just heard that the man he put inside ten years ago is out and looking for him. Mike in room 5 is the newest resident, fresh out of jail with every intention of changing his life for the better – he just needs to stay away from the lads, and the drugs. Piotr and Charles share room 6. Piotr is a Polish labourer with a bust-up shoulder; Charles, a Londoner, has been sent to Manchester by housing services because they have nowhere for him to stay in the capital – he just wants to get back to his kids. And room 2? That's Ewan's room, but he's gone missing...

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Sarah Butler

In memory of

Wayne Bardsley
John Barnes
Cecilia Carmichael
Joe Cleary
Neil Gibson
Kevin O'Hanlon
John Mongan
William Richardson
Chris Siddorn

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WEDNESDAY

Room 1

Welcome to the madhouse – that’s what Ken says when someone new turns up. It’s his line. He’s been saying it for years. Keep your head down, mind your stuff, don’t be a dickhead – those are his rules; he should write them up somewhere, frame them.

There are people like Ken who stay for years – it suits them, or they can’t get their shit together for long enough to get out. And there are people who start trying to leave as soon as they arrive. Ken clocks them straight off – knows which camp they’re in from the way they are when he shows them round. Hallway, bathrooms, dining room, bedroom. The people who look the most horrified, the most disgusted – they’re the ones who go, the ones who think they’re worth more than a shit B&B in a half-forgotten bit of East Manchester. The others – lost, screwed-up, tired – they stay.

Ewan though. Ewan, he thought would be off in a couple of months. But it’s been three years since he turned up, a bit pissed, a bit stoned. He’d lost his kid, and Ken knows what that does to a man. Ewan started drinking, got given the bullet from work, then his wife kicked him out. Just another story – Ken’s heard it all and more besides. It’s got to the point he’s stopped asking, and when people start telling him anyway, he tries not to listen.

Except Ewan’s gone. Not got-a-new-flat-packed-up-and-gone gone, but all-his-stuff-still-in-his-room-not-a-word-to-anyone gone. And Steve, the landlord, is sitting on the edge of Ken’s bed, his stomach dropping onto his fat thighs, asking for an explanation.

‘It’s been two days,’ Ken says, for the second time. ‘He’ll be back.’

‘I heard it’s been a week.’

‘Who from?’

‘Doesn’t matter, does it? I pay you to manage this place.’

Which isn’t true. Ken doesn’t pay the top-up charge like the others, but that’s not the same as being paid. He does have the biggest room. Must have been a fancy living room once upon a time – bay windows; a wide chimney breast. The fireplace has been ripped

out so there's just a hole where Ken keeps his books. He's a reader, Ken. Crime books for the most part, stories and true life stuff. You'd think I'd have had enough of that without going looking for it, he often jokes, but it's different in the books: crimes get solved, everything ends up making sense.

'Have you rung him?' Steve asks.

'Phone's dead.'

'That's money that is.' Steve jerks his thumb towards the door. Ewan's room is on the other side of the hallway. 'I'm not losing money on this.'

Except Ewan's Housing will still be coming through and Steve will keep claiming it as long as he can, even with a new person in there.

'Give him a break, Steve. All his stuff's there. He's not done a runner.'

Most of Ewan's stuff is there, anyway, but that's only because Ken's kept an eagle eye, told those thieving bastards where to stick it. He'll get his head kicked in one day. Old man, they call him, and it's not far off the truth; he feels it, most days. One day someone will fuck him up good and proper.

Steve takes out a pack of cigs. He doesn't offer Ken one, but lights his own and sucks in hard so Ken can hear the tobacco spark. Steve's always puffing on one of those plastic inhalers, but he won't give up the fags.

He blows out a stream of smoke. 'Two days,' he says.

Ken spreads his hands, palms up. 'A week.' He doesn't know why he's getting involved.

'There are people needing rooms.'

'And that's Ewan's room. It's all he's bloody got.'

Steve takes another drag.

Ken imagines landing a punch right on his landlord's pudgy nose. 'One week. You're still getting his Housing, aren't you?'

Steve's eyes flicker away towards the window. The bottom half's boarded up to save on glazier bills from dickheads punching their way in, though half the time the front door's bust anyway. The lace curtains have been there since Ken moved in, twenty odd

years ago, nicotine yellow now, though he can't remember them ever being what you'd call white. They reach all the way down over the boarded-up panes, so you don't notice straight off there's no glass there, except that the room's dark, even when the sun's out. It's cold too. Middle-of-January, single-glazing, no-heating cold. Maybe Ewan's just gone somewhere warmer, like those birds that fly off to Africa for the winter.

'So you're not losing anything,' Ken says to Steve. 'He's all right, Ewan. Doesn't fight. No drugs.'

Enough Strongbow to take down an ox some nights, but he's quiet with it, or quieter than most. And the only fights he's been in are those picked by other people. There'd been a bust up with Ewan and Jimmy a week or so back. Some beef about a computer game. Ewan had come off worse. He'd told Ken afterwards that he hadn't wanted to punch an old man, it wasn't right.

'If he's not here Wednesday next then fine. Dump his stuff. Move someone else in.' Ken keeps his gaze fixed on his landlord. 'Come on Steve.'

Steve heaves himself up off the bed, drops his cigarette into a mug of cold tea on the table Ken found in a skip years back.

'You fancy this guy?' he says, his mouth curling into a leer. 'Didn't think you were into that.'

'A week.' Ken pauses. Then, 'As a favour.' He doesn't want to say it, but Steve isn't going to give in without something, and he's a man who likes to have others in his debt.

His landlord doesn't say yes, just lifts his head into a half nod, which is better than nothing.

Once he's gone, Ken stands up, brushes the duvet flat, then sits back in his armchair and stares at Steve's fag end. He shouldn't have bothered. Don't stick your neck out for anyone, that's what he's learnt. He's getting old, and soft with it. Maybe Ewan went on a bender and now he's dead, face down in the canal. Maybe there's trouble and he's made himself scarce, though there've been no police and nobody else coming round asking after him. Maybe there's some woman who's let him stay. None of it is any of Ken's business.

First Floor Landing

Steve doesn't like stairs, but for an eyeful of that girl, Angel, he'll make the effort. He leans heavily on the bannister. These bastards are always telling him he's let the place go to ruin but this is solid, not a single loose strut and there's still that fancy wooden thing at the bottom. They're whingers, the lot of them. Nineteen steps. He's breathing like a racehorse by the time he's up onto the landing. Room Three she's in. He'd thought about putting numbers on the doors once, but never got around to it. People come and go, but the rooms stay the same – everyone knows what's what without the need for little brass numbers. Plus they'd just get nicked.

He knocks. Waits. There's music coming from the other side of the door, so she's in, most likely. In bed? He swallows. Knocks again.

'Fuck off.' Her voice is raspy with sleep, or whatever she's taken.

Steve balls his right hand into a fist and presses his knuckles against the door. 'It's Steve,' he shouts. Nothing. He presses his fist against the wood a little harder. 'Your landlord.'

There. A rustle of movement. Bed sheets? Clothes.

'Steve!' Her face at the door, pretty little nose, blue eyes, like one of those china dolls his nan used to collect. She blinks at him. 'I thought you were one of them, on the scrounge. I wouldn't have said that otherwise, would I? I'm not like that.'

'Angel.' He lowers his fist, smooths his hand over his stomach. 'Just a courtesy call, like. See how you're doing.'

She blinks again. 'I'm fine Steve. Good.' She doesn't open the door any further, just a chink wide enough for her head. He tries to see what she's wearing. A thick jumper. Maybe nothing else, but he can't tell.

'No problems?'

She purses her lips. They're dry, and he imagines rubbing Vaseline over them. Gentle. He's a gentle man.

'No problems, Steve, nope. All good.'

'Not going to ask me in for a brew?'

Her eyes widen, the way animals' do when they're caught unawares. 'Ah, Steve, not today. I'm-' She looks into the room, then back at him.

He waits.

She's fussing at a spot on her chin, feeling around it with her fingers. 'Another time?' Her voice wheedling. 'I'll get some biscuits or something.'

'I've got a proposition,' he says. Something flickers across her face. It looks like fear, but she's got no reason to be scared of him. He scratches at the skin just above his waistband. 'You don't want to hear it?'

'Sure.' She smiles. She's got a tooth missing, up at the top, but it doesn't mean she's not pretty. He waits for her to open the door so he can go in, but she doesn't move.

'Thought you might like a better room,' he says.

She tips her head to one side, like a bird might.

'Number two,' Steve says.

Now she's frowning. 'Ewan's? He's gone?' She lets the door gape open and he sees she's wearing jeans, her feet bare. Behind her the room is a mess – clothes and papers strewn across the floor. 'He's left?' Her voice rises.

'I've told Ken I'll wait till Wednesday,' Steve says. 'God knows why. I'm a softie, Angel, that's my problem.' He gives her his best smile, but she's not looking at him. 'It's got your name on it, love. It's a nice room. Fireplace. Bay window.' He smiles again – he should have been an estate agent, he's good at this. 'You might as well start packing your things. He's gone, trust me. Are you all right, love? You're looking pale.' Maybe she's coming down with something. He could make her a Lemsip, sit by her bed and stroke her hair till she fell asleep.

'I've got to go.' She pushes the door but he's quick, wedges his foot between it and the frame.

'Steve, I've got to go do something.'

'I'm keeping it for you,' he says, trying to make each word heavy enough for her to register he's doing her a favour. A big favour.

'I can't- I've got to-'

‘Well you think about it love, and I’ll let you know?’

She stares at him for a moment, her eyes round, cheeks pale. And then she closes the door without saying a word. Which is rude, he tells himself, looking at the door with its scuffed paint, a bit of hardboard nailed over one of the panels. The landing feels dark all of a sudden, and too small. There’s a mattress propped up against one wall, a pale stain across one side – something else for him to sort out.

It feels like he’s done something wrong, except he hasn’t. He’s a good landlord. Kind. He looks out for people. It’s not his fault they’re all ungrateful bastards. He’s half a mind to just open Angel’s door and walk straight in there. It’s his property after all. Instead, he starts down the stairs, feeling the strain of it in his knees. She’ll thank him once she’s in Ewan’s room. He just needs to be patient.

Room 4

Jimmy wouldn't call himself a cat person, but this wee critter is the sweetest he's ever come across. Just after being a kitten really, still bright-eyed and scar-free. It doesn't look like a stray – its black fur is glossy and soft – but there's no collar, and when he pours a bowl of milk it drinks the whole thing down like it hasn't been fed for days.

'You don't want to stay around here,' Jimmy tells it. 'This kind of place ruins a man. Look at me. Sixty-two and you'd think I was a hundred.' The cat looks up as though it can understand.

'I'm serious. Go on now. Shoo. It's warmer outside than it is in here.' He flaps his hands, but the cat comes closer, butting its head against his ankles.

'And there's rules,' Jimmy goes on. 'No dogs. No cats. No visitors. You can deal drugs, but you can't have a cat. Makes no sense, does it?'

The cat goes back to the empty bowl and licks it.

'All right. Hold your horses.' Jimmy pours more milk and the cat lowers its head. It had just wandered in the front door that morning, ended up in Jimmy's room. He likes to think it's chosen him above the rest of them.

'If you're sick on my carpet...'

They'd had a dog when he was a kid. A little bastard of a terrier. Never a cat though. He'd thrown stones at cats he remembers now, but he can't think why. Bored, probably.

'You're all right, aren't you?' He bends down and runs his hand over the cat's back, feels its skeleton, small and fragile underneath its skin. 'You're all right, wee man.'

He takes the half empty bottle of vodka off the table and pours himself a glass.

'You want a dram, puss?'

The cat carries on with its milk, ignores him.

'Too early. Fair enough.' Jimmy drinks the vodka in two mouthfuls, feels it warm down his throat into his chest.

There'd been a time when the booze helped. Took the edge off things. These days though it barely touches him. He's on two bottles a day – not that someone meeting him for the first time would know it. It'd kill him the doctor said, if he just came off it. She'd gone on about rehab and phased withdrawal after that, but what he'd come away with was the sure knowledge that if he stopped he'd die.

The cat finishes the milk, lifts its head and looks around.

'What do you think?' Jimmy pours another measure. 'Bit of a shithole? They call this place a B&B. Which you'd think was a joke, would you not? Except there are beds and Ken cooks breakfast in the morning, so there you are.'

Single bed. Ripped-up armchair. Stained carpet. Ugly bloody wallpaper painted a cold, hospital blue. Every surface is stacked with his collections. Newspapers piled up against the walls. Clothes he's found but not washed yet in a heap under the window. Plastic bags bursting out of the big builder's bag he'd found to keep them in. He puts the good stuff on the windowsill, and the little shelf above the sink – his treasures, he calls them: a blue paper cup; half a saucer with a gold rim and a pattern of little red roses; a doll's head with straw-blond hair; a different doll's arm; a broken watch with one half of its strap still attached.

'You don't know when things might come in handy, do you?' he says to the cat. 'And money doesn't grow on trees, that's what those fuckers don't understand.'

The cat pads over to the window, jumps onto the pile of clothes and looks out at the row of houses opposite. One of them's been boarded-up for years, the others are dumps like this one. Rubbish and weeds in the front gardens. Dirty curtains in the windows. This is where the unlucky people live, the ones who've been screwed since day one.

What Jimmy's learnt is this: there are people who have it easy, and people – like him – who don't. The second lot – his lot – were born to the wrong family, in the wrong place, met the wrong people, made the wrong decisions. They're the unlucky ones, attracting bad luck like a cat attracts fleas, headed for trouble from the day they got shoved out into the world bawling their heads off.

He watches the cat turn away from the window, make its way to the armchair and curl itself into a ball amongst bags of unsorted stuff, head on paws, tail flicking back and forth.

'I don't need fleas,' he tells it. 'I've got enough bloody problems.'

Yesterday he'd drunk more than usual, he'd needed to after what he'd heard, and this morning there's more of a fug in his head than there is most mornings, a dull ache at the back of his skull and needling into his temples. He takes another mouthful of vodka, but it's not helping. The stress is still there in his chest and stomach. It's not a nice feeling, makes him think of rats nibbling away at his insides, bite by tiny bite. He half wishes he didn't know the bastard was out, though it's better to be prepared, better to be on his toes rather than caught unawares. He can see the bloke's face as clear as if he was standing in the same room. A mean kind of a face: tight mouth, small eyes, a scratty black beard with pale skin showing through. A tall, skinny, tough fucker. Or at least that's what he was like when he went inside. Some people fatten up in there. Some people change their attitude. But the word is, he's out and asking round the pubs and the rough-sleeping sites where Jimmy's to be found these days.

Room 2

Ewan's room is the mirror image of Ken's: another bay window, another fireplace, the same cornicing around the ceiling, the same rose with a cheap paper lightshade hanging from its centre.

This fireplace is a proper one though, with green and yellow tiles and fancy black work. The chimney's bricked up, Steve's made sure of that. You'd smoke yourself out if you lit a fire. But, all the same, someone's placed a pile of sticks in the grate, stacked into a miniature pyramid like a kid's pretend campfire.

There's a line of pebbles on the mantelpiece – big, smooth ones from some beach. Grey, black, a soft pink. Whoever picked them chose ones patterned with thin white lines, or with holes bored through their centres. The stones are arranged left to right from the smallest to the largest and in between each sits a shell. Ribbed fans. Tight coils. Pearled insides.

Room 6

'I'm drawing a line,' Charles says. If he had a marker pen he'd do it in ink, it's not like anyone gives a shit about this place. He walks from one side of the room to the other, in between the two single beds. 'See?'

The man sitting on the bed by the window glances up for a moment and then looks down again. He's Polish; a stocky guy, thick with muscle, his hair shaved to reveal an almost square head. His right arm's in a sling, his left hand holds his phone, thumb skating across the screen. He's still wearing his boots – scuffed, workmen's boots – the heels grinding dirt into the bed sheets.

Charles starts kicking things from his side of the room to the other. Pushing clothes, a single shoe, a plastic bag, across the carpet with his foot. His brother had done exactly this to him when they were kids. Had made a line out of green string and nailed it to the floorboards. If Charles went over, even by a centimetre, there'd be fists. All those years they'd hated each other, and now Charles would give anything to sit down with him, have a beer.

The Pole is on his feet. They're about the same height. It would be a fair fight, Charles thinks. Just his luck to get put in a shared room. But he'd arrived late at night, and that was all there was. He'd nearly kicked off – put the black guy in with the Pole, fucking racists – but another of the guys had got a hold of him, marched him back onto the street and talked him down. Ewan, the guy was called. Quiet, kind of sad-looking, but decent enough. Charles hasn't seen him around in a while.

'Yours.' Charles waves his arm to his left, speaking slowly and loudly. 'Mine.' He waves to his right. 'If you can't tidy up, at least keep your shit in your half.' He pulls the table into the centre of the room and shoves a plate caked with old dinner, a couple of mugs, an empty pack of fags, over the line 'We'll split this too.' He straightens and wipes his hands on his jeans. 'Deal?'

The man's face cracks into a smile.

‘What?’

The man steps forwards and Charles brings his arms up, ready to hit, but instead of punching him, the man pats him on the back.

‘Your side. My side.’ The man gestures.

Charles allows himself a brief smile. ‘Don’t fucking forget it. And wash that plate man.’

To his surprise, the man takes the plate and tips the mouldy chips and half-eaten burger into the bin, then goes to the sink and runs cold water across its surface, rubbing at the stains with his fingertips, humming something foreign-sounding under his breath. Charles feels himself deflate a little, as though all that anger had been holding him up somehow.

He turns to the pile of washing on his bed, creased and damp. They’d had tumble driers at the laundrette but he’s saving every penny he has. He lifts a T-shirt and shakes it out. There’s a radiator beneath the window, but it’s never been on in the two weeks he’s been here. The whole building is cold as hell. He presses the t-shirt to his face. It already smells musty, he’s sure of it.

‘Give me. I make dry.’

‘Nice story.’

‘Give.’

Charles keeps hold of the t-shirt, but the Polish man steps forward and takes another off the pile before Charles can stop him.

‘Give it back.’ He can feel the anger rushing up into his head, like water pouring into a small space.

‘You need squeeze. You say squeeze?’ The man holds the t-shirt awkwardly with the hand that pokes out from the end of the sling. He folds it over, folds it over again, and then twists. A couple of drops of water fall to the floor. ‘Arm is no good.’ He pulls a face. ‘You try. You hold two hands, fold and fold and squeeze. You do.’

Charles does as he’s told. He hears something snap – stitching maybe. ‘You’ll make me rip it, man.’

‘Now fold other way.’

Charles shakes out the t-shirt, refolds it, and twists again. Drops of water darken the carpet and he feels a little flush of achievement.

The man takes the t-shirt from Charles, flaps it away from him, then holds it to his cheek. 'Is OK,' he says. 'Have to do hard.'

'They'll never bloody dry in this place,' Charles says. 'It's fucking freezing.'

'Landlord says heating two times a day.'

'He's lying.' Charles picks up a shirt. Fold and twists. Folds and twists. He slips it onto a coat hanger and hooks it over the curtain rail.

'Where are you from, Peter?' he says, turning back to the room.

The man blinks. 'Piotr. I am Piotr.'

'Pee-ot-ra, then. Where are you from? Where's home?'

The man's eyes narrow. 'Poland. I am from Poland.'

Charles gives a half nod. 'Right. A city, then? Or countryside?'
He doesn't know why he's asking.

'Small village. In east. Near Lublin. Nice village. Quiet. My family have farm.'

Charles nods.

'You?' Piotr asks.

'Me? London. Barking and Dagenham. Born and bred.'

'Not Africa?'

Charles laughs. Piotr's face remains serious, which makes him laugh even more. 'No. Not Africa, you idiot. I'm a Londoner, and the F-ing housing sent me up here. I'm on it though.' He nods, trying to convince himself. 'I'm sorting it out.'

THURSDAY

Bathroom

The lock's broken again. Someone's probably done it on purpose, so they can barge in on her – 'Oh, sorry, Angel, didn't know you were in here' – staring at her tits, and all the rest. There's nothing in the room that's not attached to a wall, except a blue bathmat – wet and stinking. She uses her foot to shove it against the bottom of the door. It won't make much difference, but what else is she going to do? She needs a shower. She needs to look her best or they'll never take her seriously.

It's early. Too early – the appointment's not until twelve. But she couldn't sleep last night and has been awake for hours already. She's never been good at relaxing, there's always too much going on in her head – thoughts buzzing about like those flies that get trapped in a room but won't stop circling, bashing their heads against the window, never finding the door you've opened to let them out. She's a fidgeter, a knee jiggler, a chatterbox. Always on fast-bloody-forward her mum used to say – you need to slow the fuck down, Angel. Except she can't. And a house like this is no place for a light-sleeper.

Her mum's house hadn't been posh, but it had been clean, she'd give her that much. The toilet was never smeared with shit; the sink wasn't grimed with dust and muck and god knows what else; your shoes didn't stick to the floor. It didn't stink. Still, it's somewhere to live – better than sleeping in a car, or on the streets.

Angel threads her towel over the empty rail, then her clothes – her cleanest jeans, a nice shirt with little flowers patterned across it, a heavy black cardigan that goes down to her knees – and balances her handbag on top. There used to be a hook on the back of the door but it's snapped off so the rail's the only place save the floor, and you don't want to put anything on that.

It's a powerful shower, but the water's cold, so cold it's like needles on her skin. She washes as fast as she can, swearing the whole time – a string of filthy words to match the room. She turns

the water off and grabs for the towel, unbalancing her bag, which falls, spilling everything across the floor. Fags. Lighter. Purse. Perfume. Tampons. Receipts. For a moment she stays standing in the grubby bath, the thin, worn-out towel wrapped around her. She looks at her bag, lying there like some kind of dead yellow animal washed up on a beach. Goose-bumps ripple over her skin and then there are tears, ready to spill. She rubs a hand across her face, sniffs. It's not an omen, she tells herself; it's just her stupid bag falling off a stupid towel rail. It doesn't mean anything. Today is the start of something. New year, new start. That's what she's told herself, and Ewan too. No more of that shit in her veins. No more messing up. She's going to get clean; she's going to get her teeth fixed; she's going to start eating properly; she is going to get Dylan back. Everything is going to change. And Ewan's going to help her. He wouldn't have just upped and gone and not told her – he's not that kind of man. And they're friends. More than friends, maybe.

She thinks about that night, a few weeks back, Ewan sitting on her bed listening to her talk about Dylan. He's a good listener – there are too many people who just want to talk about their own shit and aren't interested in anyone else, but not Ewan, he'd sat for hours that night, listening, nodding, asking questions. He told her he used to work for the council, back before his kid died. He said it was a matter of playing the game, ticking boxes, saying the right things. He said he'd help her. And then, later, when she'd crossed the room, bent down and kissed him, he'd been so kind and gentle, pulling away and saying he didn't want to take advantage, he respected her. There weren't many men like that around. He was a good 'un. He was a keeper.

Room 6

Piotr lies on his bed with his boots on, staring at the ceiling. His breakfast sits heavily in his stomach. Cheap bacon. Cheap eggs. Cheap oil. Cheap bread. He doesn't mind it; eats as much as he can get his hands on so he won't need to spend money on lunch.

He should have got compensation. He should have been given money. But no. They told him no, it was his fault the steel fell. Plus it would cost thousands of pounds, take months and months in the courts. Did he want that? Could he afford that? Really? Best just to man-up and deal with it. There'll be a job for him once he's better – he can't ask for more than that.

It's been two months and thirteen days. The bones have more or less healed, but the ligaments haven't. He can't lift his arm above his head. He can't take any weight on it. He's got a hospital appointment in a couple of days but he knows what they'll say: he has to wait, he has to be patient. Never mind he's lost his home and is eating into his savings staying in this disgusting place. Never mind he's going crazy with nothing to do. Maybe he should have gone back to Poland and let his mother look after him, but he's twenty-nine, not a baby.

He walks down the narrow stairs from the attic to the first floor, then the wider flight to the hallway. Textured wallpaper painted pale blue. Banisters painted a darker blue gloss. Tattered brown carpet buckling along the walls, fraying at the edges of each step. He leaves, walking quickly, head down – he doesn't want to speak to anyone here, doesn't want to get caught up in anyone's fights – out of the front door with its dodgy lock, its frame scarred from knives and baseball bats and crowbars; down the short path to the front gate which is simply a gap in between two posts. Onto the street – uneven concrete slabs on the pavement; ripped tarmac on the street, the old stone cobbles showing through. It is easier to breathe outside of the house and he tips his head up to the cold, grey Manchester sky and takes in lungfuls of air.

Today, he turns left, along the main road, past the chemist's, the sandwich shop, the row of houses-turned-into-flats, the tired-looking garage. Left again, onto a leafy street, neat front gardens, decent cars. He used to live on a street like this. Nothing special. A little basement flat. But it was warm. He had his own front door. Own kitchen. Own bathroom. A man needs that much at least.

It's cold, but dry, though there are clouds threatening over in the east – their heavy shapes bruised purple-grey. He is heading for the canal. Another right. And another, along a muddy path, crowded by winter-bare brambles and fly-tipped rubbish; through a brick gateway to the towpath.

It's a revelation, hidden away from the rest of the world; the water hardly moving, the pale path hugging its edge, the gardens on the far side with their wooden furniture, raised vegetable beds, hedges, lawns. The sky feels bigger here. There is more air. He can hear birdsong – a goose honking on the water; smaller birds flitting in and out of the bushes along the path, chirruping.

He can get into a rhythm here. There are no roads to cross and hardly any people – the odd dog walker, the odd loner like himself – and so he can set his pace and keep on walking. Today he turns towards the city centre – he can see the jagged shapes clustered together in the distance. One step after another. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right. At least his shoulder took the impact of that beam, not his leg. At least he's not stuck in a wheelchair. *Ciesz się z drobnostek* – that's what his mother would say. Be happy with the little things. It drives him insane: how content she is. She has no ambition. No desire for anything except what is offered up to her by the world. He vowed years ago not to be like her. He would strive, he decided. He would make things happen. He wouldn't settle for the first thing that came along.

The canal curves to the left. On the other side is a wide stretch of grass, a couple of caravans parked up, a satellite dish strapped to the roof of one. A fat little robin lands on the path in front of him and for a moment they look at each other.

'*Witam ptaka*,' Piotr says. 'Hello, bird.'

The bird hops onto the stone edge of the canal, then flaps its

wings and is up, off across the water to the other side. Piotr watches it go. It would be a fine thing, he thinks, to have wings.

He almost doesn't notice the dark shape in the water. It registers somewhere at the back of his brain and he's a good fifty metres past it before he stops and turns to look. A body. A man in a dark coat and hat, face down in the water. It's the man from downstairs. Ewan. The one people keep asking about. Piotr can't say why he's so sure it's him, but he is. Maybe he fell – drunk or high. The path is narrow – it wouldn't have taken much. Or he might have chosen to go in, decided it was better than living the way he lived, better than whatever pain he was in. Or someone could have pushed him, held him under until he stopped struggling. There's no one down here, and no cameras.

For a moment Piotr considers carrying on with his walk and letting someone else deal with the body. He's never been a fan of the police and all their questions. It isn't his business. In fact, on Piotr's first morning at the B&B, Ewan had sat opposite him in the dining room and told him the best thing to do in a place like that was keep himself to himself. Don't get involved – they had been his exact words. But then he thinks that if it was him lying face down in the canal and Ewan had walked past, he'd have stopped and done something about it. And so he hunts about until he finds a long stick, holds it with his left hand and prods awkwardly at the body until it's close enough for him to turn over.

Except it isn't a body. No bloated face. No rotting skin. Just a big bundle of old cloth, tied together with string. Piotr feels a moment's disappointment – he can't say why. He stabs at the cloth but it just bobs up and down in the water, doesn't even break apart. Stupid thing. He stabs harder and it flips in the water, moves out of reach. And suddenly Piotr is crying. He sniffs and wipes a sleeve across his face, furious. *Dziecko*, he tells himself. Don't be such a baby.

Room 1

Ken was up early to do everyone's breakfasts. He's the only one with a key to the kitchen. Ten years or so ago Steve had caved in and said he'd let residents cook for themselves. That lasted a week and Ken can't say he blames him for putting a stop to it. Some people are pigs – that's the long and the short of it. So it's just Ken allowed in there and the girl who comes to do the cleaning, not that you can see any difference when she's been.

It's bloody freezing, so he's back under the duvet with his clothes and socks on, the pillows propped between his back and the wall, reading – young prostitutes being tortured and murdered in a small northern town. The detective's just discovered he knows one of the victims – in a biblical sense – when there's a banging on Ken's door. He glances up, scowls, stays where he is.

The detective's in the mortuary, looking down at this girl.

'Oi! Ken!'

Jimmy. Jimmy never knocks unless he's after something.

'Kenny boy!'

Ken says nothing, but Jimmy opens the door all the same.

'I'm gagging for a smoke,' Jimmy says. He needs a haircut. He needs a shave. He needs to eat some vegetables.

'Fuck off.' Ken looks back to his book, but he's lost his place, and Jimmy's on at him still.

'I'll pay you back, Ken. Always do.'

He has never paid him back for anything.

'I'm reading.'

Jimmy steps over to the bed, lifts the book from Ken's hand and looks at the cover. 'Any good?'

Ken reaches out his hand and Jimmy closes the book, hands it back.

'You fucking eejit.' Ken tries to let the book fall open by itself. Sometimes it'll show you where you left off, but he doesn't recognise the page. 'Go on.' He gestures towards the door. 'Shut it after you.'

'Just the one, Kenny boy?'

Jimmy's clocked the half-full packet on the mantelpiece and is moving towards it.

'Buy your own.'

'Just the one.' Jimmy picks up the packet, waves it towards Ken who shrugs. At least then he'll leave. Jimmy takes out three fags, tucks one into his mouth and two into his jacket pocket. Thieving bastards, the lot of them.

'You seen Ewan?' Ken asks.

Jimmy flicks a lighter, holds it against the fag and draws in a breath.

'It's been days. All his stuff's still here,' Ken says.

'Probably down the nick.'

Ken shakes his head. Not Ewan.

'He robbed my game. I told you that? He robs from me, he robs from other people. Makes sense. Probably got caught – it serves him right.'

'They'd just caution him,' Ken says, 'He'd be back by now.'

'Maybe he did something worse.' Jimmy takes another drag.
'Killed someone.'

'Bugger off, Jimmy.'

Jimmy shrugs. 'Just saying. It's the quiet ones isn't it? It's always the quiet ones.'

Ken watches him turn and head towards the door.

'Shut it,' he shouts, but Jimmy's gone, the door left gaping open onto the hallway, a cold draught stealing into the room. Ken pulls the duvet a little higher, tucks it around his chest and thighs, tries to find his place in the story again.

Dining Room

Dinner is chicken burgers, chips and beans. Ken cooks it all in the back kitchen, the burgers lined up on the grill, the chips tipped out of the freezer bag onto scratched baking trays, the beans bubbling in a big pan on the hob. The room's nothing much to look at. Dingy and dark; the back windows face onto a tiny rubbish-strewn yard and the brick wall of the building behind. The place hasn't been touched since Ken's been there – black and white lino floor; scuffed laminate worktops; cupboard doors with kick marks; two massive freezers.

Ken dishes out each individual plate. Otherwise people take too much. There's bread, he tells the ones who complain – that Polish bloke for a start, he'd eat three people's dinners if Ken let him – there's as much bread as you can get down you. Nineteen pence a loaf. Bungs you up if you're not careful.

He puts the plates onto a tray and pushes the kitchen door open with his backside. There's only Piotr and Charles in the dining room. Jimmy doesn't usually come down. Ken puts cling-film over his plate and leaves it out for him. He's got a microwave in his room. Most days, Angel's there first, but her place by the door's still empty.

'Speciality of the house,' Ken declares, putting a plate down in front of each man. Neither cracks a smile.

Ken sits at a different table and the room fills with the sound of their eating. He's done the chips well tonight, Ken tells himself, dipping one into a pool of tomato ketchup and taking a bite. Could win an award for these chips.

'You two seen Ewan?' he asks.

'I saw him last week,' Charles says.

'Last week when?'

He shrugs. 'Friday, maybe?'

'Did he say anything? He was going somewhere? Visiting someone? There was a problem?'

'He looked pretty miserable.'

Ken sighs, picks up another chip. A man can't just disappear, he tells himself, though he knows full well that's nonsense. People are always disappearing. They disappear in his books the whole time. Always end up murdered in a park or a river or a suitcase.

'I think I see him in canal,' Piotr says.

'What?' Ken feels his heart quicken.

'I see this thing, looks like body,' Piotr shakes his head. 'But no body, just cloth.'

'You'll give me a bloody heart attack, man.'

'He your friend?' Piotr asks.

Ken swallows. Shrugs.

'Doesn't mean he's not in the canal,' says Charles.

'Jesus,' Ken says. 'You two are a bundle of joy. Look, if you see him, you tell me.'

The two men nod.

'If you're out and about, in town or whatever and you see him you tell me straight off.'

They nod again.

Once they've all finished, Ken takes the plates into the kitchen and dumps them in the sink. Steve should buy a dishwasher. Ken's told him a million times, but he's a stingy bastard. He goes back to the dining room with the roll of cling-film, covers Angel's dinner, and then puts it on a tray along with Jimmy's and carries it up the stairs. There's no harm in doing a good deed now and again.

He puts Jimmy's plate on the floor outside his room and then knocks on Angel's door. He can hear her music, louder than usual. He knocks harder.

'Angel? Angel love? I've got your dinner here.' He looks down at the plate. The cling film is sweating with the leftover heat.

'Angel?'

The music gets louder, he's sure of it. He knocks again.

Nothing.

Her lock's broken the same as everyone else's, but a man doesn't walk into a lady's room unless he's invited. Ken's no monster.

'I'll leave it out here for you,' he shouts at the door. 'It's still warm.'

He waits. Nothing. So he lowers the plate onto the floor,

feeling a twinge in his back muscles as he bends down. He tips it a little, the beans sloshing to the side, smearing the cling-film with tomato sauce.

'You've got to eat, love,' he shouts. 'Keep your strength up.' She's such a tiny, skinny thing – reminds him of a bird, never still.

He waits a while longer, but there's no sound. Steve doesn't like him leaving people's dinners outside their rooms. There are mice – and Ken's seen a rat before, more than once. I don't want Health and Safety on at me, Steve always says, like Health and Safety gives a shit.

Ken turns and walks down the stairs. It's only six o'clock. He could get a couple of cans, see if Aaron from across the street wants him to come over and watch a film, but he's almost at the end of his book, so he settles in the chair by the window instead. Outside, a police siren wails along the main road. Ken waits for it to turn into the avenue, but it carries on towards town. He opens his book. The detective's closing in on the murderer, a couple more chapters and everything will be in order.

Hallway

It's a decent looking house: Victorian, bay windows, stained glass, pretty grand, but it seems as though no-one's given it a moment's thought for the last thirty years. A dark blue door, scuffed and scratched, a patch of cardboard over a missing pane of glass. Broken tiles on the porch floor. Dirty net curtains. The window frames wrecked, dark wood showing through the white paint. There's a pile of overstuffed bin bags on the path, letting out their sweet, rotten scent into the wet night air. Mike lifts his hand but doesn't knock. He does not want to sleep here, even for a night, but it's late, and he's got nowhere else to go.

There had been forms to be filled in and procedures to be followed, so it was gone eight by the time Mike had got out. They gave him his stuff back – phone, wallet, clothes – plus a bus ticket, this address, and money for the one night. They'd called the landlord, they told him, it was all sorted. He'd hoped, for a moment, stepping out of the prison gates, that Kat might have come to meet him, but the street was empty and dark, slick with rain. She'd never visited, not once in ten months, so he had no reason to hope, except he'd written to her, told her his release date, told her he'd changed.

He'd started walking, turned a corner to find a pub: bright interior, footy on the television, a handful of people drinking. He paused, imagined the bubbles rushing up to the top of a freshly poured pint; the taste of it cold on the back of his throat. But one drink would lead to another, and another, and then all the rest, and he has changed, he has made himself promises he has every intention of keeping. And so he carried on, found the right bus stop, and made his way here. The probation woman had said it was a B&B, which had sounded all right. He'd stayed in B&Bs as a kid, on holiday with his parents in Blackpool and Rhyl – remembers frilly curtains, bacon for breakfast, the smell of the sea when you opened the front door. He doesn't need to go inside this house to know that it's not what any sane person would call a B&B.

He knocks. No one answers. So he knocks again and after a long moment sees the fogged shape of a person through the remaining glass. The man who opens the door is maybe sixty, but could just as easily be fifty or seventy. A face lined with drink and fags and a life lived without much comfort. His hair's dark grey, in need of a wash and a cut, and he looks underfed, his jeans baggy around thin legs, a heavy sweatshirt swamping the rest of him.

'I'm Mike.' Mike holds out his hand. The man looks at it, then nods, takes it for the briefest of moments.

'Ken.'

'Probation said they'd called.'

Ken narrows his eyes and Mike thinks he's going to turn him away. He'll be able to work something out. He could call Kat, if he can get a bit of charge in his phone. Or one of the lads. Except he needs to stay away from the lads.

But Ken's backing further into the hallway.

'It's OK?' Mike says. 'I've got money for the night.' He fishes in his pocket for the envelope.

Ken jerks his head and Mike steps inside. The hallway's painted the same pale blue as the corridors of his secondary school. He can smell cigarette smoke, unwashed clothes, baked beans, and something else he'd rather not think about. He pulls the door shut behind him.

'Room five,' Ken says. 'First floor. It's small, but.' He shrugs. 'Sheets and towel on the mattress. Breakfast's at seven. If you're not staying, you're out by ten. If you are staying, I want to know by ten.'

'I won't be staying.'

Ken laughs. 'I said that twenty-two years ago.'

Mike readjusts his bag on his shoulder. 'First floor, is it?'

Ken turns and walks towards the stairs. He moves slowly, like an old man. Mike swallows his irritation and follows.

'You got somewhere else to go?' Ken asks over his shoulder.

Mike clenches his right hand into a fist, then makes himself relax. Things are going to be different this time around. That's something prison offers you, he's realised: the chance to start over. 'I'll think of something,' he says. 'I've got plans.'

FRIDAY



Room 1

Ken's not a big writer, but he finds an old envelope and a biro, puts a book on his lap to lean on. At the top of the envelope he writes Ewan in shaky capital letters, followed by a question mark.

EWAN?

1. Dead (Murdered – random/someone he knows. Health – heart attack? Too young for a stroke? Accident – car/lorry, canal. Booze. Suicide.)
2. Left (but why's his stuff still here?) (Hiding? Police? Family?)
3. Met a woman
4. Alien abduction

He tosses the envelope onto the floor. No use to anyone. And it's not his business, not his concern. A few more days and Ewan will either be back or he won't.

The day stretches out before Ken. He's finished his latest book and hasn't got hold of a new one yet, and he's too restless to just go back to bed. He retrieves the envelope from the floor, turns it over and writes:

1. Library
2. Drop-in – lunch
3. Laundry

It's not an interesting list. He looks at it and wishes he hadn't bothered writing it down. That kind of thing can depress a man.

He hears the postie shoving stuff through the letterbox, the scrape of paper followed by a dull thud. He moves quickly. The post is his domain. No one else can be trusted with it. He sorts it into piles the same way he always does. People can either come and knock for it, or wait for him to bring it to dinner. He sticks the flyers for cheap pizza and kebabs; patio cleaning; Chinese takeaway, straight in the bin.

There's a letter for him. As soon as he picks it off the pile he knows what it is and he stands holding it for a moment, facing the

window, his mind blank. It shouldn't be a surprise. He's been at the community centre every Thursday the last couple of months, sitting at one of those computers, placing his bids. A ground floor flat in Denton. A top floor one in Ashton. Another in Longsight. If he wasn't over sixty he wouldn't have a hope in hell; not enough points to get anywhere near the front of the queue. But this last week he'd been in the top three.

He opens the envelope carefully, prising up the flap without ripping it. A folded piece of paper. Manchester Move's logo at the top. There it is. A flat in Whalley Range. One bedroom. Separate lounge and diner. Kitchen. Bathroom. There's a picture, but only of the outside – a dark brown building with blank rows of windows – nothing particularly inspiring. He can call up to arrange a viewing, it says. It's his, it says.

He moves to the bed and sits down, the letter balanced on his knee. He has lived in this room for twenty-two years. You want out of here, he tells himself. Away from the noise and the hassle of it. Away from the damp. Away from the mice and the cockroaches and the stink of the bathroom. Away from Steve's whinging. You're getting old, mate, he tells himself. And this place is just making you older. That's what the woman at the community centre had said: those houses are bad for your health, you'll feel better with your own flat, trust me. And he had trusted her. Let her sign him up for Manchester Move. Let her text him every Thursday to remind him to come in and do his bids. Listened to her telling him not to quit after the first couple of rejections because something would come up, he just had to be patient. And now here he is, holding a letter saying there is a flat, a set of walls and doors and ceilings, just for him. He should be jumping for joy. Come on, he tells himself, buck up, do something to celebrate. But it doesn't feel quite right – he doesn't feel quite right. He looks at his film posters – *Scarface*; *The Italian Job* – and wonders if they'll rip when he takes them down. He tries to work out how many boxes he'll need to hold all his stuff. It wouldn't be many. Four? Five? He has got his own place. He tries saying it out loud, 'I've got my own place,' but it doesn't make it seem any more real.

Room 3

It's a kitchen knife. Small with a black plastic handle. It's not even that sharp, but if she presses hard enough, just here on the inside of her forearm, if she leans her weight into it, then it cuts through her skin, the blood rushing up to pool along its edge and then drip in long red lines around the curve of her arm. She barely registers it. She can see the blood, see the blade, but she can't feel anything. She moves the knife further up her arm and tries again. A shiver of pain this time. Angel closes her eyes and concentrates, trying to make the pain bigger, trying to make it fill up her mind enough to block out everything else. But it's weak; it shrinks and fades too quickly.

She rolls up the leg of her jeans and tries pressing the knife to her ankle. It's quick to bleed and the pain is sharper, better. She presses harder. And again.

She uses toilet paper soaked with TCP to clean herself up, sucking in her breath as it touches her cut skin. Blood blooms across the paper and she drops the pieces, like red and white flowers, at her feet. She's sitting on the beanbag underneath the window. It was a present from some bloke, she can't remember which one. It's old – the tiny polystyrene balls squashed too many times – but she likes its furry cover, brown and white patches, like a toy dog. It could do with a wash, but she reckons it would fall apart and then she'd have nothing but a cotton bag of shitty polystyrene, so she leaves it be.

She's wearing jeans and a short-sleeved top, and she's freezing; the cold reaching right into her bones. She dabs at her arm again, to make sure the blood's stopped, then gets herself up and pulls on her black cardigan. The same one she wore yesterday. She stands, hugging it around her, and the tears come, messy and unasked for. Don't cry. She wipes at her face. Don't fucking cry. But it's got a hold of her now. She hits her palm hard against the forearm she's just cleaned up. The pain shoots through her but it's not enough to stop the tears. Nothing is enough.

She knows exactly what would be enough, but she's not going to do it. She's not.

If Ewan had come, it would have been different. If Ewan had come he'd have known what to say to that woman with the big nose and the blouse with parrots on it, with her files and records and that blue biro she kept tapping against the table top. Tap, tap, tap. Angel had had to sit on her hands to stop herself from snatching it off her and throwing it across the room. Ewan would have known how to explain to that woman that Angel was a good person; that she loved her son; that she would look after him better than anyone else could; that she would die for him without thinking twice about it. He would have been able to tell her how Angel had got off the drugs. Gone cold fucking turkey. The sweats, the shits, the lot of it. She did that on her own. She grinned and fucking bore it, and it was all for Dylan. If they kept him away from her, then what was the point?

She's going to break Ewan's balls when she gets hold of him. She's going to punch him till he cries. If you'd come, she'll shout, if you'd been there like you said you'd be, I'd have Dylan. I know it. He'd be here now. She hugs her cardigan tighter across her chest. They'd be bidding for a little two-bed place of their own. Out of town maybe. Somewhere quiet, with trees and a park and nice schools. If Ewan had been there she'd have got it right, she knows it. She'd have ticked all the right boxes – the boxes Ewan knows about and she can't for the life of her work out. The woman would have smiled, and said how impressed she was with Angel, that she could see no earthly reason why she shouldn't be reunited with her boy. And then Dylan would have walked into the room, like a rabbit pulled from a magician's hat, and she'd have put her arms around him and held him so tight he'd have known that this was it: he was never being taken away from her again.

Room 5

Mike's alarm goes at six and he's up before the second ring. Discipline. That's what he needs. No slacking. His left ankle's itching and when he pulls his pyjama leg up he can see two tiny red bites just above the bone. Fleas. Bed bugs. He has got to get out of here.

First though, he does his exercises – press-ups, sit-ups, tricep dips, a routine he worked out inside and has done often enough now not to have to think about. It isn't easy in a room this size, he either bashes himself on the edge of the bed, or the battered-looking chest of drawers, or the wall. And the carpet's not something you want to be lying on, or putting your face or hands anywhere near, but needs must.

He'd been a lazy kid. Hadn't done anything much except play computer games, smoke and sit around. He got skilled at avoiding the ball, and then skilled at avoiding games classes altogether. He wasn't fat with it, the way kids are these days; that had come later.

Even now, it's not as though he's got a six-pack, but all that flab's gone and if he runs a hand over his arms or legs he can feel the muscles – curved and strong. It keeps him sane – that's what he learnt inside – it stops his brain getting out of control; it stops him wanting to skin up; it makes him get out of bed in the morning and do something.

When he's finished his exercises, he washes at the sink. He took a look at the bathroom last night and it's not fit to wash a dog in. He runs cold water into his cupped hands and splashes it onto his body. It does the job, more or less.

There's a mirror tile screwed to the wall above the sink. Mike looks himself in the eye. This is the first day of the rest of my life, he says, moving his lips around the words but not giving them any sound. This is my chance to start over.

The first thing he has to do is get a job. He did a training course in sewing when he was inside. Surprised himself by liking it – the chuntering rhythm of the machine; the neat rows of stitches; the

pleasure of a straight line. He can't think where he'd go to get a job stitching, but there must be somewhere. Hell, he'll stack shelves in Aldi, he'll clean toilets until he can find something better.

He leans towards the mirror and examines the crow's feet fanning out from the corners of his eyes, then the thin scar that runs from the edge of his mouth back across his cheek. He's thirty five. Never been married. Never had kids. Five years off the big four O. He needs to get his shit together.

The first thing he'll do is find somewhere decent to live. Then a job. Then the rest of it – a good woman, a car, maybe he'll even call his parents. First things first though – he's not going to stay in this place a minute longer than he has to.

Room 2

It's freezing, air seeping in like cold water around the edges of the windows. The room smells of damp and old fags and feet. A dark patch of mould reaches across the ceiling, the paint flaking underneath it like bad skin. The paper lampshade's torn along one side and the bulb hangs down lower than it should.

The wall above the sofa is covered with pictures cut from magazines, cheap silver drawing pins at each corner. Not a millimetre of space in between. They are all of the sea. Wild. Calm. Grey. Turquoise. And beaches. Pebble. Sand. Rocks. Backed by dunes. Backed by cliffs. The paper has suffered from the damp. Curled, stained, discoloured. But the effect is almost magical – so much water and space.

Room 6

It's like being in a film made by some sick bastard who thinks it's funny to put his characters in situations that make no sense. It would be called *A Version of Hell*, or maybe, simply, *Job Centre*. Charles had got there on time, signed himself in with the electronic pen thing, handed over his Work Plan to the lad on the other side of the desk, who looked about twelve. Ginger hair. Spots. With that gangly, not-quite-grown-into-himself look. Charles did all that, and then he tried to explain his situation, again. He did it every time he came. Maybe he should learn that these weren't the right people to talk to, but he didn't know who else to try, where else to go.

'I live in London,' he says.

The ginger-haired lad frowns, looks at the computer screen. 'Say's here you live in Manchester.'

'I'm sleeping here, yeah. The council sent me up, didn't they? No places in Barking they said. Which is rubbish.' He shakes his finger at the boy. 'There are a load of new-builds going up, they're just not for the likes of me if you catch my drift.'

The boy looks at him blankly.

'What I'm saying is, I live in London. My ex-wife's in London. My kids are in London. My mates are in London. So there's no point me getting a job up here, do you see what I'm saying?'

'Your JSA is dependent on you looking for work.'

'I know that.' Charles can feel himself getting angry. He needs to keep it in check. 'I know that, son. What I'm saying is, I want to look for a job in London.'

The lad sticks his bottom lip out, looks again at the computer screen rather than at Charles. 'You need to look for work.'

'I need to be in London.'

'I'm afraid that's a housing issue.'

Charles let his breath out. 'So who do I talk to?' he asks.

The lad shrugs. 'Housing I guess.'

'Housing.' Charles nods. 'Housing don't give a shit.'

The lad blinks. 'Are you interested in attending a job club?'

'In London? Sure.'

'There's one in Harpurhey, starting Monday.'

'Where's that then?'

'Just north of the centre. You get the 112 or the 114.'

Charles looks across the room – rows of cubicles like the one he's sitting in; people wearing shirts and ties sitting opposite people in tracksuits; computer keyboards click-clattering.

'I need to go home,' he says.

'I can't help you.' The boy flicks a glance at Charles. 'I'm sorry.'

Charles doesn't mean to lose it. He's got good at holding things together – or better anyway. And it's not the boy's fault, he's just a guy doing his job. But all the same, Charles stands up from his blue plastic seat and lets out a roar. Slams his fist on the desk so hard the papers jump, the boy jumps, half the room jumps. He's a big man. Six two. Broad shouldered. Black. The kind of man people are frightened of before he even opens his mouth.

He leans across the desk, getting his face close to the pale, ginger-haired lad on the other side. 'I want to go home,' he hisses, quiet now.

The boy swallows. Charles sees his Adam's apple shift with the effort. 'I'm going to have to ask you to leave.'

Already there are security guards – two of them – moving across the room.

For a moment Charles thinks he's going to cry. He blinks it away. Sniffs. 'I'm just asking for someone to listen to me.'

'Sir?' One of the security guards has his hand on Charles' arm. Charles tries shakes him off, but he's a professional and hangs on. The other guard's on his opposite side.

The boy has two red patches burning on his cheeks. 'I'm afraid you'll be sanctioned,' he mutters. 'There'll be a letter.'

Charles feels the fight go out of him, his limbs suddenly heavy, his whole body tired and useless. He's got twenty quid in his wallet and that's the lot. It'll buy him a Megabus ticket to London, but not much else. He lets the guards walk him to the exit and shove him out on the street, wiping their hands against their trousers as if to get rid of the touch of him.

Should have kept your mouth shut. He stumbles down the street towards the main road. Should have kept your mouth shut.

He walks back to the house. It's an effort just to put one foot in front of the other. Halfway back he finds himself in the off licence. He hands over eight quid for a half bottle of whisky. Which leaves him with twelve. You're an idiot, he tells himself, lurching out onto the street again. You're a fucking idiot.

Hallway

Angel's put a dress on, even though it's cold, even though it means she has to wear shoes that rub against the cuts on her ankles. Self respect. She has to maintain self respect if she's going to stay clean, stay focused, find Ewan.

She's on her way to the shop down the road. Chocolate. That's all she's going to buy. No fags. No booze. Just a big bar of Dairy Milk and maybe a sandwich for later, or a Pot Noodle. She ate all her dinner – chicken nuggets and chips – but she's still hungry. Maybe she's got worms, she thinks, eating up her insides.

She makes her way down the stairs, slowly, holding onto the handrail, keeping her chin high. She pictures herself as one of those film stars with the hair and the curves and the strings of pearls, walking down the stairs like it's a catwalk, and some man in a suit and bow tie is looking up at her like she's the only woman in the world.

As she reaches the landing, the front door opens. It's Nige, doing his rounds.

'Angel!' He grins. 'You back on the good stuff yet?' He takes a tiny plastic bag from his pocket and dangles it in front of her.

It would make everything go away. That's what it's for. That's the beauty of it. She thinks about the woman with the parrots on her blouse. The look on her face, like Angel was a piece of dirt she couldn't get rid of quickly enough.

'You are, ain't you? Knew you couldn't stay away from a good thing. I'll do you a nice price, Angel. You know me.'

The first time she took it she thought she'd gone straight up to heaven. She couldn't understand why she'd ever said no.

'No thanks,' she says, making her voice bright, forcing herself to smile.

'A little freebie?' Nige wafts the bag towards her. 'A gift. Me to you. I like to treat my customers right.'

She could do it just the once. She's stopped before, so she could stop again. It might clear her head a bit, help her see what she should do next.

‘Nah, thanks Nige. I’m good.’

She sees his mouth harden. It makes his face look mean.

‘There’s a new guy,’ she says. ‘Mike or Matt or something. Room five. Next to the bathroom.’ She gestures behind her to the stairs. ‘You could try him.’

She stands aside to let Nige past. Bites down on her lips so she won’t say anything, won’t call out for him to stop – maybe she’ll take him up on the offer, just a bag, just this once.

She is going to the shops to buy chocolate, she tells herself. She’ll come back, make a brew, dip the chocolate into the tea until it starts to melt and then suck it hard against the top of her mouth so it melts some more, so it covers her teeth with its soft sweetness. And then she will make a plan to find Ewan and he will help her get her boy back.

Room 4

Jimmy's kept the cat in his room. He's worried if he lets it outside it'll never come back again. It seems happy enough, has taken up residence on the armchair by the window. He's cleared the bags off and given it a pile of jumpers to lie on, though he reckons it doesn't feel the cold the same way humans do. The main problem is shit and piss. He's found a cardboard box, ripped its sides mostly off to make a kind of tray, and lined it with newspaper. But the cat hasn't worked out what it's for, or it doesn't care. It leaves its droppings on the floor for Jimmy to sort out, pisses where it feels like pissing. The smell's not great. He's pushed up the sash window to give the place a bit of an air and the wind's blowing the rain in, spattering the carpet and the piles of newspapers with dark drops. Maybe he'll pick up a can of air freshener at the pound shop tomorrow when he goes out for his drink.

He didn't go down for dinner. Ken has it ready at four thirty – way too early for Jimmy. He brings it up to his room, sticks it in the microwave when he's ready.

'Bit of chicken?' He breaks one of the nuggets in half and holds it out towards the cat.

It lifts its head, jumps off the chair and up onto the bed next to Jimmy, takes the nugget from his hand with its mouth. He sees its tiny sharp teeth and bright pink tongue.

He hasn't given it a name. He doesn't even know if it's a boy cat or a girl and he's not that inclined to investigate.

'Chip?' He holds one out. The cat sniffs but doesn't take it.

'Suit yourself.' He pops it into his own mouth, breaks off another bit of nugget for the cat.

'You know that bastard reckons he's leaving?'

The cat has its head down, concentrating on the chicken.

'Ken? Ken's been here twenty years. Thirty years. He reckons he's just going to up and go.' Jimmy lets out a bark of a laugh. 'He's kidding himself.' He reaches over and strokes the cat, running

his hand from the back of its head along its spine. 'He's not going anywhere, that one.'

He eats another chip. 'Not that I'd mind, like. He's a boring sod, Ken is. And then Steve could get someone in who could fucking cook, couldn't he?' He laughs again. 'That'd be a result, wouldn't it? Someone who could cook.'

Room 6

Piotr's been out all day. He started walking after breakfast and just carried on. Through the reservoirs to Newton, Dukinfield, Stalybridge. The world got greener and richer the further he went. He spoke to no one and no one spoke to him. He bought himself a bag of chips and then later, on the way back, when it was already dark, he stopped for a pint in a pub with an open fire and horse brasses lined up along the beams.

He's tired. Hungry. Finds his dinner covered with cling-film in the dining room and eats it cold, standing up, with his hands. Chips and chicken nuggets. He has to chew and chew before he can swallow it down. He wipes his hands on his trousers and goes upstairs, feeling the ache in his calves and thighs and a tight throb in his bad shoulder. At least he'll sleep well tonight. He's been waking up all hours the last few weeks and lying there in the half-dark, listening to Charles snore and the traffic and sirens on the main road; thinking about the money in his bank account getting smaller and smaller; thinking about Poland, and his mum, and the girl he used to go out with who said she'd write but never has.

The smell hits him as soon as he opens the door to the room. Whisky. Despair. His dad used to smell the same way most nights of the week and then, later on, most mornings too.

Charles is half lying, half sitting up in bed, the bottle empty next to him. He lifts his head as Piotr comes in.

'Why would a man like you come to a shitty country like this?' he asks. 'Tell me, Piotty, why would you come here? They're all bastards. It's run by bastards.' His eyes are unfocused, his head lolling on his neck. 'Do you know, I'm not a drinker, I'm not. I've not had much have I?' He lifts the bottle for Piotr to inspect. 'But I'm drunk. That's what I am. Drunk. A big man like me on a little bottle of whisky.'

Piotr pulls off his boots, hangs his coat on the back of the door.

'Bastards,' Charles mutters. 'I'd offer you a drink, man, but.'

'I'm good.' Piotr goes to the sink in the corner of the room and

splashes water over his face. He squeezes toothpaste onto his brush and starts to clean his teeth.

'I bet in your country they wouldn't do this to a man,' Charles says. 'They wouldn't send a man halfway across the country away from his kids, would they?'

Piotr shrugs, carries on brushing.

'Have I told you about my girls? Rosie and Bea. Rosie's eleven. Bea's six. Beautiful, both of them.' He moves his hand as though he is stroking his daughter's head. 'They can't send me here.' His voice rises. 'They can't tell me to get a job here. How can they do that? And how am I supposed to live in this shithole? This isn't a home. It'll kill me. Same way it killed that guy, Ewan. Trust me, he's in that canal somewhere. He couldn't stand it any longer.'

Piotr spits into the sink and rinses out his mouth. When he turns, Charles has got his hands over his face and his shoulders are shaking. He takes in a noisy gulp of air, lets out something between a snort and a sob.

'Hey. Man.' Piotr walks to Charles's bed and puts his hand on the man's shoulder for a moment. 'Is OK.'

Charles shakes his head. 'Is not OK, Piotty. Is not OK.'

'It's Piotr.'

'Pee-ot-ra. It's not OK. I can't even buy a bus ticket now. I bought the whisky. Why the fuck did I buy the whisky?'

When Piotr's dad died, he and his mum had gone around the house getting rid of all the bottles stashed away in cupboards, drawers, under beds and chairs. They had poured whatever was left in them down the sink and then dropped them into thick bin bags. That's what had killed him – the drink. He must have wanted it, Piotr thought at the time, he must have wanted to get away from Piotr and his mother, from the village and the farm.

He pats Charles' shoulder again. 'You find way,' he says.

Charles looks up at him, his eyes bloodshot and desperate. 'How?'

'They are your children, no?'

'Yes.'

Piotr shrugs. 'So you find a way.'

SATURDAY

Room 5

He's got to stop kidding himself. He needs a stash of money before he can rent himself a decent place. Six weeks money in advance, that's what they all want. He's got forty quid in his pocket and a whole pile of paperwork to fill in before he can get his Job Seekers through. The thought of staying here another night, never mind a couple of months, makes Mike feel sick, but needs must.

If he's going to stay, he can at least deal with his room. Ken laughed when Mike asked about a Hoover, but he found one in the under stairs cupboard, underneath a pile of foldaway chairs and a load of black plastic sheeting. It's a shitty make, and there's not really much floor to clean, but Mike plugs it in and runs it from the door, along the length of the single bed, to the chest of drawers, then under the window to the tiny sink. Back and forth, back and forth. He switches it off and peers at the floor – not much of a difference. He turns the thing back on, pushes it hard against the carpet, back and forth, back and forth.

Someone's banging on his door. Mike flicks the switch and the Hoover stops. The knock comes again.

It's an old-looking guy, one of those who's drunk himself half to death already. He's too thin. His face lined from years of fags and drink. His hair's grey and thin and wild.

'You going to stop with that fucking noise?' he spits.

There's a whiff of cat's piss about the man. 'I'm Hoovering,' Mike says.

'I knows what you're doing. I'm asking when you're planning on stopping. It's half past eight in the fucking morning.'

'I'll stop when I'm done.'

The man narrows his eyes. 'You're new.'

'Yeah. Mike.' Mike holds out his hand but the man doesn't take it.

'And you're Hoovering, are you?'

Mike nods.

'Well you're giving me a fucking headache.'

Mike says nothing.

'Not much floor in there anyway.' The man leans towards Mike, eyeing the room. 'Like a bloody rabbit hutch. You want to ask for Ewan's old room. Number two, downstairs. I'd bet good money he's in the nick – he's not coming back here however much Kenny-boy wants him to.'

Mike's never met this Ewan they're all talking about, but he reckons that the man's won the lottery and bought himself a penthouse flat in the centre of town, decided to leave all his stuff behind so he never need remember living in this dump.

'I'm serious,' Jimmy says. 'It's four times the size of this place.'

'I'll be done soon,' Mike says. He hasn't bought this week's lottery ticket yet – he'll do it once he's finished cleaning.

The man grunts and turns away. He walks with a stoop, as though he can't be bothered to hold his head up. Mike watches him cross the corridor to the room opposite. He gets a glimpse inside – piles of rubbish: papers, clothes, bags, bits of plastic – before the man shuts the door. Mike shuts his own, turns the Hoover on again and gives the floor another go. It doesn't look much better – stained and threadbare – but at least he knows it's cleaner.

As well as a Hoover, he'd asked Ken for a cloth and some cleaning stuff from the kitchen. The man muttered like Mike had asked for a rent reduction, or a three course meal, but he got off his arse eventually, came back with a scratty Jay cloth and an almost empty bottle of antiseptic spray. Mike starts with the sink, using his fingernail under the cloth to scrape out the gunk around the plughole, around the overflow, around the base of each tap. He tries to clean the mattress. He doesn't know much about bed bugs and he can't imagine a bit of spray is going to help, but it's better than nothing. As he scrubs, he imagines seeing his numbers come up on the lottery – a perfect match. Millions. Then Kat would come running. He'd be kind, but firm. She had missed her chance. He was starting again without her.

He wipes the mirror. Then the top of the chest of drawers and the windowsill. The dust comes off in soft dove-grey lumps. He cleans the door handle, the bed frame, runs the cloth along

the skirting boards. Every time he washes it out and sees the dirt falling in dark clots into the bowl before slipping away down the plughole he waits to feel a sense of satisfaction, but it doesn't come. He doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to end up like that old guy, banging on people's doors and telling them what to do; drinking himself to death.

A man had knocked on his door last night offering whatever drug took his fancy. Mike had shaken his head. He's finished with all that. But right now he wishes he'd said yes, bought himself a little something. It would have made the day go easier.

He rinses out the cloth, stands on the bed and starts wiping the walls, big sweeps from left to right as high as he can reach. He doesn't do that shit any more, he tells himself. He's changing things, even if it doesn't feel like it right this minute, he's changing things. It can't be that hard. A job. A place to stay. A new life.

Room 6

Piotr's coat is hanging on the back of the door, his wallet right there in the pocket for anyone to see. Charles stands and looks at it. There'll be no money in it, he tells himself, and even if there is he's not a thief. His head's pounding, his mouth thick with stale whisky even though he's cleaned his teeth twice already.

What had Piotr said? You find a way. A man could interpret that as an invitation.

Charles reaches out and touches the square bulge in the coat pocket. It doesn't feel empty. He glances at Piotr. He's lying on his back, his head to one side, his bad arm resting outside of the duvet. He's not snoring but his breathing is heavy and regular.

'Hey! Piotr?' He's got the guy's name right at long last. 'Hey! Mate?' He raises his voice a notch more.

Nothing. The man's dead to the world. And there's his wallet, sitting in his coat pocket, hanging on the back of the door for anyone to take. That's it. Anyone could come in and take the man's money. There's no lock on the door. Only an idiot wouldn't sleep with his cash under his pillow in a place like this. If he confronts Charles, Charles could just blink and look surprised and say no, of course, it wasn't him – that wasn't the kind of thing he'd do.

He lets himself slip his hand into the pocket and lift out the wallet. Brown leather. Worn. He glances at the bed, but Piotr's fast asleep. He pulls the popper on the little strip of leather and opens the thing up. Fifty quid in tens. His headache shifts, sharp and painful at the very back of his skull.

He thinks about just taking twenty, but that's not what a thief would do – a thief would take the lot and not think twice about it. He looks again at the man in the bed.

You find a way.

People do things they wouldn't otherwise do when they've got kids. Charles knows that. They put themselves in harm's way. They beg. Steal. Lie. They do whatever it takes. That's biology. Evolution.

That's just how it is.

He lifts the five notes out of the wallet, keeping his eye on Piotr. The man doesn't move a muscle. If Charles couldn't hear him breathing he might think he was dead. Charles tucks the notes into the pocket of his jeans. He isn't that kind of guy. He isn't.

He grabs his rucksack – clean pants, socks, t-shirt. Enough for a few days. Phone. Charger. A clumsy sandwich he'd made with the bacon from his breakfast, wrapped up in a napkin.

He takes a last look at the man in the bed by the window. Piotr. From a village in Poland. Who disappears every day, comes back tired and hungry but never says where he's been.

'Sorry, mate,' he whispers.

Piotr stirs then, gives a little groan and turns onto his side.

Charles feels the adrenalin rush to his legs. He opens the door as quietly as he can and steps out of the room, creeps down the first set of stairs to the landing, then runs down the next set to the hallway and out into the grey morning.

Hallway

Piotr pauses at the bottom of the stairs. The front door's wide open and he can see the path choked with weeds and rubbish; the houses opposite; the sky a cool but bright blue above them. His shoulder aches, but the rest of him is impatient to get going. He will walk in a different direction today. Down through Reddish Vale towards Stockport. He woke too late for breakfast, so he'll have to buy something. The thought irritates him – he can't afford to be wasting money he doesn't have. But maybe he'll sit by the lake in the park and eat there, looking at the water and the birds that haven't left for warmer places. Nicer than that cramped dining room at the back of the house.

There's a cat sitting outside room two, where the missing man used to stay. It's black with a white-tipped nose and a patch of white on its front paw. It has its leg in the air and is licking at the fur underneath. Piotr watches. It's a good system – no need for water, no need for soap, no need for towels.

'You don't want to be here, cat,' Piotr tells it. 'Out. Go out.' He waves his good arm towards the door.

The cat looks at him. He's never liked cats. They are a little too sure of themselves. And they make him sneeze.

'Out. Out.' He brings his teeth together into a hissing sound, flaps again with his arm, but the cat does nothing. He nudges it, gently, with his boot.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

Piotr turns. It's the old man with the lined face and the funny accent. He's coming down the stairs quicker than Piotr's ever seen him move, his whole body lurching from side to side as though his limbs don't bend in the right places.

'You leave that cat alone.'

Piotr frowns. 'Should be outside.'

The man's next to him now, his hand gripping Piotr's arm. 'I said you leave him alone or I swear to Almighty God you'll be sorry.'

Piotr steps away, lifts his hand. 'OK. OK. I go.'

'I see you touch that cat again, you're a dead man.'

'I not touch.'

'Get out.'

Piotr walks towards the main door. He'd seen Jimmy pick a fight with Ewan a few weeks back. Drunk, flailing his arms. Ewan hadn't fought back, had stood there and taken a punch in the face that had turned a nasty purple-blue.

'Hey.'

Piotr turns.

'You seen a man, yay big.' Jimmy raises his hand higher than his own head. 'Dark hair. Skinny as a whippet. Asking for me?'

Piotr shakes his head.

'Goes by the name Mac.'

Piotr shakes his head again and Jimmy nods, bends down to stroke the cat which has returned to its cleaning.

'You see him, you say you don't know me.'

'OK.'

Piotr walks down the path, turns towards the main road. The air is cold but fresh. It smells good. His stomach rumbles to itself. He pats it. A bacon sandwich and a cup of tea, he tells it. A day in the sunshine.

Room 3

Angel wakes from a dream about Ewan. It slips out of her grasp as soon as her eyes open and even when she closes them again she can't get back there. All she can remember is walking along a canal with Ewan at her side, talking. He was telling her what she needed to do next and it all made perfect sense. She turns onto her stomach, presses her face into the pillow and scrunches her eyes tight shut, but there's nothing useful in her brain, just an image of that woman with the big nose and parrot blouse; and then Dylan. He's seven on Tuesday and she hasn't got him a present. She can't think what to buy that will say everything she needs to say. Strictly speaking she's not allowed to send him anything, not allowed to be in touch, not after the last time they took him away. But she knows where his school is and they can't stop her standing on a pavement. It's a free country.

She twists onto her side and lies looking at the cluster of photos on the table next to her bed. Dylan as a baby, wrapped in a white blanket. Dylan holding a plastic toy truck and laughing, his mouth wide open, his teeth like tiny white pebbles. Dylan playing football in the hallway of the flat they used to live in.

What had that woman said? You have shown a selfish disregard for your son's welfare. Bitch. She didn't have kids. Angel knew that even before she'd asked, which she shouldn't have done, she realised too late – it made the woman hate her even more. But if she'd had kids, she would have understood. She would have understood that Angel would do anything for that boy. Anything.

Ewan must be somewhere. Unless he's dead. She pushes the thought away. There's no reason for him being dead. No reason at all.

She swings her feet down to the floor and rubs at her face to try and wake herself up. She's been looking – walking the streets, asking around, and Ken's put the word out too, but neither of them have come up with anything.

She needs to go to the police. She almost laughs at the idea, except now she's thought it she can't stop thinking it. They find

missing people, don't they? There are those posters, with the red writing. MISSING. Ewan. Fuck, she doesn't even know the man's last name.

She knocks on Ken's door, pushes it open without waiting for an answer.

Ken's sitting on his bed, legs stretched out, reading a book with thick gold letters across its black cover.

'Angel!'

'What's Ewan's last name?'

Ken frowns.

'I'm going to the police. Right now. I'm reporting him missing.'

'Ah, come on now, Angel.'

'You've looked for him, right? Asked around?'

Ken nods.

'Me too. Nothing. So now it's the police's turn. That's what they're for.'

'They're not going to give a shit about someone like Ewan.'

Angel bites at her lips. 'I'll make them. They have to. I just need his last name, Ken.'

Ken gets to his feet, bends to pick up an envelope from a pile by the fireplace. 'Bright,' he says. 'Ewan Bright. But don't waste your time, love. He'll have his reasons. Maybe he's hooked up with a new woman. He'll turn up if he wants to turn up.'

A woman. Angel feels her heart do something when Ken says that. Ewan with a woman.

'You don't think he's dead, do you?' she says.

Ken hesitates for a moment before shaking his head.

'So I'll go to the station and report it. They'll have to do something.'

Ken gives her a look like he's sorry for her.

'He said he'd come with me,' she blurts. 'To my meeting. And then he didn't. And that's not right. That's not what Ewan would do.'

Ewan with a woman. Lying in bed. Laughing.

'Well, good luck to you.' Ken gets back on the bed and picks up his book.

Angel stands and watches him for a moment. She's never liked books, never read one since school, but seeing Ken with his – the

way he's quiet and focused when he has one in his hands – she wonders if she's missing out on something.

'I'm off,' she says.

Ken barely glances up.

'They'll have to do something,' she says. 'I'll make sure of it.'

Bathroom

Piotr had got back long after the sun had given up and sunk below the horizon. Cold and tired and fed up. Now he eases the sling away from his bad arm and over his head. He hangs it on the door handle, unbuttons his trousers, yanks off his T-shirt, and gets them over the handle too. The shower's already going. Cold, of course. The stingy bastard who runs this place never puts the heating on. But cold will do him fine. He wants to wash his day away. Shock it out of him.

He steps into the bath, not looking at the layers of grime that run around its inside, or the mould lurking in the folds of the shower curtain. The water's cold enough to make him gasp as it hits his skin.

Anyone could have stolen the money, he tells himself, pouring shower gel into his palm and rubbing his hands together so it lathers into white foam. There are no locks on the doors in this place. It's his own fault for leaving his wallet in his pocket instead of sleeping with it under his pillow. He rubs soap along the length of his arms, up into his armpits, across his chest. It was Charles. He knows it was Charles. He's taken it and done a runner back to London. And Piotr's fifty quid short. His bank account's almost empty. His shoulder hurts.

He tips his face up to meet the water, lets it pour over his closed eyes, his nose and cheeks and mouth. He tries to feel angry – he's been trying to feel angry all day – but all he feels is a blank nothingness. He rubs his hand over his face, the soap suds stinging his eyes and seeping their bitter taste between his lips. *Łajdak*, he says to himself. Bastard. It helps a little. He makes himself imagine holding Charles by the collar, getting right in his face – a flash of fear in the man's eyes.

There's a banging on the bathroom door.

'I am here,' he shouts.

'I'm bursting.' It's the old drunk. The one who doesn't like him.

'There is other bathroom.'

'Some fucker's broke the flush.'

'I am in shower.'

'Well hurry up.'

Piotr closes his eyes and puts his head back under the stream of water. This is not forever, he tells himself. He thinks about the canal, the sunlight glittering off its surface; the weeds and rubbish sitting just below the water; the occasional boat puttering past.

The man bangs on the door again. 'Fucking hurry up,' he shouts.

Piotr puts more shower gel into his hand, lathers it up, washes his backside, his balls, down each leg to his feet. He'd looked out for more shadows in the water, dark shapes the size of a grown man. But he'd seen nothing.

'I'm coming in.'

The door is shoved open, Piotr's clothes tipped onto the floor.

'I am in shower,' Piotr shouts, holding his hand over his cock.

'And I'm bursting. I told you.'

'Pick up your clothes.' Piotr gestures to the pile on the floor.

The man just heads for the toilet, unzips and starts to piss, a heavy sound of water hitting water. Piotr stands quite still, waiting for him to finish. The man tucks himself away, turns and leaves the room, without flushing, without washing his hands, without picking up Piotr's clothes. He leaves the door half open.

Piotr blows out a long breath and feels his shoulders sag. He wouldn't blame Ewan if he had stepped off the edge of the canal into the dark water. He doesn't blame that girl Angel for shoving whatever it is she shoves into her veins to make it all go away. He rubs shampoo into his short hair, rinses it off and steps out of the shower, shivering. His towel is thin and barely absorbent. He dries himself the best he can, lifts his boxers and trousers off the floor. It's filthy. They're filthy. No matter.

SUNDAY



Room 1

Ken's tidying up. He does it every Sunday morning. Clears away the cups; washes the ashtrays; gets the room in order. Everything has a place. He likes it that way – there's a calmness to it.

The letter from Manchester Move sits on the windowsill, tucked back into its envelope. He's going to call them on Monday and arrange a viewing. If he doesn't like it, he won't go. If he does, he will. Simple as that.

There's a knock on his door. More of a tap. A fingernail.

'Angel?' he calls.

'Ken!'

He smooths his hands over his hair, brushes his shirt down. 'Come in love.'

She's wearing skinny jeans with a row of holes ripped out of each thigh. A tight black top that makes her look even thinner than usual. Her mouth is cherry red, and she's drawn a dark ring around each eye. She's got that orange stuff on her face – he can see it clinging to the thin downy hair on her cheeks.

'Looking lovely,' he says.

She stays by the door, one hand resting against the frame. She hasn't got those fancy nails girls have these days. Hers are bitten, the skin around them red raw.

'We have to look for him,' she says.

'Come. Sit.' Ken waves her into the room. Gestures to the armchair. She doesn't move.

'I'm serious,' she says. 'You and me have to look for him.'

'Cup of tea?'

She scowls. 'I thought you were bothered.'

'I am.' Truth is he's pretty much given up hope. If the lad's gone, he's gone. There'll be a good reason for it, or no reason at all, and none of it is Ken's problem, not really.

'So come on then.' She's jiggling up and down on her tiptoes.

'The police didn't help then?'

Angel scowls.

Ken glances at the envelope on the windowsill. A few days and he could be out of here. He can't decide if he'll miss it.

'They didn't believe me,' Angel says. 'And this man, he just had this look, this kind of glazed look, like "think I give a shit?" He didn't even listen.'

'They don't want the paper work.'

'It's their job.'

Ken smiles. She's an innocent, Angel, despite everything.

'So fuck 'em. We'll do it.'

'It's been days, Angel. He could be in London. France. America.'

'He's not in America.'

'So where is he?'

'We'll go to the centres again – the lunch places and that. And then town. We'll go into town and ask around.' She kneads her lips together. 'What do you think?'

'We've both done this already, love.'

'But we might have missed something. Missed someone who's seen him. Please come, Ken?'

Ken hesitates, but he's got nothing else to do, except line his books up, dust the bloody skirting boards. 'All right.'

Angel launches herself across the room, throws her arms around him and hugs him tight. It takes him by surprise. The smell of her – soap and perfume. The way her hair tickles at his neck. He finds it hard to breathe for a moment, and by the time he's recovered she's pulled away and is looking at the floor, as though he's embarrassed her somehow.

'Let's go then,' he says.

She glances up, flashes him a smile. 'He'll be somewhere,' she says. 'He has to be.'

Landing

'Seems to me you've got an attitude problem.' Jimmy squares up to the Polish man – an ugly bloke: square head, small eyes, pale lashes, a mouth that's a bit too red and soft-looking – like a girl's.

The man blinks. He's at the bottom of the attic stairs, a rucksack on his back. Always off somewhere, this one. Probably working on the sly, same time as claiming benefits.

'I don't like people with attitude problems,' Jimmy says. He slurs a little – he can hear it, feel the sway of the vodka in his head, at the backs of his knees. 'They give me a problem, see?'

The man tries to move past but Jimmy blocks him, puts his palm against the man's chest. 'No you don't.'

The man raises both hands. 'I don't want trouble.'

'Too late for that.' Jimmy's laughter joins up with the booze, fizzing and popping off the inside of his skin. He moves his arm back and then jabs it forwards, quick as you like. He's been fighting for years – knows what he's doing. His fist catches the man's jaw. A nice crack. His head flung back. Jimmy's got his hands up now, protecting himself.

'Too wet to fight?' he mocks.

The man is staring at him. 'I no fight with you.'

'You fucking sissy.' He's just like that Ewan bloke – thinks he's too good for a place like this; thinks he's too good to fight a man like Jimmy.

'I go.' The man points past Jimmy to the stairs. 'I go out.'

Jimmy aims another punch but the man blocks him. Jimmy feels it jar along his arm and into his shoulder. He gets another one in fast, low down on the man's ribs.

'I no fight with you,' the man shouts. 'I go out.'

'If I fight with you, you fight with me.'

The man shakes his head.

'Jimmy O'Connor?' A voice calls up from the hallway. It's Steve. Fat landlord Steve. Got nothing better to do than hang around in

Ken's room, smoking, poking his nose into other people's business. 'There's someone looking for you. Saw him here yesterday.'

Jimmy lowers his fists. Swallows.

The Polish man slips past, quick as you like, and Jimmy lets him go.

'What did he look like?'

Jimmy walks to where he can see Steve, who shrugs, holds a hand out roughly level with his own head and says, 'Yay high. Skinny bugger. Looked pissed off.'

'You told him I live here?'

Steve shakes his head. 'I didn't say nothing. But I don't want trouble, Jimmy. You know that. I keep a quiet house.'

Which is a fat lie.

'He comes back you tell him I'm not here, okay?' Jimmy says.

Steve rolls his eyes and steps back into Ken's room.

Jimmy stands for a minute, catching his breath, before heading back to his room. He needs another drink. A sit down and a nice drink. He's got a little fridge – bought it off a bloke across the street. It fits twelve cans stacked up one on the other. There are five in there, he thinks. Enough for the rest of the morning.

Room 2

The carpet's brown, dirt and hair locked into its pile. By the bed are three small burn marks, the synthetic fibres melted into black lumps. By the sofa, with its sagging cushions and scratched laminate legs, is a stain shaped like South America: it starts wide, then trails off towards the tip of Chile in the centre of the room. Tucked under the sofa are a pair of black shoes, battered and starting to give at the seams, but decent. The kind of shoes you'd wear to a job interview, or a wedding, or a funeral. Inside the left shoe are the pieces of a broken mug. One reads

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Dining Room

It's nearly five but Mike is first in the dining room. He sits at the table near the window, which looks onto the little alleyway between this house and the next one. A narrow, grotty space filled with weeds and rubbish. And then the blank brick wall of next door. He can't smell any food. Can't hear anyone else about. This wouldn't happen in prison he thinks. Like bloody clockwork in there. Which he never thought he'd like, but sitting here, he can feel his heart thumping in his chest, and a faint prickle of sweat starting on his upper lip, and all because dinner's late. Get over it, he tells himself. You're in the real world now. Though what's real about waiting for some old bloke to cook you turkey twizzlers and chips on a Sunday night?

He had a girlfriend once whose family was big on Sunday lunch. They'd all go – the three sisters, their other halves and children, all piling into the parents' house. Roast beef. Lamb. Chicken. Her dad would stand at the head of the table, wielding his carving knife like some bloke in a film from the fifties. Bowls of roast potatoes, green beans, carrots. A big jug of gravy slick with fat.

What had happened to her? Mike leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. He can't remember. He can't for the life of him remember.

'Sorry! Sorry!'

Mike opens his eyes and sees Ken and Angel in the doorway, red-faced, breathless.

'We lost track,' Ken says.

'We were looking for Ewan,' Angel says as though that explains everything.

'I'll do pasta,' Ken says. 'Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. I'm sorry mate.'

Ken disappears and Angel sits down opposite Mike. She's got a pretty face, dark hair falling either side, but she's way too thin. Heroin-thin – he recognises it.

'Angel.' She puts a hand out across the table and he takes it. Her skin's cold. There are hard calluses on her palms, cigarette burns, he guesses. 'We've not met properly, have we?'

'Mike.' He smiles, lets go of her hand. He doesn't want her to think he's a lech.

'Nice to meet you, Mike.' The end of a tattoo snakes up from underneath her top towards her neck – leaves and flowers, coloured in red and yellow and green. On the opposite side there's a name written in fancy curled letters. Darren, or something like that.

'You just got out?' she asks.

He stares at her and she laughs, 'I can always tell,' she says. 'Special powers. Have you got a plan? People always have a plan when they come out, I like that. Do they help you with it, like? Write it down for you and that?'

'Who were you looking for?'

Angel blinks. 'Oh, Ewan. You'll never have met him. Nice bloke.' She stops and looks towards the window. 'Real nice. Stays in room two just over there.' She waves towards the hallway. 'No one's seen him for a week. More than a week. Landlord's going to chuck his stuff out Wednesday if he doesn't come back. Charles thinks he's dead, but he's wrong. Ken thinks he's met a woman, but he's wrong too.'

Mike purses his lips. 'You find him?'

Angel's face drops. 'Nah.'

'I thought maybe he won the lottery,' Mike says.

'You think?'

'Imagine it,' Mike says. This week had been a rollover week – twelve and a half million – Mike hadn't even got one number right. 'Would you come back here to pick up your shit? No way. You'd go and stay in a hotel. Buy yourself a fat pad somewhere nice. Get on a plane to Thailand.'

Angel is staring at Mike. He looks down. There's tomato ketchup and HP sauce in the middle of the table, a big glass salt cellar and a smaller one for pepper.

'You're wrong too,' she says, then blinks again and her face crumples a little, as though she's about to cry. 'I bet you wouldn't just fuck off and leave someone in the lurch, would you?' she says.

Mike frowns.

'You're a nice person.'

He blushes. He can feel the heat rush across his cheeks. God's sake. He coughs. Rubs a hand over his face.

'You wouldn't just leave without saying anything, I can see that,' Angel says. 'I can tell a lot about a person just by looking at them.' She stops. 'Now you're looking worried. Am I worrying you?'

Mike smiles then, lets out a breath through his nose. 'No, you're not,' he says.

'You see?' Angel spreads her hands, palms up. 'Nice guy. I was right.'

He imagines picking her up, gently, and carrying her upstairs. The way you'd carry a child, legs tucked over his arm, head resting on his chest. He blinks the image away. She's still staring at him, like she can see through his skull into his mind.

'You got a girl?' she asks. 'Someone waited for you?'

He shakes his head; sees something – interest? satisfaction? – in her eyes.

'A nice guy like you,' she says. 'Won't take long.'

Room 6

Piotr's brought his dinner up to his room. He doesn't want to risk seeing that drunken idiot from room four. His jaw still throbs from this morning, and when he touches it he can feel little tendrils of pain shooting up towards his temples. He isn't fussy about food, but this is not good. Overcooked pasta – all the bits stuck together – and some kind of tomato sauce with a bitter taste. He shovels another forkful into his mouth, chews and swallows. He's sitting on his bed by the window. If he angles his head down, he can just see the yard at the back of the house – littered with old mattresses and chairs. Further back, they're building new houses, rows of neat red-brick terraces, a few bigger ones with garages. The guys have clocked off for the day and the machines stand quiet and still amongst the tyre-tracked mud, waiting for the morning.

Piotr moves his bad shoulder, tentatively, testing it out. It is maybe a little better. He raises it towards his ear and the pain shoots down across his shoulder blade. He couldn't lift much more than a brick. He'd last five minutes before they chucked him out. Tomorrow, he has a hospital appointment. He will tell them they have to make him better. He cannot afford this for much longer.

He gets through the pasta, drinks a glass of water to take away the taste. Charles is still not back. Odds are he won't ever be and Piotr will never see his fifty quid again. He's made Charles's bed – or at least thrown the duvet across the mattress, smoothed it down a little. He'd thought he was a decent bloke – hadn't wanted to be his friend or anything, but still.

Piotr boils the kettle, drops a tea bag into a cup and fills it to the brim. He takes it over to the small low table that sits between the two single beds. Once he's shoved things back a bit there's room for the pieces of paper he nicked out of the photocopier in the newsagents down the road. The bloke on the till's either deaf and blind, or doesn't give a shit about being robbed.

He doesn't write his address on the top of the paper. By the time she writes back – if she writes back – he'll have moved and he doesn't want anyone here reading his mail. Not that they could understand it, but still, he wouldn't even want them touching it.

Dear Mama,

He looks at the words. Blue ink. The same handwriting he's had since school.

How are you? And Tata? And Babcia? I hope the snow is not too deep and the pipes haven't frozen the way they did last year. How are the animals? Snug in the barn I guess.

He can almost smell the barn – the warm fug of the cows' breath; sweet hay; shit. He can see the fields stretching white and blank the other side of the door, a knot of bare trees over by the wall.

Any news from the village? Is Mariusz still causing trouble? And Ewa? Did she leave her husband in the end?

He doesn't care about village gossip. He left for a reason.

I haven't given you my address because I'll be leaving here soon. When I have a new place I will call and tell you so you can write.

He hasn't called since the accident. He writes because otherwise his mother is likely to get on a plane and come to find him. Every Sunday he squeezes out a page, though there is nothing to say. So he asks questions he doesn't want to know the answers to. Writes whatever comes into his mind.

Things are good here.

He puts his pen down and looks across Charles's bed to the far wall. It was white once, he supposes, but now it's a pale dirty yellow – cigarettes; time; breath. There's nothing on it. He's been in Ken's room and there are posters and bits of newspaper tacked to the wall. And he saw into the girl's room once – she'd left the door open though he couldn't see her anywhere. There was a wall covered in photos, their edges curling in on themselves. And on another wall a picture of a sunset with something written underneath it in in curled white letters.

I'm working on a site in East Manchester. Streets and streets of new houses. It's good to see them go up. The pay's good.

He scribbles the last sentence out, enough so the words aren't

legible through the mess of blue lines. He can't afford to have her asking for money.

The other guys are decent. No trouble. No messing about.

He thinks about Jimmy – the punch coming from nowhere, the crack of it against his jaw. People like that should be locked up, he thinks. They shouldn't be allowed to go about terrorising everybody else.

It's cold, but not so cold as Poland. I wear the scarf you gave me for Christmas – thank you.

He does not know what happened to the scarf. Lost. Stolen.

I have been walking a lot, exploring. Some places are pretty. Some are very ugly. I did not think there would be ugly places in England.

He hears a siren wail down on the street below. He has learnt the difference between ambulance and police and this is an ambulance. It's stopped, nearby he thinks. There'll be some idiot who's taken too many drugs, who needs rushing to hospital to have his insides emptied before whatever's in there kills him.

I am sending you all love, and to Marta and Tomek in Warsaw – tell them I say hi.

Marta, his sister, keeps threatening to come and visit. He hasn't answered her last few calls.

I will call soon, with my new address.

All my love

Piotr

MONDAY



Room 5

He can't breathe. Has to pull the air, shuddering into his lungs. And still it's not enough. Mike can feel himself getting light-headed. His brain doesn't have enough oxygen. His arms don't feel right. There's a tight band around his chest. He sits on the bed, lowers himself so he's lying on his back, staring at the grubby ceiling. Maybe this is it. He's going to die in this shitty bed and breakfast. Probably no-one will find him for a couple of days. He'll be cold and hard to the touch. Maybe he'll have shat himself – he's heard that happens. And then when they do find him, they won't know who to call. They won't know about Kat. And even if they did she wouldn't come. If she didn't come for him alive, she won't when he's dead. He turns onto his side, but it makes him feel worse, so he sits up again, perches on the edge of the bed jiggling one foot against the floor. It's like his body wants to run and wants to collapse both at the same time.

Maybe Kat would come. Maybe she'd stand in this cramped room, which still looks dirty for all his efforts, and she'd feel sorry. Sorry she hadn't visited him in prison. Sorry she hadn't come to meet him when he got out. Sorry she hadn't believed him when he said it was different now – he was different. He tries to picture her – always in heels because she's five two and wants to be taller, wearing red lipstick and black eyeliner, the necklace he gave her before they sent him down – a silver cat with its tail curled around itself – resting on her breastbone. People turn hypocrites when people die. They start saying how much they liked and respected the dead person, however much they'd slagged them off when they were alive. Maybe she'd cry. Maybe she'd stand right there and cry her heart out for him.

He has to get out of this room. Quickly. He stands but then sits straight back down again, hand to his chest. His heart's beating so fast it has to give up, surely. What he needs is a spliff, something to settle him. But there's nothing, and he can't move. He tries to

breathe deeper – the way they taught him in prison: in through your nose, out through your mouth. Count. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. He stares at the sink, at the mirror tile screwed, not quite straight, to the wall above it. He won't die here. He won't have Kat come here and think that this is what his life amounted to. Not her. Not his parents either. His mother, thin and nervous in that too big coat she refuses to replace, shaking her head and saying, I don't understand, he was such a bright little boy, such a happy little boy, and his father holding her hand and saying, it wasn't you love, these things happen. Some kids are just bad eggs. Think about Lily – how well she turned out.

God. Lily. She wouldn't make it up the stairs to his room. She'd stand on the doorstep with her hand over her mouth and nose, call a funeral parlour on her mobile and tell them to take care of everything; that no, she didn't want to see the body; to send her the bill and not bother her with details.

In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. Mike presses his palm into his chest. His heartbeat is slower, he's sure. He tries standing again. Slow. Careful. His legs feel shaky but they hold him up, let him walk to the window and shove the sash up as far as it will go – the width of his hand, but at least it lets in some air. He breathes in again, slow as he can, promises himself he'll score some weed, keep it hidden away in his wash bag, for emergencies only. If he knows it's there he won't need it. It will help him keep things together.

Room 1

Ken's been thinking about Ewan – lying in bed turning the whole thing over and over in his mind – and he's pretty sure he's worked it out. It had been cold and grey when Ewan had turned up, the same as it is now. Ken remembers it: opening the door to Ewan standing on the doorstep in the dim afternoon light, his shoulders slumped, a rucksack hanging off one shoulder. It was after Christmas, he remembers that. And not spring, no, it was definitely not spring. And that one time they talked – really talked, the pair of them full of cheap cider – Ewan had said that everything had fallen apart fast after his girl had died. Choked on a pound coin. Ewan had turned her upside down and whacked her, the way they tell you to, but it hadn't worked. She was gone by the time the ambulance arrived. He couldn't cope – that's what he'd said – he just couldn't handle it. Drank so he didn't have to think. Lost his job. Lost his wife. Lost his house. So it makes sense – it must be the anniversary. That's why he's gone.

People say the first year is the worst, but Ken knows it's all impossible, and the more time that goes by, the more you struggle to remember their faces, and then the guilt gets unbearable. The fact that you're still alive and they're not is unbearable. Maybe Ewan started drinking and couldn't stop. Maybe he is in the canal, or face down in a ditch somewhere. Maybe he set off walking and now he's in Liverpool, or Leeds, trying to start again.

He hasn't said this to Angel. She's got a bee in her bonnet about finding the man, but it's not actually about Ewan. Ken's no psychologist, but he can see that much. She's got the whole thing muddled. Thinks that if she finds Ewan he'll get her little boy back. But how the fuck would he do that? People like them don't get things done. If they got things done they wouldn't be living in a place like this. But what can Ken say? Her heart's close enough to breaking as it is.

So they go looking again. Round the church halls and the charities that give out tea and biscuits, soup and pasties, clothes and

toothbrushes. They don't have a photo, so each place they go, Angel describes Ewan. Mousey hair. Yay high. An earring in one ear – neither of them can remember which. Wears a Man City coat. Black shoes. Except Ken knows the coat and the shoes are still in his room, but Angel won't listen. He's nice, she'll say. Kind. He's got a kind face. Everyone they ask puts on their thinking face, pulls their mouth this way and that, screws up their eyes, shakes their head. No, I don't think so. Don't recognise the name. Don't think he's been in here. Angel's face like a cartoon, melting from hopeful to miserable. We'll keep our eyes open, they all say. We'll tell him you're looking. What's your name? Angel? That's beautiful. And her face glimmers with hope again and Ken wants to take her by the shoulders and shake some sense into her.

They look in the cars, a couple of streets away from the house. Four Jags, rotting in the front garden of a knackered old place. They're on blocks, a few windows smashed, mould working its way over the cream leather insides. Angel slept there before she came to the house, she tells him. It was no good. She shakes her head, peering inside each of them as though Ewan might be down in one of the footwells. Cold. Exposed. There was one that locked properly, she says, but then most people could prise open a door to get at you if they really wanted to.

They go into the city centre. Walk down Market Street, Angel quietened by the bustle and the people with their neat bright clothes, their handbags and briefcases and mobile phones and confidence. She stops and talks to every homeless person they pass. The same conversation. The same headshakes, and nah, love, sorry, the same shrugs and promises. He's disappeared. They are not going to find him.

He doesn't tell Angel about his flat. Not even on the slow walk home when the rain slants into their faces and their feet are heavy and tired and the house feels as though it is getting further away with each step. He'd told Jimmy last week. The man had looked at him hard, like a policeman trying to work out if a suspect's guilty just by eyeballing him, and then burst out laughing. Day that happens is the day I die, he'd said. We're lifers, he'd said. You're never leaving this place, no more than I am.

Room 6

Piotr walks back from the hospital. It's raining – a fine, drenching rain – but he's got no money to waste on a bus fare, and a bit of rain's never hurt anyone. The cold makes his shoulder ache, but he can still feel a bubble of happiness in his chest, rising towards his throat, coming out in a whistle – a song he used to sing his sister when she was a baby. Two weeks, the doctor had said. Two weeks and he should be able to get back to work. But it hurts, he'd said, lifting his arm above his head and wincing. She'd just nodded. Of course it does. It's healing. Not long now.

Not long now. All he needs to do is keep moving it. Regular gentle exercise, and it will get better, the doctor had said. The body is a remarkable thing. It knows how to fix itself. Piotr kicks a drinks can along the pavement in front of him. It clatters pleasingly against the concrete, reminds him of playing football as a kid. When their ball was lost, or burst, they'd use whatever they could find – cans, plastic bottles, making music across the rough space with its painted-on goals.

He can just about afford two more weeks. He'll start asking around for work now – go back to his old company, they owe him after all. It is all going to get better.

The closer he gets to the house, the slower he walks, as though he could put off ever arriving. The place stinks. It makes his soul hurt. But there it is. It must have belonged to someone rich once. There's fancy brickwork around the door. Two bay windows either side. It has proportion. Presence. Two weeks and he'll be out of there.

He will build his own home one day. He's been saving. Except all that's nearly gone so he's no closer than when he first arrived. But it's what he'll do. It's what most of them over here are saving for. First you buy a plot. Then materials. Then you go home and build. With your hands and your shoulders and your back. Your sweat.

Charles is lying on his bed, eyes closed. Completely still. For a moment, Piotr thinks he is dead. He stands in the doorway, looking

at him – a big, black man with tired clothes and a sad face. A thief. Piotr waits to feel angry, but there's nothing there.

'Charles?'

The man on the bed doesn't move. If he is dead, there will be police and questions. They will think Piotr has done something.

'Charles?' He raises his voice.

Nothing.

He considers leaving, but instead crosses the room and puts a hand on the man's shoulder, gives him a light shove.

Charles opens his eyes and stares at Piotr. A wide blank stare. Bloodshot eyes.

'You stole my money,' Piotr said.

Charles closes his eyes.

'I need back.'

Charles nods.

'Now,' Piotr says.

Charles opens his eyes again. 'When I've got it, mate.'

'You're sick?'

Charles lets out a grunt, then rolls onto his side, hands bunched up over his eyes. Piotr watches his shoulders move up and down, hears his breath stutter.

'You cry?'

Charles waves a hand towards him. 'Just fuck off will you?'

Piotr moves to his side of the room, rolls a cigarette and stands by the window to smoke it. Charles has stopped crying, but he says nothing, stays lying facing the wall.

Room 6

It would be better if the guy would just punch him in the face and be done with it. You steal a man's money, there are consequences. Instead he's offering him fags, being bloody nice. Charles sneaks a glance through half-closed eyelids. The man wouldn't win a beauty contest, but he's got kind eyes. Kind eyes and a fucked-up shoulder – he's massaging it now, absent-mindedly, sucking hard on his fag and blowing the white smoke out through the gap in the window.

'We can go for walk,' Piotr says.

Charles doesn't want to go anywhere. He doesn't ever want to get up off this bed. He'll lie here until he's dead, or until someone picks him up and drags him down the stairs.

'There is nice canal,' Piotr says. 'Quiet place.'

'Aren't you pissed?'

Charles can hear the question in Piotr's silence.

'Pissed. Angry? I nick your cash, you're offering to take me for a walk?' Like a dog. He wishes he was a dog. Things would be more straightforward. You've got a good owner or a bad one. You eat, shit, chase sticks, sniff other dogs' arses, sleep, shag if you're lucky. No-one expects any more of you. Maybe you get a few kicks now and again but you're no worse for it.

He half opens his eyes. Piotr is rubbing his fag end against the window sill.

'I've still got twenty,' Charles says. He pulls his wallet from his pocket and takes out the note. 'Shouldn't have fucking bothered. I'm sorry, mate.'

Piotr takes the money, looks at it as though he's checking it's not a fake.

'I'll get you the rest.' God alone knows from where.

'You go to London?'

Charles puts his hand behind his head. 'You ever slept rough?'

Piotr shakes his head.

'It's shit.' He had slept two, maybe three hours, woken with his

bones aching so much he thought he'd never be able to stand again.

'You see your children?'

Charles sniffs in hard. 'She's a bitch, my ex-wife.'

Piotr leans against the windowsill, the fag end cupped in one palm.

'I go all that way. I go home, from here, and she just folds her arms like she's on a fucking TV show and says no, I can't see them.

I can't see my own kids.'

Piotr says nothing.

'I went mental.' Charles lets out a half-laugh. 'I went totally mental.'

Raging on his own doorstep. Except it wasn't his anymore. All the neighbours looking out their windows, enjoying the show. He'd wanted to break something. He'd wanted to rip the walls down. He'd wanted to hold his girls against him, feel their fast hearts and their warm soft skin, smell their hair; listen to their stories of school and friends and next door's cat. He wasn't going to kidnap them. Is that what she thought he was, he'd shouted? Some crazed kidnapper. He was their dad.

'I loved her,' he tells Piotr. 'I really did. Ten years, we were together and I properly loved her.'

She'd looked like a stranger, blocking the doorway, her eyes hard, her lips hard, the whole of her hard when she had been so soft, so perfect.

'We used to be happy.'

'You cheated?' Piotr asks.

Charles almost jumps off the bed and lands a punch square on the fucker's jaw. But he doesn't have the energy. He just shakes his head. 'I had work problems,' he says. 'Got myself in a bit of a mess money-wise, couldn't handle it.' He rubs a hand across his eyes. 'Went a bit crazy. Said some stuff. Did some stuff.' He shrugs. 'It's done now. But I'm their dad. I'm still their fucking dad.'

Room 3

Just the once, Angel tells herself, lifting the small wooden box from under the bed. And she'll smoke it, not inject. She isn't going backwards, she's just giving herself a break. A couple of hours. That's all she needs. A reset. Like turning a phone off and then back on again when it's not working properly. She smooths out a square of tinfoil and takes the tiny plastic bag of powder from her jeans pocket. A gift from Nige. Good old Nige. I'm looking out for you, he'd said, you look like you need a pick me up. And she did.

She's quit before. Nearly killed her, true. Pain all the way through her insides. Convinced she would die. It was only the thought of Dylan stopped her relapsing. And now it's the thought of him making her reach for the lighter.

There is a voice that tells her to stop. She's trained herself to listen to it this past year or so. Tried to stop thinking of it as some snotty, patronising woman – like that bitch at the council – judging her without knowing anything for real. She's tried to accept it's part of her – a sensible, kind part that wants to help. There it is: don't, Angel; you're stepping off a cliff, love; time to stop. It reminds her what she can do instead – a walk; chocolate; call someone. She laughs into the empty room. If Ewan hadn't fucked off she could go and knock on his door, have a chat, a laugh, distract herself. If Ewan hadn't fucked off she'd have Dylan and there'd be no need for any of this.

She sits back on the bed, her spine against the wall; lifts the pipe to her mouth, flicks the edge of the lighter, angles her hand and holds the flame to the powder. For a moment she stays completely still. You are making a choice, the voice tells her, you are choosing this.

She breathes in. Deep. She'd forgotten how bad it tastes. No matter. Wait. Wait. And here it is – the warmth. Honey through her veins. Another breath. Another. The powder crackling and melting against the foil. She feels it like a wave, lifting her up and carrying her along, washing all the shit away. They're still there – Dylan;

Ewan; this crappy room in this crappy house; her lech of a landlord; the pain in her teeth; all the bad things that have brought her here – but none of it matters. Everything is far away, getting further away, and she can't touch it, she can't feel it anymore. There's just love left over, just love filling her up from the inside, and she laughs at herself for taking so long to do this, for wanting to stop in the first place, because what could be bad about feeling so good? What sane person wouldn't want this?

TUESDAY

Room 2

The curtains used to be white, or cream, but are now a grubby grey, with sagging hems and a stain which looks like spilt tea. On the windowsill sit three models twisted out of wire. They are rough. Handmade. Spotted with rust. A bee, tipped onto one copper wing. A flower rising from a coiled base, a tiny leaf springing from its stem. A little girl, with a flared skirt, who faces away from the room, looking out through the cold glass into the front yard and the row of knackered houses on the opposite side of the street.

Room 1

The flat's in Whalley Range. A retirement complex a couple of streets away from the park. Dark brown brick. White PVC windows. The carpets are green. The curtains are green with streaks of yellow. The whole place smells of lemon air freshener. The manager shows Ken a large room dotted with armchairs and tells him it's the communal lounge. We have bingo nights, he says, card games, quizzes – you can come down whenever you want. Ken wants to laugh out loud. Me? Here? He's lived in shitholes most of his life. This place is clean. The lifts work. It's quiet.

'Feels like a hotel,' he jokes, his voice too loud, his arms jerking with his words like he's a puppet.

The manager smiles, says they should go and see the flat.

It's on the fifth floor. The front door is made from thick pale wood – solid; it would be hard to kick down. A thin metal five and a matching two have been neatly attached just above the spy hole. Ken follows the manager around the space, white walls, more green carpet. He nods at the words bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom, all the time thinking, me? Here? It's like he's playing a part on the TV – pretending to be someone else.

'We've just repainted. Put in new carpets,' the manager says. 'You've lucked out.'

That's the smell – chemical sweet.

'You've got furniture?'

Ken blinks. He's got a pile of books, some clothes, the accumulated crap of his life, but no, he's got no furniture.

'There's a charity who can help you out if you need that. I'll give you their number.' The manager takes his mobile from his pocket, starts prodding at it.

'When do I have to say?' Ken asks.

The manager looks up, frowns.

'If I want it?'

'The flat?' The man raises his eyebrows and when Ken says

nothing he purses his lips and says, 'You're lucky to get it, you know that? There's a line as long as my arm of people who want this place.'

Ken bites down on his lips, tells himself not to fuck it up. 'I just wanted to know when I need to say?'

'Tomorrow at the latest.'

Ken nods.

'You won't get another one like this.'

The manager's on the defensive. Ken tunes his words out, walks towards the window and looks out. Tomorrow is Wednesday and Ewan isn't back yet. Ken won't see him again, in his heart he knows that. He spots the school with its flat roof and playgrounds; the gold-topped front of the Hindu temple; the circles of grass in the park. He'll get lonely, Jimmy told him: you'll be bored shitless on your own, Kenny, you'll be back here before you know it. Except his room will be rented out to someone else, the same way Ewan's will be. Steve might just tell him to fuck off. You leave and that's it, he might say. Don't come crying to me when it doesn't work out.

It's not a home, that place; there's no-one there to miss you once you've gone. It's just rooms with people in them – doesn't much matter who they are as long as they're paying.

Room 6

'You want help?' Piotr is standing over Charles's bed. It's morning. A thin, grey light at the window. Charles closes his eyes, turns his head.

'You like pastie?'

Charles squints up at the man.

'Cheese. Beef. Sausage.' Piotr says, like he's a waiter reading the specials.

'Mate, leave it.' Charles feels as though there's concrete in his veins. 'Not today.'

'Eleven till one. Now is eleven. Come.'

'Which bit of no –' Charles starts, but Piotr is tugging at his arm.

'Good people. They help.'

Sausage pastie. For a moment Charles can taste it. Hot buttery pastry, the salty tang of meat, grease on his lips. He shifts himself to the edge of the bed, levers himself to sitting. Piotr claps a hand on his back.

'Good. Go now.'

And so they go. Down the stairs; through the hallway that smells of bacon and damp; out into the day – a limp, grey excuse for a day, the sky like a stained bed sheet, the air sharp and unforgiving.

Piotr walks fast, his work-boots making hard, certain sounds on the pavement. Charles finds himself hurrying to catch up, like a bloody puppy following its boss.

The place is nothing to shout about. A shed of a building next to an old church. Piotr pushes open a scuffed red door and hustles Charles into a poky corridor – green walls, brown wood; noticeboards with curling bits of paper announcing coffee mornings and jumble sales and food bank donation points. A glass-panelled door lets onto a large room with trestle tables and plastic chairs. A huge gold circle hangs on one wall declaring 'Jesus Loves You'. At the far end, curtains cover what Charles assumes is a stage. It reminds him of his primary school – he'd been an elf in

a Christmas play once; worn his sister's green tights and a hat his mum had sewn ears onto.

There are maybe fifteen people there. Charles clocks four of them as staff – young, fresh-faced, clean. The rest are like him and Piotr. A woman – staff – walks over to them, smiling.

'Piotr, good to see you.' She is short, Indian, her hair sleek black around her face. 'How's the shoulder?'

'It gets better.' Piotr grins. This must be what he does, Charles thinks. Goes around church halls eating pasties and flirting with well-meaning women.

'This Charles. My friend.' Piotr pats Charles on the back and the woman turns and includes him in her smile.

He shouldn't be here – that's what he wants to tell her. He is a decent man. Job. Wife. House. Kids. He has done what he was supposed to do. He shouldn't be here.

'Welcome, Charles, I'm Suni.'

I stole this man's money, Charles wants to say. What do you think about that?

'Brew?' Suni says, and Charles mumbles a yes, follows Piotr to a table where a grey-haired woman sits playing Patience, moving the cards with slow deliberation.

'You tell her,' Piotr says when Suni returns with two cups of tea. He turns to Suni. 'Sit.' He taps the back of the chair next to him. 'He tells you problem.'

So Charles tells her, and she listens, nodding, asking questions, keeping her eyes fixed on him. When he's done he drops his gaze to the plastic table-top, scattered with biscuit crumbs and grains of sugar. He swallows. Waits.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'You must miss your kids.'

A noise comes out of his mouth that's halfway between a grunt and a sob. He coughs, rubs a hand over his mouth.

'Can you come on Thursday?' the woman asks. 'We've got a housing advisor in then.'

Charles looks at her.

'He's really good,' she says. 'He's a lawyer, does pro bono work for us once a week.'

Charles feels a little glimmer of hope. He tries to push it away, but it's stubborn, like a flame that won't go out.

'Thursday?' he says, as though he might have something else to do. 'Sure, I can come Thursday.'

'I'll need to go and check the schedule. You get yourselves a pastie before they all go. I won't be a minute.' She bustles off.

'See?' Piotr slaps Charles on the back, smiling.

They are out of sausage pasties, so Charles says he'll have beef and onion. It's lukewarm, and he can't taste it – he feels as though he hasn't tasted anything since he got to this bloody city. He wants his ex-wife's cooking – spicy chicken and rice, plantain fried until it melts in his mouth. He wants to go home.

He keeps looking around for Suni, and there, at last, she is, walking towards them with an open diary in one hand.

'Three o'clock?' she says.

Charles nods.

Suni scribbles his name down. 'He had a similar case last month,' she says. 'Someone sent here from down South. It's ridiculous. But he'll work it out. You'll work it out together.'

Charles smiles – he can't help it. 'Thank you,' he says. And when Suni shrugs and shakes her head, he touches her arm and says, 'Really, thank you.'

Room 3

Angel sits cross-legged in the corner of her room, the knife resting in her palm. There are two lines already, beaded red, on the inside of her thigh, but she can barely feel them. Idiot. Fucking idiot. She runs the knife the whole length of her leg, not pressing hard enough to cut the skin. She'd been clean for months and now she's broken it the same way she breaks everything. It's her own fault Dylan's living with some other family. He's better off without her. It's his birthday and she's sitting in this shithole on a comedown. She hasn't even bought him a present. She'd saved up and everything. Gone into town specially. Ended up wandering round the shops picking things up, putting them down, getting herself in a right old state, because the truth is she didn't know what to get him. The tears tip from her eyes onto her cheeks and she pushes the knife hard against her thigh.

Her phone sits on the floor next to her. She's hardly got any credit, and she knows there's no point in calling Ewan. It's been over a week. First off it just rang and rang. Then it went straight to voicemail. The last time she called she got an automated message saying the phone was not currently in service and she should try again later. He's dead, she tells herself, and waits to feel something, but there's nothing there. It's like she's a shell – emptied out. She picks up the phone and goes to his number, presses call, because she can't help thinking that if he would just answer then everything would come good.

This phone is not currently in service. She throws her mobile across the room. It lands with a thud by the bed and she stares at it – little black rectangle of plastic. She hates it. She hates Ewan. She hates herself.

Dylan's school lets out at 3.15. The last time she went it ended in a right mess – teachers and police and Dylan crying and her crying. Warnings. Lectures. She'll be more careful this time. She has a shower – cold as ever – dresses carefully in her cleanest nicest

clothes. She spends an age doing her face. Foundation to smooth everything out. A pale lipstick – nothing slutty. Her hand shakes as she does the eyeliner. She has to wash it all off and start over twice before she manages to get it right.

She's halfway down the stairs when she hears Steve's voice.

'Angel!' He's smiling, a fat, wet, red smile.

She swallows. Smiles. 'Hi Steve.'

'Got a date?' His eyes narrow slightly.

Angel shrugs, tries to nip past him to the front door, but he moves to block her.

'It's Wednesday tomorrow,' he says.

She frowns.

'I told you he wouldn't come back. You want the room?'

Angel blinks, panicked.

'I don't know,' she says.

'I'm doing you a favour.'

'I know, Steve, but it doesn't feel right.'

'Why don't you make me a cup of tea and we can discuss it?' He smiles again. Maybe she should find somewhere else to live, before this gets out of control. The thought makes her tired to her bones.

'Steve, I've got to be somewhere.'

He doesn't move.

'An appointment,' she says, looking him in the eye. 'About my boy.'

His face softens. 'That so?'

'You've got kids, haven't you?'

'Two. Fucking waste of space the pair of them.'

'He's only seven, my lad. Seven today. It's his birthday.'

Steve looks at her a long while, then nods. 'Well, good luck to you Angel.'

She flashes him a smile. 'Ewan will be back, Steve, you'll see,' she says, but she doesn't believe it, not any more.

It's two bus rides to Dylan's school. The first one's late. The second so slow she wants to stand up in the aisle and scream at the top of her voice. Instead she sits on her hands, jigs one foot against the floor, looks at the clock on her phone over and again. If she's late, she tells herself, that's it, she'll never, ever get him back. It's bad

enough she's turning up with no present – what's he going to think? She's too broke. Too lazy. She doesn't care.

When the bus reaches her stop she throws herself off and hurtles up the street to the school. There's a tall green fence around the playground, a lock on the gate. It's 3.13. Unlucky. She bites at a flake of skin on her top lip and stares at the low brick building, its windows covered in blu-tacked pictures – butterflies, numbers, handprints. She had hated school. She'd get angry when the letters muddled themselves together so she couldn't see what they meant. And those teachers, always telling her off, always sending her to sit in the corridor and think about what she'd done. In the end she just gave up – spent most of her time hanging around on the old Rec playing fields, smoking, snogging, being bored.

There's nowhere to hide and so she mills around with the other parents – mums with prams, dads in running kit – tries to look as though she is supposed to be there. She keeps an eye out for the woman Dylan lives with but can't see her. Bitch. Not here to pick him up, and on his birthday.

3.15. There's no bell, or not that she can hear, just a sudden flurry of movement – the school doors opened and kids pouring out, chattering and laughing and shouting. All that energy, it makes her heart lift. It makes her stand on her tiptoes and hold her breath, looking for him.

Dylan. It's like in those films where there's a crowd of people and just one in perfect focus. He's grown. His hair's longer. He's the most perfect thing she's ever seen. She remembers when he was a baby – his skin smoother than anything she'd ever touched, the feel of him in her arms.

Angel stands in the crowd of parents and waits for him to come to her.

Room 4

He'd punched that man, Ewan, for thieving his stuff. Jimmy can remember the look on his face – all: what the fuck? I've done nothing. And then a quick shift into resignation. He hadn't hit back. Should have done. Jimmy holds the disc in one hand. He always puts them back in their cases. Always. Except here it is. Not stolen at all, just wedged down the side of the armchair, hidden by all those jumpers the cat sleeps on.

Slept on. He's not seen the cat since yesterday. It's that fucking Pole's doing, he knows it. Him or Steve. Steve's all right, but he's got a thing about pets. Won't have them pissing and shitting in his place, he says. Like it would make any difference.

Jimmy had been thinking about giving the critter a name. Had nearly settled on Billy. He didn't know if it was a boy or a girl, but Billy sounded about right. He'd even tried it out a couple of times. Here, Billy. Good Billy. Jimmy slots the disc into the console, clears his throat.

The machine purrs and Jimmy listens to the soft hiss of the disc turning. The game's theme tune starts – a burst of electronic brass. He chucks the rest of the cat's bedding off the chair onto the floor and sits down, reaches for the controller. It's been weeks since he's played and it feels like having a pint after too long sober. The thought gets him out of his chair to fetch another can from the fridge. Cold in his throat. He settles back down; loads up his last game. Level four. He's got an M16 and a good supply of ammo.

He is running through a burnt-out building, enemy fire sending sprays of rubble into his path, bullets spinning past his head. His ammo's not lasted as long as he expected and now he's vulnerable, jittery. He stops, back against the wall, gun pointed north, south, north, watching, waiting. His heart battering his ribs. He steps forward and fires, straight off, kills a guy – a satisfying grunt and groan as he crumples to the floor. Another one behind him, but Jimmy is quick, he's good, and the man's down. Ha. He collects their

weapons and ammo and starts running towards a thin rectangle of blue sky, visible between columns of smoke. But suddenly they are everywhere, black-clad men with sharp faces, coming for him.

'Fuck.' Jimmy throws the controller onto the floor. It hits a plate, buries itself in the pile of baked beans he couldn't be bothered to eat last night. Jimmy kicks the plate and the controller falls onto the carpet. The plate doesn't break. Jimmy brings his heel down onto it. Hard. There you go.

Daft to get so exercised about a cat, he tells himself. Except it's not the bloody cat, it's that man, Mac. You put someone away, they're going to get out. And they're going to come looking. Everyone knows that. He knows that. If he'd thought for half a second back then, he'd have known that, but he'd been drunk, in a fix, angry. You reap what you sow, his mam always said. You reap what you fucking sow. And now he can't stop thinking about Ewan too. Punching him for something he never did. Maybe he's met up with Mac. Maybe they're planning something together. It makes no sense, but the more he thinks on it the more he convinces himself. Maybe they've already got hold of Billy. He'll find the poor wee thing with its throat slit on the doorstep. That's what would happen in a film. You kill the pet to let the man know he's next.

Landing

Mike hears Angel crying before he sees her. He considers going back into his room. Ten minutes or so and she'll be on her way. She's trouble. He doesn't need to get involved.

He stands. Waits. What had she said? Everyone has a plan when they get out – like she's seen it all before; like nobody's plan ever works out but it's sweet that they try. He bites at his bottom lip and starts to back towards his room, but then she lets out a sound – a little whimper, like a hurt animal – and he's at her side before he lets himself think.

She's sitting outside her room, head down, back against the wall, knees drawn up to her chest.

'Angel?' he says, soft like. What a name. He wonders if it's the one she grew up with, or if it's something she chose to try and make things seem better.

She lifts her head – her face a mess of tears and snot and eyeliner – then drops it back onto her knees.

Mike crouches down next to her, puts a hand on her arm – it's too skinny, just bone and skin.

'Are you OK?' Stupid fucking question, but he can't think what else to say.

She doesn't respond, but the crying quietens and slows. Mike lowers himself onto the floor next to her. Waits. Nothing wrong with being nice, he tells himself. Nothing wrong with helping someone in trouble. He looks at the wall opposite. The wallpaper has a raised pattern – repeating squares with clusters of flowers in the centre of each. A long scratch carves a diagonal from head height to hip height – the sharp edge of a table, or a knife. The top of the skirting board is thick with black dust.

Angel says something, a teary, blurred sentence he can't make any sense of.

'Say that again?'

'He didn't stop.'

Mike waits.

‘It was his birthday,’ Angel says and gulps in a breath. ‘I hadn’t got him a present. What kind of mum turns up without a present?’

Mike glances at her. She has tilted her face towards him.

A black streak of mascara across her cheek. He wants to reach out a finger and wipe it off, but he keeps still.

‘Your boy?’

She half smiles, half grimaces, lets out another sob.

‘He’s so grown up. He’d looked so –’ She shakes her head. ‘I waited for him. I’m not allowed, but I did, because I’m his mum.’ She glares at Mike. ‘I’m his fucking mum, so they can’t say that, can they?’

Mike makes a sympathetic noise.

Angel puts her forehead back on her knees. Mike can only just make out what she’s saying. ‘I went and I waited and he came out. He came out and walked towards me. I swear he was walking towards me. He was looking at me, I swear it.’ She stops, says nothing for a long time. Then, ‘He just walked straight past.’ Mike hears her swallow.

‘He probably didn’t see you,’ he says.

‘But what if he did and he just ignored me?’

‘Why would he do that?’

She looks up for a moment, her face anguished, then lowers her head and starts to cry even harder. He always gets things like this wrong.

‘I’m sorry, love,’ he tries.

She looks up again. ‘You got kids?’

He wants to say, one day, one day I will, and it’ll be good – I’ll be a good dad, I’ll do everything right. But he remembers her face when she asked if he had a plan, and he says nothing, just shakes his head.

She gives a half hearted laugh. ‘Lucky bastard,’ she says. ‘They break your fucking heart.’

WEDNESDAY

Room 4

Billy's back. Just wanders into Jimmy's room after breakfast like he's never been away. He's been in a fight by the looks of it. A chunk out of his left ear. A limp.

'Ah sure, don't think you're getting special treatment,' he says. 'Using this place like a bloody hotel.' But he scoops up the jumpers and piles them back on the armchair and he can't keep himself from smiling when Billy leaps up – light as you like – and curls himself into a ball, his tail wrapped round him, his face buried in his paws.

That's when the knocking starts. Fuck's sake. Billy stirs, but stays put. Bang, bang, bloody bang on the front door, hard enough to shake the whole place. He's a mind to go down and give whoever it is what for, except why should he bother?

Bang. Bang. And someone's shouting now too. Jimmy. They're shouting Jimmy. Fuck. He feels his heart right up in his throat. He's told Ken – he's told everyone – if anyone comes round asking, I'm not here, you've never heard of me. Except if Ewan's in on it, then he's fucked. Jimmy edges towards the window. Kneels down so it's just his face at the glass. He presses his cheek against it, tries to see down to the door, but the angle's not right.

He turns back to the room. It feels too small. He can't climb out the window. It's too high, plus only the top bit opens and then not far – to stop people throwing themselves onto the street. It's never bothered him before. Downstairs, there's a back door. It's locked, but he's not too old to force a door if he needs to. It lets out into a little yard and then there's an alley onto the side street. He could get out without whoever's at the front seeing him.

No problem. No sweat. He looks at the cat who's asleep now, letting out little cat snores. Life of bloody Riley. Right now, he wouldn't mind swapping places with the critter. Sleep all day. Nine lives to play with. A few street fights when you feel the need.

If you were a man you'd go down there with your baseball bat and fight the bastards. The thought's in his head before he can stop

it. It's true though. Sneaking out through back doors – that's not Jimmy's style.

The banging's still going. No-one's answering. Bless them. Though the door's so bugged you could break it down without much bother. They are definitely shouting Jimmy. He's sure of it. Jimmy. Jimmy. Jimmy. Come out you fucking grass. Come get what's coming to you.

He crawls from the window to the armchair and lifts up Billy. The cat squirms, irritated, but Jimmy settles it on his lap and it curls up again, warm against Jimmy's legs and stomach.

'We'll just sit it out this time, wee man,' Jimmy whispers. 'We'll just stay put, let them get bored and go. Ewan's gone. Mac doesn't know I'm here. He's just guessing.' The cat doesn't stir. Jimmy runs his hand over its thick black fur, feels its heartbeat pulsing under his palm. Maybe he'll leave too – go some place else. Maybe Wigan or Rochdale. Ashton or Bolton. Or further. Ireland? He nearly laughs. Too many bridges burnt there to go back. But he could find somewhere. Go south. Or Wales – a place by the sea, he's always liked the sea. Nothing like sitting on a beach with a can of beer, watching the waves. He could take Billy with him. Start fresh.

Room 1

Well, he's done his best, Ken tells himself, standing in the middle of his room looking at the five cardboard boxes he begged from the off licence down the street. He looked for Ewan. He kept his room free as long as he could. There's nothing else he could have done and really he's not sure why he bothered in the first place. People come. People go. He's been reading too many books, thinking there's a mystery to be solved and an answer waiting to be found. Real life's not like that.

He's lived in this room more than twenty years. That's not the kind of statement a person wants to think about too hard. It's twenty-two years. He knows because he moved in on his fortieth birthday. The shittiest fortieth in the history of shitty fortieths. He pawned his wedding ring so he could buy enough whisky to stop it hurting. Didn't matter, he told himself – she was dead, the baby was dead; there was nothing left so what did a bit of gold mean? As far as he remembers the whisky hadn't helped much.

He thinks about the flat. The sweet smell of new carpets. The long corridors with framed pictures of flowers. Purple. Yellow. White. He has no idea about flowers' names, but they're nice pictures – calming.

Him? Ken? In a place with pictures of flowers on the wall? He's way past that kind of life, sure he is. He tries to imagine going to a bingo night, walking into a room full of white-haired residents and all them turning and looking at him and knowing just what kind of a man he is, just what kind of a life he's led. People get their hearts broken, they'd think, but most of them have a good cry and then carry on. Most of them don't use it as an excuse to give up. Except he's never worked out how those other people do it. Neither has Ewan it seems.

Come on, man. Pack. He's told Steve. Fucker hardly said a word, just shrugged and started bitching about some council inspection. The woman from Tuesdays at the church hall is coming with her car in the morning to move his stuff. It's done. He's going.

He starts with his books. Stacks them into the first box. They barely fill half of it. He looks around. Clothes, shoes, a few pictures on the walls, kettle, cups. He could leave without any of it really. Wouldn't miss a thing. He starts shoving his clothes in around the books, trying to get his breath in order – it's out of sync, awkward in his chest, like he's forgotten how to do it.

He looks up and a hundred silvery lines flicker at the edges of his vision. He gropes his way to the bed, sits himself down. Knowing his luck he'll move and then drop dead of a heart attack, and no one will know him, no one will give a shit.

He knows people here. Angel. Jimmy – who's an idiot, but all right underneath – those two upstairs and the new guy, Mike. And Ewan. Ken lies back on his bed and looks up at the ceiling. He wishes he knew what had really happened to Ewan. If he'd decided he couldn't hold all that hurt any more, or whether it was just an accident; or prison, like Jimmy said; or Mike's idea that he's run off to Thailand with his lottery cash. It doesn't matter either which way, not really, but Ken wouldn't mind knowing.

Room 2

They all think he takes the piss but it's not true. He's providing a service. He does his best – looks out for people. He left it a week before giving Ewan's room to Angel – what more proof do they need?

Steve opens another bin bag, and starts shoving in Ewan's clothes. Not many of them – a couple of pairs of boxers; a jumper; coat; a pair of shoes. He'll stick the lot in the front yard and someone will have it – it's like putting food out for pigeons, they'll be there in a flash, following each other, sniffing around, helping themselves. He runs a hand over the mantelpiece, shoving all the stones and shells to one end, then scooping them up with two hands and dumping them on top of the clothes. A thin, fluted shell falls onto the fireplace and shatters. Steve kicks the pieces into the grate.

He gets rid of the pictures by clawing his hand and pulling at them with his fingertips. They're cut out of magazines, the paper so thin it breaks as soon as he touches it. He leaves the drawing pins. Idiot shouldn't have used them, but he's damned if he's going to prise them all out – there must be hundreds of them. He stands back, looks at the bits of blue and grey and yellow paper stuck behind each pin and thinks he should have just left it as it was. And that makes him think of his mum – don't touch it Steven, you'll just ruin it.

Another landlord would just leave the lot, let Angel sort it out herself, but he's not like that. Steve eyes himself in the mirror above the mantelpiece. There's a crack running from top right to bottom left which crosses his face – makes it so the two halves don't quite line up. He puts his shoulders back, puffs out his chest, looking at himself still. He's not a bad catch. A man with property, money coming in, Angel would do all right with him. He'd look after her. Buy her things. He takes a half empty tube of toothpaste off the shelf above the sink, drops it into the bag. He'd buy her perfume, make-up, jewellery, whatever she wanted.

There's an old apple core under the sink – all brown and shrivelled,

like those people they find in bogs sometimes, their skin still on. He kicks it into the corner. He's not picking that up.

The furniture he'll leave – get Ken to give it quick once over with a cloth before Angel moves in. Except Ken's going too. Steve ties the top of the bag into a knot. It won't happen. The man's been there too long to just up and go. And even if he does it, he'll be back in a week, banging on the door, asking for his old room back. Steve's seen it all before.

Two bags of stuff. That's it. They're not even heavy. Steve drags them out of the room, down the hallway, and dumps them by the bins. He can't think what the man, Ewan, looks like. Tall maybe. Dark hair. They come and go, tenants. His head would hurt if he bothered with remembering them all.

He glances up at the house. Angel's room's on the left, above Ken's. The curtains are open and there's a bit of pink material hung in the window, the way you might string up a football scarf. A red cup sits on the window sill and inside the room he can see the light shade – a white paper globe. That's all.

Angel. He thinks for a moment about calling out to her – like they do in films, or plays: some guy standing on the street gazing up at his love. Except someone might see and he's not having that. Maybe he'll go with the present idea. Buy her a nice plant, or a little rug, some kind of moving-in present. She hasn't said she'll take the room, but she will. He imagines knocking on her door, handing her a gift and her smiling, blushing even. She'll invite him in for a cup of tea, a biscuit or two. They'll get talking. One thing will lead to another.

Room 3

She couldn't quite say how it happened, but it did, and it feels good. She's fed up of feeling shit. She isn't even thirty – she should be having fun.

Dylan. Just his name makes her wince. She shakes her head as though that could make it go away. She won't think about him today. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'll think about him. And today is an investment of sorts. This Mike is a good guy. Better than Ewan. He won't just disappear on her, she can see that. She can see now how she'd got it wrong with Ewan. She won't make the same mistake again.

She glances at Mike. Sleeping. His bare shoulder sprinkled with tiny dark moles, like the dot-to-dots she'd loved doing as a kid. Her gaze skids off the foil and powder and pipe strewn on the floor next to him. He's been clean almost a year, he'd told her. Detoxed in prison. Got himself fit. I don't do this any more he'd said, looking at the packet she'd taken from the shelf and handed to him.

She isn't sure why she did it – why she wheedled and flirted, and said she was clean too. But just the once? Where was the harm in that? Probably she just didn't want to be on her own with it. And it's working. Here she is, lying next to him on the mattress, knowing there's enough left for another smoke once he wakes up. And the emptiness she carries around with her has gone. Just like that. She lies with her hand on her breastbone and concentrates. Yes. It has definitely gone.

She reaches for the radio and turns it on. Magic FM. They're playing 80s ballads. She smiles, shifts her hips in time to the beat. Mike stirs and turns onto his back, his face angled towards her. She waits for him to open his eyes, but he doesn't. He looks younger asleep. Maybe everyone does. She thinks about Dylan as a baby, the way he'd sleep with his arms flung wide as though proving how much he trusted her to keep him safe. She shuffles closer to Mike, puts her hand on his chest and feels the soft bounce of hair under

her fingers. She used to go into Dylan's room when he was asleep and watch his chest to see he was breathing. She would bend down, gentle as you like, and breathe him in. I'm your Angel, she'd whisper and sometimes he'd stir as though he'd heard her in his sleep.

It isn't too late. She has to remember that. Mike will help. He meant it, about staying clean. He hardly breathed in when she gave him the pipe – she saw that – and she needs someone with that kind of will power. He'll help her sort herself out. They'll go to the council together. Make things right. And she's got Dylan a birthday present too. A few days late, but that can't be helped now. A bike. Bright red with black flames painted on. She'd seen a bloke from the house next door wheeling it along and she'd known straight off, that was it. She hadn't had all the money, but he's given her a week to pay and what matters is that she's got something. It's leaned against the wall by the door. There's a bit of her wonders if it isn't too small for Dylan, and there are scratches across the flames, which she hadn't noticed when she'd bought it. But no. It's perfect. He will love it. She can see his face already when she goes back to the school gates. Mike's right, he just wasn't concentrating last time – he wasn't expecting her; he had his mind on other things. This time, he'll see her, and the bike, and his whole face will light up and he'll put his skinny strong arms round her waist and hug her and everything will be okay again.

Room 2

Apart from a single bed, an old sofa, and a chest of drawers meant for a kid's bedroom, the room is empty. A cracked mirror above the mantelpiece. Lines of drawing pins still holding onto scraps of paper. A shrivelled apple core stranded by the skirting board. A dark stain on the carpet just inside the door. Everything is thick with dust – streaked where someone's moved things from their place. It smells damp, almost swampy, and there's a cold draft, from the window or the slightly open door, or both.


A black cat slips into the room. It walks from door to fireplace, bed to window. Sniffs at the apple core then leaves it be. A stray. But only recently – its coat is still a rich, oiled black; the bite out of its ear its only visible injury. It jumps up onto the sofa, then seems to change its mind; goes instead to the bed – dirty blue sheets, a lumpy duvet piled up at one end. The cat traces a circle with its body until, satisfied, it lies down, head on paws, tail coiled. For a moment it keeps its eyes open, two pale green circles taking in the room which used to be lived in by a man called Ewan, and next week will be lived in by somebody else. It stares a while longer, and then closes its eyes. Outside someone is shouting, his voice raw and angry. Nobody is answering. From somewhere in the house comes the muffled sound of music. The cat sleeps – undisturbed.



Not Home

stories from unsupported
temporary accommodation

Sarah Butler,
Stephen King, Justlife



A group of B&B residents in Manchester worked with writer, Sarah Butler and photographer, Stephen King, to create portraits and tell their stories. This collection of images and texts captures the everyday struggles faced by those living in unsupported temporary accommodation as well as celebrating people's resourcefulness and strength.

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I'm looking to the future

I was in a B&B not far short of a year. It upset my life living there. Don't get me wrong, there were one or two people who were okay, but I just felt like the walls were closing in on me – because you've got no control over who knocks on your door at what hour. It sent me a bit crazy in a way. That's how it made me feel inside, having these people knock. It wasn't nice.

I felt unsafe. I was trying to hold down a college course: Health and Social Care Level One. I managed to complete that when I was there, but I found it very stressful. I'd go out and do my thing, and as soon as I got back, my door would knock – have you got this, have you got that?

I wouldn't eat the food there. It just wasn't right. Hygiene for me is very important. It was precooked and then warmed up two or three hours later. I mean you shouldn't grumble, there's people who'd kill for food like that. I basically lived on microwave food, or ate out, which wasn't good, but I could still cook decent food in a microwave.

I came to Justlife for advice, and I've managed to move on. Where I am now, it feels safer. I can do what I want, when I want. It's great, because I've got that support. And I'm actually volunteering sorting the library out there. But I still use Justlife's centre. I come here to volunteer.

I sometimes do cooking with Ruth. I attend activities. It's really helped me. I've just given them a thank you card, to show appreciation, saying that I feel better in myself, and am ready to move forward with my life. I mean, it's still small steps, but it's good. It's great.

I was out with friends for dinner last night and they said: you seem better in yourself – we can see that sparkle back in your eye. I was coming into Justlife breaking down. I was very emotional. I felt stupid, breaking down. But like I say, the staff just calmed me down and they've helped me.

I'm doing a lot of things now that when I was there I wouldn't bother doing. I'm trying to seek more help. Use more people to get me out. I mean where I am now it's safe, but eventually I want to get my own property. Takes time, doesn't it? Baby steps. You can't run before you can walk. I'm getting there. I'm looking to the future.

I go walking

This B&B's better than the other one. This one's cleaner. It's a bit dearer, like, but no one knocks on your door for this and that. She won't give me another room though. I'm next to that pub – they're there till four o'clock in the morning. I've got to have my window open cos it's so hot. They close the doors about 11 to stop the music blasting, but they sit in the back garden singing.

I can't have the breakfasts there because my cholesterol's up here. He just slaps it in the pan. Two eggs. Two bacon. It's all grease though. I put some weight on eating all that for two months. I said to him, can I use the kitchen? No, he locks it up. No washing machine. Nothing. When I moved in here there was the same quilt the last person used. All she wants is the rent. And the top-up, but I don't want to pay the top-up cos I don't eat the food there.

I go walking. Last week I walked all the way to Ashton-Under-Lyne. I enjoyed that. I thought I'd just follow the bus route. I left here at one, got home at ten o'clock at night. It's ten minutes on the bus!

I met a girl sixteen years ago working behind a bar in a pub on Hyde Road. We got together had two kids and we moved back to Wrexham where she was originally from. She got into drugs. Heroin. Social services got involved. Kids got took off us. She's still doing it now. She used to rob me all the time. Then I met this other girl. Didn't know she had mental health problems. She wouldn't let me go out or anything. I'd had enough. I fell out with her and got on a train and came back here.

Then I went back to her for six months. After Christmas, I thought in my head, it's going to go wrong again. She goes in these moods. I just got on a train and came back. There was no rooms left in the other place, so they found me this place.

I was on Manchester Move, but because I went back to Wrexham I've got to start again. I've just sent all my ID off, so I'm just waiting now to go back on this bidding thing.

The people here – if they can't get drugs they want a drink. That's what got me last week. Started drinking with them didn't I? If I start I can't stop. I've been drinking vodka all last week – I shouldn't have. There's nothing else to do.

I'm doing well

All the places are different. In the last B&B I was in, there were always people knocking on your door asking for this that and the other – mainly rizlas or money or drugs or whatever. There were fifty-six people living there in one place. There were double rooms as well. The mattresses were no good. You'd ask for a new one and the landlord would get a second-hand one that'd already been slept on, not washed it or sterilised it or nothing. I didn't have access to a kitchen. They did food, but it was no good. Egg, chips and beans. There was mice in there, jumping all over.

I'm in supported accommodation now. You get your own kitchen, your own bathroom, your own bedroom, your own living room. They provide the furniture, the cooker, pans, all that; you just need to provide your own telly. It's clean, the staff are all right, people don't knock on your door – give me this give me that.

I came to Justlife and asked them about moving. They got me an interview on the Thursday and I moved in on the Friday. I'd heard of this place but I didn't know how to get in on my own.

I got a job the week after. Everything just came together, so I was buzzing. Same scenario: went for the job on Thursday, started on Friday. I do general cleaning at the cinema. Early mornings. I was on jobseekers for about four or five years before that. I was a bit stressed, but the stress has gone now. I had tablets for that, but they've took me off them because I don't need them now. I'm doing well.

My next move is to try and get another job, in the afternoons. Probably another cleaning job – I don't mind it, me. People think a cleaning job's a last resort. It might be, but it's a job; someone's got to do it. You either like it or you don't. I like it because the people I work with are nice – I get on with them all. They're always polite.

I'm waiting to get my own place now. Justlife are helping me with the bidding – that's out of my league at the moment, I'm terrible with computers.

It's better than being on the street

I've been living in this B&B for ten years – a long time. There are people there've been there thirty years. It's rubbish. It's a dive. It's full of cockroaches and mice and everything. You've heard the saying 'quiet as a mouse', but they're not quiet at all: they're dead loud.

My room's dead small. You can't do nothing in there. I've got enough room for my telly and my bed. There's a chest of drawers but that is built-in so I can't move anything around – it's got to be the same all the time.

It used to be even worse. The food was worse. It was the same thing every week. Let's say it was steak and kidney pie: rock hard; I mean rock hard you just couldn't eat it. Then it got a bit better – it was changed to a monthly menu instead of a weekly menu. That was better for a while. I don't eat there anymore. You're not allowed to use the kitchen. I go to foodbanks and that. I've been living on cereal for the last couple of months.

I mean we're not moaning and groaning about it – we're just happy to be off the streets. We've got a roof and a bed and TV and that'll do; it's better than being on the street, in a doorway. I wouldn't live like that, not if I can help it.

There's a lot of drinkers in there, so you're bound to see it. There's always people offering you drinks now and then, so I ended up getting back into it. Not big, but now I'm back buying my own. It helps me go to sleep. It's something to do for the boredom. I stopped for six years once, so I know I can stop if I want to – it's not a big deal. At the moment though I have been drinking a bit more, so I need to cut down again. I've caught myself.

I don't go into town much. I stick around here. I just watch TV. I like Sci Fi. It gets my imagination going – I start thinking about things that might happen in the future. I love it. I get a buzz off it, good style. I know not all of my ideas are brilliant, but I reckon some of them are pretty good. Other people could hear them, and they could make them even better. That's what happens in life anyway isn't it? That's how people produce things. I always think, drat I should have wrote that down.

I wonder if I've got a guardian angel

I live in a B&B at the moment. The truth: it's better than the streets; it's better than a doorway; it's better than prison. I was on the streets for nine, ten months. Homeless. Prison. All sorts. I'm still here aren't I? I wonder if I've got a guardian angel.

Do you want to be an actress? Do you want to be a singer? Do you want to be a guitarist? Whatever you want to be - you teach yourself. When you teach yourself, you just use your imagination.

I've played the guitar for thirty years. My first guitar? I can't remember, it was so long ago. I play the harmonica. My nanna bought me one. But my first guitar - I can't remember. I know guys who busk. I'm not as good as them guys, but we've all got different styles. I can go out and make money, but I don't need much money.

It's just a great instrument. It reminds me of a woman - it's got hips, this is her neck, her shoulders. Beautiful.

It's a horrible situation

I've been in this place just over a year. I was only visiting my brother to see how he was and that, and then next thing I know people are saying, why don't you move in here, there's going to be an empty room. I didn't want to go back to the place I was in, so I ended up staying. It's horrible. The wallpaper's falling off the walls. The lino's all cracked and pulled up. When I was first there I put a few posters up to sort of tidy the place up a bit, make it feel like home, but I just couldn't do it. I got a TV, freeview box. But of late I've given everything away, because I just want to get out of there. It's too heavy on the mind.

Half the house is on drugs and the other half is alcoholics. There can be arguments, a lot of fighting. It's a pretty depressing place. And it's crawling with bed bugs. It's a horrible situation. They don't just bite you, they get into your head.

I've been on drugs all my life. I've been on methadone thirty-three years. When I first started I was on 45ml a day, then it rose to 90ml a day now I've got back to 40ml a day. You don't know where the time goes to. I feel like I'm bypassing time. Thirty-three years has just gone – like that. I don't even touch heroin, but now I'm addicted to methadone, it's just another thing, a substitute. I was an intravenous user from when I was twenty-one to twenty-five. Then I started using crack when I was about twenty-eight, when I got out of prison. It's a horrible drug – a horrible experience when you're taking it. It makes you paranoid. Everything is amplified. But it's just addictive – it's got something in it. I keep trying to get off it, but in this place where I am, this house, it's just people knocking on your door – are you scoring today? It's just there all the time.

I just want to get me and my brother out of there, into a proper hostel, a hostel with rules and regulations, so we're getting the help we need. There's dos and don'ts in a proper hostel. But in this place there's no rules.

It's a roof over my head

I was in that place from October 27 all the way up to June 4th. It was not good. Some of the people are very nice, but other people kept knocking on my door: have you got this, have you got that? Then the TV area – the TV's always getting pinched, and there were always alcoholics in there. Severe ones. And druggies. I've never done that in my life, but it's just the way it is. The windows were never cleaned. Even though we paid a service charge – £40 a fortnight – and we thought, what are we paying for? I couldn't have a shower in that place. It was uncouth. I have a stick and there were no bars to hold onto, so I couldn't stand up, and it was dirty. I had a sink in my room, that's all I had to clean myself. I disliked it, but I just thought, it's a roof over my head – I'm not out homeless. I just kept myself to myself.

There's some nice people. Courteous. You have a few friends who you like. One of them brought me here to Justlife. Since I've been here, I've acted, I've been canoeing. All these events – things I've never done before. It's all very happy for me. They're like a family for me.

I'm in my own flat now. It does me. I get help from the Universal Credit people. I paid my tax insurance all my life since I was sixteen. I'm only fifty-two now, but I've done it all my life. I've contributed and now I'm being helped by the government. I'm very very happy.

I just keep myself to myself

I got took to the place when I got out of nick. As soon as we pulled up in the car I thought, take me back.

It's all right, but there's mice. I was watching telly and I see one – it doesn't go under my bed, just stays near window, just sits there, and I'm thinking: 'am I seeing things?' I told the landlord. He said he'd get me some stuff for it, but he never does. I've still not got a key to my room. I can lock it when I'm in but not when I'm out. I've had plenty of stuff nicked.

I just keep myself to myself. I go out and about in the day – just mooching round. I tend to stick around here.

Everything in my room is stuff I've found. Every skip I see, I'll have a look. The best thing I've found is my microwave. When I get electrics I leave them for a day just in case they're damp.

Justlife are helping me look for a place. I'd like my own place – get my independence back.

It needs some changes in the law

I've been in temporary accommodation since I came out of hospital. It was in a psychiatric ward in Stockport. I had a business and there were problems – I started suffering from the mental health. I wasn't giving myself a break. One day I just got in my car and drove off, checked into a hotel, didn't tell my wife or anyone – the police were out looking for me.

I became homeless straight after hospital. I owned a property, but I signed it over to my partner, because obviously I didn't want her to go through the same situation as I was going through. So they've classed me as making myself intentionally homeless, which is ridiculous. They put me in temporary accommodation, which I've been in not far off a year now. I'm still struggling with the term temporary.

I never knew places like the digs where I live now existed. They're diabolical. The facilities are awful. It needs a massive overhaul in my mind. It needs some changes in the law. I don't know how my landlord gets away with it. I've got bare wires coming out of the ceiling rose – no light. He gave me a plastic coupling to go onto the wires, but I'm not an electrician – I'm not going to mess with it. There's a small sink that you can't even put a kettle under to fill up. There was no hot water in my room. I chased the hot water pipe back to where it had been turned off, so now I have some warmish water when the heating kicks in, which is very infrequent. I've had ice on the inside of my windows in winter. I bought a heater. I came back one day and it was gone out of my room. Turns out the landlord has a habit of taking heaters, taking the plugs off and storing them in the cellar which no one has access to – so no one uses the electricity. My tenancy agreement says I pay £20 a week top up and I get seven meals a week. I've never had one meal since I've been in that place.

The thing is though, it's this or it's the streets. The way I look at it, it's one up from the streets, so you can't complain too much, because then you're a bad tenant, and then you're out on the streets and I don't want that. So what do you do? You grin and bear it. Justlife are trying to get

me to another place, which is more of a supported accommodation. We'll just have to wait and see.

Justlife's been a godsend – the meals they do, the snacks they give you, the support, just to make a phone call, or if you're feeling down, you're feeling low – they can't do enough for you.

There's an awful lot of drug taking that goes on in these establishments. I did have problems with drugs over thirty years ago, but I didn't take drugs for over thirty years, didn't have a habit or anything, and then unfortunately coming back to where I am and surrounded by it I ended up relapsing. I still take medication, which I have done for thirty years and luckily I've managed not to get a habit again, but it's still something I need to address.

I've got problems with my liver. With my mental health I was self-medicating with drink and that's caused damage to my liver. But I'm fortunate enough to have it caught early enough. The big picture, the plan, is to get myself right healthwise and then move to Abersoch. It's so therapeutic – it's a lovely place.

You've got to lose before you can win

I've played chess since I was nine. I'm sixty-four now. Chess is good for the mind. It's relaxing really. I used to play it for money. Then I fell into the hands of drink. In the eighties I never made less than fifty pounds a day – and that was a bad day. I used to play for five pounds a game.

I've only played one game in the last year and a half. I've no one to play. My son won't play me because I slaughter him. But he doesn't understand. You've got to lose before you can win. You've got to watch what's being done to you. It's like life. You make a mistake. You don't repeat it. It's the same with chess. You just progress and progress and progress.

It's great – it's good

I'm from Manchester: Longsight. I was on the streets, but it was winter and I needed to come in. I'm too old now – definitely too old. I'm living in a B&B. I've been there about a year now I think. It's great – it's good.

All my kids live down south, so I commute all over the shop – Brighton, Bournemouth, Eastbourne. I love it down there – I love being by the sea. I worked on the trawlers in Devon. I was a deckhand for about nine months. I loved it. You do get *mal de mere* though, whoever you are. I got it for two days – I had to just go to my bunk for two days; it's the most horrible feeling I've ever had in my life.

I come to Justlife every Tuesday and Thursday, if I'm not elsewhere, and then the rest of the week – there are loads of these places to go to.

You can't break down there

We're stuck where we are. We've been there about two and a half years. They fly by. I wouldn't mind – if we could use the kitchen and stuff it wouldn't bother me, but you can't. We go Greggs, or the church in Ancoats on a Sunday, or one of the food vans at night to get something to eat. But it's a brand new kitchen. There's a washing machine, you can't use that. There's only one shower working. The front door's not had a lock on for three days, so anyone can walk in. It's a joke. I'm never there. I'm always out. I just go out for a walk. I hate it there. It does my head in.

When I'm seeing my grandma, my grandda, I can't bring them back for a brew.

I did a cooking course in prison. I miss it. I done the bakery – all the cakes and the bread and everything. My mate's dad's a manager at Gregg's. I could get a job there whenever I want, but because of the drugs and everything at the moment, scripts and stuff like that, and living there, it's chaotic isn't it? So I'm not going to take it. If we move out of there into a supported place, then most of your wage is just going to go on that, so really we need to try and get a flat or something.

I've been on methadone, on drugs, too long, it's time to stop. I've got an addictive personality. Always have had, since I was a kid. Like when they say, you've got to have come from a broken home, I had everything as a kid, I had everything. I'm just one of them stupid people who's got to try something. I don't think I will stop. I hope so, one day, but I don't know.

If I had my own place it'd be easier to get off the drugs. I couldn't do it over there. You can't break down there. There's always people knocking on, have you got such and such's number, can you do this, can you do that? If I had my own flat, I don't know, I'd just shut the door and stay in bed and do it.

You want to see the state of this place

I was literally kicked out. She kept my passport, my birth certificate, clothes. I was put into a place for five days, emergency winter accommodation. It was hell. It was the worst five days of my life. Then I was put into a B&B and I thought, this has got to be a step up: a B&B, bed and breakfast, this sounds all right.

So I find the place. I'm walking down the hallway and the smell was rotten: hash, body odour, vomit, smoke, built-up in everything. The manager brought me into this little room. I could stand in the room and touch both sides. It was filthy. I just sat down and thought, oh my god. There was blood spattered on the wall. It was disgusting. I am a tough, tough individual, but that was a culture shock. I went up to community services the following day and I said, you want to see the state of this place. The guy there gave me loads of jay cloths, gloves, sprays. I spent a whole weekend on and off. It was only a tiny little place but I had to clean everything, the bed, frame, everything. Every square centimetre, except the ceiling. It took me hours.

You could literally push the door in. The three walls of my room were plasterboard, painted. So you can hear them breathing next door. You can hear everything, smell everything, it's horrible, man. And then they turned the heating off at night and turned it on a couple of hours in the day. And no breakfast. I don't eat pork or beef or anything so there was nothing for me. Cup of the cheapest coffee you can get. Mouldy bread – literally.

I had a few showers, but I was just standing on a towel in my room and washing myself. I'd wash myself completely, do my teeth, wash my hair, clean clothes on – I was hand washing them in the sink – but I never felt clean. When I left there I left all my bedding and some of my clothes and then when I got to the new place I spent two days just running everything through the washing machine. My teeth haven't got back to their normal whiteness yet. You just get lethargic. Even though the sink is just there – your life is drained, you feel drained and lethargic and you've no mind to do anything. Some days I'd think why

brush my teeth or wash, who's going to see me? Am I going anywhere?

No I'm not. Your normal routines go out the window. Your normal eating habits go out the window. My training regime went out the window. I was there for thirteen weeks and I was in bits when I left. Physically. You wouldn't have known me. I'd lost a load of weight. My training went out the window. I didn't even realise how thin I'd got until I left. It took me over a month to get back to normal.

It's an experience I will not forget. It was unbelievable.

I'm happy where I am, but I need to move on

I was sofa-surfing at a friend's house. Then they moved into a smaller property and I couldn't move with them, so then I was sofa-surfing in other places. I ended up in the Quick Access centre on Stockport Road for a time. It's for homeless people. You get your own room, shared bathroom. Then they found me a place at a B&B and I've been there ever since. That was 2012. It's all right. It's not too bad. It all depends really.

The worst thing is not having the money to do things. I don't go out much, but it would be nice to have the money to do things. I'm not on much money as it is, and I find it hard paying the rent. I was paying monthly cos it was easier for me, but I kept slipping on it and they said I'd have to pay fortnightly. So my money's gone right down. I don't get DLA no more, don't get sickness benefit, mobility benefit. I'm on ESA. I'm supposed to go to the job centre, but I'm still waiting for a letter about going on a back-to-work programme.

I was seven when I started smoking; thirteen when I started smoking cannabis. Then obviously I've built it up onto the harder stuff – heroin and crack cocaine – I don't use needles or nothing. I find it hard with the drugs I'm on at the minute – they bring me down. I pay my rent and all that, but the money I have left just goes on drugs and drink. It takes it all out of me. I've been on tablets for depression but I've stopped taking them because they're interfering with the other drugs.

I'm happy where I am, but I need to move on, get my own place. I've not had my own flat for years now. But if you have your own flat you've got your electric, your water, gas, TV licence. With the money I'm on I'd be skint by the time I paid out. I wouldn't have any money to live on.

I've got to get out

I've been in that place too long. I came for two weeks but I've been there two years. What's it like? Jesus, I don't know where to start. It's a craphole. I'm getting out. I've got to get out. Otherwise I'll kill myself.

I read plenty. My wife – who I'm not with now – she was educated. I met her when she was a student. I was a young lad then. She brought this book home, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer. She said, here y'are, read that. Woke me up. I like that writer, George Orwell too. Read all his books. She brightened my life up. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have survived. I'd just come out of the Paras – the Falklands and everything. About six months later – I didn't know her then – I got what they call today sectioned. War's not a good thing. Messed my head up. I met her in a pub. She brought these books. She educated me. She saved my life. Got me into reading proper, big style.

I love Northern Soul. It's a sound. I find it difficult to describe. I would go with the lads down to Moss Side. Back in the day. Early 70s. You know rastas and all that. Street parties and shebeens. Got to know Northern Soul big style. Loved it. Just took me off. On the A side you've got all this crap. Flip it over – B sides. Love it. It's the beat. It's that riff. Classic. That flip side get's you, man. I used to go to Wigan Casino. You didn't go there to drink. You'd go there to dance. I'm sixty-four now. I dance in my head.

Couldn't sleep at night

My daughter died when she was twenty-one. She had cancer. I drowned my sorrows in drink. I was missing days at work and all that. In the end they said I could either have voluntary redundancy or they'd have

to let me go, so I took voluntary redundancy. I ended up in the B&B. It was all right to start with – they had a manager at the time – and then it just went downhill. There were supposed to be no visitors – just family and social workers – but all sorts came in. Couldn't sleep at night, it was just bang bang bang on the door. People on drugs and alcohol. It just got too much.

Hannah at Justlife got me registered on Manchester Move, so I could bid for a property. I came in here a month after signing up, it was all ready. I done it, and in two weeks I got this place I'm in now. They call it a semi-retirement place – it's for over fifty-fives. I'm the youngest person there!

When I got the keys I come back and I said I didn't want it. I didn't want to leave my mates. But now I'm there, it's luxury. I've got my own bedroom, my own kitchen, my own bathroom, my own living room. At the B&B I was living on microwave meals. I've been in this place over one and a half years now and I must have used the microwave about four times, and that's only for my baked beans. Justlife helped me out: they moved me. They got me a bed, they got me a fridge freezer, there was already a cooker in, they got me a three seater settee and a chair.

I don't really miss being round here. I've got mates in the B&B, but I go in there now and I think, I've got to get out. Since I've been at this place, every now and then I'll have a drink, but it's dead rare. When I was in the B&B I was drinking every day. I go in the B&B now and my mates are drinking and I think, no, I don't want that.

I've always liked gardening – it's just relaxing, and I've always liked being outside. I come here to Justlife every week, as a volunteer.

We used to have vegetables but it was all going to waste, so we decided to just go for the flowers. Now I'm doing gardening at the Whitworth

I've been at the top in life and at the bottom

In normal life we have many many little things that make up a reasonable existence, that give us comfort, give us the things we need, they help us to make it through. Those hundreds of things that make up the fabric of life are dismantled and stripped from us in places like these B&Bs. You lose all those things which give richness to life. There's hardly anything you can hold onto which is civilised. It affects your mind.

Justlife are enablers. They enable people to do things. It's very important that organisations like this exist. When you start to lose those many things which make up a normal life and you're dragged down to a point where you're just existing, small things become magnified. Small difficulties become obstacles and it's very difficult to overcome them. Just having food is very difficult. Then, when things are provided for you, you lose some level of pride because you're not providing it for yourself. That makes you more depressed; and that implodes. Enablers like Justlife help people overcome those small things. They can help ease that pain, and help them have a better life, and help them move forwards.

I've been at the top in life and at the bottom. I was working at quite a lucrative short term contract, which ended prematurely. I was in Brighton in hotel accommodation, but with no income, and I ended up living in a tent in a park. I was digging around in my pocket and found an unused return ticket to Manchester, so I used it, and came here. I was sofa surfing for a while. Then I lived in my tent in Manchester, which was soon burnt out and my possessions destroyed. So I was living on the streets, begging on the streets. After a while of doing that, I thought to myself: I'm not doing this, I want to return something to the community and learn a skill. I don't want to spend the next ten years living on the street. I want something more. I thought, I know where I can get hold of a cornet, but I couldn't have that on the street because things get stolen. So I got myself off the street.

I got a cornet mouthpiece and I learned to make rudimentary sounds. I was stood outside Dawson's doing this. I got paid a pound for it – so I became a professional musician! Then I got a cornet. I started with a scale. The very first time I played that scale in Manchester I made £1.50. So I busked a scale around Manchester for a week and then I started to learn some tunes, and the rest is history. I thought, I've got to learn to be as good as I can be. I believe that we humans are bounded only by the limitations we place on ourselves. Expect and strive to be the very best you can be and you astound yourself by how good you can be.

I also write and I'm an artist. I've done a number of things. Trying to make it on the street, you do try a lot of different things. I tried to sell Manchester Cathedral. I had to knock the price down to ten pounds, but nobody was taking it! After that I started selling pigeons, but I've never managed to sell one. I did have a great deal of success selling wasps. You've got to have humour to get money.

It's been very interesting living on the streets. You have to keep your individuality; you have to keep control; you have to be in charge of yourself. Otherwise you're pushed from pillar to post.



Writing *Not Home*

I first worked with Justlife in 2013. At the time, I knew nothing about unsupported temporary accommodation and was shocked by the stories that emerged over the weeks I spent at the charity's base in Openshaw, Manchester. Stories of vulnerable people living in insecure and often dangerous accommodation – no locks on their doors; no access to cooking facilities; dirty bathrooms; damp rooms; constant interruptions; aggression and violence; drugs and alcohol.

Over the next few years, Justlife conducted a research project looking at the impact of unsupported temporary accommodation on people's health and well being. We started to talk about different ways of sharing that research with as wide an audience as possible, and came up with the idea of me writing a short novel set in a Manchester B&B that would enable people to emotionally connect with the experience of living in this kind of substandard housing.

In 2016, I secured Arts Council funding to support the project and began my research. I cannot thank Justlife's staff and the people who use their services in Openshaw and Ardwick enough for the stories they told me; the time they took to help me understand their lives; the cups of tea and bowls of soup; the drafts they read and commented on, and for their open-hearted enthusiasm for what I was trying to do.

I also want to thank Francesca Main, Emma Claire Sweeney, Emily Midorikawa and Paul McVeigh for their brilliant editorial advice; and Sylwia Muir and Dan Banks for helping with extra bits of research.

Not Home is a piece of fiction. It isn't about any particular person or place, but it is rooted in the real lives of people living in Manchester today – a hidden homeless population who deserve much much better. The book is dedicated to the nine Manchester B&B residents using Justlife's services who died over the course of the project.

We wanted to make space in the project for the voices of people who access Justlife's services, so I worked with photographer,

Stephen King, on a series of portraits and personal stories which act as a companion to *Not Home*. Thank you to Stephen for his fantastic work and to the people who made portraits and shared their stories with us: Ben, Brian, Carl, Chris, Clifford, Colin, Craig, Darren, Darren, Deborah, Kevin, Michael, Paul, Popeye, Stephen, Stephen and Tim.

Maybe it is ambitious to hope that a piece of literature can help in the fight for better homes for some of our most vulnerable citizens, but I believe that stories can effect change in significant ways; they allow us to step into someone else's shoes, however uncomfortable that might be.

I hope you both enjoy and are outraged by this book, and that it might inspire you to make your own voice heard in the fight for change.

Sarah Butler, 2018

Justlife – finding hope in dark places

Jon was thirty three years old when he was sent down for burglary, he got a six month stretch and it did him the world of good. He showed up back in Openshaw looking really fit, strong and healthy. This was the longest he'd been off heroin and alcohol for the best part of twenty years and it was time for a new start. 'All I need is a job and a place to live' he said to Gary & Hannah Bishop as he stood propped up at their kitchen worktop devouring a bacon sandwich. 'Then I'm all set and I can get back with my girls and be a *proper* family.'

'Just a job and place to live', it wasn't much to ask, but it turns out those things are extremely hard to come by and Jon ended up in a B&B on Gransmoor Avenue, in Openshaw, east Manchester. Within a few days of being discharged from prison he was dead and his body lay there, undiscovered, for two weeks.

The Bishop's rallied some friends and began a journey to better understand what kind of community Jon had been living in, getting behind the street's fearsome reputation, squalid physical conditions and 'no-go-zone' feel. They started regular visits to residents in smoke-filled rooms, inviting them to the local church hall for a decent meal.

A few weeks later, a group of B&B dwellers were gathering at the hall once a week, with volunteers serving food and listening to the toe-curling stories of life in East Manchester's B&B-land. As this long-hidden community began to engage with the outside world, housing workers and other professional services added their expertise to the growing momentum for change for every individual who lived there.

The sad fact was that for so many residents, the horrors they described were 'just life'. This phrase was repeated endlessly by residents who felt their life had run into a cul-de-sac and their only way out would be in a box. 'It's just life' – a mantra to the acceptance of despair and hopelessness.

In October 2008, Justlife was formed. An organisation which would come to symbolise hope and justice for this community by actively reaching out to the afflicted, the poor, the addicted, the

lost, sick and traumatised residents of Manchester's Homeless B&Bs, building trust, finding the good, gathering help, working and campaigning for transformation. Justlife's research has shown that over 50,000 families in England live in Bed & Breakfast facilities and they estimate that there could be another 25,000 accommodated in similar lodgings under different names.

This incredible book *Not Home* is published on the 10th anniversary of Justlife. The charity is now working extensively with residents of unsupported temporary accommodation in Manchester and Brighton, providing intensive health, housing and personal support to residents. It also has an influential role in research and policy through a network of Temporary Accommodation Action Groups in various local authority areas across the country.

It has been a great joy to work with Sarah as she has embedded herself within the Justlife community with the workers and the service users, learning the intricacies and complexities of their lives. The result is a compelling and insightful story which draws us into a world which the vast majority of people never see, hear of or understand. We hope that now that you have seen and heard, you will continue to understand, notice and care.

If you are interested in finding out more about Justlife, contacting us, or supporting our work, we would love to hear from you. Please visit our website www.justlife.org.uk.

Gary Bishop, Justlife CEO, 2018



Portraits

Stephen King





































