Structures of Feeling: Exploring emergent social change in the reading and writing of narrative fiction

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Rob Payne
Abstract

How does the novel capture the contradictions and convolution of feeling that characterise individuals’ subjective experience when new social and political formations emerge? Cultural theorist and novelist Raymond Williams’ concept of ‘structures of feeling’ throws into relief the processes by which characters in fiction might articulate and come to understand their emotionally ambivalent responses to economic and cultural change. This thesis aims to mobilise Williams’ concept as writing and reading practices through a thesis that comprises a creative work and a dissertation. In the first component, the creative work, I present sections from my novel, ‘All in This Together’. The narrative is set in London, England in 2012 and aims to blend pathos and humour as it explores the lived intricacies of contemporary life in an urban setting. In particular, it focuses on how individuals engage with and navigate social tensions related to the impacts of neoliberal politics and residual ideas of class. Moving between both the professional and personal worlds, the narrative sees the central protagonist question how best to live, and how to balance his individualist aspirations against his sense of community.

The accompanying dissertation uses Williams’ structures of feeling as a framework to explore how specific techniques of and approaches to the writing of fiction, such as those deployed in my own manuscript, help to capture social tensions, often in their nascent, emergent forms. Through close readings of Margaret Drabble’s The Ice Age (1977), Nick Hornby’s About a Boy (1998) and Tim Lott’s White City Blue (1999), I explore the struggles of individual characters in relation to their specific historical and social situations during the late twentieth century. In this way, complexity is restored to the historical contexts in which these novels are set, enabling readers to gain a deeper insight into and understanding of the lived moment. Together with the creative work, this dissertation encourages readers to
consider the vital role of feeling, sensation and emotion in the formation and conceptualisation of society and culture.
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Dedication

This PhD is dedicated to Professor Douglas Webb, friend and mentor, who demonstrated the nobility of scholarship every day; and Dianne Payne, whose red pen gave me a solid grounding as a naive undergraduate.
PART 1: CREATIVE COMPONENT

‘All in This Together’

Please note: To comply with word-length limits, selected chapters from the full manuscript have been removed. Brief chapter summaries are provided in their place.
Chapter 1

January 2012 – London

If life were at all fair, Nate thought, he would be spending his days doing nothing more strenuous than seeking out the perfect sandwich, perhaps while living in a cottage in Scotland near a loch and a homely pub. At the moment, his sandwich of choice was bap with creamy egg and rocket, ham if it weren’t too slimy, but he was open to other possibilities, combinations he hadn’t considered with artisan breads waiting to be discovered. He took comfort in this flexible attitude, which, along with his commitment to recycling, suggested he hadn’t yet completely succumbed to the cynicism and rigidity of middle-age.

Nate breathed deeply, intending a mournful sigh, but instead inhaled exhaust from a bus belching through the intersection. As he coughed, his fellow pedestrians shot him the kind of aggravated looks one got near commuting hubs at peak hour. This was unfair, as the day was cold and they were bundled up, their raw faces partially covered by scarves, which suggested they weren’t at risk of contracting any assumed illness. The light turned and they trudged en masse into the grey day. It was the kind of morning society hated, but Nate quite liked, which wasn’t surprising seeing as society and Nate rarely got on. Colourless skies allowed him to feel maudlin without guilt, unlike sunny warm days when the young and nubile paraded in varying degrees of nakedness, rubbing in the fact he was forty-nine and in a state of advanced decrepitude no amount of exercise and good eating could halt.

As he arrived at A&M Meat Distribution, a wave of deliveries was pulling out of the yard, the daily ritual of supermarket replenishment following its predictable pattern. Half the day would involve large articulated lorries arriving from wholesalers with skips of bacon, sausage, roasts and the like. The burly warehouse crew would hover and buzz about on individual forklifts, known as ‘loaders’, tearing open cargo, organising it on long shelves and reordering the goods for dispatch in smaller A&M branded lorries. Outgoing deliveries began
at 4.30am, with later runs at 9am and noon, with drivers returning in dribs and drabs by 4pm, having disgorged their wares to Tesco and Sainsbury’s, Marks and Spencer and the few remaining independent shops within the Islington–Angel corridor. The lorries would then be cleaned and refilled by the nightshift crew so the process could begin once again the following morning.

A&M had hired Nate three years earlier as a part-time Logistics Coordinator (night shift), responsible for organising orders in the caravan and taking them down to the operations bunker, a concrete control room staffed by men with northern accents and neck tattoos. Eight months ago he had been promoted to Logistics Deputy Manager, on day shift, though still receiving the same depressed wage minus the night shift’s supplementary meal money. But he did have the option to wear a tie and speak to a more diverse range of humans, which was a mixed blessing. The promotion had seen him replace the beloved June, who had hated him for reasons he never quite understood. It had also led to a faint glimmer of respect from his peers, something which had been completely absent for most of his life, so all up, he viewed his current work situation as a sound result. In football terms, Fitzgerald 1, Life infinitely farther ahead, but no longer keeping him off of the board.

“Good morning, Nate,” Shirley said.
“Due to austerity measures I can only say ‘good’ today. Tomorrow you will get ‘morning’. Names have been cut altogether,” Nate said.
“How’s Linus?”
“Shedding, wreaking havoc and treating the lavatory like a private martini bar – typical feline behaviour. I was honoured he looked up for almost a full second when I was leaving today, the lazy sod.”

Nate glanced at the newspaper on Shirley’s desk, wondering if anyone interesting had died or if any celebrities were entering divorce proceedings. Surely the Beckhams couldn’t
keep up their charade *ad infinitum*. The headline informed him that Scotland stood to lose £54 million per annum under the proposed Bedroom Tax, more reason for that bonny lot to jump to independence, while Greece was in the midst of yet another round of austerity riots. He wondered if the Greek economic situation were as bad as reported or if their young people were simply asserting their democratic rights to loot electronic goods and designer trainers, as had been the case in London the previous summer.

“Anything I should know this morning?” Nate asked.

Shirley pulled herself from her chair, went to the filing cabinet and shuffled back with a green folder. “The inventory report looks… well, interesting.”

“Fingers a bit light this week?” he said.

“You’ll need to look.”

He didn’t like Shirley’s consternation. She usually saved this tone for real issues of concern, like the daily pastries failing to be delivered or the milk going off over the weekend. Speaking of which, he noticed she had retrieved them a plate of treats already. He loaded two scones onto a napkin, cut a piece of butter approximately the size of a small child’s wrist (why mess about?) and slipped behind the orange polyester of his private cubicle.

“Shall I get us some tea?” Shirley called.

“I’m completely off my face on tea this morning, but why not. It could be the best cup ever steeped, so I shan’t refuse. I wouldn’t want to live with more regrets than I already have.”

She laughed and lumbered to the kitchenette down the hall. He had to admit, there was something about him that endeared him to older women. Pity his charisma didn’t extend to the young and vibrant, or even the middling and acceptable members of the fairer sex. He thought of Elaine Duncan in Accounts and attempted unsuccessfully to suppress escalating consternation, her features rising before him like water in a cistern, that eager-to-please smile
hovering too close, well within the comfort of his personal space. He had brought the situation upon himself, of course, with one poorly conceived snog in a moment of self-pity following Friday drinks. Even more dispiriting, it hadn’t even been a good pash session. She had been a biter, gnawing his upper lip and moustache like a love-struck badger, all the time moaning, as if it were some sort of erotic manoeuvre sending them to the heights of ecstasy.

Nate opened the folder of stock figures, scanned and grimaced.

*An entire pallet of chicken...*

The lads in the warehouse were taking the piss with this manoeuvre, not to mention playing a dangerous game seeing as the security cameras had been upgraded over the past six months. For years they had done little more than record fuzzy images of human-like figures moving around the premises, the pixel quality on par with those amateur videos ‘proving’ the existence of the Loch Ness Monster or Abominable Snowman – but they couldn’t get away with large grabs anymore.

Nate studied the figures and whistled through his teeth. Typically it was a dozen flank steaks walking off of the property, a few T-bones taped down the trouser leg, bacon in the pockets, that sort of thing. Covering up this level of thievery was going to be a challenge. He perused the cured meats section, which was sound as always, turned on his computer and reclined in his chair.

“Will we need to have a chat with the big man?” he asked Shirley, who had returned with his cup, a rather humorous Garfield-themed item that articulated the stresses of the modern work-week. It had been his gift at the Christmas Party, which he had attended for upwards of twelve awkward minutes before feigning illness and fleeing the premises.

“Mr Greenway is back on Thursday,” Shirley said.

“Are we wagering?”
Mr Greenway, the general manager, had arrived a year ago, assigned after his much-coveted corner shop on the Liverpool Road had been acquired by the corporation. He rarely came in more than two days a week and was tipped to receive another acquisition payment shortly, which would see him retire to Malta, or wherever it was greengrocers went to die.

“We could claim spoilage, the pallet not being assigned to its proper area and being forgotten. I’ve been holding that one back. Or we could blame rats. I notice the monthly baiting treatment hasn’t been done yet,” Nate said.

To date, his only other major disappearance had involved fifteen prime rib roasts in late November, in the run-up to Christmas Party season, which he had blamed on a collision. He had insinuated that the event narrowly missed triggering a Health & Safety investigation, potentially with compensation, which had made Mr Greenway blanch and sign off on the report without further question. Being incredibly creative, Nate had considered embellishing his story with details of a small child wandering onto the property, but given the new cameras, this was a step too far. Instead, he filed the idea away for potential use in the screenplay he might someday write (though if he were honest, knew he would never even begin). He decided to give the stock discrepancy more thought later, returning to his well-worn and comfortable morning routine.

Nate scanned the Guardian, finding solace in its affirmation of his worldview, indulged in a boost of indignation-fuelled adrenalin with the Daily Mail and then thumbed a lady’s magazine poached from the staff cafeteria the previous week. As Katies went, he preferred Perry to Price, though he couldn’t understand the appeal of this Brand fellow. Admittedly, his mawkish feelings for Kate Middleton had begun to waver. The Royal wedding had been surprisingly moving, but now that she and William had morphed back into the standard brand, he found it hard to raise much interest. You simply couldn’t get excited
about skilful waving. He appeared to be alone in this view, of course, as the masses were falling over themselves in anticipation of regal impregnation.

He opened the green folder and made sure sausage numbers were stable. The thought of going to the warehouse operations bunker for a discussion of the problem made his intestines clench, so instead, he turned his attention to the quiz “Transform Your Life!” As encouraged (or rather, bullied with the insinuation that he had been weak to this point in his life), he took out a blank piece of paper and a biro and wrote out the five things currently holding him back and ‘soaking up his psychic energy’:

1. I have not felt the warm touch of a suitable woman in several years.
2. My phobia about public transportation has got worse.
3. Despite walking for upwards of two hours daily, I continue to ‘get lardy’ as my grandmother used to say, occasionally to strangers, but mainly those she presumably loved.
4. I fear standards at my local Chinese have dropped.
5. I am lonely.

He was surprised that the warehouse staff hadn’t made the list. Perhaps his employment situation wasn’t as bad as he had suspected.

Chapter 2

A&M Meat Distribution was as territorial as the Balkans, but with clearer lines of demarcation and without the stunning vistas. A visitor had three options upon entry to the razor-wired grounds: the warehouse, with its yawning loading bays and, at certain times of the day, armies of red and blue lorries; the main building, filled to bursting with polyester carpets, stale air and administration staff; and the caravan, a decrepit but well-loved beige
unit that wouldn’t have been out of place at Blackpool, which sat slumped between the two. Poorly heated in winter, exceptionally hot when temperatures rose above 22 degrees, damp and no doubt containing asbestos, it had been Nate’s nightly home for years.

He gave the caravan an affectionate rap, producing a hollow sound where insulation should have been, and continued down the concrete walkway to the warehouse. In order to get to the bunker – the control room for the entire transport operation – he had to run the gauntlet of the loading floor, making sure to stay close to the wall and behind a strip of yellow reflective paint that ran along the perimeter. As he had been warned many times, failure to stay within proper boundaries could result in a collision, one for which the poor (possibly intoxicated) loader drivers would in no way be at fault.

This allocation of responsibility before an actual incident had struck him as presumptuous and unjust, but knowing logic was useless against bureaucracy, he accepted that his only course of action was to remain silent, smile and carry on. After all, he had learned from experience that life was unfair; but you got on with it or else ended up unemployed and discussing how optical frames had changed over the decades with a cat while watching *Blockbusters* and drinking cider, in the afternoon, in unwashed pyjamas. And yes, he spoke from experience. A few short years ago he had been ‘semi-retired’, not so much from a lucrative career, but from a patchwork of abandoned jobs, the last of which had ended with a stress-induced payout of sufficient scale to supplement his modest familial inheritance – a.k.a., the financial dregs his parents had managed not to squander before death.

Granted, he hadn’t been comfortably retired, as money was always tight and the relentless void of free time had kept him in a state of perpetual anxiety, but he had been free to shape his days. This had gone on for most of a decade, until, in the mixed blessing sort of way that defined his life, derivative-swapping by (no doubt coked-up) stockbrokers had led to a GFC-induced ‘adjustment’ of his inheritance and he had been forced to once more seek out
employment and a modicum of human contact. His patchy job history, the aforementioned ‘stress incident’ and an almost complete absence of useful skills had led him to the night-shift at A&M Meat Distribution. To say that he wasn’t married to his job was an understatement. In more than three years, he had not so much as inquired as to what the A or M stood for.

As the ear-splitting revs of engines assaulted his senses, Nate wondered why he felt obliged to raise the stock issue with the warehouse. After all, he had been aware of pilfering for years while working in the caravan, though admittedly had registered it as part of the ‘real cost of doing business’, deeply bound up in the power structure of the organisation and society at large. He had come of age in the 1970s and accepted the moral right of labour to kick against the pricks – not that he had been active in the ideological wars of that decade. Like most, he had watched from the sidelines as an average citizen, wondering idly when the lights might go out and when someone would pick up the rubbish. Yet now, as Logistics Deputy Manager, he could see that this habitual thievery was untenable – morally, financially, legally and because it made a complete hash of his spreadsheets.

Nate knew he should have addressed the issue from the outset. He had noticed stock discrepancies during his first week in the role, but had forged the numbers on his reports, not wanting to make waves, thus providing tacit agreement to the crime. Initial complicity morphed into complacency, which over the months had barrelled headlong into looming conflict. He’d managed to cover for the previous months’ missing stock, but the escalating theft numbers were finally spurring him to action. It had all got too risky. If this cover-up were discovered, previous adjustments would surely come to light, taking him and his employment into the bubbling sea of 2.67 million ‘official’ unemployed, where he knew he would never compete. He’d bob in the froth for a few long and terrible months, eating potatoes and meat off-cuts, and then slip silently beneath the waves of more qualified, younger job seekers, all with better knees.
“Men,” Nate said, raising a hand in greeting.

The loaders roared by, their drivers indifferent. Nate wondered where one went to get a neck tattoo, and how one reached the decision to have the name of a beloved inked along their jugular. The thought of his father – eternally aspiring towards the aristocratic gentleman – getting Nate’s name tattooed onto his body made him laugh out loud. The most affection he’d ever shown was a pat on the head in a decidedly weak moment, which Nate had held onto for years as proof of paternal love.

He ducked his head under some low pipe and stepped into the concrete stairwell which led to the bunker, thinking, as he often did when he came this way, about the final days of the Second World War, Berlin 1945. He imagined descending to see the Fuhrer, then completely crackers, and wondered if he would have been like Albert Speer, standing firm that Berlin should not be destroyed, or whether he would have caved and got blind drunk on French cognac in the bombed out Chancellery like most of the Reich’s final hangers-on. He liked to think he would have killed Hitler, perhaps with a well hidden pistol, or a poison-laced shiv administered to the stomach during their final hug; yes, he would have given it a good go, damn the personal consequences.

Gruff chatter and tones of rough mockery met him as he approached the door to room 101. He paused, his hand seemingly held in situ by an invisible force, forcing him to draw on his courage to propel the knuckles of his long and graceful fingers into the steel. The door lobbed open, hooked by a scuffed black boot.

“Enter at your peril,” a voice intoned.

He stepped inside to find five men in various states of recline. They were seated in front of screens displaying the warehouse floor, though none seemed particularly engrossed in the activities taking place. The bunker’s walls were grey and bare aside from an automotive calendar, a football schedule and a dart board, which currently had a black and
white photocopy of Adele pinned to it. While Nate wasn’t particularly fond of her music, decapitation-by-dart seemed like an overly harsh form of artistic criticism. Jim Watkins, the bald-headed Warehouse Manager and unrepentant scouse, turned with a Cheshire grin.

“Ned, we’ve been wondering when you’d pay us a visit. Been on holiday again? Must be nice having all them perks now you’ve made it to the top.”

“My entitlements haven’t changed much,” Nate said.

“Still, feather in your cap and a few for the nest. Never a bad thing.”

“I believe management think I have an allergy to down.”

Watkins smiled, but didn’t immediately join in Nate’s jerky laugh. Sensing the joke had found its final form, however, he gave a dry chuckle, not far from a cough and drummed his fingers across the desk.

“We’ve been aiming to natter to you, which is difficult seeing as you never manage to come down here. See, the lads are wondering about getting proper refreshments.”

“What, alcohol?” Nate said.

“No, interesting idea, but our ‘days without an accident’ count wouldn’t get too high. We’re thinking real beverages, like normal people drink – you know, Coca-Cola for the boys, Iron Bru for the girls.”

“I heard that, y’numpty,” a nearby Scot said.

“I’m the only gay in the village,” another cackled, doing a poor Little Britain imitation for no apparent reason.

“I wouldn’t be too certain of that,” Watkins said, nodding in Nate’s direction.

The rapidity of the banter, thinly veiled homophobia and disorienting way in which the laughter echoed off the concrete walls and floors made Nate jittery. He gripped the folder tightly and told himself to breathe.

“I believe we’re only budgeted for water,” Nate said.
“Real people don’t drink water. It’s boring stuff, best kept for putting out fires.”

“Oh washing socks,” one of the men added.

“Or your bawls,” the Scot said.

The convulsions of hilarity continued for several minutes, as the men improvised a list of alarmingly creative, increasingly impractical and menacing uses for water, including water-boarding Chris Moyles. Nate adjusted his tie and strained to keep his smile high and bright until he realised the conversation had lulled and Watkins was looking at him, waiting for some sort of response.

“I’ll see what can be done,” Nate said.

“That’s what we like to hear. Now, did you come down here to talk about something in particular or were you just stretching your pegs?”

“Chickens,” Nate said.

“We’ve got a lot of them. Whole, half, thighs and necks…”

“Yes, though not as many as, perhaps, we should?” Nate said.

He uttered the last word with an unintended rise in intonation, making it sound like a question instead of a firm statement of fact. Watkins raised his eyebrows and fell silent. Nate had expected a confession of guilt, or at least some sign of remorse, but the man seemed genuinely perplexed. Either that or he was skilled in the art of deceit, no doubt a useful survival trait on the mean streets of Toxteth. Nate had no choice but to go on.

“In the last few weeks, a fair number of birds seem to have, well, stretched their pegs, if you get my meaning – wandered off the property, that sort of thing.”

Watkins lifted his chin as if to compensate for a shift in ballast, the penny dropping as the accusation registered. The motion was similar to a footballer swaying back before propelling forward to head a ball, which caused Nate to waver backwards. He fought the urge to excuse himself and flee, planting his feet firmly onto the hard concrete and assuring
himself that, while a strange perversion of the brutish order, he was technically Watkins’ superior.

“Any idea where eighty chickens might have gone?” Nate said.

Aside from the distant drone of machinery, the room was silent. The men seemed to coalesce behind Watkins, forming a single entity, even though none had moved. They stood completely still, eyes dark, waiting for their scouse leader to speak. Watkins rubbed the ginger stubble on his chin for several long seconds then broke into a grin.

“They must have needed to cross the road,” he said.

While the reply left Nate momentarily confused, the men unleashed harsh peals of laughter, turning back to their screens, now done with the exchange, as if some definitive resolution had been reached. Watkins repeated his quip again and landed a meaty hand onto Nate’s shoulder, swinging him around and walking him towards the door.

“Probably human error, Ned,” he said. “We move a lot of dead meat around here, and with all your bloody forms and paperwork, some is bound to land on the wrong lorry from time to time. Retailers don’t look a gift horse in the mouth – literally with discount brands – so they don’t report the mistake. You and I would say that’s selfish in this economy, what with us all being in it together, but people are arseholes.”

“But eighty chickens,” Nate said.

“I’ll see it gets sorted.”

“It’s a fair few.”

“Eighty too many, if you ask me,” Watkins said. “Certain people will be reminded to be careful with your lovely paperwork and pay attention. Mind you, new beverages might help to keep their wits sharper – raise the blood sugar and all that – if you know what I mean.”
Watkins directed Nate up the stairs, the Liverpudlian’s gravity unnaturally strong, propelling him along. At the crest of the stairs, Watkins winked, gave Nate a firm rap on the shoulder in the direction of the warehouse floor and turned back in one fluid motion, like John Terry seamlessly stripping an opposing forward, pivoting to pass and uttering a gratuitous racial slur. Nate looked down to see he was across the yellow line. He jumped back, his heart jangling as a loader roared by – its wake ruffling his hair. Nate held still for a few moments, then took a very deep breath, straightened his tie, turned toward the exit and walked at pace not far removed from a run.

Chapter 3

[Summary: Nate ruminates on whether or not Watkins pushed him into the path or a loader intentionally or had simply been jovial in a laddish sort of way. New books arrive at Nate’s flat, delivered by Danny, a worker on a zero-hour contract who previously worked at a discount butcher’s that Nate frequented. Danny notes the leaking in Nate’s ceiling and offers to put a friend in touch who can do the gutters for 50 pounds. Nate accepts.]

Chapter 4

The fact that Mr Greenway hadn’t come in to the office at all that week didn’t faze Nate, mainly because he could relax and utilise the company’s free bandwidth without a possible walk-by. Not that Mr Greenway ever begrudged him snooping at blog articles such as ‘Purr-fect Partnerships: techniques for a good human-feline relationship’ or ‘Ten Ways to Supercharge your Colon’, but having grown up in a rigid system of hierarchical control, Nate felt intensely guilty by nature. Overall, he was mostly conscientious, though eight hours of
sustained concentration in a single day was a lot to ask for a creative mind. And besides, he rationalised reading articles about the unemployed or the deplorable state of democracy in Russia made him a better global citizen, and thus a better employee, increasing his mental reserves for when tasks actually needed doing – which admittedly in his new position was less frequently than he had expected.

He was concerned about what the arrest of punk band Pussy Riot meant for everyday Russians. He also wondered if the international press would have been quite so interested in freedom of speech if the three ladies weren’t young, nubile and endowed with a weighty hint of lesbianism. But one mustn’t be a cynic. He clicked back to the homepage and scrolled. He knew he should engage with Syria and the Arab Spring, but frankly, didn’t see how he could fit it into his life emotionally. It was surely tragic, but far enough away that his input, positive or negative, would have no effect. He had his own issues, which among other things, included: the leaking roof; caring for an indifferent feline; maintaining an admittedly small yet vital social circle; preparing for, travelling to and actually doing his job; catching up on Downton Abbey and fretting about Gwen achieving her ambition to become a secretary; feeling anxious for the NHS, rising unemployment and the ever-present threat of terrorism; recurring plantar fasciitis; and, the need to buy butter on his way home.

Frankly, it was exhausting. He wished the Syrians well, he honestly did, because their situation was horrid, but he had nothing left to give. He found it difficult enough to deal with issues on a local and national level, much less taking in and processing the complexities and contradictory explanations for events on a global scale. Even without a job, he would never have enough information to formulate a proper opinion on work conditions in China, free trade, pharmaceutical trials in Africa or Russian pop music. In most cases, all he could do was to accept a third-person commentary and regurgitate arguments as if he had given them
proper consideration. In reality, most of his pub talk was a synopsis of the *Guardian*, which made internet access at work all the more vital.

Of course, all of this added to his stress, as he conceded his disengagement and inaction with the Syrians’ plight would provide yet more ink on his application for Hell.

Speaking of which, he saw that George Osborne was once again spouting off about helping the nation’s poor by taking away their money. Benefit suspensions were on the rise, hurtling people toward destitution and starvation. Perhaps the Tories thought if they punished those on welfare enough they would turn nomadic and roam Europe instead of the UK, joining the Gypsies as a problem to be handballed around the EU.

“Wasters,” Shirley said, reading over his shoulder and putting a slice of orange marble cake on his desk.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the benefits crowd need to put down the tins and get proper jobs, don’t they?” Shirley said.

“In an ideal world… Mind you, in a lot of these places, they are being told to get jobs that haven’t existed since 1981, with training they don’t have and can’t afford.”

“So they should start a business, like my Donald.”

Shirley’s son had quit high school at sixteen and latched on to a tradesman who put up blinds and curtains. As everyone needed to block out light and prying eyes, it was a stable industry, and granted, he had done well, eventually purchasing his own van. To his mother, this elevated him to a position somewhere in the vicinity of Lord Sugar.

“And what should these people use for capital?” Nate said.

“They could start with their big screen televisions, I suppose. Did you know the couple across the street from us break their front window practically once a month? They go out to the pub and lock their keys inside, so instead of paying a locksmith to come let them
in, they smash the window at the front, because they know the council will fix it. I think Mr Osborne is right about not expecting the rich to pay for everything. We’re all in this together, which is why that lot should be thrown into the street.”

“Even the children?”

“No, of course not the children. It isn’t their fault, now, is it?”

Nate had learned not to argue with Shirley about politics, not simply because he didn’t agree with her views, but because a more sympathetic reading of the social situation seemed to make her more adamant in her position. She too had adopted a point-of-view – one she insisted was rooted in ‘common sense’. He thanked her for the marble cake, which was moist and flavoursome as always.

To be honest, Nate saw Osborne’s growing rage as proof of Austerity’s complete and utter failure. But having gone down the political road of selling it as an economic and social cure-all, it wasn’t like a politician could reign back and admit he’d made a colossal error in judgement and policy. No, the Chancellor of the Exchequer was simply directing his frustration at the weak and generally harmless, as was his birthright, instead of admitting he didn’t have a clue as to how to resolve the country’s current malaise. To some degree, he was joining a long line of politicians that stretched back to the late nineteenth century, the pinnacle of Britain’s rise and thus the beginning of its long and seemingly endless decline.

Nate snooped around a bit more, scanning an opinion piece saying the poor should pay cash instead of using credit cards, because studies showed it was a better method for keeping to a budget. This seemed sensible, except for those situations where the destitute might not actually have a tenner handy and were feeling greedy enough to indulge in such activities as eating food. Nate thought perhaps he should write an opinion piece advising the poor to learn photosynthesis; though with winter’s inclement weather, especially on the west coast, it would end up the same. Wales would surely starve.
Deciding a break was due, he watched a selection of YouTube videos of cats while reflecting that Phil Collins had reached his pinnacle when he could ‘feel it coming in the air’, then roused himself long enough to look over and approve the warehouse roster for Accounts, submitted by Jim Watkins. Nate’s responsibility was to look the roster over and presumably confirm that everyone on the list actually existed and was present on the dates specified, but as this would require visits to the warehouse, he decided to trust Watkins as a sign of good faith. Nate then approved the caravan roster, which involved three personnel on the day shift and one on nights. He thought the staff solid, if occasionally light-fingered, and reflected morale was as high as could be expected given the repressive nature of employment. The company paid a competitive wage, and, as there were few decent jobs anywhere else for low-skilled workers, retention was running high.

He decided to retrieve the next allotment of tea, knowing biscuit supplies were restocked on Wednesday at 11am and one had to be quick to nab the Jaffa cakes, which disappeared almost immediately. He was humming Simply Red’s ‘Holding Back the Years’ (mistakenly called ‘Holding Back the Tears’ by heathens) and admiring his own subtle footwork as he entered the staff cafeteria, so caught up in Mick Hucknall’s soulful lyricism that he forgot his first rule of office navigation: scout ahead for Elaine Duncan.

“Why Nate, so lovely to see you,” Elaine said.

He looked up to see her planted in front of him, a wall of formal floral attire blocking an already half-empty packet of Jaffas. She was smiling with a hint of artifice, like the Queen pretending she was enjoying Lady Gaga at the Royal Variety Gala. (Diana had been the only one who had ever looked genuinely happy at that event; and look where it had got her: murdered in cold blood by Libyan assassins hired by Philip and trained by Gadhafi himself.)

“Elaine,” Nate said.
“I’ve been hoping to run into you.” She sidled close enough for him to feel her body heat and smell her perfume, also floral. “You haven’t replied to my emails.”

“Yes, apologies for the delay. I’ve been extremely busy, what with inventory and staffing, but they are certainly on my to-do list.”

“I like being on your to-do list.”

She pressed closer, causing Nate to rock back on his heels.

“It’s a business account, of course, so I can’t respond to all of your requests,” he murmured, distracted by the effort of modulating his choice or words in real time so as to avoid further erotic double-entendres.

“Did you like the poem?” she said.

“It shows great promise, though not being meat related, I may refrain from a full critique!”

He laughed, intending his casual whimsy as a point of disengagement, and tried to move around her to the biscuits; but she misunderstood this as an attempt to get closer and slid her arms around him, her ample and cushiony bosom pressed into rib cage.

Nate considered his options in the same way one does when a match is burning perilously close to one’s fingers – searching for a suitable action while simultaneously fighting to keep panic at bay. She put a hand on his chest, reached her fingers into the nook under his top button and caressed his ample hair. Her breath smelled of chocolate orange.

“We really shouldn’t do this here. Someone could walk in,” he said.

“Maybe I want them to walk in.”

“That would seem an unhelpful complication.”

“Perhaps I should come to your house tonight.”
At this proximity, he could see chocolate wedged between a canine and incisor. He wondered if she flossed. It was always the hardest part of the oral hygiene regime to maintain.

“I’ve been thinking. I wouldn’t want anyone to accuse me of giving you preferential treatment, now that I’ve been promoted. Perhaps we should ease back on what briefly began…” Nate said.

She had purred at ‘preferential treatment’ which had startled him enough to derail his train of thought while (admittedly and worryingly) making him vaguely aroused. He viewed this as yet another betrayal by his loins. He could sense himself weakening. He did a series of sums, totalling the number of months since he had touched a woman while calculating how much effort and emotional energy would be required to reach an amicable understanding and ‘break-up’ should he submit to another moment of passion, at his home, where he knew he had a refrigerated bottle of Australian Chardonnay. No, no, no... Given his penchant for avoidance, decoupling from Elaine could take weeks, if not months, making his work and social life a perpetual source of anxiety. Equation complete: he didn’t want her nearly enough to make the endeavour worthwhile.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, nibbling his neck.

“We need to be professionals.”

“All we’re to do is report the relationship to HR,” she said. “Then we’re free to do whatever we please. Whatever, we please…”

“But say we didn’t report the incident.”

“Naughty…”

As she went in for a bite, he leaned backwards, using her forward momentum to step around and past her. He quickly grabbed a paper plate and began loading up on biscuits. Sod the tea; Shirley could come back for it. As he gathered comestibles, two sales reps came into
the room, toting their product binders and loosening their ties. The reps were typically young, clean-cut and full of the kind of restless energy people who sell things for a living need to survive. While they were often around, few were well known to staff, seeing as they worked alone off-site; and these two were no exception. It occurred to Nate that posing as a rep would be the perfect cover for a terrorist looking to gain access to the compound without facing questions. They could hide a small explosive device in their large binders and impact meat delivery in the Angel–Islington corridor for upwards of several days.

“I’m beginning to think you’re not interested,” Elaine said.

“Elaine, decorum,” Nate said.

“You invited me to dinner.”

“I said we should get a fish supper one night.”

“That’s dinner.”

While out of earshot, the reps clearly clocked that the conversation was intense and personal. They nodded apologetically as they reached for cups and tea bags, one of them snaffling up four Jaffas. Nate felt a desire to remonstrate, but was personally too reserved and accepted that egregious individualism had been firmly indoctrinated into the man’s generation, long after the miners’ strike had reduced ‘solidarity’ to nothing more than a catchy name for a wine bar.

“Alright?” the other said, a slightly older Asian fellow.

“Yes, we’re deciding on a restaurant for dinner,” Elaine said.

“Il Lido down near Islington Green is nice, and not too dear if you fancy Italian,” he said. “I took my girlfriend there a few weeks back. Wine was nice, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.”

“Bit risky with this one,” Elaine said, poking Nate.
Nate felt an urge to clarify that they had snogged once, and that it hadn’t been particularly enjoyable, but she and the rep were giggling nonsensically. The man reached down and also swiped four Jaffas, increasing Nate’s dislike.

“I’m not keen on Italian,” Nate said. “Tomato sauce gives me indigestion.”

“You could get a primavera,” Elaine said.

“What would be the point?”

“What you want to do,” the rep said, “is get yourself some Rennies and brave the lasagne – big as man’s fist, stuffed to bursting with mince, bacon and cheese.”

“Oh, brave man,” Elaine cooed.

“Forget Iraq, I’d go to war for bacon.”

Again, they laughed uproariously. Nate frowned. Men had once gone to war for Helen of Troy, now their testosterone spiked for cured pork products. Mind you, the lasagne did sound intriguing, enhanced by the fact it was nearly lunch time and he hadn’t yet had a Jaffa. His blood sugar was plummeting and the witless banter combined with the pressure of Elaine’s unwanted affection was making him prickly. When the rep poked Nate in the ribs, goading him on, he snapped.

“I don’t bloody like Italian,” Nate said. “And I never said I was taking anyone out for a meal. I said maybe we could get a fish supper, and I suggested it to be polite, because the taxi driver was waiting.”

Nate swiped two more Jaffas, jamming them on top of the four already on his plate, and turned to depart. He noted the reps’ unimpressed faces.

“I’m sharing. I’ve got fewer biscuits per capita than you lot.”

What he hadn’t noticed was the crumpling of Elaine’s pale face, now reddened to the shade of the rose on her faux-silk shirt. She let out a wet sob and put a hand over her mouth,
bolting for the exit, her sensible flat-soled shoes making a rapid-fire scratching on the dusty linoleum. The cleaners were notoriously substandard.

“Bit out of line there, mate,” the Asian rep said.

“I’m touchy about the Jaffas. People hoard.”

“I meant your lady.”

“I know what you meant… but she’s not my lady. We kissed once. I was trying to let her down easy, as they say. I regret you’ve become involved in our situation, but thank you for the restaurant recommendation. That lasagne sounds sensational.”

Nate strode out of the room, holding a hand over his biscuits. His legs were wonky, but somehow he managed to put one in front of the other in a functional manner, knowing the reps were staring daggers into his back. He would have to eat the top biscuit, as the chocolate was beginning to melt onto his fingers. A small crowd of women were gathered around Elaine’s desk, but Nate sped by without taking a closer look, hoping there was a pressing accounting issue and not further tears. He cursed himself for saying what he had said, even if it were the truth, feeling both the victim and the villain. He slid three biscuits off and handed the plate to Shirley, whose mouth was forming a question.

“I don’t know what the commotion is about,” he said.

“You’ve been gone for ages. No tea?”

“Would you mind getting it?”

She shrugged. “Mr Greenway is in. He’s packing up his belongings.”

Nate stopped and turned back, his Jaffa turning to cardboard in his mouth. He coughed and looked around for tea, which he didn’t have, and instead drank some water that had been on his desk since Monday. It tasted of chlorine and dust, but saved him from choking. So the big man’s final cheque had arrived.
Mr Greenway had a box propped on his desk, which he had loaded with several framed photos of his family and grandchildren. Given his lack of interest in the job, he appeared perplexed as to what else he might need as he departed A&M Meat Distribution for the last time. He put in some scotch tape and a stapler, which Nate noted were technically company property, and then put in and took out several reports, which he no doubt knew he would never read, even on a dare.

“It’s funny, you know,” Mr Greenway said. “You spend yearsdreaming of retirement, but when it arrives, you have absolutely no idea what you’re going to do. When I sold my business, I spent months looking in the mirror wondering who I was and who I was expected to become. I had spent thirty-five years, six days a week, going from the wholesalers early to the shop and staying on late doing the accounts.”

Nate didn’t say that he spent most mornings looking at his reflection feeling the same way, despite being gainfully employed. Mr Greenway picked up one of the reports again, grimaced and offered it to Nate, who took it obediently.

“I accepted this job to try to feel better, ease myself off work, and now I’m back to square one,” Mr Greenway said.

“So why leave?”

“Things are changing around this place, Nate. The company has taken on a major overseas investor who will be looking for efficiencies and more profit. Now that the property market has cooled down, the rich don’t know where to put their money to get large returns.”

“What about government bonds?”

Mr Greenway laughed. Nate knew nothing about making money.

“I hadn’t realised meat was profitable,” Nate said.

“It isn’t, but transportation can be lucrative. We’re a stepping stone into the market.”
Nate looked around the sad office with its beige walls and bristle-board shelves of annual reports and bound marketing documents. He thought it ironic that this was what people aspired to, the seat of power. A&M had informed Mr Greenway of his departure with the delivery of his final buyout. Apparently he had always been a placeholder while the details of the overseas shadow acquisition had occurred. Mr Greenway informed Nate that a consultant would be taking over as director, at least temporarily. The corporation had decided they needed an outsider to identify efficiencies, streamline the organisation and then move on, a task this new man had apparently recently done in the book retailing industry. Given the growing absence of shops on the high streets, this made Nate queasy.

“Well, meat will always need to be delivered,” Nate said. “I can’t see how he’ll change very much, especially seeing as we run at a steady clip. We’ve had all the trucks on double deliveries for weeks.”

“Oh god, they don’t give a toss about that,” Mr Greenway said. “My advice is to keep your head down and look busy. Take on extra projects, even if they’re pointless. You’re a good man, Nate. I hope I’ve been of some help to you.”

“You’ve been wonderful.”

“But always remember, it’s just a job. They’ll forget you as soon as you’re out the door, so don’t stress yourself for their bottom line. Play the game.”

Mr Greenway gave up the search for mementoes, even putting the stapler back. Despite reassurances, Nate was quietly hyperventilating, seeing himself for what he was: middle-management flab, ripe for trimming. He had been much busier and vital to day-to-day operations on the night shift in the caravan, coordinating orders. He couldn’t go back to poverty, home brands, pound shops, used books and charity sales. Mr Greenway picked the framed photos out of the box, tucked them under his arm and shook Nate’s hand, deciding to leave the rest.
“What now?” Nate asked.

“I’m going to Thailand for a holiday. My plan is to learn surfing.”

They were interrupted by the phone. Mr Greenway picked it up and listened intently for half a minute, glancing at Nate with growing concern. Finally, he informed the caller that he no longer worked for the company and frankly couldn’t give a toss about the issue, then hung up.

“You may want to keep your head down starting now,” he said.

Nate always wanted to keep his head down.

“It seems you’ve made a young lady cry so hard her nose has begun to bleed. They’ve taken her to a clinic.”

Mr Greenway chuckled.

“Always watch the quiet ones,” he said, departing forever.

Chapter 5

[Nate is approached to join the union by Anesh, a young man who has taken over Nate’s previous job in the caravan. While Nate likes the idea of solidarity, he relates that others see it as risky and decides to keep his head down to try to avoid redundancy.]

Chapter 6

[Nate discovers that many at A&M regard him as a cad for his perceived treatment of Elaine. Shirley suggests Nate send flowers and apologise. Watkins and the warehouse staff send him a gift-wrapped jumbo roast chicken with Mediterranean spice, which Nate regards as a peace offering.]
Chapter 7

[Nate recounts a great Twitter session and discovers that the gate protecting access to his property has been wrenched off its hinges. Danny’s tradesperson, Jimmy, arrives and tells Nate that he needs half of the tiles on his roof replaced. Nate reluctantly agrees to the discounted cash-job.]

Chapter 8

Given the commotion surrounding his arrival, and his reputation for brutally streamlining companies to achieve efficiency and flexibility, Nate had expected the new director to be imposing, perhaps a tall man with a military crew-cut and rugby player physique. Instead, Dick Richards was a short, squat man with a barrel chest and arms that looked too small for his body, dangling like the stunted appendages of a T-Rex. His shoulders were hunched, causing the fabric of his slightly-too-small blue suit to stretch and strain across their length.

For the entire morning, he sat in his office with the door open as management mandarins came and went to glad-hand their new master. Less well-placed employees made frequent and irritating visits to Shirley with insubstantial questions or requests for staples, simply to glimpse the man who held their work lives in his hands. This frenzy of curiosity and hushed whispers had the disconcerting effect of increasing Mr Richards’ eminence, transforming him from a runty chap with tailoring issues to Kurtz of the meat factory. Nate could practically hear the beating of drums down the hallways and imagined a procession of
pig heads being held aloft by members of the Finance team, their faces bathed in blood. Certainly getting a hold of animal parts wouldn’t be an issue.

Nate knew he would be summoned eventually, though he wondered if popping his head in casually for an introduction might be better, to show enterprise and confidence. He vowed to do this later, when the butterflies in his large intestine had settled and the raw skin around his neck had calmed. He was making a concerted effort not to scratch, but his hand would drift upwards almost as soon as his concentration drifted to his computer screen. He had worn his best suit, the one reserved for funerals and very rare formal events, summoning it from its hibernation in the back of the box-room wardrobe and beating it for twenty minutes to remove the embedded dust from the sleeves and collar. While this hinted he was perhaps not accustomed to high-power meetings, it was also nice to realise he had gone several years without a funeral. He had pressed a shirt and wore the red tie bought from an Oxfam shop in 1997 to celebrate Blair’s election, which he considered a symbolic act, given that Mr Richards would clearly be a Tory. Nate conceived of it as an act of civil disobedience, one Henry David Thoreau might appreciate. Looking at himself in the mirror, he had felt divided, desiring to reject the vulgarities of modern office life, while at the same time wanting an easy life for once. In the past, he had lived with little and could survive, having learned the art of getting pleasure from simple and inexpensive activities such as a thermos in the park, a long wander, patronising the library system or researching new and inventive recipes for root vegetables, but the perilous state of the roof once again raised the spectre of future need and old age, which no longer seemed so distant. The only sensible compromise seemed to be found in resigning himself to adopting the outward appearance of the company man while keeping his inner self thoroughly hidden and thus liberated. He only wished the suit didn’t itch so much.
Shirley brought over the weekly reports, maintaining the terse professionalism she had adopted since the nosebleed incident. With trepidation, Nate opened the folder and began to scan, easing into his investigation of the stock numbers through the always reliable prosciutto and polish sausage figures. No doubt the former was too upmarket for the ruffians in the warehouse, while the latter unpatriotic. The manager of HR brushed past, marching into Mr Richards’ office bearing a box of artisan truffles.

“This kissing of the crown is like a dry-run for the Jubilee,” Nate murmured. “We should put up bunting.”

Shirley grunted and shuffled back to her desk, where she had a plate of scones and tea which she retrieved only for herself. Nate thought of Elaine Duncan and marvelled at how one slip of the tongue (well, two if you counted the Friday drinks snog) had transformed him from a generally harmless chap worthy of a chat to a callous letch to be shunned. Of the two versions the office had constructed of him, the juicier, more salacious tabloid version had clearly won out, becoming the ‘real’ Nate Fitzgerald, though he couldn’t see what evidence the women of A&M had used to discern his true nature. He oscillated between not caring and wanting to scream, ‘but I’m a good person’, feeling like the character on reality television programs that the producers vilified through careful editing.

The stock report was proving anti-climactic. Cured meats were good and beef was within a reasonable level, one whose minor discrepancies could be accounted for through spoilage and discounting. Bacon was a few boxes short, as usual, but lamb was dead on target, and sausages were stellar. Crumbed and boxed prepared meats were positively divine. As Nate made his way to the dreaded chicken list, which he had consciously left for last, he discovered that overall accuracy had never been better, not in his whole time in the position. Clearly the lads in the warehouse had reacted positively to his pressure, as he had suspected.
Necks, wings and drumsticks were excellent; thighs in good shape; breasts more buoyant than expected; stunningly, half chickens and full birds were exactly where they were expected to be; and jumbo roasters were only out by one. Nate threw his arms up in triumph, doing a full Wayne Rooney and engaged in an impromptu dance at his desk, relieved that Mr Richards could peruse his first week’s numbers and find everything on target and above board. There would be no cause to examine past reports. Nate would start the new era with a good record and endeavour to pretend he cared about the company for long enough to weather the redundancy storm. Perhaps he wouldn’t end up in a pauper’s grave after all.

Looking at the chicken numbers again, he thought of the previous day’s succulent bird, the Mediterranean spice adding a hint of heat and exoticism to the traditional roast. He had a wing portion with gravy and stuffing in the staff fridge for his lunch and was thinking of using the rest for a stir-fry. Then he felt a hitch in his throat, an awareness seeping into his mind. The missing jumbo roaster was Mediterranean. He told himself this didn’t necessarily mean anything, as correlation was not causation, yet the single digit discrepancy lingered on the page, a pulsing red bleat, and he couldn’t help but believe the warehouse staff and their scouse leader were sending a message, setting him up, painting a target on his forehead in cumin and paprika for Mr Richards to consider. They would have known a jumbo bird was too much for a solitary man living alone and that Monday’s lunch would be eaten at his desk, well within olfactory range of the new director, who would have a look; and when the stock numbers hit his desk, the penny would drop.

Nate’s breathing became shallow and difficult. Couldn’t the lads in the bunker see the economic challenges of today’s society for a single man and realise they were all in this mess together? Why did everyone in the company suddenly hate him so much? He was a good person. Once again he felt trapped in some bad reality TV show and imagined himself being
led out of the administration building, trekking to a long blue sofa and giving his exit interview in front of a live studio audience.

“Are you not happy?” Shirley asked. “I can hear you sighing across the room.”

“You’ve seen the numbers.”

While technically only an administrative officer charged with printing the report, Shirley always poked her nose in to suss the state of affairs. After all, knowledge was power at A&M, especially during the afternoon tea-and-gossip break in the cafeteria with all the other pepper pots.

“I thought they were excellent,” she said.

“Yes, well...”

“You’re just nervous about meeting the new director.”

Nate glanced at the clock. If he could hold out for five more hours – a mere three-hundred minutes of unbroken misery and dread – he could flee the premises, get home and regroup. If he could put off an introduction to Mr Richards today, he could come up with a plan, or an excuse, perhaps explaining how Mr Greenway had occasionally asked him to test the meat at home to assure quality. He would have to buy his lunch today and smuggle his Tupperware out. Shirley placed a clip board with a thick stack of papers onto his desk, a petition of some sort.

“What’s this, a protest of redundancies already?” Nate asked.

“No, we’ve decided enough is enough with this Government. While I support some of their policies, like cutting down on thieving chavs, their assault on the working man is a step too far.”

Nate thought to correct her to working person, but now was not the time for antagonism. He read:
Axe the Pasty Tax. We the undersigned demand that the Government immediately stop this poorly considered and wrongly directed legislation. Fresh baked goods such as sausage rolls, pies and pasties are the cornerstones of True British Pride, and we do not believe this assault on our traditions and way of life should be tolerated. Save our savouries!

Nate flipped through the petition, which ran to well over a dozen pages, each dripping with blue ink and barely legible signatures. Nate didn’t see the fuss about an issue that simply clarified all hot take-away food was eligible for VAT, even reheat-at-home, but since Cameron had uttered his boldface lie about eating a Cornish pasty at Leeds Railway Station, the tax had been recast as a class war between toffs and the workers. Thank goodness for crack investigative reporting. Still, Nate supposed any grief for the Conservatives was a good thing. Feeling obliged, as usual, he signed his name and added an address suitably close to his actual one but not accurate enough that anyone hoping to engage with him further would be able to find him, and handed the clipboard back to Shirley. Hopefully this support for a popular cause would help rehabilitate his image.

“When’s the last time you ate a pasty?” she asked.

“I’m a regular at Manze’s Eel Pie & Mash shop in Angel. They know me by name, so I’m happy for you to ring and enquire. You’re not catching me out. Isn’t this stomach proof enough of a pastry addiction?”

She looked at his distended abdomen and appeared satisfied.

“People are angry. I’m angry,” she said. “We need to send a clear and strong message that ordinary men and women do not want this tax. You don’t see them lot in Whitehall increasing tax on hemp and soy bean lattes or that muck from Iran.”

“What, falafel?”
“If we’ve got no respect for tradition, the English are doomed.”

She handed him a small flier detailing a protest planned for the end of the month outside the local MP’s office, with a number of area food distributors taking part. Gregg’s mascot was coming along for support, which caught Nate’s attention, as he was fond of their chicken korma lattice and hot rustics. If the protest was going to be catered, he would consider popping by.

“How does Mr Richards feel about this fomenting of complaint?” Nate asked.

“Are you talking about the petition?”

“Yes.”

“He’s in complete agreement,” Shirley said. “He supports the working man, which shows he’s not the closet crypto whatever you called him—”

“Fascist,” Nate said. “That was a throwaway remark, to be kept between us. I said it in a weak moment and would prefer you not repeat it.”

“Still, he’s not one of them. This is Tory policy after all.”

Nate didn’t see how the new director’s acceptance of a pointless protest having nothing to do with the company made him a bastion of socialism, but he trailed off, distracted by the disturbing sight of Elaine Duncan striding down the corridor with a (mid-sized) basket in her hand, its green ribbon flapping wildly. He had anticipated that an appearance was possible – while hoping she would opt for a polite, decent and emotionally detached email thank you – but hadn’t expected she would hurl in his direction with such shrill velocity.

“Is this some sort of joke?” she shouted.

“Ah, you got the basket,” Nate said, moving swiftly to cut her off before she traversed the sightlines of Mr Richards’ office. He decided a hug was the best way of stopping her momentum and stretched out his arms in an inviting manner only to get a torpedo of wicker
in his gut. He staggered back, a rainbow aura momentarily filling his vision as his lungs struggled for purchase.

“A bloody cheese basket?” she said. “You know perfectly well I’m lactose intolerant. Are you having a go? Is this some sort of threat so I’ll leave you alone?”

Nate didn’t remember them ever having shared health information, and doubted it would have slipped his mind given their brief time together. He tried to fathom when food allergies would have come up, yet accepted that, given her adamance, it must have been a topic of discussion on that fateful inebriated Friday. He resented the fact normal people could partake in casual sex without strings attached – being ‘friends with benefits’ – and yet he had been doomed to this by some minor above-the-clothing groping and a smattering of lip action.

“The girls thought you’d finally come good,” Elaine continued. “They said all men were cads, but believed eventually you’d realise what you’d done, because I’m a good person. But then instead of chocolate and wine, I get cheddar. You’ve humiliated me again.”

Nate was momentarily speechless. He’d ordered Red Leicester, Wensleydale and Normandy Brie (very milky), with quince paste and crackers. As Elaine began to cry, he faced yet another unfathomable stew of emotions. He felt guilt (when didn’t he feel guilt?), mild annoyance at her lack of appreciation and a strange unhappiness that her regard for him had not re-emerged with his generous gesture. Food baskets were not cheap, and the mark-up always exceeded the sum of their contents. He had anticipated she would take the gift as intended, as a symbolic gesture of truce, and revert back to displaying her unsought yet not-completely-unwelcome affection, which he would wear like a cheap but satisfactory cologne, one no doubt destined to be discarded when the bottle was a quarter empty, having putrefied and turned rancid.
Nate was aware that activity in the office had slowed, with faces poking around corners and bodies standing inert in the hallways, his co-workers rubbernecking like drivers moving by a twisted Volkswagen on the motorway. Nate remembered a day near Victoria Station when an air ambulance had landed in the intersection, its whirring chopper blades coming uncomfortably close to the light poles and awnings. A pedestrian had been struck by a bus, no doubt a tourist who had unwisely decided to ignore the reminders to ‘look left’ or ‘look right’ on the ground. The girl had been immobile. He had felt pride watching the chopper land, a reminder of the better part of the Island’s nature and abilities.

Shirley stiffened and turned away abruptly, hustling to her desk, an action which seemed to prompt office life to accelerate once again, propelling others into reanimation. Several people ducked away.

“Is there a problem?”

Nate turned and looked down at Mr Richards in the doorway, his expression passive. Nate forced his facial muscles into a smile and cleared his throat in a manner intended to express he was getting back to business. Elaine however didn’t move and looked about to break into another round of aggravated weeping, one which could severely and irreparably damage his reputation.

“No problem, simply a bit of a mix-up with Elaine’s birthday gift,” Nate said.

“One which he’s promised to make it up with a lovely dinner this weekend,” Elaine said.

The triviality of the event seemed to instantly bore Mr Richards, who nodded and returned to his office, pushing the door closed for the first time since his arrival.

“How do we feel about French?” Elaine asked.

“Sounds wonderful,” Nate replied.
Chapter 9

[Mr Richards offers Nate an extended analogy about his overweight father to justify ‘efficiencies’ at A&M. He asks for Nate’s help in evaluating the warehouse staff, but asks him not to inform HR.]

Chapter 10

[Nate stays late again, though he doesn’t have any actual work to do. He considers his earlier answers to the magazine quiz about his happiness and finds he has new problems. He visits Anesh and they discuss the previous year’s riots and Austerity. Nate agrees to join the union.]

Chapter 11

While he accepted the need for gainful employment, Nate had never been fully committed to the concept and took off two Fridays each month without pay, an arrangement that had carried over from the caravan to his new position. He habitually and obsessively calculated the cost, quantifying income in terms of material sacrifice. For example, one Friday without pay was the equivalent of a new pair of casual slacks for around the flat. He would therefore either go to work or accept one more winter wearing clothing frayed at the crotch from years of thigh rub. This bartering system allowed him to justify the loss of wages to himself, though admittedly, others often met his habitual time off with hostility, including pub acquaintances who resented him enjoying a semblance of freedom and advantage. They enjoyed pointing out that the thirty-hour workweek was a French invention, insinuating he was no better than an indolent, non-bathing Gaul, and thus a traitor to the true British spirit.
Secretly, he knew the benefit of his purchased time was something he had lacked in the past, namely better mental health. Mind you, on this particular Friday, his wellbeing was suffering, as he faced the prospect of supper with Elaine Duncan in less than nine hours and the sound of boots scuffling on his roof. Contrary to stereotypes, the workmen had arrived on time, bright and early, and had got to work with little more than a clipped hello, sipping their steaming tea and making several trips to the street to retrieve stacks of roof tiles.

Nate had done his part, making meaningless remarks about the weather, affirming its cool beginnings while hoping for a fair and pleasant day. Among the entourage was a young man around seventeen, standing quiet and aloof. Nate decided to engage him in conversation to make him feel welcome.

“So, have you been doing this work long?” Nate said.

“No.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“It’s alright.”

“I don’t suppose you do gates?”

“We do roofs,” the kid said.

“Oh, yes, of course. It just seemed like something you might do… In today’s competitive marketplace, offering a wide choice of services might stand you in good stead.”

As the young man walked away, Nate tried to think of why his comment had caused offence, but came up blank. He had meant the comment with sincerity and respect for manual dexterity, being as useless as a blind sea slug when it came to tools or making large pieces of metal and wood stay affixed. When his shower head had broken in 2004, he had taken to having baths, a habit that continued to the present day.

Nate retreated into the home as the men worked for several hours, sending great chunks of broken clay raining down onto the lawn with ever-increasing frequency, the noise
and their mere presence distracting Nate from his French language CDs. Without warning, the general din of swearing quieted and a pair of denim-clad legs descended outside the window, followed by tattooed arms and Jimmy’s smiling face. He jumped the last two rungs onto the ground, which made Nate wince as he imagined the knee pain he would experience with such a manoeuvre. Jimmy rapped on the door.

“Finishing up?” Nate asked.

“Hmm, I wish. Bit of a problem, actually, mate. Don’t know how you’re going to feel about it.”

Given Jimmy’s tone and attempt at a pained expression, Nate doubted he would feel good. He wasn’t feeling particularly chipper already, his central nervous system bathed in stress-induced cortisol and his hands shaky. Having people in his comfort zone made him uptight, especially when they argued for hours about the merits of various car components while stomping overhead. Looking at Jimmy, Nate felt like an Old Testament prophet having a vision, in this case seeing stacks of pounds set alight as he trudged along a barren landscape in hoary, leaking walking boots and ragged clothes, returning home to the sound of perpetually dripping taps.

“Maybe it’ll be a good thing,” Jimmy said. “Seeing as your tiles are as brittle as me gran’s bones. They’re all coming to pieces when we’re pulling the old ones up, and even when we’re just walking on them.”

Nate wanted to suggest they step more lightly, but somehow knew this wasn’t the gist of the young man’s talk. As he couldn’t think of anything else to say, his body entering a phase of economically induced paralysis during which he offered nothing more than a low droning huh.
“I’d suggest replacing the lot,” Jimmy continued. “It’s just the smart thing to do, really. I’ll have to requote you, of course, but I can give you a decent price, and we’ve got stock in the truck, so we can keep on with the job today.”

“What might we be looking at?” Nate asked.

“Well, let’s see. We’ll need triple the number of tiles, or thereabouts, but you save on the consultation fee and transit time. What’s say I do the whole job for double the original price. That’s a cut for me, but I feel bad quoting you without having a real good look. I’ve got family guff over the weekend, but we’d definitely be done by Tuesday.”

“I thought you said today?”

“We can keep working today, finish Tuesday, or thereabouts.”

“And if you replace only the broken tiles?” Nate asked.

Jimmy sucked air through his teeth. “I could do that, yeah, I suppose. But you’d end up calling me in a few months. I’m happy to do either, but if you want to get the deed done and dusted, forget about your roof and have some peace of mind, a full replacement is the ticket.”

Nate considered his options, looking at the collection of broken tiles on his lawn and reasoning if a high proportion were in poor condition, logically the rest would be equally bad or on their way. Jimmy seemed sincere – after all, he had even apologised – and thrice the tiles for twice the price represented long-term fiscal responsibility as a homeowner. He hadn’t spent much on upkeep since, oh, 1994, so perhaps the time had come to invest in maintenance. And he could afford twice the price, though he would need to get creative with cash flow, making sure he had sufficient funds when various bills were due. Keenly aware that making financial decisions was like ripping off a plaster, requiring immediate action with minimal thought, he steeled himself.

“Wonderful,” Nate said. “Make it so.”
Jimmy beamed. “Star Trek fan, eh?”

Nate wasn’t, but from Jimmy’s enthusiasm, he saw this as the common ground for bonding, one that might result in a potentially deeper discount for a member of the tribe. He made a few jovial gestures and the usual affirmative noises while offering nothing to indicate an actual working knowledge of the program. He admired Patrick Stewart, of course, and had wanted to see him and Sir Ian McKellan in Waiting for Godot, but seeing as the production had a dearth of aliens and colourful space-age jumpsuits, making the point likely wasn’t pertinent. Instead, Nate politely took his leave and retreated inside, locking the door behind him.

Jimmy knocked on the window.

“Any chance of a cuppa?”

Nate smiled and gave a nod and lively thumbs up, silently reflecting that for the money he was paying, Jimmy might show a modicum of decorum and fuck off to the high street to get his own.

Chapter 12

Aided by a hot shower and one very large tumbler of Scotch, the constriction in Nate’s chest lessened, though it returned the moment Elaine Duncan emerged from the tube station with a look of hapless enthusiasm on her face. They had agreed to meet outside the restaurant, a quaint and trendy-looking bistro in Shoreditch. Nate had walked to it in a tidy forty-five minutes, which he had spent rehearsing conversation topics, a list of suitably neutral interpersonal questions and a small speech intended to make it clear this was a one-off event, not the preamble to a Nine ½ Weeks-style erotic free-for-all.
The restaurant Elaine had chosen was clearly fashionable, and no doubt painfully expensive, though with no menu on the window, it was impossible to tell. The lighting was dim and worryingly romantic, though ascertaining the atmosphere inside was hampered by the windows being opaque with street-light reflection. Nate shaded his eyes and leaned against the glass for a better look, which clearly annoyed a young couple seated at the window. Too bad, he thought. You booked the table, but you do not dictate what happens on the street. Yes, it looked hopelessly romantic, with candles, warm wooden beams and a small, possibly fake fireplace in the far wall.

Once inside, they were seated by a young woman in serious black trousers and a crisp white shirt who insisted on snapping open napkins and placing them near their sexual organs. Nate sat rigidly in his curvaceous wooden chair, which was slightly too small for his long legs and lacked padding, meaning his haemorrhoids would be swollen in the morning if the service weren’t fast and efficient. Of course, measured discomfort was likely the establishment’s plan. He had read about how restaurant furniture was built to become uncomfortable after an hour, promoting table turnover and allowing for two full seatings per night. He glanced up from the wine list and smiled pleasantly at Elaine, who looked decent enough in the shadowy light, her frock too frilly but thankfully mostly hidden by the table. She wasn’t a bad egg, he thought. She was more like a Scotch egg, nice in moderation, but off-putting when consumed too frequently. Perhaps it was the large whisky swirling around his system, but he felt a faint swell of friendliness toward her. And why not? They had always got along fine before the snog, so a quick meal was not unreasonable or burdensome. In fact, it would probably help clear the air.

“Did you know you should always order the least expensive wine on the menu?” he said. “Not including the house brand.”

“Is that right?”
“Yes. The second cheapest bottle always has the highest mark-up, because proprietors know most people won’t opt for the least expensive choice, not wanting to look like skinflints. In fact, the second cheapest bottle typically retails for less than the first.”

“Would you believe it?” Elaine said.

“People also tend to be more satisfied with their overall experience when the lights are low, and they digest better when they pray before their meal. Mind you, I’ve seen too much of religion to be religious.”

They decided on the cheapest white wine, a Chilean Sauvignon Vert with ‘varietal character’ and some nonsense about peach pits, and moved on to the strikingly elaborate food menu, which ran to two full pages, each dish reading like a film review. Nate noted the place was not French, as Elaine had said, but billed itself as ‘modern cosmopolitan’, which from his vast knowledge of American Culture (gleaned via Sex and the City), he had thought was a drink. At least the prices, while dear, weren’t panic-inducing. He had steeled himself for death-by-cheque, accepting it would be his penance for having allowed the Elaine situation to get out of his control, but apparently the recession and local competition were keeping restaurant prices under heel. Still, the constriction in his chest intensified as he attempted to simultaneously maintain small talk and decipher the menu’s prodigious information.

He didn’t want to choose steak, because he’d need to decide on a cut, a degree of cooking, a sauce and a wine to go with it. They had rules about that sort of thing and you needed to know them, especially now that hyper-competitive reality cooking shows had established it was perfectly acceptable to mock the ignorant. He knew meat necessitated red wine, but they had already opted for white, so he couldn’t back-track gracefully. Besides, he didn’t really like red wine, except when mixed with Coca-Cola, a confession he couldn’t make unless he explained it in terms of a fascination with Spanish peasant culture or a desire to be ironic.
In reality, the entire menu was problematic. The terrine contained pigeon, there was a Shiraz vinegar which no doubt would induce indigestion, he couldn’t fathom why anyone would want a soft-boiled duck egg, couldn’t see the purpose of quinoa, wondered why no one could just make ‘gravy’ anymore, knew nothing about reductions, foams or froths, and was generally averse to hints of galangal and bloody five-spice. Even the croutons on the garden salad weren’t simple, having been made from Viennese sourdough and pan-crisped in Normand beurre. He liked French dairy, but really, was their butter really superior to that of Yorkshire? How much variation could be found in churning cream and salt?

He looked up and smiled encouragingly at Elaine.

“What an astonishing menu. Any thoughts as to what you might order?”

“I’m intrigued by the spatchcock with Danish juniper berry reduction and black pepper.”

“Yes, very compelling.”

Even more compelling was the notion of making a speedy exit and finding a quaint Chinese with plastic tablecloths that served Peking duck. He certainly hadn’t grown up as a pleb, but as his eyes fell on ‘locally sourced cockles with a frolic of coconut milk and Thai basil, he felt very much like someone who slurped tea from the saucer. He wondered if he had become that old man, set in his ways, destined to resist all change from now until the grave, nostalgic for the England of his childhood – one which, while admittedly less dazzling, held a lot fewer questions about where you stood. Now, cultural cache, brand allegiances and trend knowledge seemed the core assertion of your personal value. And food was so complicated, what with all the cooking programs convincing people they had an aptitude for a proper béarnaise. Fuck this, he thought. He’d rather a jacket potato. But then, these sorts of restaurants weren’t about giving him what he wanted. They were about giving him what they said he wanted, while tormenting him with choice. He wondered if drinking white wine with
Jamon Serrano (whatever that was) would mark him as a pillock. His eyes felt very tired. He thought about home, his pyjamas and catching up with Inspector Rebus.

“Any idea what Jamon Serrano is when it’s at home?” he whispered, leaning forward across the table, not wishing to be overheard.

“Prosciutto, I believe.”

“Ah right, what we used to call Italian ham. How did you know that?”

“Jamie Cooks Italian.”

“Pukka. Mind you, I’m more partial to Rick Stein, seeing as he can actually cook.”

They laughed, though Elaine followed with a rather sincere speech about Jamie Oliver’s good work in inner city schools, which Nate felt obliged to acknowledge. He had narrowed his choice down to either Yukon lamprey with gremolata, ‘Aadil Mustafa’ herb mash and quinoa, or bangers and mash, the only recognisably English dish on the menu, no doubt put on as a laugh. The wait staff probably mocked his type in the kitchen, pushing through the doors with chants of ‘we’ve got another one!’

The waitress appeared at his elbow, standing stiffly with her hands behind her back.

“Sorry for my ignorance, but what is gremolata?” Nate asked.

“Lemon zest, parsley and garlic nuanced in a mortar and pestle.”

“Oh right, of course. And who is Aadil Mustafa?”

“Kuwaiti chef, very daring…”

“So the lamprey dish is fish with mashed potato?”

“It’s much more than that.”

That was really all Nate wanted. He had no idea what people like Aadil Mustafa did to their quinoa in the Middle East, or really, what quinoa was, other than the dish de jour.

“Your menu is quite the United Nations,” Elaine said.

“As we like to say, live locally, eat globally.”
“I’ll have the bangers and mash,” Nate said.

He handed the waitress the menu. Elaine held hers tightly, as if she were nearing the climax of a particularly gripping crime novel. She made a clucking sound with her tongue and licked her lips, her eyes moving between possible choices.

“Oh, so hard to decide… It all looks so divine. OK, I’ll have the Nova Scotia lobster with truffle butter ravioli, and will start with the scallop ceviche.”

The waitress affirmed that this was ‘a good choice’ and swept away with their orders, quickly returning with the wine and a basket containing not one type of bread, but an assortment of mini variations. Elaine took a miniature Chinese steam bun of supernatural white, stuffed with purple sweet potato while Nate slathered Normandy butter onto a sour dough bun. With the ordering task complete and their props removed, they shared a lengthy moment of silence, an emptiness needing to be filled, and one requiring effort to restart the social exchange.

“I notice you don’t work on Fridays,” Elaine said.

Clearly she was stalking him, he thought.

“Not entirely accurate. I work every other week, but reserve two Fridays per month for personal development.”

She looked at him expectantly, clearly waiting for more.

“At the moment, I’m learning French. I have tapes,” he said.

“Oh, are you hoping to work in France?”

“I don’t believe so. I’m rather hopeless at the language, je regrette.”

“Do you spend a lot of time over there?” she continued.

“Not since the late ‘70s.”

“But you’re going?”

“No plans.”
She laughed. “So why are you studying the language?”

“Personal interest, I suppose. It keeps the grey matter from atrophying. And I like the sound of French. I find German much too guttural, and everyone knows Italian is mostly cursing and hand gestures.”

“German is very jarring. My father used to say that’s why they were so hateful. Do you believe we should be in Europe, or are you inclined to agree with Mr Farage?”

“Well, you have to trade with someone. Mind you, they’ve made a hash of the euro. Thank God Blair didn’t bully us into that one.”

“I liked Mr Blair. He had very nice hair.”

“Yes, perhaps, though I still prefer my politicians with a moral compass. Say what you will about Gordon Brown, you knew where you stood with him, whether you were a Europhile or a racist housewife from Rochdale.”

“He didn’t have good hair. The sweeping fringe made him look untrustworthy.”

“Do you think? I found him quite dependable. Mind you, he did continue with that Afghanistan morass for too long, though that’s what you get with a Scot. They don’t have a history of knowing when to give up a meaningless fight.”

“Have you been to Edinburgh?” she asked.

“No. Beautiful country, though.”

“Breathtaking. My sister lives in Perth. The city has the most magnificent salmon ladder. You wouldn’t believe what those animals go through to spawn. And then they die, you know.”

Nate supposed that was either tragic or terribly romantic, depending on your point of view, but he didn’t say so, not wishing to give Elaine any insight into his emotional life. If she saw him as a starry-eyed compassionate type, she may think he was softening in his commitment to maintaining a purely professional relationship.
“I’m in the process of getting my roof fixed, speaking of ladders,” he said.

“Oh, you have to watch out for workmen.”

With relish, Nate launched into the evolving situation of the granny flat, dramatising the destruction of his tiles and the rough demeanour of Jimmy and his helpers. Unlike many people, Elaine appeared to really listen to the details of his mundane life, leaning forward in her chair and nodding in all the right places. She related a similar experience, with some bathroom renovations, and they agreed the responsibility of representing a trade was commonly debased. Despite himself, Nate realised he was having a rather nice time, reflecting it was a pity he found Elaine so unattractive, as the conversation was easy, and they had always got along, prior to ‘the mistake’ when the sexual politics had changed and become so emotionally charged. By the third wine, following talk about favourite panel shows (Would I Lie to You? for both), he considered perhaps she wasn’t so bad looking after all, especially in dim light, away from the colour-draining, probably cancer-causing, fluorescents of the office. He was now glad he had hedged his bets and refrigerated a bottle of Australian Yellow Tail Chardonnay (featuring a cartoon kangaroo on the label – God bless the antipodeans, they just couldn’t help themselves). He smiled at Elaine as she tucked into her entree.

“If the cosmopolitan theme doesn’t work out, I suppose they could stress the Lilliputian size of the portions,” he said.

“No worry about breaking the diet,” she said. “Would you like some?”

“Only if you’re unable to finish…”

As the mains arrived, Elaine sipped at her wine with clear deliberation, her eyes lingering above the thin rim, staring at him with devilish intensity. Nate accepted some pepper from a large phallic wooden grinder, aware that Elaine’s gaze had not dropped to her
plate. Her expression cut through his warm alcoholic haze and made him aware of the
dangerous path he was considering.

“Delicious,” she said softly.

Nate nodded politely to the waitress, trying to cool the bubbling eroticism of the
moment, and tapped the empty wine bottle with a nod. Having committed such an exorbitant
amount of money to his home repairs, fretting about the cost of another bottle seemed silly. *In
for a penny, in for a pound*, as they said. He evaluated the stirring in his loins, and wondered
what ‘Future Nate’ would say when he looked back at this moment, the moment he put into
motion a course of action that would no doubt see him caught in a web of Elaine Duncan –
his personal space violated, expectations of nights out, dinners with friends, intense talks
about feelings, prodding for expensive weekends away, well-intentioned but ill-fitting
lingerie… He smiled pleasantly at her and raised his glass, having what alcoholics refer to as a
‘moment of clarity’. No, he would be a gentleman throughout the evening and not manoeuvre
for a quick shag. If he woke up in the cold light of day and decided a second evening out was
appropriate, he could let the relationship develop in a slow and deliberate manner. Also, he
was aware that, given the amount he’d imbibed, intercourse wasn’t likely to be successful or
enjoyable at this rate anyway.

“So I was married once,” she said.

“Snap, me too,” Nate replied.

“And he cheated on me with multiple women, including two of my best friends.”

“Oh goodness…”

From the way her throat caught, Nate estimated this had occurred not very long ago.
He realised Elaine was suddenly and rather presumptuously attempting to move them from
general small talk to more personal conversational grounds, territory he had no desire to
traverse. She launched into a dinner-table confession, not waiting for cues of aversion or
acquiescence. He tried to listen, but a voice in his head kept ranting that the meal had just arrived, he was terribly hungry, having consumed a two-bite bread roll and copious alcohol, and he had not, to the best of his knowledge, given any grounds for increased intimacy.

He thought about a quick run to the WC to create a ‘cooling off’ period, allowing him to steer the conversation back to neutral territory upon his return, but his sausages smelled fantastic and his stomach needed lining to steady his fuzzy head. He dug in and murmured several remarks about the food’s quality, but these barely slowed the unspooling narrative. As Elaine provided specific details of her collapsed marriage and her husband’s modes of deceit, Nate realised how little he knew about her, aside from the usual superficial things one picks up in workplace small talk, such as her views on the A&M accounting software (out-dated), weather preferences (fond of rain), general music taste (‘80s), fashion habits (floral, dowdy), pet orientation (cats, a.k.a. ‘normal’), sibling details (sister, seen often), children (one, male, 17), lunch preferences (sandwich, biscuits) and typical weekend activities (shopping, nice meals, small circle of friends, occasional film).

“And you?” she asked. “Have you been lucky in love?”

“Yes and no,” Nate replied.

“Do tell…”

“I’m currently unattached.”

“But you were married. Did she stray?”

“She passed away.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

The mash congealed slightly in his mouth as he became aware of the mechanical effort of chewing. While he anticipated the information could come up, he had rated the possibility as low, more likely to occur if there were a second or third outing, or post-coitus.

“It’s been a long while. I’ve come to accept it. But thank you.”
He expected an intense lull, which typically followed this information, and waited for
Elaine to move on to something banal. People always changed the subject to a television
program, an interesting bit of news, mundane facts about a mutual acquaintance, anything to
create space between themselves and the dark maw of mortality. He had come to accept this
annoying yet habitual aversion to death.

“Was it cancer?” Elaine asked.

“Sorry?” he said. “Oh, no, not cancer…”

“I have a great fear of cancer. My father died of leukaemia. It wasn’t long after my
husband left. He didn’t even have the common courtesy to come to the funeral.”

Nate took a bite of his sausage, fully spiced and bursting with fatty porky tang, which
seemed too much at the moment, the intensity unwanted by his senses. Elaine gave an
account of her father’s illness, decline and sudden passing. He buttered a piece of seeded
flatbread to distract himself, realising that the bread was intended to be dipped in olive oil
and Dukkah, but he was already halfway across its circumference, so protocol be damned.

“How did she die?” Elaine asked.

Nate hesitated with the knife. In for a pound…

“She choked to death,” he said, not looking away from the bread.

He sometimes only said choked, but choked to death seemed more definitive, nailing
the event’s finality, keeping it still and contained. For a long time, of course, he had said
nothing, had refused to answer the question or discuss his wife. For almost a decade she had
been erased from social conversation, stowed tenderly but complete in a small room in the
back of his disordered brain. He had come to interact with her death slowly, by sanctioning a
narrative, allowing it to evolve in his mind only as a film, the discovery of her body on that
day a plot, created on a set. Actors had played paramedics and police, coroners and hearse
drivers. He had not been in the film, though a character much like him had been played by
Willem Dafoe, at other times by Bob Hoskins, on occasion by Billy Connolly (though that had never come off right). And then he had begun to walk, obsessively, for hours each day, until his calves ached and his thighs burned and his head had threatened to explode from cinematic repetition.

“What did she choke on?” Elaine asked.

Nate stopped buttering and remained still for several seconds. The wine no longer felt warming, but cold in his bones. He supposed Elaine was giving him an opportunity to talk, offering him a strange form of kindness. If he were to push away the inquiry, he could no longer inwardly complain that people ran from the tragedy’s finer details, expecting he would bottle up the experience and deal with it himself, privately. He couldn’t have it both ways.

“She choked on a bit of casserole steak,” he said. “I always said she had to cook it for a long time to get it tender, but Helen wasn’t a patient woman, except perhaps with her husband. I found her in the dining room, curled up near one of the chairs, and I remember thinking, ‘what are you doing sleeping in the middle of the day, you silly thing?’ Of course, then I noticed the spilled plate and all the rest, though it still didn’t quite make sense. It was all truly horrible. She’d even tried to give herself the Heimlich manoeuvre…”

“But she’d come to no success.”

Clearly he was not the only one prone to awkward remarks. “I’m certain with more practice, she might have come good. If at first, you don’t succeed…”

It was the sort of black humour Helen would have appreciated, but from Elaine’s expression, he had misjudged the remark’s appropriateness. She began to breathe rather quickly, fanning her face with her napkin. He encouraged her to have a drink of water, but this only seemed to increase her anxiety, so much so that the waitress hurried over to ensure there hadn’t been an allergic reaction to seafood. They had an epi-pen, she said. After reassuring her all was fine, Nate suggested he and Elaine go for some air, but Elaine waved
him away, composing herself. She returned her attention to the barely touched lobster in front of her, digging around a bit with the meat fork, her hands shaking slightly, clearly unsure of how to proceed. She’d got the best meat from the claws, but getting at the torso was perplexing her. Nate filled the silence by pouring another wine.

“Probably not the best dish to order,” she said.

Nate drained his entire glass, trying to remember if it was his fourth or fifth, stood up and reached across the table, coming close enough to the candle to guess fifth. Why did she have to bring up marriages during the first outing and ask so many questions if she weren’t prepared to accept the consequences? He hadn’t wanted to revisit the worst day of his life. There had been no need. He had been trying to put her at ease, not poke fun at his wife’s futile attempts to survive – poor, poor dear Helen. If only she had cooked the bloody steak for as long as he’d said, he wouldn’t be in this predicament, in this restaurant, with this woman, at A&M, in this life. He couldn’t have predicted he would have ended up like this, living with a cat, generally miserable but getting by, stiff upper lip, all that old codswallop. They would have done better. He wouldn’t have broken down. He would have done everything in his power to make her happy. Elaine had caught him off guard. He took the animal firmly by the head and spiny trunk.

“To get at the back meat, you’ve got to wrench off the head,” he said, gripping hard and twisting, the stubborn ligaments tearing away with a series of resounding cracks.

He realised other patrons were staring in their direction, but no longer cared, catching his reflection in the mirror and seeing what they saw: a freakishly large, awkward man with a kempt but too-long beard and middling features, flushed red from drink, lording over a full table, having just ripped apart a small aquatic creature with his bare hands. Sod them, he knew he wasn’t one of the cosmopolitan set and would never be. Nor would he ever return to this restaurant. He belonged to another world entirely. Briny juice ran down one wrist,
soaking into the sleeve of his jumper. Nate pulled a section of white meat from the lobster carcass and jammed it into the dish of melted butter, which had cooled enough to produce a slick yet frothy film on its surface. He offered the plate back to Elaine, fell back into his unpadded chair and inadvertently spread lobster juice onto his cord trousers.

“Who said romance was dead?” he laughed.

Chapter 13

[Nate’s 87-year-old neighbour, Mrs Donaldson, arrives to find a depressed Nate in bed. Mrs Donaldson and Nate share a long history of mutual support for one another, having met not long after Helen’s death at a church jumble sale. They are clearly fond of one another. Armed with scones and jam, she is full of motherly advice for his various problems. They talk about Elaine, and Mrs Donaldson suggests Nate give her a chance, as companionship has its value. She then asks Nate to go to Peckham and check on her nephew, Danny, who has a long history of trouble.]

Chapter 14

Nate had been standing at the refrigerator for several minutes, fully aware he should eat something before going to the just-announced, vital, not-to-be-missed staff meeting. As so often happened, however, the act of choosing had paralysed him. The problem was he was not terribly hungry, yet knew his blood sugar would bottom out perilously if the meeting stretched beyond thirty minutes, leaving him distracted and tetchy. But choosing a food was not straightforward thanks to a noticeable snugness in his favourite trousers, their new restrictiveness clearly caused by the weekend’s self-pity and subsequent excessive cheese and
roast consumption. Waking up this morning with the scent of gravy on his whiskers, his mind had fixated on concerns about diabetes, heart disease and dying alone in the bath and not being found for days. In some ways, this was a typical bloody Monday.

It was odd that his greatest joy, the act of eating, could be so frustrating when he wasn’t in the right mood. He continued to stare at the contents of his lunch. What should he eat? What did he truly want? If he had the banana, he would feel full but restless because the blueberry yogurt was more desirable, yet it was full-fat and much more calorific, which meant its consumption would provoke regret. Of course, if he refused the yogurt, he would spend the next half hour obsessing about it, his only relief coming when he could break free from the communal work gathering, rush headlong to the kitchen and suck it down his gullet like a blue whale filtering krill.

He supposed the choice came down to either low satisfaction or guilt, unless he ate both the yogurt and banana, thus asserting his right to self-determination and rejecting socially-imposed values related to self-restraint and weight moderation. But seeing as half the nation was overweight or obese, this act wouldn’t be a novel stand, and in fact, would make him a conformist – just another tubby sheep excusing his gluttony with rhetoric about being an individual. He then thought of the Japanese island of Okinawa where people apparently stopped eating when they were seventy-five per cent full and lived until they were 120 or some ridiculous age. The Independent had run a story about them just last week, when his trousers were loose and the subject seemed interesting but irrelevant to his life. Now he wished he had paid more attention.

“Have the yogurt. You won’t stop thinking about it if you don’t,” a voice said.

Nate turned to see a woman with sandy blonde hair standing behind him, a bagged lunch in her hand. Her black cardigan was embroidered with bright red cherries and brilliant green stems, which appeared to teem down onto her black skirt and sensible flat-soled pumps.
She raised an eyebrow and pointed beyond him to the open fridge. Nate leapt aside with what he hoped was a gentlemanly air of decorum – though he conceded it looked more like an aborted jig. He estimated she was in her late thirties, possibly early forties, falling into a category he loosely referred to as ‘too young to be interested in a wreck such as me’, but saw no reason to dismiss the possibility completely out of hand, as she could alternatively possess youthful genes. Her pleasantly rounded face was as pale as thimbleweed, with light freckling about the nose, which he’d always been a sucker for.

“I had thought as much,” he said. “Actually, I was trying to determine if I felt seventy-five per cent full, which is what—”

“The Okinawan diet,” she said. “Not overeating and playing stickball will make you immortal. I read that last week too. Let me know how it works out for you. No, wait, if it works out well, I’ll be long-dead and you’ll still be eating seaweed.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll let your next of kin know,” Nate said, as they both laughed. “Mind you, success seems unlikely seeing as I can’t keep to any diet for more than a week. I managed Atkins for a month, but the extra loops on my belt didn’t compensate for feelings of perpetual rage.”

“Carbs are important for your mood. Fish, seaweed and green tea seem a better option.”

“Did you know Atkins was obese when he died?” Nate said.

“But probably in a good mood.”

“Ha, yes... I don’t know why we do it to ourselves. Not that you, er, would need to do it to yourself, being a very nice size for your stature.”

She raised an eyebrow, smirking, and shook her head as she jammed her lunch in among plastic bags, plastic containers and naff dinner kits, including an elaborate Japanese bento box, whose owner, even Nate knew, deserved mockery – unless of course they were
actually from Japan. If that were the case, authenticity would make the bento box a multicultural artefact, requiring respectfully pertinent questions about heritage and customs. The more likely scenario was that its owner had read the Okinawa story too and was displaying their awareness of new food trends, much like a peacock strutting its feathers.

The young lady’s plastic bag was from Aldi, which Nate associated with a thrift mentality, in keeping with her sensible shoes, adding support to his first impression. Not finding sufficient space, she pushed the bag through a precariously perched wall of soups and leftover casseroles, some of which Nate knew had been in situ since at least February. The bean wrap in cellophane was the longest-serving member of the rancid food brigade, though its lack of decomposition raised the possibility it was replaced regularly, perhaps by a member of staff who ate the same lunch every day. Obviously this had occurred to others on the fridge-cleaning duty roster, as the wrap continued to take up its place on the shelf week after week.

The woman turned and smiled at Nate, her green eyes so deeply luminescence that he felt faint vertigo. A smile crept along her mouth, radiating upwards to eyes, which creased, their intensity causing him to giggle. Clearly this was a strange reaction, but instead of rushing off, she stepped back to take him in more completely, making Nate once more aware of his large and gangly self.

“The banana may be the more sensible choice,” he said.

“I ate a round of brie over the weekend, so don’t talk to me about being sensible. Mind you, I’ve packed enough carrots to make a rabbit sick today, so I’m paying my penance.”

“The vending machine has chocolate bars,” Nate said.

She laughed. “We’ve just met and yet you know me so well. No, I can make it a day. I don’t suppose your yogurt’s the kind with toppings in the lid?”
“Plain blueberry – but full-fat,” he added quickly.

She closed her eyes and sighed deeply, which while clearly meant humorously, struck Nate as disturbingly intimate. He dropped the yogurt into the fridge, deciding losing a few pounds was the right choice, as it could potentially make him more desirable to the opposite sex, perhaps even women who were fond of cherry-embroidered clothing. With a start, he then quickly reached in to retrieve the tub, realising if he went with the banana now, she might perceive it as a rejection of her opinion. She opened her eyes, surprised to see him gripping both.

“A person after my own heart, having it all...”

She winked, spun on her sensible heel and gave a parting salute, striding out of the room as if the situation were perfectly normal and nothing momentous and vaguely life-affirming had just occurred. When she had turned the corner, Nate replaced the yogurt, hiding it behind a long sandwich (ham and salad), and shifted his attention to making tea. Though she was physically gone, the kitchenette still pulsed with her energy, and Nate’s stomach tumbled with strange excitement. He wondered if their interaction qualified as flirting, what with the coy smiles and dizzying level of cheekiness; yet he wasn’t certain exactly how one differentiated flirting from spirited banter. He simply didn’t know the rules. There had been no sexual innuendo, though she was clearly too classy for such linguistic palaver, and any attempt on his part to engage in that sort of thing risked an HR caution. As he bobbed his tea bag, he began to think he had been mistaken. Most probably she was a new member of staff hoping to make a good impression – being overly friendly while certain the age gap would prevent him from getting the wrong end of the stick. Not that age was everything. Charlie Chaplin had been fifty-six when he married his eighteen-year-old fourth wife, and he had sired a child at seventy-five. While this was mostly disturbing, Nate felt it proved some sort of point.
Certainly there was no harm in finding out her name and department, though he would need to make discreet inquiries, as A&M lived on insipid gossip and character speculation. Workplaces were not far removed from school, after all. A superficial occupation-related justification would need to be found, perhaps something to do with establishing a bureaucratic hierarchy for the company, though that sort of scheme was limited by his remit, which extended no further than the warehouse and caravan staff.

“Oi, Osmosis Jones, you digesting that through your skin?”

Nate turned to see Watkins standing dangerously close, which caused him to rock him back onto his heels. The burly warehouse manager shouldered past, jamming a hammy fist into the fridge.

“I know you like curved shafts in your hairy palm, Ned, but keep it behind closed doors. Speaking of which, what have you heard about redundancies?”

“Nothing but idle speculation, though certain operations are being reviewed, which by happenstance, um, means I’ll need to speak with you. I’ll send you a meeting request.”

“Review means redundancies, you know that, right?” Watkins said.

“It’s more of a reorganisation.”

“Another word for redundancies. The Mersey shipyards got a wonderful reorganisation when I was a lad, causing my dad and uncles to get reviewed right to the dole queue. But hey, the docks got a Beatles museum, so everyone wins, right?”

Nate was unsure of what to do with his phallic fruit – he couldn’t very well peel it or eat it, and sticking it in his pocket could only lead to more ridicule. He threw it onto the counter and decided it would be yogurt after all.

Watkins pulled an Aldi bag from the refrigerator, which Nate regarded as typical. Despite earning a decent pay packet, and constantly asserting his working-class credentials, the man patronised a company known for pushing price competition to the lowest rung – the
knock-on effect being lower salaries. Watkins collapsed into a chair and hauled out what smelt like a fish-based sandwich.

“Aren’t you going to the meeting?” Nate said.

“Wasn’t invited. Your boss has decided to talk to the warehouse staff separately, no doubt so he can tell us different lies. Why don’t you come down after for a chat?”

“I’ll have to check my diary.”

“Don’t send me one of those email appointments. I never pay attention to them. Just pop your head round. I’m curious to see what Joe Stalin promises you lot. We’re all in this together, remember.”

Nate gave a vaguely affirmative nod of his head, knowing full well he wouldn’t go. While he supported the warehouse staff, no good could come from engaging in clandestine actions and anti-management plots. For all Nate knew, Mr Richards would be on the lookout for people scurrying off to share information. No, the proper approach would be to lay low and remain completely invisible. While everyone’s head might be on the block, Nate felt justified in keeping his as far away from the executioner as possible.

[Mr Richards gives a surprisingly well-received speech to A&M’s administrative branch about success and failure and the need for the company to improve efficiency. Shirley defends the director to Nate, suggesting people like him are needed to keep the Romanians from swamping the country.]

Chapter 15

[Nate meets his friend Piotr, a Polish immigrant and IT professional, at the pub. Nate takes up Piotr’s offer to edit his company’s annual report and talks about Elaine and the mystery]
woman in the kitchen. Elaine shows up at the pub after tracking Nate down via Twitter. When Elaine breaks down and confesses that she is having a rough time, Nate panics and agrees to go on another date.]

Chapter 16

[Jimmy informs Nate that the roof beams need replacing and offers him a special deal. Nate jokes about the Bedroom Tax and how he would brick up his spare box room if he were on benefits. He rushes to work, late.]

As he alighted and shuffled past the loading bays, he wondered what newspapers Mr Richards took, and thought he should find out in order to convincingly feign a worldview amenable to the new director. He was so lost in thought he barely noticed the lithe and seductive woman emerging from the warehouse. She was striding back to the main building, her cardigan black, this time dotted with ladybirds. Only a casual sweep of her hair caught his eye, making Nate wonder at how such a simple movement could be so enchanting. He was also curious as to why her duties would extend to the rabble in the warehouse, seeing as anything pertaining to them generally went through him. He was a buffer between the two separate and largely incompatible worlds of administration and transport delivery.

His timing was pure Kismet, despite the fact he was twenty minutes late, as it afforded him a reasonable and un-creepy opportunity to admire this mystery woman without attracting undue attention. She had an even better figure than he had previous thought, well-proportioned and decidedly symmetrical. Her walk was nice and even, not rushed, and while her hip movement hinted at a moderate misalignment in the lower back, she remained graceful. He arrived inside in time to see her disappear towards the cafeteria, which prompted
him to offer Shirley a perfunctory hello, dump his belongings and hightail it, mug in hand, for an accidental but cosmically-predestined romantic rendezvous at the tea cistern. He attempted to catch his breath and appear calm as he approached the counter.

“Salad at 9.30 in the morning, how very masochistic,” he said, glancing over her shoulder.

She turned and smiled, a strand of hair falling across her face.

“This is a midday snack, should you need to know. I’ve been up since 6am.”

“Running laps and doing aerobics, no doubt. If a vegetarian were to resort to cannibalism, do you think they’d opt for a vegan first? Would it be a more ethical choice?”

She laughed, mixing dressing into her salad and hopefully not suspecting Nate had been holding this whimsical insight back for just such an encounter. “If they started by making a haggis out of the stomach contents, they’d be OK. With any luck, a rescue plane would arrive before they carved up the loins.”

Nate giggled and shared his knowledge that human flesh allegedly tasted like pork and that bacon was the meat most likely to break a vegetarian’s resolve. He speculated these two facts together might prompt vegetarians to renounce their principles should they be caught in a situation where cannibalism was a last resort. While her reaction to this view was more subdued than he had hoped, he felt confident enough to offer his hand, figuring that having flirted on two occasions, a formal introduction was in order. Her name was Allie and she was an office all-rounder on a temporary contract, renewable monthly. Her hands were lean and soft, though not in the ‘fragile skin’ way of Mrs Donaldson, but in their exertion of a light feathery pressure on his palm. As he reflected on this physical attribute, he felt his brow and armpits moisten and wondered if his cheeks were flushing. The thought increased his heart rate, and no doubt the blushing, so he thrust his head deep into the refrigerator, feigning he was looking for something in its nether-regions.
“Hmm, thought I had left another yogurt in here…” he mumbled.

“It might have been thieved. This place has a black market in dairy products.”

“Yes, well, sometimes it’s hard to know which of the dozen blocks of identical Tesco cheddar belong to you. Do you need milk for your tea?”

“No thanks. It’s green tea.”

“Ah, you were serious about the Okinawan diet,” he said.

“Yes, I’m giving it a go, though as you said, diets were made to be broken. I’ll probably fail within the week. What can I say, I’d like to be a Zen master, body like a temple and all that guff, but I drink too much, eat too much and definitely swear too goddamn much.”

Nate winced and Allie apologised immediately, putting a hand on his forearm, making his mouth go dry. His tongue felt large and floppy as he spoke.

“Sorry, I swore in front of my mother once as a young man and she struck me rather soundly with a bottle. It was accidental – she had forgotten it was in her hand – but nonetheless, it achieved the intended Pavlovian effect.”

“You salivate when a bell rings?”

“Ha, yes… Has it become that noticeable?”

Her hand remained on his arm, a look of concern on her lovely face, the moment slipping into an odd silence, neither appearing to know where to take the conversation to next. Nate felt as if he had cicadas in his head, buzzing so chaotically that forming a coherent thought was impossible. As the moment lingered, he realised rather suddenly what embryonic love was really about: bravery. He needed to say something here, make some gesture or offer or invitation that could capitalise on this fleeting connection – to act before opportunity slipped away into the tedium and un-remarkableness of everyday life.
“I may have another biscuit,” he said, which of course was code for: I believe I may be madly and irrationally in love with you despite the fact we’ve barely spoken a hundred words. There could be something here, between us, that might be interesting and revealing to us both, and this is a journey worth attempting. I am lonely and in need of someone who can understand my confusion at this hectic and frenzied world full of untidy human relations, and I believe for some absurd reason despite the often destructive limitations of love that you are that person.

“A moment on the lips, lifetime on the hips,” Allie said.

“Or, in my case, the love handles,” Nate said, grasping the fat of his midsection with two hands to demonstrate. God, he hated himself sometimes. He made several nonsensical hand gestures towards his steaming cup and shuffled around her to dump his tea bag into the composting box. She winked, gave a short wave and began to slip away, her sensible shoes making no sound as she moved toward the door towards the hallway’s depressingly grey polyester-weave carpet beyond. The A&M administrative building really did need a renovation. The place suddenly seemed so drab, the beige paint on the walls so old and dull, constricting around him. Perhaps Elaine had been right in the pub, saying that he should want more, Nate thought. But as Allie disappeared, he realised the key to motivation was not in simply wanting more, it was in knowing the more you wanted, and this vivacious woman was surely it.

Almost immediately, a familiar voice of doubt piped up to suggest he was being dramatic and self-indulgent, attempting to spice up his mundane life with a fantasy created from two admittedly-witty conversations and a mutual obsession with shifting a few pounds. Once again, he was letting his imagination run roughshod over reality. Nate knew he had lived most of his life buttressed by fantasy, interpreting events and circumstance to build worlds in which he could orient himself as happy, safe and necessary; yet in practical terms,
His nostrils drew in regret and the lingering scent of Allie’s perfume. It was something woody – soft and understated. She clearly enjoyed his humour, and there had been a palpable energy. Something faintly akin to determination rose in his chest and he thought, sod it. Hope was better than the certainty of misery. He splashed milk into his over-brewed cuppa and whistled his way back to his workstation.

“Someone looks like he’s swallowed the canary,” Shirley said. “Might that have something to do with a certain lady friend?”

Nate stopped, spilling hot tea onto his hand. Shirley offered a tissue.

“I heard you and a certain someone met up for drinks last night. I’m glad to see you’re doing right by Elaine. I’m sure you’ll enjoy her home-cooked dinner at the weekend and whatever is for dessert.”

From Shirley’s giggling, this was clearly innuendo, though Nate wondered what Elaine might actually serve for dessert, as she had an excellent reputation for baked goods. He pondered whether the situation with Elaine could help boost his allure to Allie, the notion of another woman’s interest helping transform him from a desperately solitary man with suspect social skills to a Lothario. Perhaps he could enjoy a seemingly romantic but completely celibate relationship with Elaine in order to intrigue Allie, building enough rapport until he could confront her with their uncontrollable mutual attraction, and then firmly drive home to Elaine that the two of them were spiritually incompatible. He could quote Woody Allen’s ‘the heart wants what the heart wants’ – though given it was used to
justify a decidedly creepy coupling with an adopted member of his immediate family, maybe the ‘uncontrollable mutual attraction’ bit would suffice.

“Snap out of it, Romeo. You’re late for your meeting,” Shirley said.

Nate retreated to his desk and gathered up his spreadsheets, graphs and lists, all of which had been colour-coded to impress Mr Richards with his professionalism and attention to detail. He had left them on his desk in full view for several days, hoping the director would notice, thus justifying the bloody long time the essentially pointless task had taken. He looked at the clock. Ten minutes late. Knowing full well tardiness was a message to others that their time was not as important as your own, Nate tarried, checking his email one more time and casually strolling by the caravan, stopping to inspect a not particularly interesting section of new fence. A light rain was beginning to fall, the kind he enjoyed, a fine spit not far removed from mist. In the right light, it resembled pinpricks of snow flurries. Satisfied he was late enough to have annoyed the warehouse manager, Nate strolled through the din of small engines and scent of petrol fumes mixed with recently severed beef, pork, lamb and chicken. It was the smell of desperation, mechanisation and destruction, or as he liked to refer to it: work.

As usual, the stairs down to the bunker were slippery and dark. He knocked and a shout came to enter, which he did, finding Watkins with his steel-toe-boot-clad feet on the cluttered desk, nonplussed. He and his minions were absorbed in a video of a swarthy chap talking about football, all chortling enthusiastically as photos of dogs wearing team jerseys appeared on the screen.

“Did we have a meeting?” Watkins asked.

He kicked some papers from the desk’s corner and told Nate to ‘take a perch’.

“So what have we done now, Ned? Did you find the Mona Lisa stashed behind a wall of pork mince? Is Tom Hanks hot on our trail?”
Nate ignored the banter, not wanting to broach his dislike for Dan Brown-inspired entertainment, knowing it could do nothing more than cause tension. He adjusted his tie and opened his file, which contained a colour-coded list of warehouse staff organised under the heading ‘Chronological order of value’. The ranking had been determined using a number of criteria Mr Richards had loosely articulated, including (but not restricted to): duration of employment, sick days taken, personal days taken, training sessions attended, verbal and written warnings received and health and safety violations. The last condition struck Nate as ironic given Mr Richards’ tirade against government regulations designed to protect the physical or mental wellbeing of the ‘coddled workers’, but his position was too tenuous to query its inclusion.

“Ah, yes, the league table,” Watkins said. “I did a list of my own, if you don’t mind—thought perhaps we could compare notes, make sure we’re on the same page, stop you and Mussolini from screwing anyone half-decent on my crew…”

Watkins pulled a crumpled envelop from his back pocket, the scrawled blue writing on its surface running slightly, no doubt from the sweaty dampness of his trousers. Nate intercepted this overt attempt to seize control of the meeting by launching into a speech about how meticulous, scientifically-sound rigour had gone into the production of his lists, insinuating that while he was giving Watkins the illusion of input, few to no changes would actually be considered. Watkins rolled his eyes and snatched Nate’s paper away. He took a pen and popped the lid off with his mouth, spitting it onto the desk. After telling his staff to get out and give them a moment, he began to put noughts, crosses and question marks against the names, commenting as he went along.

“Good, psychopath, waste of space, dangerous…”

“I’m not sure you’re doing that correctly,” Nate said. “We want to avoid subjective bias.”
Watkins drew a series of arrows to rearrange the order, taking several names near the top and indicating their more suitable position at the bottom. His rankings were completely at odds with those Nate’s system had produced. Finally, Watkins clapped down his pen and shoved the now-crumpled and visually shambolic page back to Nate.

“Aside from my name on the top, you’ve pretty much bollocksed the lot,” he said.

“No according to my records.”

“No, maybe not, but we like to live according to the laws of common sense down here. I can’t believe they pay you for this.”

Nate looked the list over more carefully. “Jenkins can’t be in third. His leave record is appalling.”

“Yeah, his youngest has leukaemia. The mother does most nights at the hospital, but she needs a break from time to time, not being super-human, and granny likes to run off to cribbage. You know how old people get about hobbies. Jenks gets his nuts squeezed from both ends, so we cut him some slack. Rank Todd higher, too. His wife’s been depressed – tried to top herself a few months back, the silly cow. And Smith goes up too.”

“He’s had four health and safety notices.”

“Yeah, I know, but he’s coming around. One day he’s the son I never wanted, the next I want to batter his head into the ground, but if you don’t give kids like him a chance, they end up breaking into your house.”

Nate flinched, wondering how Watkins knew this was an area of intense paranoia for him. The warehouse manager appeared confused, sensing some sort of discomfort, but simply sighed and went back to watching dogs in football jerseys. Nate told himself to remain calm, as the remark had clearly been coincidental, especially as he hadn’t discussed his almost-constant fear of burglary with anyone at the office.
“The report is supposed to be about efficiency,” Nate murmured, his tone less certain.

“How long has Jenkins’ young one been ill?”

“About six months, but you wouldn’t know that, seeing as you don’t come down here much. He wants to keep it quiet, what with him being private and all – likes to take care of his own business.”

Nate remarked the news was terrible and made a note of ‘extenuating circumstances’ to adjust Jenkins up the line. He wasn’t sure how he would square the new rankings with the statistical information Mr Richards had mandated, but he supposed a few violations could get overlooked and certain numbers reconsidered. Once again life was conspiring to make a hash of his well-constructed spreadsheets and reasoned reports, putting his professional integrity at risk. The loose ends would be hard to tie up tightly. He had hard copies of the personnel files at his desk, but the protected electronic versions were soundly locked up by HR. There was little wiggle room there. Small favours could be called in from other departments, but Human Resources were known for being a fastidious and dispassionate lot.

As they walked across the depot grounds, out of earshot from the warehouse staff, Watkins gave Nate a more brutal rundown of his team. He knew there were inefficiencies, but saw these as a trade-off for keeping morale decently high, which he argued was better in the long term for productivity. Watkins stopped, planting his work boot and taking a pugilistic stance. Not looking at Nate, he requested that Bill Welsh get dropped near the bottom of the list, despite having good seniority and a clean record.

“I’ll need quantifiable substantiation,” Nate said.

“If you want reasons – which I think is what you just said – he’s a smelly bastard who’s never met a bar of soap he likes, and he’s been taking liberties since the scent of blood hit the air, contradicting my orders and being a general pain in the arse. A comment here, a
joke there, but always giving it a nudge – you know the type. I can’t have that sort of thing. Giving him the flick will send a message."

“\n
“I can’t put the man’s job at risk because you don’t like him,” Nate said.

“He’s a bell-end.”

“You can’t say that in the workplace.”

“Well, I’m not coming to your house to say it. Listen, you said there wouldn’t be redundancies, that it was idle speculation. What was that, wink, wink, nudge, nudge?”

“It’s not my decision.”

“I could have bloody told you. Drop Welsh down, Ned. Your scientific method isn’t going to make my warehouse a better place to work, no matter how many colourful charts you whip up. We’re people, not products. If the cull is coming, and I know it is, I want to keep the men who do the job and don’t give me the shits.”

Nate could see his point, though he was very fond of his charts. He said he would do what he could, but made no promises. He was tempted for a moment to mention how juicy and succulent the Mediterranean chicken previously gifted by the warehouse had been, feeling Watkins’ vulnerability at throwing a long-term staffer under the bus. That sort of disloyalty wouldn’t play well in the warehouse, even if most of the workers hated Welsh as much as Watkins did. But seeing as a bribe was morally wrong and would create problems he himself would have to cover up, Nate refrained. Leave it to him: the one time in his life when he was in a position of power, albeit minimal, and kick-back opportunities were hamstrung by logistics. This would never happen to Berlusconi.
Chapter 17

[Nate wavers between Allie and Elaine. He thinks of Helen, his deceased wife, and their first kiss. He decides to take up Elaine’s offer of dinner at her home. He returns home to find all of the tiles off his roof and a large tarp in their place. He phones Jimmy in fury.]

Chapter 18

[Nate hires a reputable tradesperson to evaluate his roof. Ray confides that none of the work is necessary. However, Nate has paid Jimmy in advance and has no budget to hire the older man to do the repairs. He returns to work and impulsively asks Allie over for dinner under the guise of her being new in London. She is not, however, and the offer isn’t taken up.]

Chapter 19

Dear Elaine was doing things down below which, frankly, Nate had neither experienced nor ever considered an option. His eyes floated into the back of his skull as his nerve endings danced, leaving him to wonder where she had learned such a tremendous technique. He supposed a friend might have suggested it; or had she simply thought up it independently, driven by instinct, curiosity and a remarkably adept understanding of male physiology? Whatever the case, the darting of her surprisingly fast and moist tongue had his full support and admiration. In fact, so pleasurable was the moment that he chastised himself for having resisted the coupling for so long. She wasn’t a bad egg, and affection and physical attraction could grow over time, he supposed. After all, arranged marriages worked perfectly well for a third of the planet. Really, when one considered the functionality of many relationships, including the Blairs and Clintons, cinematic love in the form of Hugh Grant
and Andie McDowall’s coming together in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was more an unattainable ideal than a reflection of real life. The thought of Andie McDowall’s curly black hair and Elaine’s shifting tongue pressure forced his eyes closed and his blood pressure dangerously upwards. No wonder so many older men died during intercourse.

Elaine emerged with a coy smile on her flushed face, burrowing back up the bed sheets and collapsing next to him in satisfied exhaustion. She had certainly been at it for a substantial amount of time, displaying a keen dedication. Part of him hoped she might trundle off for a quick tooth brush and rinse, but the endorphins were making his slight feeling of queasiness manageable.

“Well, I feel considerably less stressed,” Nate said.

“Good. I like to know I’ve helped. Things have been difficult for you.”

Nate nodded, admiring her lavender bedroom, the barely distinct features of a pastoral scene hanging on the wall to his left, the light from the street excluded behind her heavy blinds. The room felt well lived in, full of clothing and shoes and the detritus of everyday life, yet neat and orderly. He thought of Andie McDowall, and then Allie, and wondered what both were doing and what their most private spaces might look like.

Despite the afterglow, Nate now felt booze-heavy, his brow numbed by wine, beer and a snifter of cognac, which thankfully had been offset with heavy lashings of spaghetti, gummy white garlic bread and store-bought tiramisu. He had managed to adequately fill his spiritual chasm with booze and sex, just as the world of rock music had advocated for so many decades, adding a few thousand mostly empty calories for good measure.

“I think you should throw yourself into the restructuring,” Elaine said. “After all, you know the place well. Mr Richards will only be here for a few months and your help will put you in good stead. It’s not long.”
Nate considered the point, mildly distracted by her shifting closer and inserting her head in the crook of his shoulder. He wasn’t sure if this level of intimacy wasn’t a bit premature, but then he supposed after what had just occurred, all bets were off. He wondered vaguely what he had done to his carefully controlled life.

“I’m not sure about becoming Mr Richards’ right-hand person,” Nate said. “As you’ve mentioned, he’ll be gone before too long, and any reorganisation is bound to create enemies. Frankly, I’ve got enough.”

“But he’s very popular. People want change.”

“People think they want change, and usually when pressed, it’s about shifting some of their work to others or wanting energy drinks in the vending machines. I like to keep above the fray.”

“You’d ensure fairness.”

“If I had any say. I’m not comfortable with what I’ve been charged with now, what with this ranking system. It’s difficult having control over other people’s lives, and their situations are often more complex than you’d think. Did you know one of the men in the warehouse has a young daughter with leukaemia?”

“That’s terrible. My father died of the disease, as you know. Perhaps we should hold a fundraiser?”

“He’s a private man, doesn’t want a fuss.”

Elaine ran a hand through Nate’s copious grey chest hairs. “You see, you’re across the needs and abilities of your men. Use those skills. The review is going to happen whether you’re helping or not and acting aloof isn’t likely to reflect well.”

“I may land on Santa’s naughty list, you’re saying?”

Elaine purred and Nate reminded himself once again to be vigilant in his phrasing. This, in turn, increased his consternation, as the impulse made him acutely aware of how
much he wanted Elaine to be Allie. He wondered if the pressure in his head was an excess of hormones or looming insanity, or both.

Nate didn’t feel like getting into the bigger issues, so murmured he would give Elaine’s suggestion some serious thought. He closed his eyes, wanting to get lost in the peaceful blackness of sleep before his hangover came on or she tried for round two. Yet, the bigger issues wouldn’t let him drift away. He was happy enough to appear as Mr Richards’ diligent servant and help put the company on a better footing in the competitive local and global market (and all the other crypto-fascist management speak), but felt hampered by the niggling knowledge he didn’t believe in any of it. He wondered if his lack of genuine zeal would eventually become apparent, exposing him as a decidedly non-team player, thus landing him in even more trouble than if he had stayed aloof. By attempting to appear industrious, he could very well increase his chances of being downsized.

Of course, this raised the question of what he actually did believe in. Religion was a non-starter, though Richard Dawkins’ arrogance prevented him from identifying himself as an atheist, choosing instead to adopt the wishy-washy label of agnostic. Sports were tribal and essentially pointless. He didn’t see how wearing an overpriced team shirt while watching millionaire imports from Spain kick a leather ball into a net created a better society, never mind the hooligans and mindless destruction. He wasn’t nationalistic or militaristic, and still didn’t see the point of spending millions of pounds maintaining the Falklands or Gibraltar. Conspicuous consumption had never interested him, aside from a compulsion to purchase books, which he viewed as a cerebral activity, not a mode of competition. The Joneses didn’t know who he was, and if they did, they certainly wouldn’t invite him to dinner given the state of his wardrobe, so there was no point in trying to keep up with them. Class solidarity was dead; social justice was passé; hedonism piqued his interest, but frankly, it struck him as too tiring and potentially messy. Overall, he supposed he had to throw his weight in with Camus
and admit he believed in very little, because life was absurd. No matter what he did, he would end up dead, along with everyone he knew and loved. For this reason, he decided the only good reason for getting up in the morning was fresh air, good food, a few beverages and laughter with people who didn’t want to tell him about their investment portfolios, views on immigration or recent purchases from Freedom.

He thought about Jenkins in the warehouse, with his sick child and cribbage-addicted mother-in-law and felt an urge to do something discreet but good for the man. He supposed a few cooked dinners could suffice, helping ease his load with nutritious food. Nate did a fine pie, and that was a food that crossed all class and economic barriers. Yes, he would buy some quality flank steak and slow cook it with mushrooms and onions. While he preferred a bit of kidney in the mix, he conceded this wasn’t in keeping with current tastes. The idea of selfless service to others gave Nate a warm glow, as if it were an act of faith in society and human progress.

“What are you thinking about?” Elaine said, noticing his eyes open.

“Er, how we might help Jenkins, without making a big show of it.”

“You see, you care. A&M needs you.”

Sensing she was on the verge of initiating another coupling, Nate closed his eyes again and shifted himself into a position for sleep, slowing and deepening his breath. Her hand lingered on his chest and then moved slowly south, but he maintained his rigid resistance long enough that she got the message. He must have been more exhausted than he realised, because the next thing he knew, morning and a steaming mug had arrived, with Elaine beaming down at him, enrobed in a blue paisley dressing gown with a pink faux-fur collar.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d like coffee, tea or me,” she cooed.
The answer was obviously tea, but he made a noise he hoped conveyed non-committal intrigue, which he conceived of as a sort of hum, tailed by a rising intonation to indicate mysteriousness. Admitted, the result sounded like a half-hearted attempt to clear his throat, which while disgusting, didn’t deter his lover. Elaine dropped the dressing gown to reveal her naked body, which admittedly was not bad for an office worker in her late forties who sat for eight hours a day. Nate felt a stirring and decided this was not the most unpleasant situation in the world. There certainly was no good reason to embrace celibacy. Allie had given him a clear signal of her lack of interest and his libido wasn’t getting any younger. Yes, surely with effort, he could get into this relationship, trading low-level dissatisfaction and mild disappointment for a boost of sex, decent conversation and breakfast in bed. The key was to suppress his feelings and remain rational.

After doing something similar to the previous night’s activities once more – though with a bit more attention to her needs – they drank their tea and discussed the weekend. Elaine’s son would be away, so the seafood ragout was on, perhaps with a film. Two boiled eggs, toast and a shower later, Nate departed for his rendezvous with Piotr and the annual report. As he emerged onto late morning light, he felt a strange displacement with reality, as if he had arrived the previous evening as one person and awoken as quite another. This sense of transposition was no doubt partly due to his hormones being thrown out of their usual static levels, reminding him once more that the human race was nothing more than a pack of lusty animals. Yes, he affirmed to himself, he would change his perspective and sort his various problems out in an orderly and constructive manner. He was determined to break from the old patterns and ways which had got him into the mess that was his life. He would stop being so bloody obstinate. Nate Fitzgerald was due for an upswing.
Chapter 20

[Nate goes to Piotr’s for dinner and discovers that the CEO of his friend’s company doesn’t like his edits to the annual report. Instead, the CEO wants the document filled with more jargon in order to dissuade anyone from reading it. Nate returns home to find all of Jimmy’s equipment and the replacement tiles gone. Jimmy texts to say the tiles have been recalled by the manufacturer. A desolate Nate talks to his deceased wife and takes it upon himself to clean Isabelle, the fairy statue in the water feature in the Greek’s section of the property. He thinks of his childhood loneliness, when he used to talk to Isabelle for solace. He goes to Elaine’s and gives her his copy of Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, which has informed his approach to life. She’s never heard of it.]

Chapter 21

As was routine, Nate spent the first half-hour of Monday morning easing into the week. He drank tea, ate toast and trawled through his emails, including a message from the A&M Social Club declining his offer to sit on their 2012 organising committee. While his services were not required, the club hoped he would continue to attend functions and offer informal input. Seeing as he had never attended a single Social Club event, their comments were grossly ill-informed and the rejection unsurprising. However, it still stung, in large part because he had never actually wanted to be on the committee and had only responded to their call for nominees to show a commitment (admittedly disingenuous) to employee morale. ‘Team player’ was an attribute HR types droned on about, so participating in a few meetings to decide whether people wanted bowling or a karaoke afternoon seemed a small price to pay for potentially vital employment-review kudos. Well sod them too, he thought.
At ten, he checked the day’s calendar for the umpteenth time, his mouth dry, knowing his only appointment was a meeting with Mr Richards and Watkins at eleven. As was the director’s way, the meeting request had only come that morning and had offered no idea what would be discussed. Mr Richards seemed to enjoy keeping workers off balance, no doubt knowing a person was more apt to utter the truth accidentally when they weren’t given sufficient time to rehearse their lies. Nate’s fingertips felt cold on his keys, and the sensation continued even as he drunk his tea, the cup unable to offer sufficient warmth. He decided to escape his unease by reconnoitring another – but two cups would be the limit this morning, as he had no desire to suffer a strained bladder if the meeting ran long. He paused at Shirley’s desk, inquiring about her weekend.

“Ruined by the bloody immigrants,” she said. “My mother has to move to a new doctor due to these NHS catchment boundaries being redrawn. She can’t see the doctor she’s been going to for the last twenty years.”

“What does that have to do with immigrants?”

Shirley looked at him like he was simple. “There’s too many of them. They’re everywhere. Most of them live twenty to a house, so they’re filling up the GPs and clinics. Everyone is being pushed out.”

Nate supposed if anyone lived twenty to a house it was probably because London rents were exorbitant and any sort of social housing had lagged since the Thatcher era when councils had sold off millions of homes for wildly reduced prices – all in the name of free market values. Regulations to prevent property speculation had long been swept off the books; and the green belt, while ethically and environmentally sound, didn’t help. Granted, the immigration projections of the Blair years had been wildly inaccurate, but that was the EU. It all added up to the knowledge you couldn’t trust anyone in politics anymore.

“The only constant is change,” Nate said, not wanting to get involved.
“All they want is a handout,” Shirley continued. “This is the problem with charity. You breed people who don’t want to work. Look at Africa. We’ve been handing that lot millions of pounds for decades and they’re still a mess. Now we’re importing the problem here.”

“I’m sure Africans work quite hard. I’d suspect it’s more a question of economic inequality and—”

“Carrying water on your head for a couple of miles isn’t work. And those women should be wearing bras. I’ve got to take her myself tomorrow, you know, because she’s afraid she won’t find her new doctor’s office.”

“The poor love. Give her my best.”

Shirley handed him an internal mail envelop with his name on it, which contained a smaller envelop inside of which was a pink note reading: Happy Monday, lover. A large smudged lipstick kiss lay below this along with XXX and an ornate E. While this mode of communication was clearly safer and more clandestine than the no-doubt monitored company email system, the missive blurred the already uneasy line between professionalism and personal life. Nate mumbled something about the note being a request for more printer cartridges in the caravan and stumbled off to get more tea.

At five to eleven, Watkins poked his head over Nate’s partition. Either he had received advanced warning of the meeting or kept a spare razor in the bunker, as his usual stubble had been shorn clean. He looked younger, though also faintly egg-like.

“Dipping your pen in company ink, I hear, Ned. I sure lost that ten quid. Not that I can talk, I suppose. Word around the traps is you put a smile, and perhaps a bit more, on a certain Admin lady’s face.”
Nate blanched, his shoulders tightening. The rumour mill was efficient at A&M, but generally not this spectacularly fast, not to mention anatomically accurate. The only explanation was that Elaine had slipped out of her professional persona and spilled the beans entirely. Either that or someone had hijacked the camera on her bedroom laptop, which he had noticed was open on her dresser.

“Sure hope you and Goebbels don’t end up sacking her,” Watkins said. “I’ve heard she likes to bite. I suppose that’s why they coined the old adage, ‘never shit where you eat’. Ah well, enjoy it while you can. We’re not getting any younger.”

He rapped on the top of the partition and disappeared, leaving Nate to wonder who else in the business Elaine might have bitten, and how many. Again, he hadn’t suspected her of having a sexual side, much less an erotic past, but ample first-hand evidence of her lusty appetite clearly opened up the possibility he wasn’t her first tawdry conquest in the company. This made him feel devalued, but also relieved, as it suggested detangling himself from her grasp might be less emotionally damaging should the need arise.

The fact that this was his default outlook – and offered comfort to his nerves – reinforced his sense that he was acting poorly towards her. He had to try harder to want her and to desire their relationship. He wondered if one could get hypnosis for that sort of thing.

His musings were interrupted by a summons from Mr Richards. Watkins played the sycophant card by shaking the director’s hand firmly and blathering on about how nice it was to see him again. Nate simply clutched his decoy files and gave a professional nod, which Mr Richards missed, as he was distracted by Shirley using the break between meetings to request he sign a load of forms, requests and invoices.

Since their last sit-down, the director had cleared away most of Mr Greenway’s haphazardly stacked boxes and the walls had been repainted – which must have occurred over the weekend, as the paint smell was fresh and intoxicating. Mr Richards had also installed a
small round table by the window, where Nate sat across from Watkins, who was leaning back
in total relaxation, eying the comings and goings outside.

In the middle of the table lay a green file folder similar to Nate’s and a mobile phone. Taking a
glance towards Shirley’s desk, Watkins picked up the phone and swiped a finger
across the face. He made a *tsk* sound.

“Always amazes me people don’t put passwords on these things,” he said, scrolling
around, angling the screen away from Nate.

“Put that back. You’ll get us both fired.”

“Aren’t you curious about who he’s been talking to?”

“Whom.”

“Tom Whom? In Finance? You think they’re conspiring?”

Watkins chuckled, dialled a number and put the receiver to his ear. “Jihad, Jihad,
Jihad. We meet at dawn. The infidels will pay in blood.”

He put the phone down and leaned back, turning his face to the window again as
every pore in Nate’s body contracted like negative space in a black hole. He couldn’t speak,
his tongue flopping uselessly as he envisioned SAS troops crashing through the windows and
bundling them away in hoods to a CIA ‘enhanced interrogation’ centre in outer *Kazakhstan* –
though knowing Watkins’ luck and overweening arrogance, he’d talk his way out of arrest
and Nate would be the only one to disappear into black ops neverland. Watkins began to
shake violently, his face contorting and turning red before erupting in laughter.

“Christ, your face. I didn’t actually phone anyone, Ned. I’m not a complete idiot.”

Mr Richards came back in, pausing to assess the mirth, before ignoring it and closing
the door carefully. He took a seat and opened his folder, shuffling papers and finally sliding
one into the middle of the table. The page contained a ranking of warehouse and caravan
staff, in a completely different order than either Nate’s original or revised list. While trying

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not to look as if he were poring over the document, Nate scanned for his own name, which was disturbingly far down. Beside each name was a monetary figure. Nate’s number was several thousand pounds lower than his wage while Anesh’s was making thirty per cent more, which seemed to indicate the sums were not salary.

“Don’t mind the numbers,” Mr Richards said. “They’re a monetary value based on your Employee Self-Report and other assessments – simply another method we use to make our evaluations. With that said, you may want to note the statistics when trying to improve efficiency. We have some decidedly low achievers.”

“Might I ask how exactly they were calculated?” Nate asked.

“It’s the algorithm.”

This in no way answered his question, but he didn’t feel confident in pushing the inquiry further. Frankly, he was disappointed to find he was only worth 15,890 pounds to the organisation. Given the scope of operations, this was the equivalent of a mere three or four truckloads of meat products, which meant his value was loosely the same as 4000 beef briskets, 80,000 pork sausages, or 8000 packages of bacon rashers. These were distribution prices of course, not retail purchase cost, but still seemed shockingly low for the amount of effort and time he spent at the office.

Mr Richards pulled out Nate’s Employee Self-Report, which included the colourful pie graph he’d constructed to represent his full day in fifteen-minute intervals. Wanting to show off his ability to multitask and handle myriad duties, he had added a wide variety of responsibilities – so many in fact he had exhausted the colours available in the spread-sheet program. The greys came up poorly, but were distinguishable after he had separated them and organised them between stronger, more vibrant palettes. Mr Richards then pulled out two more reports, which Nate had never seen. One was apparently the director’s own evaluation of him based on the criteria he had set for the warehouse staff, with sick days, health and
safety warnings and the like. The other was a 360-degree Report, which Nate hadn’t been told about, but which involved those above and below him in the corporate hierarchy evaluating his day-to-day performance.

“I’m slightly concerned that more than half of the men in the warehouse don’t know what you do, Fitzgerald, and didn’t have any way of evaluating your work as their representative in this office,” Mr Richards said.

“I liaise mostly through Mr Watkins,” Nate replied. “We like to keep the lines of authority and communication clear and concise.”

Also, he saw no point in talking to the warehouse staff, and admittedly, was afraid of most of them. Mr Richards pulled out Employee Self-Reports from Watkins and Anesh, which were much duller and lacking in pie charts, and lined them up together.

“What do you see?” Mr Richards asked.

Nate and Watkins leaned forward. Nate had no idea what he might be looking for, so scanned for spelling errors.

“We’re busy,” Watkins said. “I knew we were swamped, but this really brings it home.”

“You three are doing many of the same tasks,” Mr Richards said. “There’s far too much overlap in your positions at the moment, partly due to your physical proximity. Why do we need a man in a caravan? Why can’t we have the warehouse staff print out order forms and determine which items are put on the trucks? After all, the vehicles are right in front of them, so surely they can estimate loads better than a person in the blind, away from the action.”

“It can be tricky, and rather overwhelming, especially in the holiday season,” Nate said.

“There could be safety issues too,” Watkins said.
Mr Richards ignored their comments and went on to outline the new structure he wanted to ‘test’ in the coming weeks. The CCTV in the bunker would continue to run, but that space would be abandoned, with all staff relocated into an open-plan arrangement on the warehouse floor. Watkins would oversee safety and workflow directly, without screens, and Anesh and the caravan day staffers would set up with him to process orders in real time, as they came in. Nate would be expected to oversee the transition and assess efficiency, providing a conduit between the administration building and the guts of the operation while being accessible to the workers should they have any concerns.

“As for safety, this is a better system,” Mr Richards said. “If you see a situation developing on the shop floor, you can intervene, wave your arms around or give a shout. From that bunker, you’d be able to give a very clear report to the authorities about how the accident happened, but meanwhile your man has lost his leg, or worse. I want a practical yet lean approach to how we operate.”

“I agree completely,” Watkins said. “I’m just worried about Health & Safety, the HR types and bureaucrats, not to mention our insurance coverage.”

“Leave all that to me. Honestly, we’ve got a tonne of regulations but all they do is cause delays, taking up so much time that actual workers get fatigued and more likely to make mistakes that cause injuries.”

Watkins was nodding his head and appeared to be in full agreement with the dismantling of his operation. Nate, on the other hand, was confused. A lot of what Mr Richards said made sense superficially, but his vision was incomplete. For one thing, a time-lag was involved in processing orders and getting lorries organised. Loads often had to be split over the course of a night, such as when orders came in late or large hub stores needed higher than usual volumes. If the caravan saw potential problems, they could delay the process and navigate the uncertainty without a single steak being loaded, thus saving time in
the long run. Nate saw the ability to balance lorry loads as a fine art, a strangely creative skill that required imagination. Mr Richards wanted efficiency, but the whole system was by nature chaotic and bespoke.

Nate was torn between contributing this informed opinion and staying silent, as per his survival strategy. His internal debate was cut short by Watkins, who grunted in surprise and looked pointedly out of the window. As Mr Richards turned to see what had happened, Watkins switched Nate and the director’s folders. Nate shook his head vehemently, but by then, Mr Richards had returned his attention to the table.

“One of the trucks had another near-miss getting onto the street,” Watkins explained. “We’ve asked for the speed limits to be lowered on that approach, but the council doesn’t listen.”

Mr Richards considered this, rising from the table and going to his desk. He sat, looked over his screen and began to type, no doubt responding to an email – one too important to delay with thanks and farewell. Nate lingered in his chair, waiting for Watkins to move far enough from the table so he could switch the files again, but the warehouse man stayed put, glaring and mouthing for him to go. When Mr Richards looked up pointedly, Nate relented and took the director’s file under his arm.

“Are you trying to get me dismissed?” Nate hissed when they were out of earshot. Watkins snatched the file and made for the photocopier.

“Wouldn’t think of it – you’re comic gold, Ned. You’re like Morecambe without the Wise. What’s your code?”

Nate nudged him aside and shielded the keypad, the machine slinging out two copies of the documents within seconds, one for each of them. Watkins shovelled the originals back into the file and jammed them into Nate’s gut.

“Do you think you can sneak them back in?” he said.
“I doubt it, he’s taken to locking his office.”

“Leave them on your desk then, Ned, where he can see them, and go to lunch. He’ll clock the mix-up when his next meeting starts and switch them back, thinking you’re just a hapless berk.”

“Thank you. I thought you were enthusiastic about his plan?” Nate said.

“That was called pretending. I don’t know about you, but I’m not keen to spend ten hours on the warehouse floor listening to loaders. The way half of those muppets drive, it’s a surprise no one has been maimed yet, and giving them more people to run into isn’t going to improve the situation. I was serious about safety.”

“Mr Richards has a thing about H&S, just so you know.”

“Yeah, I know – the British Empire wasn’t built on fluorescent armbands. It was built on dead miners and limbs lopped off in industrial accidents. That’s why we have regulations. People didn’t just pull them out of their arses one day.”

Nate decided to share his limited pool of information. Watkins in turn offered the details of Mr Richards’ recent private speech to the warehouse crew. Nate was not entirely surprised to find the director’s message hadn’t been about pulling together to abridge the distance between success and failure. Instead, it had taken the form of a harangue on cutting the bloated bureaucracy of the administration side while looking out for those doing the real heavy-lifting at A&M.

“Of course, we realise it’s all bullshit and he’ll do whatever he pleases in the end. These types always do. He’s just trying to keep us docile,” Watkins said. He patted Nate on the stomach. “Just remember, we’re all in this together.”

With that, Nate returned to his cubicle, dropped Mr Richards’ file on his chair and decided to go out for lunch, despite having a perfectly good egg and cress sandwich in the staff refrigerator. A walk in the cold rain would do him no harm.
Chapter 22

[Allie belatedly accepts Nate’s invitation to dinner. Mr Richards talks to Nate about the demands of the modern economy, including the pressures of globalisation and technology. He appears to suspect Nate is working against him.]

Chapter 23

That evening around 10.30pm the gate bell chimed, rousing Nate from the sleep he had fallen into while watching Hustle. For reasons he couldn’t fathom, the program always sent him into a deep slumber. As was his way, he ignored the bell, suspecting any visitor at this time of night would be a drunk or mischievous teenager. His few friends knew to phone first, as was standard policy. For several years he had left the chime disconnected, though the increased frequency of his book deliveries had required him to reconnect the device. When the bell rang again, this time for longer, giving an emphatic sense of purpose, he pulled his body from the warm fabric, put on his slippers and made his way down the dark pathway to the domain of street life. His back was decidedly stiff, and he cursed himself for not getting up and stretching more often. Had the tyrants of the Middle Ages known about office chairs, they could have dispensed with the Iron Maiden.

While not knowing what to expect, the sight of two police officers came as a shock. Nate imagined Mrs Donaldson crushed under the rubble of her council flat, treated as a human speed-bump or murdered in a violent home invasion – some drugged-out hooligan looking for elderly pain medication.

“Do you mind if we come in, sir?” one of the officers asked.
Nate wasn’t sure if he uttered an affirmation, but the officer slid past regardless. Nate moved to the side to allow the other to enter the grounds, intending to be a good host and close the gate behind him, but the man put up his hand and motioned for Nate to turn back and lead the way, as if fearing he might bolt out and flee. Despite years spent avidly watching *The Bill* and assorted NYPD shows from America, Nate was unsure of how to act, but turned and led the procession down the ill-lit walkway to the flat.

“It’s nothing too serious,” the first officer said, as if sensing his apprehension. “We’ve had a complaint about you.”

“About me?” Nate said.

“Your neighbour says you were on his property earlier today.”

“My neighbour?”

“He said you were tampering with his possessions and taking photos through his windows.”

“Taking photos?”

The police officers exchanged a look, appearing perplexed by the echo. Nate wondered if he had betrayed his guilt, then wondered what he had to feel guilty about, as he didn’t recall creeping around the Greek’s house. Most days he liked to deny the man’s existence entirely. Nate wondered if Jimmy and his crew had come back onto the property. They had lifted the tiles with ease, so clearly they had thieving talent, and Jimmy had made mention of Nate’s shoddy window locks weeks earlier, which suggested a tendency to ‘case joints’.

“I assume you’re talking about Mr Georgiadis,” Nate said. “We share a property actually, as there’s no fence. I’ve been having work done on my flat, so he may have seen one of the men using a phone. They take photos now, you know.”
“He was very clear you were the person in question. If we were to take your camera and recording devices, what would we find on them?” the officer asked.

“Take my camera?”

The officers exchanged another look. “If we were to take them, what would we see?”

Nate racked his mind, thinking they would find an unsettling number of photos of a man and his cat, including Linus in different outfits and with various items placed on his sleeping body. Nate had long found the cat’s ability to sleep so soundly amusing and had begun by putting his stuffed mouse toys on his slumbering head, casually working his way through the kitchen brush, socks, small pillows, hats and a series of humorous signs. He considered eventually digitalising them and putting them onto the internet, hopefully attaining the popularity of Anne Geddes, who clearly made a good living from a similar humiliation of children.

“Isabelle,” Nate said suddenly.

“Is she your partner?” the officer said, looking around the flat, clearly confounded by the two-thousand books and unable to find any hint of a woman’s touch. Nate resented this, though it was true and he supposed coppers had to make assumptions about people – or ‘perps’ as they were know. Nate wondered if he was a perp, finding the notion faintly appealing in being rebellious enough to pimp his reputation with the opposite sex. For the first time since the gate, Nate looked to the second cop, who wore a much more relaxed expression.

“Isabelle is a fairy,” Nate said. “She’s been with me since childhood. Mr Georgiadis lives in what was my family home, and frankly, he’s allowed her to get into an advanced state of disrepair. I cleaned her up and may have taken a few snaps.”

“Of a fairy in Mr Georgiadis’ garden?” the first officer said.

“She’s a statue. I’m not a mental,” Nate said.
“You weren’t taking photos through his windows?”

“God no, why would I? Have you seen the man?”

“Have you had any issues or confrontations with him?”

“We’ve had a number of missives exchanged over his needing to fix my front gate and walkway though I’ve since had the gate repaired myself. I haven’t been in touch personally for several months. We’re going through a restructuring process at work, you see, which has been quite consuming, and my romantic life has been incredibly active.”

Nate thought about pointing out that were he interested in photographing the Greek, he would invest in the proper technology – spy cameras and all that palaver – but thought better of sharing. Private investigator, Nate thought, yet another job relegated to the dust bin of history by technology, unless of course you worked for *News of the World*.

The officers asked to see Nate’s photos of Isabelle, but waved him away when he offered them the film-camera. Still, the gesture showed a cooperative attitude, which Nate fostered, knowing full well they would need a warrant to take the device away. The second officer jotted down Nate’s details and gave him a warning about not taking pictures on private property, but this seemed a matter of protocol.

“We’ll be in touch if this goes further,” the first officer said.

“Call anytime,” Nate said.

While he felt vindicated, the notion of a follow-up to the ridiculous accusation struck him as absurd. All he had done was engage in grounds maintenance and take a few selfies with a pond statue, which while not typical behaviour, wasn’t grounds for arrest. And since when did anyone in the modern world care about photographs? Everyone on the planet was snapping away on a practically continuous basis, documenting their coffee froth, new hat, daytrips, recent purchases, injured toes and tan lines.
He made a cup of tea to calm his nerves and ranted to Linus for several minutes. Not knowing what else to do, he rang Elaine and recounted the incident. From her groggy voice, she had turned in early.

“You should be glad the police are so vigilant. We are in a war on terror,” she said.

“We’ve always been in a war on terror; it used to be called keeping the peace. You’re missing the point. The Greek is trying to restrict my freedom. I don’t even feel I can look in the direction of his house anymore.”

“You shouldn’t be snooping anyway,” she said.

“I wasn’t snooping. I was tidying up the garden.”

“You can stay here for a while if you’d like.”

Nate hesitated, needing to step lightly around this first hint of cohabitation. He politely declined the offer, explaining the situation wasn’t that bad and he was simply tired. She asked if they were getting together on Friday for dinner and Nate agreed, deciding he could postpone taking any firm decision on their relationship until after Saturday night. If things went well with Allie, perhaps he would need to let Elaine down gently, though he felt confused. The fact he’d called her first about the statue debacle was unsettling and he wondered if she hadn’t made her way further into his life than he’d suspected.

Chapter 24

Nate had little appetite the next morning, the situation with the Spanner in the Manor having fuelled strange dreams. As he forced down a piece of toast, he glared through the lace curtains at what had once been his family home. Not only was the Greek refusing to maintain the grounds properly, as per the long-established terms of acquisition, but now he was being openly harassing. Nate wondered if a community lawyer might take up his case pro bono.
though this was unlikely seeing as he was employed, owned his flat and hadn’t been charged with a crime.

Without warning, the unshaven spectre of Jimmy appeared, moving across the lawn from the Greek’s side of the property. He was carrying a toolkit and a small portable stereo and seemed oblivious to the fact he was trespassing. Nate rushed outside.

“How’d you get in here?” he asked.

“Aristotle buzzed us through,” Jimmy replied, motioning to the Greek’s house.

“Is that how you got in the other day, to steal the tiles?”

“I told you they were defective, right?”

Nate nodded. “Am I to assume you’re finishing my roof today?”

“Still waiting for replacements, I’m afraid. I rang the supplier and totally lost my nut about how unacceptable the situation was and how imbecilic he’s being – gave him some real attitude – but he’s being a cunt. Said he doesn’t like being spoken to that way, you know, disrespected and all. Some people are touchy about that sort of thing, if you get me.”

Nate frowned. “So then, what are you doing here?”

“Doing work for your landlord,” Jimmy said, motioning to the Greek’s house again.

“He’s not my landlord. How did you arrange that?”

“Like I said, Aristotle lets us in. And he likes our work.”

Nate wondered what work that might be, aside from dismantling what a proper tradesperson viewed as a functional roof and overcharging him for tiles which didn’t technically need replacing. He watched as Jimmy’s lackeys brought two wheelbarrows of bricks into the courtyard, deciding to hold back on badmouthing the Spanner, as it appeared he may have capitulated and was finally going to repair the no-man’s-land that was Nate’s walkway. Perhaps the police had told Georgiadis to get the hazard fixed, warning him that any accident would have legal repercussions, thus validating Nate’s belief that the second
officer had been fair and understanding. While still angry about his near arrest, Nate could see how the incident might be viewed as a mixed blessing.

He gathered his bag and departed, walking double-pace to A&M. The bad night’s sleep had left him decidedly anti-social, but he had to go to work given that the tranquillity of his personal space was being overrun with tradespeople again. While wanting to be a staunch defender of the working class, Nate conceded Jimmy was battering it out of him. Of course, drinks with Mr Richards hadn’t convinced him to sign on as a neoliberal either. He considered what this near-constant stress might be doing to his system, no doubt morphing his haemorrhoids into tumours, which would explain the itchiness. He’d have to have a colonoscopy now, which was fine, as it was a trendy health option and not as embarrassing as in the past. Luckily, Elaine had made contact with his prostate on several occasions and hadn’t mentioned any abnormalities or swelling, so that was reassuring, though a full physical might still be wise once his life situation returned to normal.

God he was getting old. Just yesterday he’d turned forty-five and felt at ease with his age, having got over the personal crisis of reaching forty. Now he was 49 and angst-ridden once again, though in a myriad of new and novel ways. He had been so many different people in his lifetime. No doubt in the future he would look back at this version of himself and think he was far too upset about his trivial relationship issues and work conflicts. Yes, sixty-year-old Nate would shake his head, having lost his legs to a microbial infection, but only after his home had been destroyed in a fire caused by suspect roof repairs – which had invalidated his insurance policy. Or he might be married and generally content, having taken up ping-pong. Anything was possible.

Nate wondered who he really was, deciding he was a million different people depending on the situation and who was judging. At any given time he could be a misfit, a poor man, a rich man from a global perspective, a loner, a man with a few chosen associates
and good friends, pet owner, home owner, Englishman, British, a Southerner, Londoner, North Londoner, upstanding member of the Islington community, a European, a member of the human race, a man, straight man, tall man, bearded man, psoriasis sufferer, pedestrian, walker, rambler, a man committed to green transport, an environmentalist, recycler, bargain hunter, consumer, carbon emitter, hermit, white collar, middle class by birth, a disappointment, a pacifist, a music aficionado, a cultural enthusiast, multiculturalist, hopelessly irrelevant, unfashionable, retro-fashionable, an ale drinker, a real ale drinker, a cider drinker, a non-smoker, politically left, a socialist, a disillusioned Labour voter, an uncommitted voter, an occasional vegetarian, a pie lover, seafood lover, home chef, English speaker, monolingual, student of the French language, pedant, *Downton Abbey* enthusiast, dieter, closet romantic, romantically duplicitous, a gossip, hypocrite, trusted friend, cad, technophobe, intellectual, reader, an utterly confused member of the 21st century, or any number of other identities. If you asked Elaine, he was in a committed relationship, though he preferred to see himself as a single man still considering his options. To Anesh he was a mentor, yet to Watkins he was a nuisance. In the end, his identity was a mishmash, the happenstance result of genetics, upbringing, decisions, contexts and perspectives, like everyone else on the planet. For some reason the thought depressed him further, as it suggested he was not, in fact, *special*.

As the red and blue confines of A&M rose in the distance, Nate formulated a strategy for his day. He would launch into Shirley straightaway, using his annoyance to be firm about her need to work full-time. Following that, he would avoid everyone in the building for the rest of the day, going out for lunch, avoiding chit-chat and keeping his head down. It was Wednesday, meaning the Jaffas would be out, but the kitchen area was an exposed social no-man’s land, so he would rely on the emergency snacks in his desk drawer. He would forsake the urinal and use the stalls exclusively, even if they were filthy as usual. Yes, he would
harangue Shirley and then plunge into work with his headphones on and Leo Sayer cranked all the way to six. He felt confident about this plan until he saw Shirley crying, her eyes scarlet and her hands shaking.

“It’s mother,” she said.

“Not bad news from the doctor, I hope,” Nate said.

“We won’t have her results for a few weeks, but the stress. She used to be so in control, but you should have seen her in the waiting room this morning, huddled in her jumper, falling to pieces. She looked so old.”

Nate felt the need to put his hand on her shoulder, but wasn’t sure how she would react to physical touch. Their relationship had never been that personal. Instead, he handed her another tissue from the box. “It’s good you went along. I’m sure she appreciated the help. You’re a good daughter,” he said.

“Why does everything have to keep changing all of the time? When will it end? Isn’t enough, enough? She’s ninety-one years old. She doesn’t deserve this constant stress.”

Nate retrieved some water. He wasn’t completely sure why, but he’d seen it done in films and being proactive let her know he was concerned. He hadn’t given the NHS doctor switch much thought, but from how Shirley described the situation, losing her doctor had impacted Shirley’s mother quite badly, increasing her frailty. Nate supposed any change in your tenth decade was bound to be upsetting.

“Was the new doctor good, at least?” Nate asked.

“He was Pakistani, but they all are these days. You’ve just got to accept that, like the gays. It used to be the blacks and Irish blowing things up and causing problems – we just get used to that and the country starts filling up with more of that foreign lot. We’ve become the minority.”
Nate was thankful for the overt racism, as it gave him space to withdraw emotionally from the situation without undue guilt. He assured Shirley all would be fine, and that her mother was a woman with hidden depths of strength who would adjust to her new circumstances. This wasn’t based on anything other than Shirley’s vague nostalgia, but again, it ticked the right boxes and the crying abated. What it didn’t do was afford Nate good grounds to broach Shirley giving up her family time on Fridays to serve the company. He decided to aim instead for the end of the day, perhaps softening her up with frequent comments about the rising cost of living and wage stagnation.

Nate’s plan of solitude took a second hit when he logged onto his email and found a request from Mr Richards to spend half the day in the caravan overseeing the physical logistics of the new scheme – which translated into helping to lug equipment and organise the workstation on the warehouse floor. The director certainly wasn’t delaying putting change into motion. As the caravan day-staffers Tina and Tracy did their usual job of sorting orders and rush deliveries and sending invoices to accounts, Nate and Anesh disassembled the pigeonholes, computers and printers. They loaded supplies onto panel carts and began transporting the surprisingly abundant amount of material into the warehouse, which as always, boomed with the rev of engines and clattering pallets.

“I can barely hear myself think in this place, much less concentrate on organising deliveries,” Anesh said. “Do you think this is Mr Richards’ way of encouraging me to resign?”

“From what I’ve seen, he values your contribution to the company,” Nate said.

“What did he say?”

“23,600 pounds.”

“Ah, yes the report you stole.”

Nate blanched and nearly dropped a box of extension cords onto his foot.
“Mr Watkins provided me with a copy for strategising,” Anesh said. “I believe the director is looking to move against non-permanent staff, as he has end-dates listed for all contracts. He has also noted union membership.”

Nate wasn’t completely surprised Watkins had passed along the report, though if word got back to Mr Richards that copies were floating around, the fact the original had been found in Nate’s cubicle would be problematic. He had hoped to limit the report to two copies, but conceded the data could already be on the internet or in the hands of a journalist, about to explode into the Independent and make Nate into another Julian Assange. While he didn’t mind being portrayed as a principled whistleblower, he doubted he would make a good fugitive and had no interest in fleeing to Sweden. The cold winter mornings would be murder on his joints.

Speaking of which, hauling CPU units and boxes of A4 paper was making his shoulders and neck muscles bark. Surely A&M had people employed to lift heavy things – young people with slow minds who wouldn’t get bored or wake up the next day in agony. Though lean and weighing no more than eleven stone soaking wet, Anesh was certainly showing no strain.

“I finally managed to sit down with Mr Richards this morning, trying to find common ground,” Anesh said. “He gave me ten minutes and ended the meeting by mentioning youth unemployment in this country is currently running at twenty-two per cent.”

“Did he give you his globalisation speech?”

“Yes, though I’m not certain French corporations are about to thrust themselves into the hotly contested Angel-Islington meat distribution market.”

Clearly Richards had updated Greece to France in his warning following Nate’s quip about the latter not being able to afford lorries. It was nice to see his feedback being taken onboard. They set up the new night workstation on a folding banquet table, stacking supplies
underneath. This was to be temporary, with new furniture arriving if the scheme proved successful. Nate suspected the warehouse workers were buzzing their loaders more closely than was necessary, feeling wind on his neck more than once. From their expressions, they were annoyed at the intrusion into their space, though this lot had always struck Nate as perpetually angry, so maybe they were simply bad drivers. Watkins came up the stairs from the bunker shaking his head at the clutter in his already-jammed warehouse.

“Christ,” he said.

“It’s just a trial period,” Nate said.

“If you think our feedback is going to get this mess shifted back to that caravan, you’re deluded. Any way he tries to sell it, Herr Director has already decided this is how we’re going to operate.”

“If we all push back, he’ll have to reconsider,” Anesh said.

“No, he’ll show his bosses he can cut at least one of us three, and no doubt a few of my support staff. They don’t care if our conditions get worse. Richards thinks sitting in that bunker is a holiday. I’d like to see him spend January underground with that heating system.”

Nate wanted to suggest that having a dart board with Adele’s face on it might have sent a mixed message and that IT could no doubt easily look into their cache and expose a penchant for YouTube viewing. Somehow, however, he sensed the three of them had been thrust into solidarity, needing one another to form a united front against Mr Richards. The director clearly knew this, which was why he had allowed them to see their evaluations. Now they were left to find a solution or else fight it out, knifing one another until the weakest member’s limp body could be dumped over the side to the murky depths below.

By the afternoon, Nate’s back had begun to stiffen even more severely than usual, so he made a post-work stop for aspirin and anti-inflammatory tablets. He knew he should do floor stretching and ice the muscles before going to bed, but that sort of thing was so tedious.
Instead, he popped into the pub, opting for a three-cider cure, hoping the alcohol would do the loosening while being careful not to imbibe enough to risk a pill-alcohol overdose like that poor chap who played the Joker in *Batman* or Whitney Houston.

Returning home, he was encouraged to find the trusty gate locked, having wondered sporadically throughout the day whether Jimmy and his ilk might leave it open out of incompetence or spite. He looked forward to seeing the new walkway, viewing its rehabilitation as a symbol of renewal. Numerous studies had shown that good upkeep of an environment leads to feelings of hopefulness, just as decrepitude conditions or graffiti invite depression and crime. Forcing himself to be positive, Nate emphatically reiterated that the new gate and pathway were steps in the rejuvenation of his living space, with the roof soon to follow, topped off by Allie moving in all her worldly possessions by mid-year. All of these would increase the odds of his future happiness, helping to make the past two-plus decades of his life an aberration.

Unfortunately, upon stepping onto the grounds, he looked down to discover the bricks under his feet were the same broken and uneven ones he had left that morning. He hoped fixing a walkway was time-consuming and Jimmy and his crew simply hadn’t made it all the way to the street, but as he shuffled into the gloom, he could see no sign of change. Stepping into the light of his meagre courtyard, he instead caught sight of the Berlin Wall.

Along the property line separating his and the Greek’s territory was a two-and-a-half metre red brick fence, the top of which was crowned with pieces of broken glass in pools of cement. The barrier was as imposing as that surrounding Buckingham Palace, and Nate, while infuriated, had to admit Jimmy had done decent work. Clearly he was better-suited to bricklaying than roof repairs – kudos to the Spanner in the Manor for recognising his potential.
Nate ran a hand across the brittle brick, verifying it was real. Tragically, it struck him that he would never see Isabelle again, and that in time, grime would build up once more and wind and rain would erode her further, eventually wearing away her delicate features forever. No one would be there to take care of her. She would spend her days abandoned, unloved and utterly alone. He felt a surge in his chest, realising the police hadn’t been on his side. They had simply kowtowed to his wealthy neighbour.

Gripped by a formless rage, he went into the flat – now drafty, as the tarp was loosening with every passing day – and found chalk in the chesterfield drawer. Not knowing what else to do, he went to the wall and wrote the word ‘wanker’ in huge white lettering. This endeavour, while pointless and utterly pathetic even to his eyes, drained his bile, opening an easy pathway for melancholy. He requisitioned a cider and sat down on the stoop, staring at his forced alienation from his family home. While still the same proximity away as before, that part of his life suddenly felt even more distant and removed from his current existence. Shirley was right, at what point would the relentless assault of change abate?

He left a message for Jimmy politely asking him to call back and then turned his attention to eating a take-away Marks and Spencer’s Cajun Chicken Gumbo cold. Acting completely out of character, Linus brushed against his leg, allowing Nate a pet in exchange for a cheeky taste of this new dish.

Nate thought about buying a sledgehammer and bringing down the wall. He imagined striking the bricks while shouting that the world needed fewer barriers and more communication – but the Greek wouldn’t care. He wouldn’t even notice, cocooned behind his double-glazing in front of an enormous flat-screen with the surround-sound system turned up high. He would sleep easily, engaging with the destruction only long enough to call his solicitor to force Nate to pay for a replacement wall. The Greek wouldn’t see Nate, because he no longer wanted to see him.
Yet Nate took strange comfort in knowing every time the Spanner looked out his window he would see the wall, and he would have no choice but to think of the irritant still living on the fringes of his property, isolated but not purged. Nate laughed at the man’s paranoia, hoping it would escalate and drive him mad, drained the last of his drink and stiffly rose to go back inside.

He surfed the internet for a while, then changed into his nightclothes and made his way through his ablution regime, feeling too tired to floss, but forcing himself onward anyway. There was no blood on the string, so clearly the day hadn’t been a total loss. He shuffled from the lavatory, and then paused, looking down the short passageway to the box room. He turned on the light and blinked several times. Where the door should have been were rows of red bricks identical to those in the garden. At first he thought it was some kind of illusion, a stress-induced hallucination or an optical illusion created by the hall mirror angled to the courtyard, but the tactile sensation beneath his fingertips proved his spare room had been sealed up.

Nate threw his shoulder into the bricks but the cement had dried solid, bouncing him back. Stumped for several long seconds as to how to proceed, he eventually exited the flat and went around to the box-room window, where surprisingly, he found a small door. A key had been left in the lock, which he turned, finding his familiar spare room. He pulled his mobile from his pocket and left a message for Jimmy, unable to sound anything but overly perplexed, hearing his voice as if from a distance. He sounded perfectly civil, like this was the sort of mix-up that could happen to anyone, and did on a regular basis. He then went to the fridge and got another tin of cider.
Chapter 25

Nate continued to leave messages for Jimmy throughout the week, but received no response. Each time, the workman’s recorded voice informed him he was busy but would ring back shortly, the message half-shouted above what Nate believed to be drum ‘n bass music.

On Friday afternoon, an exhausted-looking Anesh informed him that the first test of the warehouse loading system had gone reasonably well for most of the evening before descending into chaos when two trucks needed to be completely reordered. This glitch had bogged down the flow of orders, extending the shift until nearly one in the morning and leading to some impressive cursing from the warehouse staff. That this had occurred in a slow period was disturbing, but teething problems were to be expected. At least no one had been decapitated.

Nate refrained from sharing his housing situation with anyone, muted by lingering disbelief and faint shame. Seeing Shirley’s empty chair weighed on his mind and he was made edgier still when Elaine emailed to say her seventeen-year-old son Daniel would be on hand that evening, which would constitute their first meeting. Nate considered dropping in to HR to discuss the director placing pressure on him to perform tasks outside his job description; but as Richards seemed to know everything that went on at A&M, he refrained and told himself he would confront Shirley first thing Monday, definitely.

That night he stood outside of Elaine’s flat, adjusting his collar and gripping a Chilean red, steeling for the resentment her young son would direct at him. He was an interloper into their lives, the man who was taking the place of the boy’s biological father in the household, a rival for his mother’s attention and affection. Elaine opened the door with a generous smile and escorted him in, on this occasion refraining from yanking out his member and fellating
him in the hallway. She cooed at the wine and insisted on opening it immediately to let it breathe, clearly unaware that the bottle had been fished from a remainders bin for less than five quid.

Her abrupt departure to the kitchen left Nate to wander solo into the living room where a young man in glasses sat stiffly, his hands on his lap, watching the television. He had a straight fringe and was painfully thin – not Karen Carpenter, but in need of a protein shake – and wore green trousers and a collared shirt, as if ready for a day on the links. He rose, keeping his gaze down, swiped hair from his face and jutted out his hand to shake. For no good reason, Nate had expected a large lad with piercings and an American baseball cap turned sideways, but frankly, the geeky Daniel could have passed for his own offspring.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr Fitzgerald,” he said.

“And you. Please, call me Nate.”

“Daniel is just on his way out, meeting up with his friends to get up to mischief,” Elaine said, sweeping back in. “These young people.”

“Going to a rave?” Nate said.

Daniel’s nose wrinkled. “We’re going to watch Game of Thrones.”

“Tremendously violent,” Nate said.

“Yes, but it’s just a television program.”

Elaine straightened her son’s collar and held him by the shoulders, beaming. He didn’t strike Nate as someone apt to cause anarchy; in fact, he couldn’t image the boy littering. When Elaine released her loving grip, Daniel murmured a farewell and promptly fled the premises, clearly as happy to avoid a meet-and-greet as Nate.

“Nice lad,” Nate said.

“He doesn’t cause me any problems, and he’s very good at science. Thankfully he doesn’t take after his mother at all.”
Nate had the sense he was supposed to make a comment about her aptitude, but he was distracted by the thought they shared a decidedly odd dress-sense, which was clear proof of maternal influence. He couldn’t say this, of course, and by the time he turned his attention to addressing Elaine’s comment, the moment had passed. She handed him a red wine, her lips pursed, and he changed the subject by telling her about his box room.

“You’ll have to sue,” she said.

“You’d be surprised how often that phrase comes up in my life.”

“Have you contacted Consumer Rights? They’re a government agency that offers advice on these sorts of matters – both with this wall and your shoddy workman friend.”

“I was in contact today, actually. I don’t believe I have any recourse with the Greek, as he’s got every right to barricade me out – he doesn’t even need council approval given our strange set-up. And I can’t help feeling young thick Jimmy might have misinterpreted one of my earlier remarks about the Bedroom Tax, which puts me on an awkward footing.”

“How so?”

“I may have floated the idea of bricking up the room as a joke.”

Elaine was clearly appalled by this passivity and didn’t even crack a smile when Nate commented that with the box room walled up, he now owned both a home and a granny flat. She seemed determined to take charge of the situation, demanding Jimmy’s number and insisting she would call and set things right. Nate refused, noticing for the first time that she was wearing a small brooch on her frilly blouse which appeared to be a ceramic green bean encrusted with fake emeralds. Surely a woman in her late forties couldn’t think the accessory suitable, especially in a romantic situation, unless of course they happened to be Susan Boyle – and everyone knew she was a special case. Yet there the brooch was, lingering as an incongruous blight on an already suspect ensemble. Elaine nudged in next to him on the sofa, her legs tucked up underneath her and a hand extended across the back to his shoulders,
which she had begun to massage gently. With foreplay commencing, his attention was conflicted, drawn to the ample expanse of her bosom and enjoying the fingers yet distracted by the ornament.

“I really don’t know why I’ve had so many challenges of late,” he said.

“The universe is telling you to take charge and make radical changes. You’re unlocking the mysteries.”

“Hmm, quite... A lot of people hire dodgy workmen, I suppose. Otherwise we’d have no need for Consumer Rights. And I’m not the first to have neighbour issues.”

“You need to be firm.”

The double entendre was punctuated by her hand dipping from his shoulder onto his chest and working down to his thigh.

“I’m not certain anger is the proper response. It certainly didn’t work for my father in all the years he took it for a career strategy. And besides, it’s not in my nature. I’m a complex individual.”

“No you’re not. You’re a very simple man.”

Nate bristled, but Elaine didn’t appear to notice, fixating on his belt buckle.

“I know what you want out of life,” she purred. “Good food, a few books and your Elaine. I know exactly who you are, and what you need, and I intend to give it to you.”

Not wishing to appear rude, Nate submitted to Elaine’s pleasuring, reflecting he hadn’t mentally prepared himself for a coupling, being under the impression Daniel would be in for the evening. As her head moved over his lap, he attempted to knead her hair, getting decidedly thrown off by that stupid pea broach. He supposed there was nothing wrong with vegetable-themed accessories but couldn’t fathom what message she was trying to convey to the world in wearing it. If the intention was to express joviality, she was being disingenuous, because she wasn’t a carefree type. He was also annoyed by Elaine’s belief that he was a
simple man. In fact, this was possibly the worst comment anyone had ever made about him – and given his history for antagonising people, that was a major accomplishment.

“Are you... um, having issues?” she asked, glancing up.

“Perhaps we should reconvene later. I may be self-conscious about Daniel coming back and finding his mother in this position.”

Elaine sat up. “He’ll be out all night.”

“Still, he might have forgotten something, or taken ill. I see you’ve been reading Thoreau.”

He motioned to the copy of Walden on the side table.

“You can have it back,” she said. “I couldn’t get into it.”

She got up and retrieved the book, holding it like one might a used sock. Nate took it gladly, wondering if Allie had ever read the work. Elaine sat back down and Nate zipped up, aware that a tension had crept into the room. Their conversation, which typically flowed easily, became intense with long pauses of silence, the stillness filled with sips of wine and vague murmurings of appreciation for the classical music, which as always, Nate was unable to identify. He regretted coming, seeing his continued relationship with Elaine as ethically questionable given his feelings for Allie. It reflected his weakness, of course, another aspect of his character he would strive to overcome in the arduous process of self-reinvention. Never again would he allow himself to be in such a situation.

While confessing he was tired from work and recent events, he felt obliged to stay for the meal, both as a courtesy and because she’d made Moussaka and he was a sucker for anything with mince or béchamel, the combination of the two being a luscious adventure for his tastebuds. Two bottles of passable wine later, he found himself pinned beneath her naked flesh on her floral bed sheets, the pea brooch tucked well out of sight under her crumpled blouse on the floor. Yes, it was weakness, but he assured himself Elaine was getting
something positive from the experience too, as evidenced by her rapidly escalating moaning. As the lights burst in Nate’s head, he thought the moment a fine farewell to this chapter of his life, like fireworks on New Year’s Eve over the Thames. If all went well on Saturday, he would schedule a breakup meeting on Monday and let her down with as much grace as he could muster.

Chapter 26

Throughout Saturday, Nate tried to reassure himself it was not potentially the most important day of the rest of his life, all the while secretly indulging in a fantasy of seducing Allie, marrying her, leading an intellectual and erotic life together and then dying simultaneously of massive heart attacks after the consumption of a roast pork dinner at the age of eighty-five (and whatever age she might be at that time). He thought their twin-death touching and romantic, with the added advantage of negating the thorny issue of who would be left behind to grieve. For most of the afternoon, he swung violently between excitement and nausea.

By six he was beginning to worry that she would not show up, having come to regret her polite acceptance of his dinner invitation. However, because they worked together, he assured himself that if bailing she would at least text an excuse, such as an illness or sick cat, so as to avoid future discomfort. He kept his mobile close and began to check it every three to four minutes. At 6.27pm the gate chime rang out and he took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders like Gielgud about to plunge onto the stage at Stratford-upon-Avon. He drew the gate door open in welcome and gasped as a bottle of plonk was thrust into his chest by Jim Watkins.

“Thanks for the invite, Ned. I had no idea you were so fond of me.”
Watkins passed, eying the broken pavers and looking around, and Allie appeared, giving Nate a gentle peck on the cheek. She smelled nice, something like vanilla and cedar.

“Looks like the kind of place Jack the Ripper might like,” Watkins said.

The walkway was narrow and dim, the floodlight having gone out several years back due to a short in the fuse box, or something like that. He’d pushed for a replacement for that too, but given up long ago. Nate thought this but said nothing as Watkins’ thick torso disappeared down the narrow walkway and around the bend to his home. Allie followed, stepping lightly, feeling for secure pavers with her foot as she went. Nate looked at the wine in his hand, a decent Italian drop if the label were anything to go by. He still couldn’t conceive as to why the warehouse manager was here, in his personal territory, though he suspected he wouldn’t like the answer.

He caught up to Allie and grasped her by the arm, guiding her over the roughest patches, knowing where to step and which sections to avoid. He took this navigational ability for granted, much like Parisians subconsciously avoiding the mounds of dog faeces on the pavements, leaving the tourists to get it caked onto their Nikes. When they turned the corner, Watkins was starring up at the tarp on the roof, which was flapping more loosely than ever, one decent storm away from detachment.

“You squat here?” Watkins asked.

“Ha, no, simply getting some work done to increase the property value. They’re talking about an upswing in the market, so it’s good to keep on the leading edge.”

“Yeah, that’s what London needs, another housing bubble. I guess we’ve got to keep the foreign speculators happy. That tarp’s not looking great. Hey kitty cat.”

He bent down as Linus came over and began affectionately rubbing himself against the scouse’s trouser leg. The traitor flopped down and rolled over to expose his fluffy
stomach and missing testicles, no doubt intending to shame Nate, who had sanctioned the genital mutilation and never been forgiven.

“What’s your name, mate?”

“He goes by Linus, from the Latin felinus domesticus,” Nate said.

“Your daddy’s got a big brain, doesn’t he?” Watkins said, roughing the cat’s chin.

Nate had committed ten months of alternative Fridays to learning Latin before conceding French was a more useful language, seeing as the odds of him attending medical school were slim to none and he wasn’t about to dine with Marcus Aurelius. He noticed Allie staring at the Berlin Wall, and realised he’d forgotten to scrub the word ‘wanker’ off.

“Someone doesn’t seem to like you,” she said.

“I wrote that. It’s directed at my neighbour, the Spanner in the Manor, in the big house. It’s a long story, but he’s a toss-bag.”

“Can he see your writing from his window?”

“No, but the intention is the same, an assault on his karma,” Nate said.

Watkins snorted. “Yeah, it’s true what they say: revenge is a dish best served cold, in a form the recipient can’t see and will never find out about. You should break one of your windows and shit on the rug to really get him.”

Being a gracious host, Nate joined in with their gentle laughter, while imagining running Watkins through with a screwdriver, and then offered them welcome into his humble abode. Allie smiled almost apologetically. Nate wondered if perhaps Watkins was pursuing her, or was a friend from the home county, tagging along in the belief the evening was a purely social occasion.

“So where’s Elaine?” Allie asked.

Nate almost said ‘who?’ but caught himself, the situation strangely crystallising. Dominos of logic fell into place, the roaches of regret scampering across his wishful
thoughts. His mind traced the timing of events with rapidity, every word and invitation and reconsideration lining up, confirming that Allie had only accepted his invitation after his relationship with Elaine had become known to the office. She had said yes when it had become clear that he was spoken for, when he was harmless. Nate knew this because Watkins had ribbed him about ejaculating on Elaine’s face earlier on that same day. All of this suggested Allie viewed the night as a group endeavour, some sort of double-date, which was currently missing one pivotal party.

“She has food poisoning,” Nate said. “Or her son does. Actually, they both have it a bit. They ate the same dish.”

“Oh no, that’s awful,” Allie said. “I once got food poisoning so badly from a country ham I couldn’t remember my name. I was cleaned out and recall being incredibly thirsty and dying for an energy drink.”

“Your body wanted the electrolytes,” Watkins said.

“Don’t pretend you were concerned,” Allie said, poking him in the ribs and turning to Nate. “This one went to the pub.”

“You told me to go,” Watkins said. “I didn’t know she was that bad. Course, we had to hazmat the toilet later and ended up selling the flat.”

They laughed uproariously at this tender touchstone from their relationship, which the anecdote suggested had been going on for a long time – at least long enough to buy, share and sell a dwelling.

“Have you been together long?” Nate asked.

“What did she eat?” Watkins said. He had turned and was now perusing Nate’s shelves of books, starting in the history section with its thick spines and pages promising relentless, violent death.

“Country ham, I believe,” Nate said.
“No, Elaine. What gave her the food poisoning?”

“Oh, duck,” Nate said quickly. “Peking Duck, though they call it Chinese Duck now for political reasons. It has something to do with China’s economic rise, and probably colonialism, come to think of it. Although she may have taken ill from the chop suey, what with the prevalence of e-coli in bean shoots. Came from a dreadful little place on the Holloway Road.”

“Not Changs with no apostrophe?” Watkins said.

Nate nodded, feeling his back prickle. He was aware he was sweating, despite the flat being airy and cool. He wondered if he could feign late-onset diarrhoea and ask them to leave before his life imploded in a white dwarf of lies.

“We grab a take-away every few months, when we need a fix of sweet and sour stray cat,” Watkins said. “Would never dine in – full of lonely types and sad cases.”

“I wouldn’t mention any of this to Elaine,” Nate said. “She’s very fond of the establishment and would be appalled if she knew I’d told you about her illness. Maybe we can keep it between us.”

Watkins pulled down Antony Beevor’s *Stalingrad* and began thumbing through the pages, no doubt looking for the pictures. Nate noted that Allie’s initial exuberance had shifted to mild reserve, the conversation instead being taken up by her ... boyfriend? Common-law husband? Nate’s mind refused to process these possibilities. For one thing, they completely went against his numerous Allie fantasies, and secondly, he had never once considered that Watkins would have a life outside of the warehouse with its cold coppery reek of dead animals. He supposed on some level, he had always known Watkins went somewhere after work, perhaps to a dismal flat with Sky Sports and a refrigerator filled with Belgian lager. But this vague notion had never been considered in any concrete detail; it had simply existed to be ignored, like the ingredients list on a package of Smash or the instruction booklet for a
microwave oven. You never had cause to engage in any of these peripheral information sources, because they were in excess to the already overwhelming demands of everyday life.

“You a reader by chance?” Watkins said.

“It’s my one vice,” Nate replied. “That and meat industry magazines.”

Allie laughed. He wanted to mention his obsession with the Okinawan diet, but they’d been to that well twice and going back would seem desperate and pathetic, which showed he had at least learned something of flirtatiousness in his short and generally unsuccessful romantic life. How he had ever landed Helen was a mystery.

“Are you interested in history?” Nate asked.

“Not really.”

No, of course not, Nate thought; no one liked history anymore, not unless it gets adapted into a television program and all the facts are wrong. Half the world now believed the Americans had broken Enigma, for god’s sake. Of course, on many a night, after an exhausting day of work, he would lie flat and stare at a screen, though he could never live without the immersion his books offered. The novels allowed him to understand the experiences of others on a very personal level and helped him to survive, endowed as he was by such a poor grasp of other humans, as the current evening was demonstrating.

“Treasure Island,” Watkins said. “That’s my favourite book, has been since I was a kid. My grandmother used to read it to us. And The Invisible Man – you like that one? And The Time Machine is great. I’m into all of those early science fiction books, like Frankenstein, and all of Stephen King’s. With his imagination, future generations are going to look back and say he was a genius, just like we do with H.G. Wells and that lot, because it’s only looking back that people get over the ego-trip about slagging writers off for not being Virginia bleeding Woolf. I mean, look at The Shining – what a ripper. Most people hate spending Christmas with their families and King puts this poor kid in a haunted hotel for an
entire winter with his mum and mental dad. That is pure claustrophobic genius. You sure that
tarp is OK?”

Again, while Nate had assumed the warehouse manager probably could read – at least
enough to get his paperwork done – he hadn’t considered him oriented to novels. And while
it would be easy to dismiss his leanings toward genre fiction, Nate had long argued that
Stephen King’s merits were overlooked and that his imagination contributed to cultural life in
ways few appreciated. He felt decidedly uncomfortable being in agreement with Watkins.

“They were supposed to have the job done by now,” Nate said, seeing the edge of the
tarp flapping through the window. Feeling he had little left to lose, he recounted the Jimmy
saga while pouring his expensive Champagne and bringing an assortment of nibbles to the
coffee table. Admittedly, the candles looked inappropriate in mixed company, so he swept
them away as casually as possible, tucking them into a drawer.

As he spoke, he wondered why Allie was so uncharacteristically quiet, now virtually
silent and staring self-consciously into her glass. Rather uncomfortably, as he rambled, Nate
had the unsettling sensation of being on a romantic first date with Watkins, who was
plundering the smoked salmon with abandon and sucking down Moet like fizzy water.
Usually with guests he opted for more economical salami, but had refrained, thinking if the
night were to end in mad pashing, he didn’t want to have peppery cured sausage on his
breath. He laughed to himself and shook his head, which his guests interpreted quite correctly
as bitter misery at his situation.

“You have to secure that tarp,” Watkins said when Nate finished. “After we have a
nosh, let’s haul out your ladder and fasten it down, otherwise it’ll pull away and you’ll be
living underwater at the first rain. Terrible. You want me to get some lads from the
warehouse to chat with your friend Jimmy?”
“No, no need,” Nate said, feeling flushed by the prospect of violence. “I’m sorting it with Consumer Rights.”

“Make sure you do. Speaking of nosh, what’s that gorgeous smell coming from your oven?”

“Braised beef cheek,” Nate said.

“You’re a man after my own heart, Ned. I wagered Al you’d go continental and serve us truffled yak wank au Paris. Speaking of which, we went to this restaurant a few weeks back calling itself as cosmopolitan. You’ve never heard better verbal diarrhoea. It was all Normandy butter, Moroccan bread, Peruvian sheep testies...”

Allie cleared her throat. “Elaine recommended the restaurant.”

“Cripes, between that and Changs, Lainie’s not allowed to make any more restaurant suggestions. Mind you, the place she told us about with the bacon in the lasagne was fantastic. Shame she couldn’t be here. Do you mind if I get a top-up on the vino?”

As Watkins went to the kitchen bench, he looked toward the table, which Nate realised was set for two. Nate caught Allie’s eye, her lips tight, and understood why she had gone quiet. Even if she knew, Nate would never admit now or in the future that he had planned for an evening of romance. Like Clinton with Lewinski or the astonishing number of actors who had been caught paying transvestites for sex in parked cars, he would deny the truth no matter how much evidence piled up against him.

“Yes, Elaine was supposed to help with the preparations,” Nate said, getting up. “I’m afraid I’m rather behind. Not only did I leave chalk obscenities on the garden wall, but I haven’t even finished laying the table.”

He hustled to the chesterfield for another of the good plates and the silverware he kept for special occasions. He’d only polished two sets, so he’d have to eat with tarnished utensils, hoping his guests wouldn’t notice and that the ingestion of oxygenated silver wouldn’t cause
a tumour in his intestines. At the moment, of course, death didn’t strike him as a bad option. He grabbed a cloth napkin from the top drawer and triangulated the place-settings as his guests lingered with their drinks listening to The Definitive Christopher Cross.

“Do you need a hand?” Allie said.

“No, I just need to retrieve another chair from my... box room.”

Being rational people, his trailing off must have seemed odd, the minor task of getting a chair no reasonable cause for concern for most humans. Watkins and Allie looked at one another in confusion as Nate hesitated. Finally, the warehouse manager put down his wine and sprang up.

“Let me – down the hall?”

He disappeared before Nate could say anything, reappearing a few seconds later looking considerably more perplexed. Nate could only imagine the gossip that would be swirling around A&M on Monday morning, his eccentric life exposed and dissected, mocked and ridiculed. Yes, he lived in a tiny granny flat, which could be found down a broken pathway with no light, cohabitating with a cat who hated him and several thousand books, all of which were threatened with water damage and destruction by the prospect of the plastic tarp which was his roof blowing off. His neighbour had walled him off for spying, which he had responded to by writing obscenities only he could see, and his spare room could only be accessed by a small door set in a window pane outside the house. Beyond that, he hadn’t modified the furnishings or decor since the late 1980s, giving the place the feel of a museum exhibition, which amazingly was the least of his issues. Even more incredibly, he seemed to believe he could use this set-up to seduce the warehouse manager’s common-law wife.

Watkins stood scratching his ear, his nose wrinkling. “I didn’t see a chair in your bedroom, and um, your second room seems to be... bricked up?”
Nate supposed a bricked-up room suggested illegal confinement, perhaps of a loved one, or undocumented immigrants. He couldn’t very well pop out the door and announce he was nipping to his granny flat, though that idea had sounded good for situations in which those he might tell would never, ever come to his home.

“Bit of a practical joke that,” Nate said.

No doubt out of morbid curiosity, Allie went to have a look, coming back with her mouth hanging open. Whereas Watkins appeared disturbed, Allie was amused.

“I have to hear this story,” she said. “You really do lead an interesting life.”

Reluctantly, Nate recounted this last recent event, leading them around the flat to the small door where his box room window used to be located. Watkins’ uncertainty dissipated and he became surprisingly angry, his hands gripped into fists.

“Seriously, give me this dickhead’s address and I’ll go around tomorrow and have a calm discussion about how he’s going to fix this ASAP or have an Easter egg hunt for his teeth.”

“As I said, I’m going through conventional channels,” Nate said. “It’s all in-hand, the wheels are in motion. I have a Skype call with Consumer Rights on Monday morning.”

Watkins shook his head, looking again at the door and opening it to look inside. He leaned in and hooked a chair with his hand, dragging it out. Nate offered to carry it, but the scouse was already on his way. Allie put her hand out to Nate as he made to go. She leaned close and kissed him gently on the cheek, putting an arm around his waist with a gentleness that made him flinch. He could smell her sweet woody scent and feel her warmth and wanted nothing more than to drag her towards him and kiss her deeply, escaping his life by moving into hers forever. Surely the universe owed him a reprieve, one more chance at beauty and wonderment. She seemed to sense his desire, but didn’t pull away, kissing him again gently before turning and moving off.
“An interesting life,” she said.

“Just think of what I haven’t told you,” Nate said.

“Like, you’re in deep cover for MI5?”

“How did you know? You’d be surprised how far terrorism networks have penetrated into abattoirs and meat distributors in this country. And it’s not just Halal.”

She giggled as they went back inside.

Nate was happy with how the beef cheek turned out, falling to pieces with a light probe of the fork, his potatoes soaking up the rich gravy and the parsnips adding a nice bitterness. The wine and warm food prompted Watkins to take off his heavy jumper, underneath which was a t-shirt featuring the smiling mug of David Cameron biting into a meat pie and the words *We’re all eating this together*.

They talked about the Pasty Tax and its groundswell of grassroots’ opposition. Nate had missed the big rally, which had gone ahead despite the Government backing down from the tax, as he had wanted to appear dedicated to his job. Also, he had heard the catering had fallen through.

“I don’t see how people can get so passionate about insignificant issues when we’ve got huge social problems, like not enough jobs outside of the South-East,” Allie said.

“You can’t move the toffs on the big issues,” Watkins said. “People try to control what they can.”

“It’s globalisation and technology,” Nate said. “Mr Richards and I have been discussing it a bit. You see, international competition and technology are driving a push for maximum efficiency across borders, so every government is cutting costs and corporate taxes to attract companies that can move wherever they get the best deal.”

“Screwing the workers,” Watkins said.
“Well, yes, but from what I’m told, it’s inevitable.”

“People in Britain need jobs, Ned. And if the cream wasn’t always being licked off the pot by the one per cent, you could keep blokes in Anfield pulling in a wage to support their families. There’s enough money, just not enough re-distribution.”

“I have to agree with Jim,” Allie said. “Globalisation is a good idea, but it’s been done badly. They can’t even collect taxes from these huge corporations.”

“Most of who are registered in the Caymans.”

Nate wondered for a second who ‘Jim’ was before remembering Watkins had a first name. While the conversation was civil, he had the feeling he was being rhetorically cornered by his guests, which was ironic given he agreed with their points of view. He had only wanted to share Mr Richards’ perspective, not become aligned with his ideology. Still, Nate feel obliged to carry on, having spent several years of his youth in the debating society.

“I see your point, and I’m sure someone is working on it,” Nate said. “I agree Britain needs new jobs, but I don’t know where we’re going to get them. The government won’t tell you this, but new jobs for the underclass aren’t on their way. We’re not getting shipbuilding back – the Asians make everything – and no one is going down a mine on this damp little island again.”

Watkins bristled at the word ‘underclass’ and Nate felt vaguely dirty, yet strangely empowered. So this was the buzz the conservatives got, drawing firm lines between black and white. It felt so easy to simply say jobs were gone, as if the problem could then be shelved and not considered with any degree of complexity. Not only did an ideological point-of-view make him feel above the nasty little problem, it made life so much simpler and orderly.

“You might be right,” Allie said.
Nate smiled, seeing his serve blow past Watkins, evening the match at fifteen-all. He imagined this discussion as a duel for Allie’s mind, and thus her heart, seeing as she was a cerebral person who could only love a man whose intellect she admired.

Allie continued. “I don’t think jobs are coming back, not in those industries, and I’m not sure how we create new ones. Actually, I have this idea that a lot of people should be encouraged not to work, except for doing simple things like sweeping the streets or visiting the elderly. There are loads of young mothers who need a hand.”

“I believe that’s Cameron’s Big Society,” Nate said.

“Where people volunteer until they starve to death,” Watkins said. “What are you thinking, Allie?”

They were both looking at her in expectation. She swirled her potato around, creating a starch-gravy version of Van Gogh’s Starry Night.

“They’d be paid benefits,” she said. “But as a society, we’d acknowledge what Nate said, that we don’t have enough jobs, so benefits would be more like a proper wage. Then there wouldn’t be any stigma about being unemployed – you know, the constant benefit-scrounger hysteria and bashing of the poor. If there aren’t enough jobs, and the government isn’t going to try to create any, they still have to have a plan to allow people to live decently.”

“So, Big Society with money to survive,” Nate said.

“Basically, I suppose.”

Watkins shook his head and stabbed a parsnip. “It’s a nice idea, but it wouldn’t work. Some people might help granny with her housework, but you and I know loads of people who would pocket her pearls and shit in her crockpot. People need to earn a living.”

“We have to change the way we think,” Allie said.
“Idle hands are the devil’s darning needles,” Watkins replied. “Or whatever that fucking stupid saying is... The only way people get self-esteem is through work. And no matter what you do, you’ll always have wasters poaching the system.”

Nate sat back and watched this animated exchange with interest, happy that his humble home was the site of big ideas and intellectual exchange, even if it were between a temporary administrative clerk and a warehouse manager and not leading politicians and philosophers. Surprisingly, he saw the merit in both their positions. Being a person who appreciated a self-contained life with small pleasures, he liked Allie’s idea of minimal public work for a small pension, so long as that covered room, board, music and books. Yet taking Watkins’ position, he couldn’t see the populace getting on board, allowing the rich and well-educated to live a privileged life while they subsisted. Some would be alright, but others would resent the inequality and others would turn to crime. Of course, the modern world was rife with inequality, so perhaps it wouldn’t make a difference.

“Personally, I’m keen to see what the robots do,” Nate said.

Allie and Watkins paused to look at Nate, who hadn’t expected the comment to draw quite so much surprise. He supposed this was due to the fact he had been considering the robots for the past few days, imagining possible future scenarios, and they had probably been consumed with other thoughts. Sometimes he forgot other people didn’t inhabit his mind or closely share his interests.

“I’ve been reading about something called the singularity,” he said. “This American chap, Ray Kurzweil, believes technology will be so advanced by 2025 that computers will start thinking on their own. Basically, they’ll take control and we’ll all become their pets. He also talks about uploading our minds into cyberspace, though I haven’t had time to really explore those ideas.”

“You want to become a computer’s pet?” Watkins said.
“They’re bound to be more sensible than human beings,” Allie said.

“I’d be happy to give up control and let a cyber mind make the big decisions,” Nate said. “They’d pull humanity into line or exterminate us in the first twenty-four hours. Either way, it would cut through the confusion.”

Watkins didn’t appear to have a response to this. He pushed back his plate and sat back, drinking his wine. Having solved the world’s problems, they retired to the living room for dessert. At eleven, Nate’s guests thanked him for the evening and departed, holding hands as they disappeared up the street and around the corner.

Chapter 27

[Nate travels to Peckham and finds Mrs Donaldson’s nephew, Robbie, busking on the street. They go to the pub and Robbie assures Nate that he is doing alright, despite his benefits being under threat. Robbie believes that democracy in Britain is dead, but that most people are still kind.]

Chapter 28

By the time Nate reached home, he felt far too tired to visit Mrs Donaldson, so rang to offer a brief reassurance that Robbie was fine, promising a more comprehensive catch-up on Monday night. Her grandson had not been the only one neglecting the good woman. Monday was also D-Day for telling Elaine that their relationship was over, though he was wavering on his vow to himself. On the one hand, Allie was clearly in a relationship; on the other, there was no ring on her finger, she had lingered on the kiss outside his flat, and there was an undeniable connection between them, what the Bangles might have called an ‘eternal flame’.
Perhaps Allie agreeing to come round for supper had been a test, an initial contact to measure Nate’s desire for more, like diplomatic contact through a third party. After all, she and Watkins had shown friction in their debate about benefit seekers. Yes, they had held hands going down the road, but that could have been window-dressing, to keep the scouse from suspecting her divided feelings.

Nate rose early on Monday in preparation for his Skype meeting with Consumer Rights to talk about the Jimmy situation. He had not heard from the tradesman since seeing him on ‘Berlin Wall day’ (as he had taken to referring to that unfortunate betrayal), and even more disturbingly, over the weekend Jimmy’s phone had begun to ring out, no longer going to message bank. Nate had downloaded Skype over the weekend and hoped the technology would work, as attempting to speak with a Consumer Rights representative on the telephone involved extended stretches listening to on-hold muzak, which he suspected was intended to drive advice-seekers to madness and hang up. Of course, Austerity cut-backs had hit virtually every department, and those committed to actually helping people with legitimate problems were no doubt the most highly targeted. After all, consumer rights fell into the category of excessive regulations on business that Mr Richards and his ilk were desperate to remove.

Thankfully, Nate’s video call connected and he found himself face-to-face with a grainy image of Service Representative John, who mumbled a cursory hello, glanced at his papers and requested a synopsis of the issue. His sudden appearance was jarring and Nate had expected a bit of polite chit-chat, so was flustered as he explained Jimmy’s poor work, absconding with material and construction of the Berlin wall. As he rambled, he cursed himself for not making proper notes, as John was big on dates and times. Nate was also distracted by his pixelated self in a small box in the corner of the computer screen, mirroring his every movement. He looked washed out and wished he had combed his hair and put on a proper shirt instead of lingering in a t-shirt.
Feeling John wasn’t fully on his side, perhaps because he hadn’t properly articulated the tenuous state of his lodgings, Nate offered to position his video camera so the service representative could see the tarp.

“No need,” John said, typing on a second computer. “I can’t find this sole trader on the business register. What is his VAT?”

“Um, I haven’t got it, I’m afraid.”

For the first time since the video call began, John looked directly at Nate, his eyes narrowing. “It should be on your invoice. I’ll need that number as well, a copy of the initial quote and his business address.”

“Um, I’ve got a mobile number.”

“The one that has been disconnected?”

“Might be disconnected. Perhaps he’s on a pay-as-you-go plan and hasn’t recharged.”

“Your service provider did charge you VAT, correct?” John said.

“I assume so. I paid in cash, so I don’t really have much of a paper trail. You see, there was a discount—”

“So you have no way of verifying that this person runs a legitimate business? Basically, you gave a man who offered to clean your gutters several thousand pounds in cash to rip up your roof, and you don’t have a receipt or know where to locate him. Is that correct?”

“He came highly recommended.”

Nate didn’t bother to mention Jimmy had been recommended by a delivery person on a zero-hours contract who used to work at a discount butcher he frequented, which went bankrupt and closed. Even he could see this wouldn’t boost his case.
John closed his folder. “I’m afraid we can’t help you, Mr Fitzpatrick. We only assist with legitimate business transactions, not the underground economy. Frankly, you should be glad you’ve only lost a bit of money, as we could pursue you for abetting tax evasion.”

Nate thanked John politely, his heart pounding and his bladder pressing, and fumbled around until he figured out how to hang up the virtual call. The screen sucked itself into oblivion, removing Service Representative John from Nate’s home. He went outside and looked at the tarp, now securely fastened, thanks to Watkins’ manual dexterity, but still a fucking tarp, then returned inside and pounded his fists on the table several times, causing the computer to jump and a cup to skitter onto the floor. Linus bolted out of the room and down the hall. Nate waited for the sound of a cat hitting a brick wall – as the box room was Linus’s usual cowering space – but none came. Nate gripped a chair with clenched knuckles, contemplating throwing it across the room, but refrained, knowing he could ill afford to buy a new chair and that it might ricochet and strike Linus coming back into the room. Knowing his luck, he would break the cat’s tail, have to pay an exorbitant veterinarian’s fee and get rung up by the RSPCA, even imprisoned, which at this point might be a relief, as at least he would have a roof over his bleeding head for winter.

For the first time in his life, Nate considered selling the flat. He could move to something small but comparable in the countryside, or somewhere on the coast, like Ramsgate, close enough for day trips to London but less expensive than a university town. He could get a small cottage on the outskirts and take up rambling, immersing himself in leaves and brambles instead of the bustle and constant change of urban life. He would have to start again socially, of course, which was not his strength, and he would be leaving Mrs Donaldson with less support, though she had the church crowd. Yes, they were all as ancient as her, but they were around – for a while, at least. He scanned the flat and thought of his neighbourhood, the familiar territory he had known all his life (aside from those dreadful
years in Milton Keynes) and wondered if he would be the same person transported to the coast. While the promise of escape was enticing, somehow moving felt more like an amputation than a great adventure. Also, under the stipulations of ownership, the Greek would have first right to purchase his abode, which meant finally getting rid of Nate. Giving even this small victory to the Spanner in the Manor increased Nate’s resolve to stay.

At A&M, Nate kept his head down, though it was more difficult than usual since he had no work to do. Like most jobs, his tasks ebbed and flowed, making extended periods of quiet part of the routine. In the early days, dear Mr Greenway had mentioned finding him additional duties, but this had never come to fruition and Nate had instead taken to reading great swathes of the Huffington Post and paying his bills on-line. Mr Greenway hadn’t cared, content that his staff were docile and got their tasks completed on time with minimal fuss. These seemed like long-lost idyllic times.

Nate was scheduled to make one of his appearances in the warehouse to assess how the new delivery project was getting along, but had no desire to see Watkins, feeling emotionally unprepared to interact with the man he was desperately hoping to cuckold. Mid-morning, Elaine emailed to inquire about lunch, which Nate declined, saying he had tight deadlines and Mr Richards was watching him like a hawk. He hoped she wouldn’t come by his desk, seeing as the director’s door was closed and Nate was currently clipping and filing his fingernails.

At noon, Shirley dropped an internal mail envelope onto his desk.

“How lovely,” Nate said. “I always feel like I’m receiving a gift when I get one of these, which is ironic given whatever is inside typically means more work. How’s your mother, by the way?”

“She says the new doctor is stealing her blood.”
“Tell her he probably is, and that he’s selling it in the underground economy to heroin users looking for full blood transfusions, like Keith Richards used to have done in Switzerland. That was the rumour, anyway. If you don’t keep the elderly straight, they’ll just badger you with strange ideas.”

Shirley waited to see what Nate had received, no doubt recognising the handwriting on the envelope as Elaine’s and eager for gossip fodder. Despite what Mr Richards said about his hectic schedule, she wasn’t inundated with work either. Clearly her time would be much better spent with her family. Seeing as she refused to budge, Nate relented and pulled out a book entitled *The Answer* and a note which read ‘This book changed my view of life – which is much sweeter and richer with you in it’. From the dust jacket, Nate saw it was a self-help title, its pages apparently holding rarefied knowledge previously guarded by ‘an elite few’ throughout history, including prominent physicists, authors and philosophers. Now (for reasons not given) the answers to all of life’s problems were available to everyone for less than a tenner.

“I’ve read that one,” Shirley said. “It unlocks your hidden potential.”

She said this with a straight-face and didn’t appreciate Nate’s involuntary snort of amusement. He apologised, having regarded the remark as an ironic piss-take, but she frowned and waddled back to her workstation to continue her rousing game of Solitaire. Given her mood, Nate decided now, again, wasn’t the time to mention Mr Richards’ desire for her to shift to full-time, thinking he might push it back until Wednesday, vaguely knowing he would adopt a Napoleonic approach and leave it indefinitely, hoping the director would forgot the request altogether.

Nate thumbed through *The Answer*, the flip of each page echoing another nail into the coffin of his relationship with Elaine. Not only was he still annoyed by her remarks that he was a ‘simple man’ and her vegetable-themed jewellery, but she had cast aside Thoreau for
pop psychology mixed liberally with mysticism. Despite the hours they had spent together, Nate realised this idiotic book demonstrated how little she knew about him – aside from his erogenous zones, which she had an extremely good handle on. How could he be the simple one when she believed there was a discoverable answer to the questions of happiness, prosperity and health? If life were that easy, no one would need anti-depressants or ever vote Conservative.

This thought prompted another insight, which surprised him. Nate realised he wasn’t actually unhappy, even with all the recent complications in his life. Yes, he was financially strapped and anxious about his employment, had a home falling to pieces and a large fence constricting his view, his cat loathed him and he was the victim of unrequited love, but life was more exciting than it had been for years. His health was fine, he’d broken his celibacy streak, he was in love (even if she might not be), had a job and had met a number of interesting people lately. Depending on what perspective he adopted, his life was either ruinous or terribly buoyant. He tossed The Answer into his bottom drawer, next to the flavoured tunas and some old union collateral, and slammed it shut.

This strange feeling of goodwill stayed with him for the rest of the day, which made Nate suspect he was losing his marbles, though he conceded he might also be the only sane person left in Britain. Either way, he was happy to have plans after the exhaustion of filling eight hours of empty office time. Pity the supper wouldn’t be remarkable. While Mrs Donaldson’s sweets had remained of a high standard, her cooking had entered that decline phase typical of the elderly. This wasn’t surprising since baking was a science requiring exact measurements, while sauces and stews relied on taste. Given the well-known decline in elderly tastebud sensitivity, this resulted in most of Mrs Donaldson’s dishes tasting like a salt-lick, which Nate rarely complained about, seeing as a free meal was a free meal.
“You look like the wreck of the Hesperus,” she said, holding open her door. The rain was just beginning, a hard and cold downpour as grey as wool trousers, and Nate was eager to get inside.

“Some day you’ll need to update your cultural references,” he said.

“Mary Bauman died today.”

Nate fastened the Velcro clasp on his umbrella, the drips wetting the mat. “Oh how terrible. When’s the service?”

“I don’t know yet. It was pancreatic cancer, and she lingered – a painful way to go. She was a terrible woman, but I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

While Mrs Bauman hadn’t been the warmest soul, Nate had mixed feelings about her, as she had given him and his wife a very nice set of towels for their wedding and had been the first to suggest he buy a wok. It had been the 1980s and he’d got excellent use out of the pan. He hadn’t seen her in several years, though she had been a mainstay in gossip, what with her children’s struggles and her tendency to tipple. Nate reflected this was another reason to feel good about his life: he wasn’t Mary Bauman. He made a mental note to get his pancreas checked as part of his full physical, if that were possible, not wishing for an extended, agonising departure from this mortal coil.

Mrs Donaldson gave him a rundown on the inheritance fight already taking place between Mrs Bauman’s three children, while serving up her cheese straws, still savoury and delicious. Nate couldn’t help but think she was looking paler than usual – her cheekbones more prominent, as if she had lost some fat from her face. He would have to steal a glance into her refrigerator and cupboards later to make sure she was stocked up and hadn’t fallen into the solitary person’s habit of missing proper meals. From experience, he knew living alone could easily lead to a tin of cold beans for supper, or a piece of toast eaten while standing at the kitchen bench.
“So Robbie’s doing well?” she said.

“Thereabouts,” Nate said. “He has a roof over his head, no visible health problems and is patching together a living. I’m not one to judge.”

“Not working, though?”

“He’s a popular street performer – bills himself as the Prince of Peckham. Between that and his benefits, he seems to be doing alright.”

“So not working then…”

“He’s an entrepreneur. He had a large bag of coins.”

He felt obliged to mention that the DWP were looking into his financial situation, but painted the investigation as routine and unlikely to lead to eviction or benefit suspension. Mrs Donaldson grunted and led the way into her living room, lowering herself gingerly into a recliner whose arms were covered in lacy doilies. As always, BBC 3 was on. As they drank their tea, Nate painted Robbie’s life in positive terms, mentioning the bit about him rubbing up against society and enjoying the weather. From the way she hummed and hawed, Nate could see Mrs Donaldson had already made up her mind about her grandson.

“He can’t go on begging forever. He’ll end up in a pauper’s grave,” she said.

“Technically he is a performer. He has a guitar, several strings and… sings.”

She looked even more shrunken in her chair, the old springs barely holding her above floor level. He would need to investigate an upgrade for her soon; otherwise she’d sit down one afternoon and sink so low she’d never get back up. He really had been remiss in his duty to keep an eye on her, cursing himself for being so absorbed in his own life. Not wanting to add any unnecessary stress to her life, he changed the subject from Robbie.

“Rebekah Brooks seems determined to fight this phone hacking charge,” he said, leafing through the paper.

“You would too if you had Murdoch’s lawyers.”
“Yes, I suppose people like her don’t get convicted, or if they do, they pocket a tidy sum for their silence, serve a year in prison and then get welcomed back. As Alasdair Grey might say, the woman is an instrument of an instrument.”

“I’m not interested in any of that muck.”

“How are you feeling?” Nate asked tentatively, knowing how proud Mrs Donaldson was about her longevity and good health, and how touchy she could be when questioned.

“Nothing getting younger wouldn’t cure.”

“Yes, well, I suspect you’ll go on forever. But are you well?”

“I’m not one to complain.”

Nate wasn’t sure whether to enquire further. While she knew he cared about her welfare, concern and advice typically flowed one way, with her taking the maternal role and dishing out instructions about cold baths and cod liver oil. She had never been open with her needs, which Nate viewed as a generational thing.

“Been cooking much?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, stop with all of that.”

She frowned and pretended to be interested in the music. He waited, glancing from her to the tepid grey of the sky framed in the window, feeling a chill despite the relative warmth of the flat. He decided not to press, hoping she would confide any issue to him in her own good time. Instead, he recounted his night with Allie and Watkins, which perked her up to no end.

“I’m not surprised you’re finally attracting young women,” she said.

“Young in a relative sense,” he laughed. “How do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve never been handsome, let’s face it. But part of that was that for years you never seemed comfortable in your body, or within yourself. I don’t mean that as a bad thing. It’s simply a fact. But in the last few years you’ve reached your proper age.”
“We’re all our proper ages, I would think.”

“No, what I’m saying is, you’ve always been a fifty-year-old man but stuck in a younger body, so you were out of sorts, all muddled up. Now your beard has enough grey to be respectable, and you’ve softened. You finally seem comfortable within yourself, which is what attracts a woman.”

“You believe everyone has an ideal age that suits them?”

“Yes, and you’ve finally reached yours. You’ll never get better than you are now, so make the most of it.”

“Funny you should say that. Just the other day I thought when I catch my reflection in the mirror, in dim light, from a distance, at just the right angle, I do look surprisingly handsome for a man of my age.”

Kidding aside, Nate saw some sense in his elderly neighbour’s philosophy and supposed he was satisfied with his appearance these days – though he could stand to lose a few kilos and wished the skin beneath his eyes didn’t sag so much. He stole a glance at Mrs Donaldson and wondered what her proper age would have been. He suspected in her mid-thirties, when she would have been at home, raising children and gossiping with other housewives. She caught his glance.

“What are you looking at?”

“I was thinking you’d have been a fox in your younger years.”

“You wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

The conversation ebbed and they listened to some godforsaken overture before moving to the kitchen for a supper of microwaved fish, boiled potatoes and tinned mushy peas. Sometimes the price to pay for being a good neighbour was horrid indigestion. Despite being rather tired of the topic, Nate gave her an update on the work situation, noting that a meeting on restructuring had been scheduled for the following week, at which point the
tension engulfing A&M would either erupt or be pacified. He opined Mr Richards’ drawn-out evaluation process felt akin to saying goodbye to a friend at the airport, or a loved one with a terminal illness – you didn’t want the time to pass, but knew you were powerless to prevent the impending departure.

“I don’t see why they need to cut jobs if the company is doing well,” Mrs Donaldson said.

“It’s globalisation. We’re all in competition with one another. I often imagine my doppelgangers in Spain, China and Bangladesh toiling away for some shipping company, wondering about their job security.”

“I blame Margaret Thatcher,” Mrs Donaldson said.

“While I always enjoy Maggie bashing, I’m not sure we can. After all, she was against the country giving up control of its finances, and she certainly wasn’t fond of the EU.”

“Still, she carved up the national industries and gave power back to the upper classes, who added to their country piles by selling it all to foreigners. You can’t expect people to live in a global world. It’s too complicated. I don’t know what’s going on with the local council, much less in China or one of those South American dictatorships.”

“I believe they’re mostly democratic now.”

“It’s like asking a bird in Skegness to comment on the weather in Sussex.”

“A great many birds migrate.”

“Don’t be a pedant. You know what I’m saying – people can only make a small bit of difference in the world where they live. People should be helping their neighbours, not sitting on the World Wide Web thinking they can make a difference to Egypt. Honestly, I’m glad I won’t be around to see what happens next.”
While the future was daunting, Mrs Donaldson had gone through World War Two, the Cold War, the turbulence of the 1970s and the destruction of the welfare state in the 1980s. Nate supposed no generation had an easy time of life. His youth had been spent with fears of the Soviet Union and debates about whether to stick trident missiles on British soil, not to mention the IRA. Now he was inundated with Islamic terrorism, global warming and rampant economic inequality. Hopefully these would simply resolve themselves, because she was right, he felt far too tired and completely incapable of making any sort of difference. He was a bird in Skegness, probably a measly seagull, being blown about by a rising coastal wind.

“You should tell this Allie girl how you feel,” Mrs Donaldson said.

“She’d appreciate my views on globalisation?”

“No, tell her you’re infatuated with her. From what you’ve told me, she might not be around your office for long, and you’re clearly smitten. Maybe things aren’t working out with the boyfriend.”

“I thought you said give Elaine more time?”

“Well, you have, but she clearly annoys you too much.”

“I’m very complex. What’s changed your mind?”

She shook her head and avoided his glance, slowly cutting a white potato. She took the salt shaker and gave it a liberal sprinkle. Then Mrs Donaldson put down her fork, laid her hands on the table and jutted out her chin. She looked up with damp eyes. Her own good time had arrived.
Chapter 29

That night, Nate composed two emails – well, three if you count the short missive to Shirley saying Mr Richards wanted her to move to full time. That had been remarkably easy and Nate wondered why he hadn’t simply written the request in an impersonal email earlier. He suspected his concern for how people might perceive him and his habit of avoidance were not nearly as beneficial as he had been telling himself for years. His other two emails were more difficult, as they involved shattering one woman’s hopes for love and trying to convince another he was a better mate than a man who could jerry-rig a tarp and lift a twenty-five kilo bag of chicken livers.

In Elaine’s case, Nate decided brutal honesty was best, writing he was in love with another, hated her dress sense (especially the pea pin) and couldn’t be with anyone who didn’t appreciate the beauty of Walden. He then scrapped that version and wrote a vague note about them moving too fast and him needing more time, being a long-time bachelor and having a personal crisis. He pressed send, feeling a moment of nausea which quickly gave way to liberation.

Allie’s email was much more difficult. He felt a confession might be better done in face-to-face conversation, but knew his courage was suspect and tongue prone to stammering and paralysis. Also, for decades, his emotional life had been lived primarily through characters in novels, films and ‘70s ballads, making them the touchstones for conceptualising and articulating his deepest self.

Dear Allie,

Forgive my approaching you in this way, but my tongue has long had a habit of betraying my best intentions. Since our first meeting, I have struggled with my feelings for you. You are a
lovely, whimsical, intelligent and engaging woman. I feel we have made a rare connection in what is a brief and absurd life, and I can think of nothing I would rather do than spend time getting to know you more deeply. I am not a rich man, nor an accomplished one. I am just a man, standing here before you, asking you to consider exploring where our feelings might lead. Should you feel otherwise, I shall gracefully leave off. However, if you are keen, how about supper this weekend?

Best,

Nate Fitzgerald

This seemed to strike the right balance, containing genuine emotion yet clear and concise enough that he might later view its rejection objectively, like a business transaction, with Allie declining his invitation to form a partnership. This might in turn save his heart from complete destruction and leave his ego intact. He was also happy he had drawn on Julia Roberts’ climactic speech in Notting Hill, yet integrated it seamlessly with his own emotional pleas so as to leave the borrowing unrecognisable to all but the most ardent lovers of romantic-comedies. Nate left the email on his screen for ninety minutes, pacing the room and trying to keep blood flowing to his extremities. He debated the merits of taking such overt action, imagining the gossip and ridicule his vulnerability would create in the office. Even if he weren’t made redundant, he might have to quit. But what was the alternative – continuing with his shapeless life, never taking a risk and accumulating regret, dying alone and having a hungry trapped cat nibbling his succulent stone-cold ears?

As he was unable to concentrate on television or a book, he listened to The Best of Eric Clapton, wondering if the protagonist in ‘I Shot the Sheriff’ actually killed the deputy or was framed. As a confessed murderer, concocting an elaborate cover story to deny the death of the deputy was pointless, as he would be convicted regardless. The man’s entreatying tone
made Nate inclined to believe him, yet the song’s Jamaican rhythms created doubt, given that country’s association with violence. This in turn prompted Nate to question his racial prejudices before deciding there was no way anyone could know what happened, as the song only presented one side of the argument. What the song needed was a rebuttal from law enforcement and witnesses, perhaps in the form of a Greek chorus. This lack of information made him aware he was taking a shot in the dark with Allie, not having any idea how she felt. The only way he would know would be to make her speak.

Nate pressed send and promptly ran to the lavatory where he vomited until his stomach was empty, despairing that the romance could be so terribly unromantic. He got into his bed and turned off the light, trying to keep his mind as blank as the darkness, floating on the unstoppable tide of time, bound to crash or land safely. He had either undertaken the bravest or stupidest action of his life.

He woke the next morning feeling oddly energetic, before sinking back into the bed, the memories bubbling up, making him like a drunkard recalling fragments of the previous night’s compromising bar-room chatter. In the soft light, the notion of sending an email professing his deep affection for Allie struck him as an impossibly foolish act of social, if not professional, suicide. And yet the deed was done.

As he approached the A&M doors, he half-expected a mob of cackling co-workers to meet him, either that or an irate Watkins with a large metal pole and bag in which to dispose of his corpse. But the entrance was quiet aside from the usual suspects sucking on their carcinogens and scowling at anyone showing any sign of disapproving of the habit.

“I’m not doing Fridays,” Shirley said as he skirted her desk. “I’ve talked with the union. They said A&M have to give me two month’s notice to change my schedule and I’m not obliged to increase my hours until my next contract.”

“You’re in the union?” Nate said.
“No, but that Asian boy offered me some free advice. Oh, and he says the union is organising a vote to take strike action if this temporary contract rumour is true. It’s typical of that lot to walk off and leave us with their work and ours to do right before the summer season.”

“Backtrack – what temporary contract rumour?”

“Anyone on a temporary contract up for renewal in the next three months has to reapply for their job, if it’s posted. Apparently management don’t have to keep all current positions, so a bunch might disappear.”

Given its recent constrictions, Nate felt his chest would soon implode completely with air never returning to his lungs. His contract was up in two months. He ducked out to the warehouse, forgetting until he was halfway across the loading dock floor about the whole Allie-Watkins love triangle business, only remembering it after being spotted by the burly warehouse manager, who frowned and gave him a terse wave. Nate thought about retreating, but knew he’d stand no chance of outrunning a loader or Watkins, who despite his bulk, moved like a rugby player.

“What did I tell you, Ned?” he barked.

“I’d been drinking. It was research for a novel I’m writing.”

Watkins hesitated, sighed deeply, but having spent enough time with Nate lately, decided not to ask. “Half of my workforce is on rolling six-month contracts, which means a large number are going to get caught in this non-renewal scheme. I told you General Pinochet would do whatever he wanted. He was just looking for a loophole, and now he’s found it.”

Nate stopped bracing for a blow to the nose and relaxed his shoulders. He looked around to see a few loaders revving around, but most were idling, with the men grousing, drinking coffee and stewing in groups of two or three. He couldn’t blame them; his motivation to do anything productive for the company had never been lower, and frankly he
would have welcomed a pot of petrol and a match. Watkins confirmed Shirley’s rumour that unless a job had been advertised before being filled, a clause in the agreement meant it didn’t technically exist. This ran counter to the company’s long-established practice of making new hires based on recommendations and not through advertising and interviews, which had been part of A&M’s ethos of encouraging a supportive community atmosphere.

“You want someone decent, hire who you know, but that’s being used against us,” Watkins said. “I’ve even heard Richards is considering taking on Workfare people – the work-for-the-dole lot. Not only would that cut my staff numbers, but I guarantee you would see people driving loaders into walls.”

Nate didn’t know much about Workfare but felt certain it hadn’t been passed as legislation, though parliament could have adopted it without debate or examination given the opaque dealings between politicians and the media. Still, even more distressing, the time was ten o’clock and Watkins apparently knew nothing about Nate’s email confession. Did this mean Allie was keeping the advance a secret? If so, was this because she was interested in Nate’s proposal? Or was she afraid of what Watkins might do? Or perhaps she was under the weather and hadn’t come in today?

“How’s Allie?” Nate asked. “Feeling alright?”

“She’s fine. Your supper didn’t poison her, if that’s what you mean. And she knew her contract wouldn’t be renewed, so none of this really affects her. Thanks for asking.”

Nate nodded his head. Being this close to Watkins’ thick torso, he wondered if he could pull the email back. Perhaps she had an early meeting or received a lot of messages and hadn’t got around to it yet. He could ask IT how to yank the missive back and make it disappear into the ether of the internet. He lingered for a few more minutes, figuring he could count this as checking in and getting to know the team, alternating between feeling cold and sweating, like he’d caught some tropical bug.
Nothing in his life was clear-cut at the moment. While he wanted to retain his income, he wasn’t keen on submitting a CV and cover letter and interviewing before a panel. He knew he’d have to feign rabid enthusiasm and formulate a ‘vision’ for his position, including ways to reduce waste and make A&M more efficient. Committees were very big on vision and long-term goals, even if they were insincere, unworkable or didn’t really mean anything. It occurred to him he would be in competition with younger, more sincere and driven people, who actually believed they could make a difference, which given society’s strange preference for youth, suggested he would lose the job. He contemplated applying for his old position in the caravan, which he had done well, implementing many of the time-saving procedures now accepted as standard. But this would mean competing with Anesh, who as his protégé was under his protection. Ethically, he couldn’t pull an Abraham and stab the young man in the heart, spoiling his idealism and turning it into Nate’s rancid cynicism. Also, the job was no longer in the caravan, and working in the din of the warehouse was sure to give him migraines. While that could lead to a disability pay-out, it didn’t quite seem worth the agony.

When he got back to his desk, Nate found an email from Piotr saying his CEO was happy with his revised editing of the annual report, which had mostly consisted of fixing spelling mistakes and syntax errors. The money would be in his account by the end of the week. Nate’s moment of joy dissipated as a tiny email icon appeared on-screen from Elaine, containing her response to his plea for time. Surely she could see they weren’t compatible, that a man who admired Henry David Thoreau’s convictions on self-reliance could never mesh with someone who believed that happiness could be won and held ad infinitum; no, happiness was a fleeting enterprise requiring daily maintenance and perpetual thanksgiving for the good people and moments. It was hard work, endless toil with no short-cuts or finality.
As he opened the email, he hoped Elaine’s response would contain disappointment and heartache mixed with gratitude for the good times they had shared. Given the nice chats and orgasms they had shared, this seemed sensible.

Hello Nate,

I should have listened to EVERYONE who warned me about you, but no, I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. But then you go and BETRAY ME. Well, I’m not a VICTIM. You’ll be glad to know I’ve sent an email to HR and MR RICHARDS about how you’ve been undermining A&M Meat Distribution. Yes, I’ve shared your FIDDLING of stock numbers, STEALING of Mr Richards’ report, accepting and eating a STOLEN JUMBO CHICKEN!!! Not to mention the A4 paper and A&M office supplies in your flat and your ENDLESS need to constantly TALK DOWN Mr Richards’ improvements to this company. I know you think you’re an INTELLECTUAL and oh so smart but you have the POOREST JUDGMENT ON THE PLANET!! Frankly, I’m glad to see the back of you FOREVER. NEVER SPEAK TO ME AGAIN, NOT EVEN IN THE OFFICE. If you see me, walk the other way. Not that you’ll be here for long.

Elaine Duncan
Administrator

PS – I know about your ‘thing’ for Allie Martin. She asked about my stomach and blathered on about Chinese food and how it was too bad I missed the dinner party. So I guess that makes you a LIAR and a CAD too, JUST LIKE EVERYONE SAID!!!

Elaine was a better writer than he would have suspected, though her extreme overuse of capitals was distracting. These thoughts, along with ‘oh fuck’, looped in Nate’s brain for a good five minutes as he sat trying to think of career ramifications and plausible excuses.
Everyone stole office supplies, so that didn’t amount to much, and he could easily deny any knowledge of the chicken theft. You could buy a jumbo chicken anywhere, and he’d only ever suspected the gift to be stolen property. The report was more problematic, but it would be hard for anyone to prove theft, especially since Richards had retrieved his file soon after it had disappeared. He could deny talking down the company, as that was hearsay and Elaine was clearly disgruntled, and everyone had a whinge now and again. The tricky business was the stock numbers, which he had always known would compromise him, since the very first week he moved from the caravan to his polyester cubicle with its ergonomically-suspect swivel chair.

Needing time to get his lies straight before meeting Mr Richards, he told Shirley he would be inspecting the warehouse for most of the day, mumbling about glitches in the new process. As he raced to the door, he nearly collided with a person coming into the building. He murmured an apology, then recognised Allie and barely suppressed a scream.

“Can we talk?” she said.

“I was drunk, and writing a novel,” he said. “I got carried away. Please ignore everything. I was in character at the time. You know, like Dustin Hoffman preparing for *Rainman*.”

“I owe you an apology.”

“I don’t think so. We’re fine, thanks.”

She put a hand on his arm. “No, I don’t feel I’ve been completely honest.”

“I’m certain you’ve been completely above-board. I’m the one with issues – unless you’re referring to telling Elaine about dinner, which I’d strongly hinted against, but really, I should have been more adamant and you weren’t to know. That relationship was never going to work out. She’s surprisingly vindictive.”
Needing to get out of the building, Nate motioned for Allie to join him outside. They skirted the smokers, now reduced to two individuals, and made for the warehouse kitchen facilities, which thankfully were empty aside from lingering smells of microwaved mystery-meat pies. They sat at a folding table whose surface had been scarred by hot plates and knifed-in graffiti and Nate told her about Elaine’s email, alternating between staring past her shoulder so as not to meet her eyes and putting his face in his hands.

“I’m not surprised. She has a reputation,” Allie said.

“She does?”

“Yeah, a lot of people hate her. You’re not the first person she’s slept with, or ratted out to management. But listen, Nate, about your email—”

Nate winced. “Must we?”

“You’re not completely mistaken.”

He hesitated, thinking that would be a first, and looked up. This made Allie look down at her hands.

“I have enjoyed our chats, and I’ve been more flirtatious than was appropriate, maybe to shore up my ego. See, Jim and I haven’t been getting along really well over the past few months, mainly because I’m confused about what I want out of life, and all the stress. I’ve been in a rut for a while now.”

Despite again being momentarily confused as to who Jim was, Nate felt a glimmer of hope in what was to now a dismal morning. The glimmer wasn’t much, certainly not a lighthouse beacon or the sun breaking through the clouds – more the luminosity of a pinhole camera, a beam barely punctuating the total darkness. He wanted to reach out and take her hand, but her tone held too many caveats.

“My life is an extended rut. It can be distracting,” he said.
“You are one of the more interesting individuals I’ve met in a long time. So many people have gone stale – they want to talk about their jobs or the price of laundry detergent, whatever. I’ve really enjoyed our chats, and I’d like to get to know you better too, but I’ve been with Jim for a long time and he’s a good person. He’s the one stable part of my life, and I think it’s too late to change.”

“Better the devil you know,” Nate said. “A bird in hand… I understand.”

Nate wondered how many clichés he could spout as the pinhole light wavered and faded back to black. His life, his job, his flat, his confidence all struck him as ridiculous. He had been deluding himself, convincing himself he was engaging in real life when all he’d been doing was what he’d always done, struggling to get by for a while and choosing to see his world through the lens of fantasy to distract himself from his miserable life. He forced his hands onto his lap, trying to keep them still, and harangued his facial muscles into a loose smile.

“You should definitely work on your relationship with Watkins. Love is difficult to find. You have to appreciate it. I wouldn’t expect less from you. I get caught up in my own mind on occasion and let my imagination take over.”

“We’re all running away from something,” Allie said.

“Are you going to tell Watkins about my email?”

She grimaced. “I don’t think that would be a great idea. Jim’s a nice guy, but he’s not Nelson Mandela.”

She got up and leaned over the table, kissing Nate gently on the cheek, her woody scent lingering as she turned and disappeared. As it dissipated, the sweet smell seemed to mix with the room’s pastry odours, creating the sensation of being in a bakery. Nate did the only sensible thing he could conceive: he got down on the floor, stretched out and propped his head against the wall, his feet under the table. He needed to think and stay out of sight,
perhaps forever, though certainly for the day. The weight of his rejection settled on him and pressed into every part of him, gravity pulling him ever downwards. He imagined the atoms in his cells being dragged into the Earth’s molten core, his body evaporating but some essence continuing on, floating away. He really knew next to nothing about physics. Eventually, he sat up and wondered where to next.

Chapter 30

Nate came up with his idea somewhere around 3pm, only moments after he had emerged from hiding in the cleaners’ cupboard adjacent to the warehouse kitchen. Perhaps it was hours spent next to strong solvents or the desire to take charge of his life and not remain beholden to stronger forces, or maybe it was fatigue and fatalism, but regardless, he decided today would be his last at A&M Meat Distribution.

He searched his decoy folder for paper and happened upon the quiz he had done on Mr Greenway’s final day, entitled ‘Transform Your Life!’, promising to reveal the things holding him back and soaking up his psychic energy. He decided to amend the list.

1. I have not felt the warm touch of a suitable woman in several years. I have been a borderline Casanova – celibacy counter restarted to zero (though now currently back to three days).

2. My phobia about public transportation has got worse. Slight improvement thanks to calm thoughts, social tolerance and catching bus numerous times due to being late/busy life.

3. Despite walking for upwards of three hours daily, I continue to ‘get lardy’ as my grandmother used to say, occasionally to strangers, but mainly those she presumably loved. Walking frequency down, though long trek to South London
accomplished and one belt-loop lost due to copious erotic physical interludes and perpetual nervous stomach.

4. I fear standards at my local Chinese have dropped. (Confirmed)

5. I am lonely. Everyone is lonely, but I have many good and loyal people around me.

To prove the point, he got on his mobile phone and pulled in a number of favours, including ringing Watkins with the biggest request of all. Surprisingly, the warehouse manager agreed to help, though only after numerous reassurances that no blame would be pinned on him. Nate suspected part of the reason Watkins was on-side was he knew Elaine’s email to HR implicated him too, so having Nate commit professional suicide could curtail further investigation into the report theft and stock discrepancies. Following this call and several others, Nate sprinted out of the warehouse kitchen and through the gates without a glance backwards. Around 8pm, Piotr and Robbie arrived at his flat for a briefing and suitable intake of Dutch courage.

They talked about the plan, about ethics and the constant pressure of globalisation, which Nate now blamed for all of his work problems. Piotr disagreed with his negative assessment, arguing that unlike in most of human history, modern governments were negotiating trade deals instead of going to war over resources. Given colonialism and two world wars, he suggested inequality was the best the world could expect.

“Seventy million people died in the Second World War, including ten million Poles,” Piotr said. “If you do this math closely, that is one million dying every month for five years. Compared with this, I think life in Britain is pretty good, even if the chavs can’t go to Ibiza for holidays every year.”
“Yes, but inequality started the Second World War,” Nate said. “Without the Great Depression, there wouldn’t have been a Hitler. The German people voted for him out of desperation. It could happen again.”

“My life lets me know socialism isn’t the answer.”

“But perhaps in another form. Try and fail, try again, fail, but better. And it doesn’t have to be absolute. Surely we can create something that isn’t communism or capitalism – a middle ground.”

“Show me your blueprint and I will let you know.”

At midnight, Nate’s mobile rang and they were off, ducking into the A&M warehouse to find Watkins and thirty trucks fully loaded and ready for the early morning hours. The rest of the staff had clocked off and gone home, including an exhausted Anesh, who while intrigued by Nate’s scheme, declined to participate. Apparently some people still had principles. They followed Watkins to the bunker’s main computer and Piotr typed in a series of mysterious IT-professional codes, gaining access to the CCT video files.

“So you can erase any trace of being here?” Watkins said.

“Given your terrible network security I could have done it from my home on an Apple computer from the 1980s. Do you want me to corrupt the data or duplicate yesterday’s video of the same time period when the warehouse was empty?”

“Compromised data might look suspicious,” Nate said. “Make it look empty – as long as no one can detect what you’ve done.”

Piotr shrugged and started typing. “Who cares if they do? They won’t be able to retrieve the original data. It’s amazing how vulnerable so many systems are, yet no one does anything about it.”

Robbie was bobbing up and down like a footballer about to hit the pitch, clearly relishing the opportunity to take a shot at international capitalism, albeit with a small and
rather insignificant jab. They left Piotr to his work and went back upstairs, just as an ITV van pulled into the car park. Watkins handed Nate a set of keys and disappeared through the back exit. Nate offered an on-camera interview, remembering to keep still and recite the lines he had rehearsed about A&M’s compassion and support of the community. A journalist from the *Islington Gazette* also showed up, saying he was a night-owl and intrigued by the story. When Piotr emerged from the bunker and offered thumbs-up, Nate invited the group to follow as he and Robbie did a series of late-night drop-offs to soup kitchens and church welfare organisations in the area, contact having been facilitated by Edna Donaldson.

The work was surprisingly easy, with the *Gazette* journalist getting into the spirit, hauling boxes of bacon and large gammon joints into haphazard kitchens in battered community centres and church basements. Nate was surprised at the goodwill of the outreach managers, half expecting them to resent these late-night rounds.

“You’d be surprised how often we do this sort of thing,” A large, red-faced man named Ted said. “We take whatever we can, whenever we can, which makes last minute pick-ups one of our lifelines.”

Ted explained how this meant keeping in touch with the supermarket chain managers, who would sometimes call offering stock that was approaching its use-by date or surplus supplies taking up valuable storage space. These were always rushed affairs and Ted said knowing the loading bay workers was vital, as they were the ones who put the food out for collection or could decide the task too arduous and throw it in the rubbish.

The news crew got Ted on camera. He said the A&M donation was the second largest they’d ever received, the first being the entire contents of an articulated lorry that had jack-knifed on the A1. He said the need for donations was greater than ever since the GFC and Austerity and mentioned a report called the Living Standards Survey which estimated four million kids in Britain were not properly fed, twenty per cent of adults went without so their
children could eat, and thirty million Britons could not even save five pounds per week.

While London and the South-West were better off than most, they weren’t immune – though not many in Westminster appreciated the fact, since the ranks of struggling citizens lacked a voice. Nate was appalled by the statistics and couldn’t help but think Ted was the sort of man who should have been given a chance to speak long ago.

By 3am, the lorry was back at A&M and Nate had secured the warehouse and outer fence, aware that drivers would be showing up for the morning shift within two hours. He took a final look at the empty industrial estate and walked home with Robbie, happy about what they had accomplished but uncertain about the ultimate outcomes. Yet for once, he had taken action, making a very small (if technically illegal) change within his local area instead of complaining idly or ignoring the problem. He couldn’t help Syria, but tomorrow, at least for a day, a swathe of people would eat well.

Back at the flat, neither Nate nor Robbie felt like sleeping, exhausted but wired, so they broke out the good cognac, kept for special occasions (and thus almost completely full). The drink seemed to mellow Robbie, who finally broached what they had both been thinking about but were reluctant to begin.

“Nan’s sick, you know,” he said.

“Yes, I’m aware. She told me last night,” Nate said.

“I called her this morning. I’ll move in with her when it gets bad. She’s always been good to me, even when I didn’t deserve it, which let’s face it, has been most of my life. I’m not letting her down this time, you know.”

“I know, and so does Edna. I believe that’s why she sent me on my mission to find you. We can trade off when the time comes. Cancer moves slowly in the elderly, so she may have longer than we suspect.”

“I don’t think we’re looking at years,” Robbie said, his eyes wet.
Nate knew this but refused to justify the fact by confirming it. Death could have its day, but it wouldn’t be welcomed or treated kindly. It could fight its way into his life this time, and even then be shunned. While he could accept dying was a natural part of life on a theoretical and rational level, thought the knowledge all well and good until mortality entered your sphere. Real death couldn’t be grappled with as a concept. It bore into you, hollowed you out. He thought of Helen, allowing her memory to envelop him momentarily as he and Robbie entered the kind of silence that is pointless to try to fill – the sound of time moving forwards, a sound regularly swamped by the banality of politics and celebrity, scandal and gossip, narcissism and the needs of the day. Maybe she would be proud of him after all.

Nate got up and poured them another dram. He imagined his own death, wondering who would attend his funeral (not many) or how he would be eulogised (likely not well). He thought maybe he should arrange invitations, drinks and stellar catering in advance to pull in acquaintances who might be on the fence, thus pumping up the numbers. Given the recent outpouring of love for pasties, he could hire Gregg’s to do a nice sweet and savoury lattice spread.

“How do you think you’ll be remembered?” Nate asked.

“Depends on if we get arrested for stealing a lorry full of meat, I suppose. Am I an old man or does a bus hit me tomorrow?” Robbie said.

“Let’s say you live an average life – you’re seventy.”

“That’s good. I’ll take that. My father died when he was fifty-two.”

“Mine was forty-seven. I’ve already outlived him, which is a strange feeling. I can’t compare myself to him from now on, for good or bad, which is liberating.”

Robbie sat forward, his elbows on his lap and gave Nate’s question intense thought.

“OK, I’ve got it. I think my family will cry, despite themselves, and a few friends will remember when we were young. They’ll say, ‘Robbie-boy did some good things, but then he
fucked it all up, but really, who doesn’t?’ People who know me now will say ‘he was alright and tried to be good to everyone, and even though he failed miserably as a human being, there is nobility in his soul.’”

“That’s quite beautiful,” Nate said. “I could imagine Michael Caine saying it. Mind you, you don’t know what could happen between now and seventy. You might save a baby from a burning building; then that would be the story everyone would tell at your funeral.”

“I might even get a statue,” Robbie said.

“I believe you have to bomb Europe to get one of those.”

“How many people do you think’ll be at your funeral, Mr Fitzgerald?”

“Three hundred.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’m a good person and plan to have it superbly catered.”

More honestly, Nate figured he’d be farewelled by a modest few who would wear black, raise a toast but be home before the rain set in, as it was with most people. He had a theory that if a person were lucky, perhaps ten people would truly be changed by their death – close family and dear friends. The lives of these few would be irrevocably changed, the previous version of themselves within reach but gone forever. They’d have some sense of their old self, but an intense sadness would fill the spaces where joy, love and friendship used to live. Everyone else would feel sad for a few days, maybe weeks, but the bills would come in and the dog would need walking, and work would always be pressing.

“Your tarp is holding nicely. You’ve done a good job there,” Robbie said.

“Would you like to move in?” Nate said. “I’ve got a separate room and you’d be closer to your nan, and if the DWP suspend your benefits you’d be alright. Maybe the government could even pay your housing benefit to me. I’m not exactly sure how that works, but it would seem fair in a cosmic justice sense.”
Robbie was keen on the idea, barely blinking when Nate led him outside and around the house to the box room. Apparently his current sleeping space was equivalent to a mid-sized closet, so the tight confines weren’t a massive step down. Feeling upbeat and positive, because clearly he was finally completely nuts, Nate shook on the pact, yawned and suggested they get some sleep.

At 9am, Nate’s mobile roused him and a perky voice said she’d seen his piece on ITV and wanted to do a story for the Guardian. A short time later, this was followed by a call from the Telegraph, which was doing a piece about how private businesses might unload excess stock to charities in exchange for large tax write-downs. While Nate wasn’t completely comfortable with the angle, he was happy for the coverage. By midday, his story was trending on Twitter under the hashtag #allinthistogether, with many questioning A&M’s motives and others trumpeting the donation as an example of true British character.

Shirley called at 2pm and said Mr Richards would like to see him at 4.30pm. Nate took a minute to shuffle some papers, saying he’d have to check his busy schedule. Finally, he accepted the meeting.

Chapter 31

Nate decided to dust off his good suit for the tête-à-tête with Mr Richards, going so far as to put on cufflinks and shine his shoes. He trimmed his beard, which had been getting scruffy with all the demands on his time lately, flossed and found his appearance acceptable. He arrived at the office promptly at 4.30pm and told Shirley he was there to see the director, as they had a meeting.

“You still work here, you know,” she said.
“Technically, but let’s be honest, the Nate Fitzgerald era has ended. Did you see me on the news?”

“Yes, and I read about it on the *Independent*. I think the company’s made a lovely gesture. I’m not sure why you were asked to deliver all that meat, though. You looked ragged in that video.”

“Thanks for your support, Shirley.”

“You should have worn that suit.”

“It was rather dusty.”

The fact she believed the mass donation of a full truckload of meat had been a corporate-level decision intrigued Nate. While he had sold that very idea to the media, he felt his co-workers would know the real story, yet apparently no one believed he could possess the rebel cache to execute the feat. On the one hand, this was disappointing, as he wanted some recognition; while on the other, it reduced the likelihood of arrest. He declined to take a seat and after ten minutes of waiting, simply walked into Mr Richards’ office without bothering to knock, finding a woman from HR in deep discussion with the director. From their expressions, they had been discussing him.

The woman tarried as if expecting to stay, but Mr Richards noted Nate’s body language and asked her to excuse them for five minutes. When the door closed, he spoke firmly but calmly, busying himself with papers and not looking at Nate.

“Well, there’s no question we have to let you go, Fitzgerald. I’m not sure what motivated you to steal merchandise and concoct this idiotic plan, but I suppose you thought you were making a statement about job losses or something.”

Nate pulled at his chin hairs. “It was a small gesture for the community. I don’t expect it will do any good, but who knows. A loner living in a cabin at *Walden Pond* inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King.”
“You’re terminated,” Mr Richards said.

Nate took a seat, crossing a leg over his knee. “Now, Dick, how would that look for the organisation – I mean, from a PR perspective, making the worker who organised your charity-giving redundant?”

Mr Richards noted Nate’s posture and put down the papers. “I’d say no one would notice, and I said terminated, not redundant. You’ve had your fun, now let’s not make this more difficult than it needs to be.”

“But say, certain journalists were contacted to do a follow-up? My dismissal lends itself to the angle of ‘no good deed goes unpunished in Britain today’. The media love those at the moment.”

“I could have you charged, Fitzgerald.”

“That would definitely generate coverage.”

Mr Richards pursed his lips. “Those journalists have probably forgotten you already – you’re fish-wrap – and even if they did write a follow-up, what would you gain? The public would have a moment of outrage, but it would be entertainment, forgotten in a week. Society doesn’t have time for sustained anger anymore. You’d be replaced by Russell Brand’s porn addiction or Stephen Fry threatening to top himself again or some singer posting his breakfast on social media. You’ve not a chance.”

“But why risk it?” Nate said, using the nervousness in his chest to push on. “You’re not going to be at A&M for long, so why let your name get attached to a negative story about a disgruntled employee, one that a potential future employer could find on the internet forever? The public might forget, but cyberspace won’t. As a man who moves around a lot, this isn’t in your best interests.”

For the first time since Nate had met him, Mr Richards flinched – but it wasn’t a flinch of fear, more of recognition that Nate had taken his lecturing on-board and had come to
understand the game. He was looking after himself and wasn’t letting anything as
inconvenient as loyalty undermine his strategy. While he originally rejected adopting such a
position, he had realised that in an unethical system, too much morality was a liability. It
made you exploitable.

“I didn’t think you had it in you, Fitzgerald. OK, only a few people know about the
theft, so if you don’t talk, I suppose we can return to the status quo. Or were you looking for
your old job in the caravan?”

“I’ll take redundancy,” Nate said. “With three months full wage, of course, plus
holidays owing and a written recommendation that outlines my excellent work. That should
give me financial stability while my copy-editing business gets rolling. Life is short you
know.”

Mr Richards rubbed his hand along his chin, considering Nate, who held the director’s
gaze, smiled and shrugged. He didn’t have anything to lose at this point. Finally, Dick
Richards turned to his computer.

“Seems reasonable,” he said. “I’ll send an email to HR now. If you have anything to
retrieve from your desk, they’ll have a representative supervise. We can’t have you deleting
sensitive documents, or stealing anything.”

“I can’t think of anything pressing.”

“You’ll at least want to log off Twitter.”

From the way Mr Richards shook his head, Nate felt certain he would have ended up
on the redundancy list. Somehow the man knew everything. His legs wobbled as he rose and
he waited with his hand outstretched, not moving until the director shook it and offered a
professional farewell.

He thought briefly of telling Shirley she should have more compassion for minorities,
but knew it would be a useless gesture, unlikely to change her point of view. Instead, he took
comfort in knowing he would no longer have to see her or listen to her blow-by-blow updates about *Coronation Street*.

“I’ll miss your scones,” he said.

“You’ll be back. Bad pennies always turn up.”

He smiled and made an affirmative humming noise, knowing full well he would never even accidentally pass by A&M Meat Distribution, not even to win a large wager. This phase of his life was done, his new freedom promising opportunity and uncertainty. At least he lived in London, where the money was, not Liverpool or any number of abandoned towns in the north, and he had a home that couldn’t be sold from under him by an ambitious or corrupt council. He would find enough dosh to scrape by on, covering food, heat, a few good books and an internet connection. With these, streets to walk and a few pints with friends, what more could one ask of life, really? As he made his hurried farewells, he was tempted to see his departure as signifying a fundamental flaw in himself, not strong enough or lacking in team spirit; but this was the trick, the story the privileged sold to justify undermining egalitarianism and inclusive society. People were treated badly, their wellbeing debased to serve the few. He was simply another worker churned up in the machine, grasping at the illusion of control but essentially powerless. No individual was strong enough to thwart the vagaries of life and whims of fate, and especially not those born to the section of society that needed to scrimp and save to keep a roof over their heads and feed a family – to survive. The modern world was a sea, constantly roiling, throwing up human confidence and plunging good people under the waves. Those with power promised solid land on the horizon, saying if we all rowed harder or swam with more vigour we could reach it and find reprieve. But jobs were always temporary, rents were always rising, services were forever being cut and the Government lacked any conviction beyond servicing the economy and pandering to the very forces plundering collective security. Nate wanted to go back to 1979 and run through the
streets shouting for everyone to stop. The uncertainties and strikes of the 1970s weren’t due to coddling of the workers and an overly generous social security net. They were due to oil prices quadrupling and international gyrations. Yet even these cataclysmic spasms hadn’t broken the country. Only fear of being broken and disingenuous promises of personal freedom at the cost of communal security had accomplished that. The revolution of the 1980s had become never-ending, just as Thatcher and Orwell had both predicted, and the victim count continued to rise.

Nate did a quick perusal of his desk, pocketing his two-minute noodles and aspirin. He pulled open his bottom drawer, filled to overflowing with the corpses of plastic bags that had once carried his lunch. Life was simultaneously so meaningful and yet utterly banal. He decided to leave them for the next chump. It was time to go home.

Chapter 32

Several weeks later, on a bright Saturday morning, Robbie came in to find Nate hunkered down over a large pad of yellow paper, writing in his indecipherable scrawl. While the box room was fine as a bedsit, they had failed to realise access to the lavatory would be an issue. Still, despite the regular arrivals of his lodger, Nate was happy for the company. His business was not yet up and running, so he wasn’t busy schmoozing clients, though he had designed a few logos and was in the process of setting up a website. These endeavours often took a backseat to stress management, however, which involved the adventures of a high school chemistry teacher named Walter White whose poor health had prompted him to begin production of crystal amphetamine. It was all very morally suspect, but admittedly cracking good television.

“What's going on?” Robbie asked.
“I’m writing a story. I like stories. Life works out the way you’d like in the end. They say history is written by the victors, but occasionally people such as us can portray ourselves with more nobility than we possess.”

“I’m fond of Terry Pratchett.”

“He has Alzheimer’s, you know.”

“I knew, but had forgotten.”

As Robbie chose a magazine to take into the bog (one that upon exit Nate would discreetly dispose of), the front gate chime rang and Nate put on his slippers, vowing as always to invest in an intercom. He’d need one if clients were to come to his flat, though he conceded the company’s brand might be better served with him buying a new suit and going to them. Swinging the gate open, he was surprised to find Allie’s smiling face, so surprised in fact he stood stock-still as she moved in for a greeting hug. She wasn’t soaking wet like Andie MacDowell in the climax of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* confessing her love to Hugh Grant and her intention to end her marriage, but moisture could be over-rated. Unfortunately, a lorry door opened and Watkins jumped out, followed by two more warehouse workers – Jenkins and Smith, he believed.

“Pick your lip up, Ned, and prop that door open,” Watkins said.

Jenkins opened the boot and pulled out a wheeled cart. Nate was surprised to find the lorry filled with roofing tiles.

“We took up a collection,” Watkins said. “I told people what you did and they decided your survival in winter was worth a few quid. Go figure, eh? If you stay out of our way and don’t try to help, I’d say we can get these tiles on in a couple of hours.”

“What about my rotten beams?”

“I had a look when we were slinging that tarp and they seemed fine to me.”

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Nate stepped aside as the first load went in. Several more men from the warehouse came down the pavement, nodding and following their manager, their taut arms and neck tattoos meandering by. They were a nice lot, really. Accepting his limitations, Nate made tea and passed around biscuits, inquiring if anyone had a sledgehammer to reopen the box room door to allow for WC access. Allie mentioned that her job had ended at A&M and that redundancies had begun, though not as many as some people had predicted. Nate was stricken to hear Anesh had not been rehired for his position, which everyone attributed to his valiant yet doomed attempts to defend the workers through the union. Nate made a mental note to call him. He retrieved his copy of Walden from the bookshelf, with the notion of lending it to Allie, knowing she was a reader and still admittedly holding out some hope she might ditch the man kindly organising the free repair of his home. He hesitated. While he had outwitted Mr Richards, a return to personal ethics was due. Just then, the gate chime rang again.

As had been the case with Allie, except exponentially more so, he was surprised to see Elaine Duncan in a yellow and pink frock with her chin jutting into the air, standing on the pavement.

“I’m still angry with you, Nate, but I’ve had some time to think. I’ve heard about your work for the poor and can see you were clearly under a great deal more pressure than I suspected.”

“Please, Elaine, really—”

“No, let me finish. The redundancy situation made me more sensitive than usual as well – even Daniel commented on it. What I’m saying is, I may have been too hasty in cutting you out of my life. Have you had time to consider our relationship?”

While plenty of time had elapsed, he hadn’t given it any thought. He had certainly missed the sex, and her cooking was of a high standard, especially the seafood ragout, but he
had felt glad to be rid of the moral chaos and her pressuring about ambition. He felt very comfortable with the end of the affair, even if the resolution hadn’t been ideal. And yet, as she milled self-consciously before him – an action which accentuated her ample bosom – he couldn’t help but wonder if certain annoyances could be overcome. She was a nice woman and he wasn’t always assertive enough; they had certainly had some nice dinners and they shared similar interests. Also, his libido hadn’t reacted well to being suddenly and inexplicably cut off, with celibacy leaving him feeling strangely itchy.

“Elaine, you grassed me up to HR and management,” he said.

“I was angry, Nate. Word was you weren’t going to get renewed anyway, so really, I didn’t jeopardise your position. And besides, you’ve started your own business, which is exactly what you should be doing. Why don’t I come in?”

She purred these last two words, which twigged Nate’s loins. He was about to explain he was getting work done on the flat and perhaps hers would be better, but she moved past him and down the walkway before he could finish. He checked the street to make sure no more surprise visitors were on their way, maybe Mr Richards with a bouquet of roses, then fidgeted with the lock and made to follow – suddenly freezing. He realised Elaine would find Allie in his home, leafing through his books and making herself comfortable, with Watkins just near enough to hear her scream and go on a tirade about Nate’s unrequited affections for his common-law wife. She would uncover the truth about ‘beef cheek night’ (as he had taken to calling it) and this would no doubt lead to his email confession of love to Allie. Elaine was not the type to stay calm and see the situation as innocent and unpremeditated. He could practically see Watkins descending the ladder, holding his hammer and racing down the shattered walkway to exact revenge. Thinking fast, Nate closed the gate behind him and decided a day out was in order.
Still wearing his slippers, he walked down the Essex Road, ending up in Pizza Express, an establishment that was used to eccentrics lingering for great swathes of time and gorging on carbohydrates. After getting his fill, he planned to spend the day and likely most of the evening in the Compton Arms, reading their newspapers and getting slowly legless.

He ordered a mozzarella and tomato salad and dough balls with garlic butter, knowing they weren’t particularly healthy but keen to maintain his renewed attempt at vegetarianism. He took out the small notepad and wrote as he ate, cursing himself for having left his mobile in the flat. He was creating an outline for a screenplay based on recent events, so wanted to get the facts down right, while they were still fresh in his memory – otherwise who would believe him. As he wrote, he couldn’t help but notice a woman in a black shirt glancing his way. Looking up, he met her gaze and panicked, wondering if he had soft cheese or buttered dough in his beard. She smiled.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but notice your book. It’s one of my favourites.”

He looked down at Walden, noting the woman had an American accent. “Yes, mine as well,” he said.

“We had to study it in school. Did you know Gandhi carried around a copy of his essay on civil disobedience? It influenced Martin Luther King too.”

“His impact on modern thinking has sadly waned. Are you a tourist?”

She shifted over to a chair closer to him. “I guess so, for the next three years at least, unless I screw up and get fired or have a nervous breakdown, which between you and me isn’t outside the realm of possibility.”

“New job?”

“Bingo. Yup, I’m the new kid on the block. I had no idea the city was so hectic. It makes Boston feel like a small town.”

“Ah, you’re from Massachusetts. Have you been to Walden Pond?”
“Sure, a bunch of times. I take it you’re obsessed with Thoreau. I’m hoping you don’t carry that book everywhere, ‘cause if you do, I’m going to politely excuse myself, walk to the bathroom and then climb out the window.”

She spoke slowly and yet so American-y that Nate couldn’t help but giggle, which she echoed, the two of them sounding like sniggering teenagers. She was a beautiful woman, with glistening blonde hair, excellent cheek bones and lips in perfect proportion to the other features of her face. Nate admired symmetry. She wasn’t exactly trim, but had a wonderful, shapely figure, her hips clinging to the black fabric of her skirt as she shifted about. He estimated she was in her mid-forties, though her eyes suggested twenty-one and madly curious. They introduced themselves in a formal way, even shaking hands, and shared basic information, as if they weren’t simply making small talk at a chain pizza restaurant. Sarah was renting a small flat in Angel and had only been in the country for a week, confessing she was eating pizza because she was wary of pubs.

“The only thing to fear about pubs is the grumpy old men,” Nate said. “And the backpackers behind the bar will probably attempt to give you incorrect change. The food can be predictable, but we’ve got lots of nice restaurants in this area – fine dining, cosmopolitan, Chinese, dough balls coated in garlic butter.”

Each time she laughed, Nate imagined a number rising on a magical scoreboard. If he could have this effect at Pizza Express while wearing slippers, he might not end up alone forever after all.

“So I won’t get mugged?” Sarah said.

“You might get chatted up. But I’d be happy to escort you into a pub and defend you against any malcontents or football hooligans if you’re interested in a drink. I often help tourists get over their phobias.”

“Super, so long as it’s not cider. That stuff is so sweet. What do you drink?”
Nate smiled. “I enjoy a nice pint of bitter.”

“That sounds happy. Did you know gin is a depressant?”

“I believe all alcohol is a depressant, which is confusing, as getting tipsy can be incredibly invigorating.”

They laughed, paid and made their way into the street, where Nate inquired about her Sarah’s new job.

“I’m an editor at the Guardian. I’ve transferred from the American operation to the mother-ship, which is freaking me right out. I keep wondering what I’m doing – I mean, besides being that cliché of the woman whose divorce comes in who wants another chance at excitement.”

“You can overthink change. Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith.”

“What about you? What do you do other than hang out eating donut balls in the afternoon?”

Nate snorted, prompting two pigeons to scramble into the air. “They’re dough balls, and you can’t dismiss them until you’ve tried them. I’m a writer and editor, self-employed, corporate work mostly. My business is just getting off the ground.”

She stopped and reached into her purse. He wondered if she was reaching for a teargas canister, about to blind him and flee due to his angling for a job. In reality, he wasn’t looking for anything, except maybe to impress; he enjoyed his new identity, even if the title weren’t based on anything tangible and he hadn’t formulated the company’s KPIs yet.

“I’m also writing a screenplay. It’s about a lonely man who almost falls off the edge of Earth, but then doesn’t.”

“Sounds intriguing. Is it sad?”

“Somewhat, but I’m determined to give it a happy ending, no matter how implausible. People need happy endings, you see, in order to believe there’s justice in the world.”
After taking a remarkably long time, Sarah drew out a stack of white business cards and handed him one.

“I’ve got to get one of those little holders,” she said. “Look, I don’t want to seem forward, but our digital team needs people who can edit and proof on the night shift. I know you’re probably swamped with your business, but if you wanted a regular gig, send in a resume and mention my name.”

Nate took his time in examining the embossed writing on the card, the paper so white it practically glowed in the overcast light. He alternated between suppressing a yowl of excitement and fear that this woman was part of a prank. He thanked her politely and said he might be interested, given the stress of running a business and his desire for stability. As they walked, he looked around his neighbourhood, at his city, at the people moving towards their destinies, moving from pain and sorrow to possibility and renewal. Each individual had their own story, which ebbed and flowed and contributed to a greater narrative.

“How do you feel about seventies’ pop music?” he asked.

Sarah’s eyes lit up and she hooked her arm around his in that forward American way. “I love it! You should see my vinyl collection. Cost me a fortune, but I had to have them all shipped over. I’m a bit of a packrat when it comes to albums.”

“I’m a bit messy myself,” Nate said.

“What’s life without a bit of chaos?”

THE END
PART 2: DISSERTATION
Chapter 1. Introduction

In 1995, I travelled to London as a backpacker. In the early-internet age, when globalisation and cultural exchange were not yet ubiquitous, arriving in a foreign country meant novelty. I was fascinated by newspapers that chronicled issues related to France, Spain, Italy and Europe at large, and which were not, like Canada was, overwhelmed by the political and cultural behemoth that is the United States. I discovered music that would never reach Canadian mainstream radio stations – often on pub jukeboxes – as well as writers who seemed intensely important to British readers. I recall staring at the silver cover of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993) in an Edinburgh bookshop, wondering what could prompt *Rebel Inc* to endorse it as: “The best book ever written by man or woman ... deserves to sell more copies than the Bible”. Along with Blur, Oasis and the rising urgencies of Brit Pop, the literary scene suggested something culturally vital was happening.

More than any other novel, Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* (1995) made me want to become a writer. The story revolves around protagonist Rob, a used-record store owner who has recently been dumped by his girlfriend, Laura. I, too, was a guy named Rob who loved music and had recently broken up with someone, so it seemed Hornby and I shared the zeitgeist. This novel, with its introspective, rather self-obsessed main character, spoke to how I was feeling, not just about love but about life. To me, Rob’s lack of certainty about himself and where he was going captured what it felt like to be a young male in the 1990s. It was an inspiration. And, so, between 2002 and 2006, I published five novels, including three that I referred to as ‘young urban comedic fiction’ – Hornby by another name. My novels captured a sense of my life and the world around me, helping to express the lived historical moment.

However, by 2006, I knew that this urgency was fading. It was as if something nebulous and ungrasped had shifted, either in me or society, or perhaps both, and I no longer felt that I had anything meaningful to say. I effectively ‘retired’ from writing, moved to
Australia and started a family, focussing on creative output better able to pay the bills, such as marketing copy and press releases.

By 2013, bored with my career, and restless, I felt a renewed need to write and began to look at doing a PhD. In the act of figuratively returning to a former self, I went back to Hornby for inspiration, and, while re-reading *High Fidelity*, came across a passage in the novel that gave me pause. It involves Rob considering how Laura had changed from the early stages of their relationship to the present and how her passion for social justice had transformed into the embrace of a corporate job. He reflects:

> Now she works for a City law firm ... not because she underwent any kind of political conversion, but because she was made redundant and couldn’t find any legal aid work. She had to take a job that paid about forty-five grand a year because she couldn’t find one that paid under twenty; she said that this was all you need to know about Thatcherism (Hornby 2008 [1995], 70).

It occurred to me that, despite spending a fair bit of time in the UK during the late 1990s, voraciously reading novels and fervently embracing Brit pop, the legacy of Margaret Thatcher and the social, political and economic revolution that she had helped to drive in 1980s Britain (and beyond) had barely registered with me. While changes to British society had no doubt influenced much of the soul-searching of the novels I read, the non-political nature of the majority of these texts had never led me to directly confront Thatcher’s influence and her policies. I had responded to *High Fidelity* in terms of what it offered about being young and male. This realisation led me to pose the question: in what ways could fiction help me to understand British society more deeply, and, in particular, the effects of the Thatcher years? And what was Thatcherism anyway?

**Thatcherism in realist novels of the 1990s**

Initially, finding novels that illuminated Thatcherism’s impacts on 1990s Britain proved frustrating. In a review of Tim Lott’s *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002), historian Andy
Beckett notes that few fiction writers in Britain up to 2002 had produced novels that dealt explicitly with the changes of the Thatcher years, suggesting only Jonathan Coe, Iain Sinclair and possibly Irvine Welsh (Beckett 2002). Beckett wonders if this is due to a lack of clarity about what occurred (“Britons are still getting used to the new country she created”) or to a reluctance to delve into “the strange and rackety modern nation all around them” (Beckett 2002).

Ironically, despite the fact that *Rumours of a Hurricane* does engage directly with Thatcherism – by following union man Charlie Buck from Thatcher’s election in 1979 to her resignation in 1990 – Beckett finds fault with the novel. He argues that Lott’s text lacks ambiguity, offering a broad view of social change without appreciation for the subtle transformations that occurred in how individuals came to perceive the nation, their place within it and their role as citizens. Beckett writes that the novel

> generates little insight into the less obvious shifts in personal ethics that took place under the Conservatives: the socialists who started quietly sending their children to selective schools, the people with double-barrelled names who ended up running illegal raves (Beckett 2002).

What Beckett desires is evidence of social change at the individual level, as shaped through the small, seemingly insignificant choices people made in the lived, historical moment. This viewpoint made me realise that I didn’t have to search for 1990s novels that dealt directly with Thatcherism to understand its impact on British society; rather, the evidence was already present in the realist novels that I loved. To understand social change from the imaginative perspective of narrative fiction, I needed to pay close attention to the pressures characters faced and the choices they made. Despite Beckett’s claims, I suggest that many authors in the 1990s were engaging deeply with Thatcherism and the fallout from the 1980s and were trying to make sense of it in their writing. It wasn’t always conscious or explicit, but the evidence is there.
Structures of feeling

As I go on to explore in the dissertation, and as might be identified in my own practice as a novelist, the idea of structures of feeling, developed by cultural theorist and literary critic Raymond Williams, offers a way for writers and readers of realist texts to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural contexts in which they were written, and the individual and social experiences they sought to capture. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams suggests that when people consider the past, they tend to conceive of it via institutions, formations and experiences produced through the social processes of understanding and meaning-making. These processes involve acts of simplification, classification and reduction, which transform lived experience into more stable forms of comprehension. However, such conversion and stabilisation of inherently chaotic historical moments often sees the complexities, tensions, shifts and uncertainties muted and thus largely lost. What remains is a view of the past characterised by cause-and-effect relationships, inevitability, and, consequently, a loss of intricacy. In contrast, Williams posits that “the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present” (Williams 1977, 129). Literature captures “senses of instance and process, where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalised and assembled” (Williams 1977, 129). As such, the novel arguably provides the closest approximation of what it might have felt like to live in a given historical moment, offering not just characters’ rational reflections on society, but their emotional and felt responses. Through realist fiction, chaos, confusion, impulse and ungraspable pressures are documented as experience at the individual and social levels.

Williams proposes that through readers engaging in “active ‘readings’” (Williams 1977, 129), novels can provide insight into deeper tensions of a particular time and place, which might complement historical and social accounts. Indeed, in terms of the 1990s, I have
found that, contrary to Beckett’s view, authors were actively engaged with “the strange and rackety modern nation all around them” (Beckett 2002), as they attempted to unwind contradictions and understand feelings produced within them by the society around them. While characters rarely articulate the causes of their anxiety in terms of Thatcherism or its subsequent development as neoliberalism¹, a political ideology that, among other things, privileges market-based identities and individualism above social collectiveness, they deal, often unconsciously, with the pressures these intertwined political and ideological movements helped to produce. In a similar way, realistic fiction authors today use what is around them, drawing on tensions that are often unique to the time and place in which they write. Williams’ idea is a way to better understand the ways in which these tensions manifest and how individuals attempt to make sense of them.

Framing the argument

This thesis explores structures of feeling as a conceptual framework for reading and writing fiction that reveals new insights into the lived culture of Britain in the 1970s, 1990s and 2012 through the production of two complementary thesis components. My analysis of one novel from the 1970s and two from the 1990s offers a ‘before Thatcher’ and ‘after Thatcher’ perspective on British society, helping to reveal the effects of Thatcherism within the culture. My creative work is set in 2012 and aims to respond to tensions in contemporary society through a work of fiction located in a near-contemporary metropolitan setting. At this time, British society was faced with an economic austerity program under the Conservative government led by David Cameron, which aimed to reduce what the party characterised as excessive government spending (Summers 2009). Policies that arguably targeted the poorer

¹ Neoliberalism is explored in Chapter 2 below.
members of society, such as the Bedroom Tax\textsuperscript{2} and Pasty Tax\textsuperscript{3}, were countered with the promise of the Big Society, a political ideology that involved individuals, charities and community groups volunteering or funding community and social programs (BBC 2010). William’s idea of structures of feeling is useful to probe how individual characters feel, help produce, and resist cultural change in these respective periods.

The first part of the thesis is an original creative work of fiction that attempts to capture the structures of feeling in 2012 London through the everyday experiences of its main character, Nate Fitzgerald. Nate is perpetually in the middle: in middle management; middle-aged; and, no longer accepted in the upper-middle-class position of his birth. When a new director comes in to ‘right-size’ the meat distribution firm where he works and ‘efficiency everyone up’, Nate is caught between resisting and acquiescing in order to keep his job.

The novel charts Nate’s anxieties, as he attempts to understand how best to live in contemporary Britain. This involves both his personal life and his professional life. Professionally, he has to deal with the influence of neoliberalism’s underpinning by economic rationalism, which involves the reduction of human life and activity to quantifiable, economic terms. Within Nate’s workplace, this includes the use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), precarious contract work and human labour formulated in terms of measurable productivity. Nate’s third-person narration illuminates gaps between the ideological ‘truths’ that these reductive modes of business promise and his lived experience, which suggests the limitations of economic rationalism as a way of living and making meaningful human and social experience, and the need to recognise the richness and value of non-material facets of human existence.

\textsuperscript{2} In April 2012, the Cameron Government voted for an “under-occupancy penalty” that reduced housing benefit payments for council housing tenants deemed to have a spare bedroom (Gibbons et al 2018, 1).
\textsuperscript{3} A proposed 20 per cent tax on pasties, rotisserie chickens and other hot foods sold on a take-away basis from bakeries and shops. The proposed tax prompted intense social media reaction (Barnett 2012). The Cameron government later abandoned the proposal.
Nate negotiates social pressures produced by complex contemporary culture. His reactions are subjective and are informed by his current circumstances as well as residual culture, such as class consciousness and ambivalence towards the egalitarianism of Britain’s post-war consensus politics. Nate’s positioning as in-between, and often disempowered, encourages his ongoing process of assessment and reassessment within his situated position. This may be read as an actualisation of Williams’ idea of cultural production as a merging of “the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings” (Williams 2001 [1958], 11).

The novel’s tension is firmly grounded in feeling. Often, Nate is bewildered by society, which leads him to focus on and attempt to rationalise his impulses and sensations. His confusion offers insight into the lived moment, which the established institutions and systems of belief of the dominant (neoliberal) culture often prove insufficient to explain and resolve. In this way, Nate’s character offers a way of seeing “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences” (Williams 1977, 132). Nate is a complex character in a complicated world, whose impulses, actions and reactions aim to capture a dynamic sense of what it means to live in twenty-first-century London.

The second part of the thesis (this dissertation) includes a critical analysis of one novel from the 1970s, Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age* (1977), and two from the 1990s, Nick Hornby’s *About a Boy* (1998) and Tim Lott’s *White City Blue* (1999). I show how these fictional texts help reveal structures of feeling from their respective decades, thus making them, in this sense, representational. Drabble’s novel sees characters attempt to understand the pervasive sense that Britain has lost its way, economically, socially and politically. As they try to comprehend their feelings, the characters draw upon prevailing and competing
ideas about the nature of the mid-1970s sense of crisis. This reveals biases and processes of rationalising that might be regarded as cultural precursors to Thatcher’s election. Hornby and Lott’s novels are set in a very different nation and see characters attempt to understand how best to live in a society that has become more individualistic, materialistic and unequal as a result of the changes of the 1980s. While often not consciously voiced, these characters probe the limits of neoliberal ideas about the nature of society and reveal a desire for compromise between the egalitarian politics of the pre-Thatcher nation and what has come afterwards. Throughout, I pay close attention to the narrative techniques that Drabble, Hornby and Lott use to interrogate the tensions of their respective eras.

**Approach**

I started out this dissertation with a straightforward research question: how could novels help us understand how Britain changed under Thatcher? This required a survey of works, which I began by seeking out socially-engaged realist novels from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. These novels did not necessarily have to be overtly political or make direct comment about specific cultural conditions or government policies, but they had to be attuned to the social reality in which they were set. For instance, I sourced some novels from DJ Taylor’s news article “‘La divine Thatcher’: how novelists responded to Maggie” (2015) and Philip Hensher’s “Darkness Visible” (2009) which considered novels of the late 1970s and 1980s that engaged with the politics of the times. However, these novels were not always overtly political, with Taylor considering novels in terms of being stories “written in the very considerable shadow of Thatcher” (Taylor 2015). This consideration of texts that give a sense of the times, but that are not explicitly preoccupied with politics and change, is particularly relevant in the 1990s, whose lad lit fiction suggests an era marked by de-politicisation and alienation, where characters do not often engage in politics or conceive of themselves in political terms.
The novels I focused on were similar in spirit to those belonging to the realist tradition identified by Williams in “Realism and the Contemporary Novel” (1958). Williams suggests novels that fit this category offer “a valuing creation of a whole way of life”, where “every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, and yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms” (Williams 1958, 22). Williams identifies the social novel as the best exemplification of this type of text, though he acknowledges that “the future-story”, such as Brave New World, can capture the sense of an epoch and its tensions in a way that may illuminate aspects of the lived reality of the time (Williams 1958, 23). While Williams’ article pre-dates his idea of structures of feeling, the mode of realism he identifies is consistent with the type of novel he considers as vital for understanding structures of feeling, as he articulates it in Marxism and Literature. He writes: “For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period” (Williams 1977, 131).

To source novels, I explored scholarly books and anthologies concerned with British fiction, including Nick Bentley’s British Fiction of the 1990s (2005), Richard Bradford’s The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction (2007), Andrea Ochsner’s Lad Trouble (2009) and Malcolm Bradbury’s The Modern British Novel (1994), among others. I also noted novels mentioned in non-fiction socio-historical works such as Alwyn Turner’s Rejoice! Rejoice! (2010), Crisis What Crisis? (2008) and A Classless Society (2013) – retrospectives on the political and cultural life of Britain in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively – Andy McSmith’s No Such Thing as Society (2010), about Britain in the 1980s, and Andy Beckett’s When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies (2009). From an initial list of novels, I reviewed academic papers exploring the works of these authors to find links to other similar
writers. And I sought out various award lists, including (the then) Booker Prize and Whitbread Awards.

This search produced a list of well over 150 novels. In refining the list, I generally discounted genre fiction, such as science fiction and fantasy, but included speculative novels if they engaged with tensions that helped to reveal structures of feeling. This includes JG Ballard’s *High-Rise* (1985) and Anthony Burgess’s *1985* (1978), which can both be read as allegories related to the welfare state and class in 1970s Britain. Many other novels were useful in gaining a feeling for the eras in which they were written, though I deemed them peripheral to my research focus. For instance, while Paul Bailey’s *Old Soldiers* (1980), Paul Scott’s *Staying On* (1977) and Michael Moorcock’s *Mother London* (1988) explore the passing of the World War II generation, they deal more with nostalgia and memory than with situated social conditions. Similarly, many novels, such as William Trevor’s *The Children of Dynmouth* (1977), offered a sense of British life in the 1970s, but their stories were more insular and less engaged with social life broadly depicted.

While I did look at popular realist novels from the 1980s, my main area of interest became the 1970s and 1990s – the before and after of Thatcher’s prime ministership. I wanted to understand the 1990s, in particular the forces that had helped produce its society. As such, the 1970s offered a starting point for comparison. I concentrated on specific aspects including characters’ attitudes about the UK, the government, worries and concerns, values and what seemed important to individuals. I then compared these to characters’ attitudes in 1990s works, specifically the (somewhat loosely defined) lad lit genre, which helped to capture that decade’s zeitgeist and structures of feeling.

The following offers a brief overview of key trends and social forces reflected in popular realist fiction from those decades, which offer insight into the prevailing structures of
feeling. This overview is intended to offer general findings that informed my selection of the novels for closer analysis in this dissertation.

**From the 1970s to the 1990s: A brief overview**

In many popular realist novels of the 1970s, characters sense that things in Britain are not working, though the underlying reasons are unclear. They often fixate on the state of the nation, most notably in terms of the welfare state, which is expressed through positions on immigration, youth culture, union power, class and the viability of socialism. Yet within this focus on the wellbeing of the nation, there is a sense that characters conceive of the government as representing their will in the traditional democratic sense, with citizens themselves invested in the social and political health of the nation. Threats are largely perceived as external (immigration, global competition, inflation) or localised (unions, youth).

In the 1980s, several shifts appear to occur. While change is felt and debated in 1970s novels, it becomes rapid and often overwhelming for characters in the 1980s, with recurring feelings that circumstances are moving beyond their control. At the same time, rapid change comes with a feeling of excitement and self-indulgence for some, as the structured order of the welfare state with its regulated market, high taxation, devotion to full employment, and an ethos of income redistribution give way to individualism and a move to personal fulfilment via opportunities previously restricted by social, class and economic boundaries. However, individualism comes with a heightened sense of vulnerability, including a breakdown in how many characters conceive of their relationship to government. In many novels, the government is pitted against the individual, and is less a representative of the citizenry’s collective democratic will than an adversarial force. While some characters are still politicised, elements of alienation are rapidly emerging.
By the 1990s, particularly in the lad lit genre, characters appear to conceive of themselves primarily as individuals, with little to no mention of national politics or the health of the nation. Conflict revolves around personal problems to do with relationships, families and the need to create and sustain an identity built from what Zygmunt Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi refer to as an increasingly fragmented number of ideas and principles (Bauman and Vecchi 2004, 12). This fragmentation can be viewed as resulting from the opening up of identities through the individualism of the 1980s, where more ‘solid’ and traditional points of reference such as class, religious affiliation, neighbourhood community, jobs-for-life and national identity have given way to variable and often changing points of reference.

This new, more complex and urgent process of identity-building is both voluntary and involuntary, a mix of freedom to identify with transient social and popular culture movements (football teams, music and television, celebrity culture, lifestyle choice), through consumption as a consumer, through gender-related categorisation (gay, straight, feminist, lad), via occupation (though this is often precarious and fleeting), or through a hierarchy based on wealth. The 1990s sees some forms of identity forced upon individuals, including ‘the underclass’, as the neoliberal pivot to individualism posits that a person’s circumstances are the result of personal choice or a lack of will, rather than of a lack of access to economic and social opportunities, or the whims of fate. In many popular realist novels of the 1990s, characters appear primarily to see themselves not as citizens but as individuals charged with solving their own problems and ensuring their own security.

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4 Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi argue that in the Thatcher and post-Thatcher eras, a segment of the population “came to be regarded as an ‘underclass’ subsisting on the benefits provided by their industrious and, above all, ‘respectable’ betters” (Nunn and Biressi 2010, 138). This hierarchy of value is predicated on the neoliberal narrative that success and failure are more dependent on personal choice, work ethic and morality than structural impediments.
This surveying of decades is consistent with Williams’ use of structures of feeling as an analytical tool, most notably in the approach he takes in his consideration of novels of the Victorian Age in his essay “Structure of Feeling and Selective Tradition” (1961). He supports this approach by writing that

a key-word in such analysis is pattern: it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned (Williams 2014, 33).

However, for this thesis, I decided to select three novels – one from the 1970s and two from the 1990s – that best capture the structures of feeling for their respective period. I believe that by using structures of feeling as a framework to analyse these novels, the processes by which characters engage with, resisting and accepting dominant culture become clearer. In this way, the general culture is captured in the personal, offering the ‘whole of life’ that Williams argues is vital in realist fiction. This approach also allows for a closer consideration of the technical aspects of each novel and the ways in which authors construct their worlds and create works that are social and personal as well as imaginative and critical.

In terms of the complementarity between the creative work and dissertation in this thesis, it is important to acknowledge Williams’ claim that literary works can act as a response to society, a response that is intrinsically linked to the historical situation. He saw cultural studies and artistic endeavours working together to provide a deeper and more informed sense of lived reality. He writes that what is involved in identifying cultural formations is never only a specifying artistic analysis, though much of the evidence will be made available through that, nor only a generalising social analysis, though that reference has to be quite empirically made. It is the steady discovery of genuine formations which are simultaneously artistic forms and social locations, with all the properly cultural evidence of identification and presentation, local stance and organisation, intention and interrelation with
others, moving as evidently in one direction – the actual works – as in the other – the specific response to the society (Williams 1986, 30).

From this perspective, Williams makes clear that literature is a vital component in understanding the past and the present, one that works with social analysis such as non-fiction and memoir, and theoretical investigations. This thesis aims to show how the practice of reading and writing fiction can make visible dominant and hegemonic forces and how they work, allowing individuals to interrogate and assess the norms and values attached to them. As Williams points out:

It would be wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which, while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralised, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and original (Williams 1977, 114).

**How the dissertation and creative component work together**

The dissertation and creative component of this thesis were written concurrently, with the theoretical and socio-historical research complementing the creation of the manuscript ‘All in This Together’. My reading and analysis of novels from 1970s, 1980s and 1990s using structures of feeling helped to reveal how individuals may have engaged with tensions arising from social change, including ways in which they attempted to conceptualise traditional, residual and emergent forces⁵ and existing and evolving ideological discourses. To a great degree, this concurrent approach helped me to identify points of tension in different periods of late twentieth-century and contemporary Britain and to better understand how they are realised in material or conceptual forms.

In doing this research, I also became aware of recurrent tensions, often linked to residual culture and tradition. The awareness of how class, postcolonialism and post-imperialism have affected the construction of British identity, gained through a critical

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⁵ These are explored more closely in Chapter 2.
analysis of select novels of the late-twentieth century, informed the writing of my creative work. For example, unease about non-white colonial immigrants in some 1970s novels informed how I considered (in my fiction) contemporary discourse around Polish and Eastern-European immigration from the EU. The distrust of the rising working-class in 1970s fiction, and of the underclass in that of the 1990s, led me to consider more deeply caricatures such as The Chav and attitudes towards those on social benefits, particularly in relation to ideas such as the Big Society and policies such as the Bedroom Tax. My research also made me aware of contradictory elements of national identity, as Britain draws upon ideas of tradition and modernisation, accommodating ideological notions of self-reliance and meritocracy as well as residual class biases. Through Williams, these apparent contradictions make sense. Notably, Williams sees tradition within culture specifically as ‘selective tradition’, “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (Williams 1977, 115). By gaining an understanding of structures of feeling at various times in Britain in the late-twentieth century, I have been able to better understand ways of thinking and feeling in the contemporary nation, which has informed the writing of my creative component.

My critical analysis of the techniques that Drabble, Hornby and Lott use in their respective novels also informed the production of my creative component. For example, my consideration of character triangulation in Hornby guided how I situated Nate, who often acts as a neutral observer between other characters with opposing worldviews to allow for the voicing of ideas and positions from lived reality in Britain in 2012. Like Hornby, I adopted a third-person narrative perspective for Nate, which allows for reflection on the worldviews and ideas of the characters around him, offering space for the reader to consider the limitations and contradictions of ideological positions and hegemonic discourses. In this way,
the theoretical and social/historical analysis is interwoven into the artistic work and arguably strengthens its representation of the historical moment.

Analysis of the novels of Drabble, Hornby and Lott through a critical framework informed by Williams’ structures of feeling also allowed me to identify points of tension in British society, understand them more deeply and consider why Thatcherism and neoliberalism took hold in the last three decades of the last century and remain potent within the country. Through my novel in general and Nate’s character in particular, I was able to explore how individuals attempt to make sense of disparate meanings, values and practices as lived reality in contemporary society.

**Structure of the dissertation**

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework through which I develop structures of feeling as a critical tool for the reading and writing of fiction. I begin my discussion by outlining this concept, and then discuss its imprecise nature and Williams’ application of it in the interpretation of texts. I briefly show how the concept can be applied to interrogate novels of the 1970s to disrupt what Stuart Hall identifies as a later perception of the inevitability of Thatcherism (Hall 1996, 231) and to restore complexity to imaginative renderings, through fiction, of the decade.

In Chapter 3, I undertake a critical reading of Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age* (1977), viewing the text as capturing structures of feeling that relate to a sense of crisis about where Britain is headed, economically and culturally during this period. I explore how Drabble uses language and metaphor to articulate feeling and how the forms of these constructions help to reveal underlying and emergent cultural formations. I consider how Drabble tests beliefs and

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6Williams uses the terms pre-emergent and emergent in reference to pervasive social experiences that have not yet found form as changed institutions, formations and beliefs. Rather, they exist as “changes of presence” that nonetheless “exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action” (Williams 1977, 131-132; italics in the original). They are felt, but not yet understood, but lay the foundation for looming cultural shifts that are definable. I use the term emergent throughout this dissertation.
ideologies, including those related to the welfare state and the free-market capitalism espoused by Edward Heath’s Conservative Party. This includes looking at how the author situates her characters in discomfiting social situations in order to disrupt their habitual ways of seeing. This allows them to consider their views, and the competing narratives explaining Britain’s crisis, through their practical consciousness – comparing what they are experiencing against the accepted norms, values and dominant understandings that characterise the society as a whole. While the novel is set during the time of the welfare state, I argue that the novel shows ambivalence towards socialism and free-market capitalism and reveals middle-class cultural assumptions that can be seen as forming the basis for acceptance of the Thatcherist project.

In Chapter 4, I consider Nick Hornby’s About a Boy (1998), arguing that it features characters attempting to accommodate the cultural changes produced by Thatcherism and burgeoning neoliberalism. This includes adapting to new forms of identity construction linked to consumer culture and individualism. I consider how Hornby uses metaphor to express feelings of precarity and vulnerability. I also look at how he uses irony to expose the gap between principal character Will’s values – those of the dominant neoliberal culture – and the character’s contradictory feelings and sensations. This gap between official consciousness and practical consciousness is evidence of nascent resistance to the new values and norms that inform his life, which might be seen as a precursor for Tony Blair’s “Third

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7 The Conservative Party’s 1970 manifesto A Better Future outlined a desire for tax reform, trade union legislation, a reduction in public spending, no government support for failing industries and no statutory incomes policy (wage and price controls); these policies were a shift from the post-war consensus (Turner 2009, 7).

8 Williams refers to practical consciousness as “what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived” (Williams 1977, 130-131). Official consciousness refers to dominant systems of belief and influential systems of explanation and argument, which Williams posits have “effective presence” (Williams 1977, 130). As such, the gap between these two social forms or experiences is a source of tension that informs the structures of feeling. This is considered more closely in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
Way” politics.\(^9\) Similarly, Hornby’s triangulation of his three main characters, Will, Fiona and Marcus illuminates several aspects of the times: it shows how values associated with the welfare state continue to influence individuals; gives insight into how cultural meanings are negotiated as social as well as personal; and, provides evidence of an emerging desire for a compromise between the polarities of socialism and neoliberalism.

In Chapter 5, I analyse Tim Lott’s *White City Blue* (1999), suggesting that its structures of feeling relate to the class insecurities felt by individuals with working-class origins who became middle-class during the 1980s and 1990s. While the problems within the novel can be read in terms of gender and the ‘lad’\(^{10}\) resisting commitment, characters experience a complex morass of feelings, including guilt, shame, repulsion and nostalgia, which relate to shifting modes of identity formation, most notably the diminishment of class-based identities. Lott’s novel offers insights into the effects of residual working-class culture from the pre-1980s, and his narrative explores how stigmatisation of working-class identities by dominant culture in the 1990s leads to repression of class distinctions within the individual subject. The chapter also considers how the spoken language signifies class belonging, how characters regulate one another’s language to reinscribe concepts of identity, and how Lott’s alternating between the past and present reinforces the protagonist’s feelings of being perpetually caught in-between. I argue that an analysis of the nature of tension within Lott’s work makes working-class culture visible again, offering resources of hope to readers and those with working-class origins.

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\(^9\) Alwyn Turner refers to The Third Way as “an increasingly popular political concept in the English-speaking world that promised to blend free-market economics with a leftist social policy of ‘fairness’, though its exact definition remained obscure at best” (Turner 2014, 258). Turner quotes Christopher Meyer’s view of the idea as “less a coherent philosophy of government, more a tactic for election-winning” (Meyer in Turner 2014, 258).

\(^{10}\) This refers to a hedonistic, narcissistic and anti-feminist form of masculinity that gained prominence in 1990s British culture. The identity construct is explored in more detail in Chapter 4.
Chapter 6, the Conclusion, outlines how the concept of structures of feeling has informed and enhanced the practice of both the reading and writing of fictions in this thesis. This includes a reflection on how, for both critic and writer of fiction, harnessing the concept can draw attention to points of tension within the society represented, which, in turn, may illuminate latent desires for change and opposition to dominant ways of thinking. This restores a sense of agency to the individual, as it shows cultural production to be a dual process of social input and personal evaluation. Further, it destabilises the notion of neoliberal hegemony and opens up space for readers and critics to consider the possibility of social change and new ways of thinking about how we live. In addition, I posit that structures of feeling allow an appreciation of the essentially social and collective nature of culture and the materiality of residual and emergent cultures. In this way, Williams’ concept allows individuals to see themselves as part of a larger whole, not simply now but across generations. This, too, disrupts neoliberalism’s emphasis on solipsism, individualism and economic rationalism by encouraging readers to see themselves as members of wider communities that share common causes and social visions. Thus structures of feeling also propose a way to reawaken solidarity and foster sites for belonging, which respond to and respect the felt emotional aspects of human life. In short, my aim is that both the creative component and dissertation work to reveal the complex ways in which individuals and societies see themselves and the vital role that sensuous experience plays in the making of meaning and understanding.
Chapter 2. Structures of feeling

I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? What is going on in these pictures in my mind?

(Joan Didion 1976)

In this chapter, I provide some background to Williams’ work and its applicability to my argument, namely how structures of feeling can help readers and critics better identify the social tensions represented in fiction, as well as understand the complexities of the historical moment in which individual realist novels are set.

Structures of feeling

Structures of feeling is an idea that Williams developed over more than three decades of his career (Highmore 2016, 147). His clearest articulation appears in his 1977 book *Marxism and Literature*, in which he suggests that the greatest barrier to understanding cultural activity is its expression and articulation “in an habitual past tense”, as a construct that has happened and become fixed into conscious and conceptualised formations and institutions (Williams 1977, 128). In other words, culture is conceived as something that has already been produced, with meanings and relationships established. Its characteristics have been mapped to consider historical events, developments and relationships that have led to the current state, taking on what Williams calls “fixed, finite, receding forms” (Williams 1977, 129).

Williams sees this perspective of culture as having limitations, in part because it offers no way to express our experience of the present (Williams 1977, 128); however, life
and culture are lived, continuous and evolving, never static. While existing institutions and modes of understanding need to be acknowledged, they are not enough to explain many aspects of subjects’ ongoing experiences of their reality, which is ever-inundated with new sensations and ideas. Williams calls into question the notion of culture as fixed and finite, since it entails a separation of the social from the personal (Williams 1977, 128-9). From this perspective, ‘culture’ is articulated as a generalised version of a social reality, with individual experience homogenised and made fundamentally indistinguishable from the larger formulation. Paul Filmer (2003) refers to this as “reduction to formalising concepts of society and the social” (Filmer 2003, 208). In resistance to such a view, Williams insists that “the living will not be reduced” (Williams 1977, 129), writing:

All the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself (Williams, 1977 129-130).

This speaks to Williams’ belief that culture is ongoing and occurs at both social and individual levels. This can also be seen in his 1958 essay “Culture is Ordinary”, where he rejects the Marxist idea of ‘the masses’ (Williams 2001 [1958], 18), instead offering the idea of the individual experiencing culture across many layers, including common societal culture, class culture and community-level culture. He formulates culture as a whole way of life, characterised by plurality (Milner 2006, 76). This multiplicity is the result of how ideas about society, country and the ways and means of life must be negotiated by individuals. He points out:

The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind (Williams 2001 [1958], 11).

So, while societies, classes and communities can have distinct cultural characteristics, this does not mean that their members are uniform or homogenous. Williams rejects what he
regards as a tendency to use Gramsci’s idea of hegemony as totalising. He notes that hegemony “does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified” (Williams 1977, 112). He also writes that “while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive” (Williams 1977, 113).

In his application of structures of feeling to literature and literary analysis, Williams presents his concept as counter-hegemonic in the sense that literature often reveals resistance to hegemony as a totalising force. Literature allows the processes of renewal, recreation, defence and modification to become visible, via analysis. Andrew Milner asserts that lived culture is not identical to dominant culture and takes the position that structures of feeling “actively anticipate subsequent mutations in the general culture itself; in short, they are quite specifically counter-hegemonic” (Milner 2006, 81).

While the notion of hegemony presupposes a system of cultural production originating from the bourgeoisie, Williams is much more sensitive to the individual experience and to culture as intimate and immediate – a lived process of subjective remaking.

Fiction, with its direct access to the minds of characters, is, therefore, well-placed to illuminate this individual process of meaning-making and cultural production. Characters’ responses help to reveal the social and cultural contexts they inhabit and show how personal experience can deviate from dominant norms, values and ideas. This is evidence of culture as an active process, which is never settled. This subjective experience, or what, as explained previously, Williams refers to as “practical consciousness” (Williams 1977, 130), often offers evidence of resistance to dominant cultural norms and values, with inconsistencies between larger formations and individual perception acting as a conduit for readers to consider points

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Thomas Bates identifies the concept of hegemony as the “unifying thread in Gramsci’s prison notes” and defines it as “political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class” (Bates 1975, 351-2). He relates this back to Marx’s idea that the ruling ideas of each age are the ideas of the ruling class (Bates 1975, 351). Williams resists the totalising aspect of Gramsci and Marx’s propositions (Williams 2001 [1958], 15) and offers, in my view, more nuance and consideration of the individual experience in the construction of a worldview.
of unease and dissatisfaction within a complex society. This resistance first takes the form of feeling, which characters negotiate, consciously and unconsciousl

cy. It is “feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social” (Williams 1977, 129). However, characters often find that the existing understandings, beliefs and institutions of a culture are insufficient for consciously understanding and articulating what is felt at the individual level. Williams suggests that “there are the experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognise” (Williams 1977, 130). Structures of feeling are the arrangement of what is not yet graspable, what Williams terms the emergent or pre-emergent (Williams 1977, 132), which, while not yet classifiable, still exerts a material force.

Williams’ structure of feeling is helpful to understand the historical moment of a novel’s setting, as they offer a “cultural hypothesis” (Williams 1977, 132) in relation to that setting. The nature of structures of feeling also dispels notions of hegemony and historical inevitability, as the concept restores a sense of the individual as an agent of cultural production. Resistance to dominant cultural norms becomes visible and marginalised voices are afforded room to speak. Filmer suggests structures of feeling do this because of two key elements: otherness and the possibility of change (Filmer 2003, 203). Otherness is deviation from prevailing cultural formations and

which is unarticulated through exclusion – the otherness of those social and cultural groups displaced by the distortions of formal structures of social and political interest and the dominant economic institutions of production and exchange (Filmer 2003, 203).

Otherness might be regarded as alternative or oppositional culture, which sit at a distance from effective dominant culture (Williams 2014 [1973], 129), or simply as changes of presence (Williams 1977, 132), which signal the embryonic shifting of social understandings, attitudes and inflections.
As such, Williams’ idea helps to illuminate that which is displaced, emerging or invisible to provide fuller and deeper insight into a given historical moment. Williams proposes that certain kinds of novel offer

a valuing creation of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of individual human beings, who while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves (Williams 1958, 22).

As in the lived world, characters in such novels are simultaneously a product of their culture, help produce culture and resist culture. The novel overcomes Williams’ critique of the view of culture as static, as instead, it is “defining a social experience that is still in process” (Williams 1977, 132; italics in original). This temporal openness thus makes possible the re-evaluation of supposed causative relationships, the challenging of ongoing cultural assumptions, and change. According to Ben Highmore:

The work around ‘structures of feelings’ [sic] was never simply about doing better, fuller cultural history ... it was about understanding how change occurs, how social and cultural forms are maintained, and, perhaps most importantly of all, of locating what Williams referred to as ‘resources of hope’ (Highmore 2016, 160).

This hope is an acknowledgement of the possibility for transformation and new ways of living, as culture and society are once again rendered mutable and dynamic. In a sense, this quality is what makes the novel subversive and political, even if the subject matter within it is not overt in its resistance to dominant culture.

**Identifying structures of feeling**

Williams acknowledges the challenges of identifying structures of feeling, pointing out that

the most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of living and thinking (Williams 2014 [1961], 33).
He suggests that useful cultural analysis starts with an awareness of patterns (Williams 2014 [1961], 33), which can help illuminate not just particular histories, but complex relationships within society. Yet these patterns in and of themselves do not provide an encompassing realisation of the time in which they were written. In order to approach this type of knowledge, the reader has to be sensitive to deeper and more subtle cues, as the concept applies to “the difficulty of articulating that which [is] not yet articulatable. … The experiences thus invoked are patterned but as yet neither structured nor structuring” (Filmer 2003, 211). Identifying structures of feeling requires sensitivity to nuance and points of tension in the social atmosphere of a time and place. Williams proposes that structures of feeling are “a particular quality of social experience and relationship” that is general and historically distinct, which he suggests is akin to ‘style’ (Williams 1977, 131). While a slippery proposition, readers can come to grasp these social styles in mood, manner and feeling. Williams suggests an awareness of shifts such as “characteristic approaches and tones in argument” (Williams 2014 [1961], 34) within a narrative.

Williams highlights the significance of particular language use to help ground his idea, arguing that “no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors. The difference can be defined in terms of additions, deletions and modifications, but these do not exhaust it” (Williams 1977, 131). In this conceptualisation, it is not simply what is said that is indicative of change, but also shifting and implied cultural understandings embedded in words and words’ rendering of objects. These encoded meanings offer the sense of a period. Highmore suggests that structures of feeling as akin to style pertains to clothing, housing, food and furnishing, as social relationships to these objects are often unique to a historical period and place (Highmore 2016, 145). Highmore posits that

the joining together of a socially phenomenological interest in the world of things, accompanied by an attention to historically specific moods and atmospheres, is, I think, a way of mobilising the critical potential of ‘structures
of feelings’ [sic] towards important mundane cultural phenomena (Highmore 2016, 145).

He writes that “hope and nostalgia, melancholy and exuberance have sensual forms that are sometimes durable and sometimes fleeting” and that social flourishing and struggling are imbued with tactile and sensory associations (Highmore 2016, 145). These ideas offer a logical and interesting way of considering, for example, Corbusier’s tower blocks in 1960s/1970s Britain, or a home espresso maker in the 1990s. They are not solely objects, but encapsulate feeling and deeper cultural meaning specific to time and place. Similarly, the structures of feeling in physical items are also important in understanding the evocations of certain metaphors in historical texts.

Use of structures of feeling in critical textual analysis

In “Structure of Feeling and Selective Tradition” (1961), Williams offers an application of his idea, offering a model for its use, as he considers English society in the 1840s. His method has informed my writing practice and my analysis within this thesis. He first approaches the decade in terms of history and sociology, identifying seven general features of the period and its dominant social character. He then looks at general shifts in the dominant social character in the period, such as how working-class ideals began to influence dominant middle-class ideals (Williams 2014 [1961], 47). However, his examination of novels offers evidence of a “radical human dissent” (Williams 2014 [1961], 52) from dominant cultural assumptions, which is latent and not yet consciously grasped.

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12 A free trade victory following the repeal of the Corn Laws, re-creation of a new-style Tory Party, the Chartist movement, factory legislation, the fight for the Public Health Act, attempts to amend the Poor Law, the expansion of heavy industries and capital investment (Williams 2014 [1961], 42).

13 Williams defines social character as “the abstract of a dominant group” (Williams 2014 [1961], 46). In the 1840s, this includes belief in the value of work, the assumption of a classed society, growing acceptance of social position defined by status and not simply birth, principle virtues such as thrift, sobriety and piety, and high regard for the sanctity of marriage and abhorrence of adultery (Williams 2014 [1961], 45). However, Williams sees the presence of alternative social characters having a material effect that is underappreciated in terms of historical understanding (Williams 2014 [1961] 46).
The confident assertions of the social character, that success followed effort, and that wealth was the mark of respect, had to contend, if only unconsciously, with a practical world in which things were not so simple. … What comes through with great force is a pervasive atmosphere of instability and debt (Williams 2014 [1961], 49).

The atmosphere of instability and debt that Williams identifies is at odds with the official consciousness of the age, as the subjective experiences and practical consciousness of fictional characters is different from those to be expected from the dominant social character. It is essentially within this gap that the structures of feeling are found. A change is occurring and is characteristic of the time, but it is evident in the form of feeling. What Williams shows is how novels can offer, at times, an alternative sense of the historical moment, one that documents mutations in the culture not yet fully realised, yet still asserting a material force.

Applying a similar approach to the reading of a number of realist novels of the decade, I have found tension and difference between the dominant social character of 1970s Britain and the practical consciousness of their characters. While the nation’s shift from the welfare state to a competitive capitalism characterised by deregulation and privatisation took place in the 1980s, realist fiction from the 1970s provides evidence that change was occurring much earlier, taking the form, first, of feeling and sensation. Works such as Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, Piers Paul Read’s *A Married Man* (1979), AN Wilson’s *Who was Oswald Fish?* (1981), Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* (1975) and Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) all feature characters who offer ambivalent views of the welfare state and whose reflections suggest a pervasive social atmosphere of uncertainty and crisis. Evidence of a *sense* that something was not right with Britain could be regarded as an emergent shift in cultural character that would, under Thatcherism, be seized upon and conceptualised into fixed formations and institutions.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Hall argues that Thatcherism’s project took advantage of the tensions created by a confluence of profound social, economic, political and cultural changes taking place in western capitalist societies (Hall 1996, 223-4), as Thatcherism applied an ideological narrative to the anxieties produced by deeper changes, thus appropriating
At the same time, the ways in which characters within these novels attempt to understand and make sense of their feelings show that Thatcherism and a shift to the political right were not inevitable. Though many characters feel that something is not right with Britain, socialism\textsuperscript{15} is not necessarily rejected. Instead the welfare state is often perceived as flawed and a work-in-progress, yet preferable to pre-war liberal capitalism. \textit{The History Man}’s radical sociology academic, Howard Kirk, reflects that “we are in a world of late capitalism, and capitalism is an over-ripe plum, ready to fall. It is cracking, bursting, from its inner contradictions; but who, from its fall will benefit? How can the new world come?” (Bradbury 1975, 68). Kirk’s attitude suggests that a multitude of possibilities for the future existed in 1970s Britain, with no single and logical outcome being inevitable or predetermined. However, the structures of feeling do provide evidence that change was desired, as profound tensions existed between the social character of the times and the practical consciousness of characters navigating aspects of lived reality. As such, Williams’ concept can inform a more textured understanding of the 1970s, unsettle apparently coherent ideological narratives, including the idea that Thatcher saved Britain (Hannan 2013), and restore a sense of possibility and complexity to our understanding of the historical moment.

A gap is also evident between the social character of 1990s Britain and the practical consciousness of characters within a number of realist fiction texts. However, the structures of feeling in this decade relate not to a sense of the nation in crisis so much as to sensations of isolation, precarity and vulnerability, which can be related to individualism and tensions

\textsuperscript{15} My use of socialism within this dissertation refers to the ideology. The welfare state within Britain is better regarded as ‘negotiated social capitalism’, which David Coates defines as a system in which “the degree of direct state regulation of capital accumulation may still be small; but the political system entrenches a set of strong worker rights and welfare provision which gives organised labour a powerful market presence and the ability to participate directly in industrial decision making. The dominant cultural networks in these capitalisms are invariably social democratic ones” (Coates 1999, 651).
around consumer-based identity formation. In novels such as Hornby’s *About a Boy*, characters work to understand, accommodate and resist the effects of the dominant culture on their lives, one greatly shaped by Thatcherism in the 1980s and a burgeoning neoliberalism. Hornby’s text offers evidence of ambivalence towards neoliberalism, suggesting an emergent desire for compromise between the dominant culture that privileges the sovereign individual and the commitment to social egalitarianism of the past.

Structures of feeling are important for analysing lad lit,\(^1\) which Hornby’s work falls into, given that characters in these novels rarely engage with politics or political issues directly. However, these works are still political in their testing of norms, values and ideas that have been shaped by evolving neoliberal ideology. Andrea Ochsner suggests that some novels within lad lit “explicitly deal with the value-system which was promoted by Thatcher’s government” (Ochsner 2009, 49). Nonetheless, characters rarely, if ever, explicitly consider the effects of this value system on their lives, but, rather, navigate it through the pressures it exerts and feelings it produces. As such, how they conceptualise and rationalise and respond to their reality provides insight into how burgeoning neoliberalism was encountered, felt and resisted in the decade.

**Structures of feeling, the contemporary novel and neoliberalism**

While Williams uses structures of feeling as a means of critical reflection and analysis to better understand the lived social complexities of the past, I believe the concept also proves useful for writers of fiction engaging with the contemporary world. Williams suggests that structures of feeling are “distinguishable from other social and semantic formations by [their] articulation of *presence*” (Williams 1977, 135; italics in original). This emphasis on sense

\(^{16}\) A popular genre in 1990s Britain characterised by hedonistic, narcissistic and anti-feminist male protagonists. I look at this genre in more detail in Chapter 4.
and presence can help attune novelists to the pressures, tensions, feelings and contradictions within the contemporary society that they aim to depict. While Williams suggests that novels are always in the present tense, in that they articulate individual practical consciousness, an appreciation of his idea of structures of feeling can not only help the author capture the structures of feeling but also direct the reader towards a deeper understanding of their character and the nature of the forces impinging upon them.

Within the creative component of this thesis, ‘All in This Together’, I have focused on capturing my imagining of felt tensions of contemporary Britain, allowing characters to express the chaos, contradiction and indecisiveness of the times. As Drabble does in The Ice Age, my characters also engage with and articulate prevailing ideas within society that attempt to explain and fix these pervasive feelings. However, using Williams’ concept as my guide, I have also attempted to create scenes and conflicts that potentially direct readers to a consideration of how neoliberalism affects felt and lived experiences that to relate to such things as human value, individualism and social obligation.

In order to engage with the pressures and tensions produced by neoliberalism in the contemporary world, it is useful to define this ideology as I harness it for this thesis. The ‘Thatcher revolution’ of 1980s Britain can be viewed as part of a move in the western world to the politics of neoliberalism. Heavily influenced by the ideas of Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, it is an ideology that privileges the ‘market’ as the most efficient and rational arbiter of economic decision making. At the level of governance and the organising principle of the economy, Arne Kalleberg and Kevin Hewison explain that:

Neoliberal policies emphasise the market, fiscal discipline, trade, investment and financial liberalisation, deregulation, decentralisation, privatisation, and an altered role for the state. ... In practice a range of related policies have been emphasised or modified in particular circumstances, including a limited welfare state, decentralised labour relations and the weakening of unions, lowering of taxes and fees on business, and fiscal discipline taking precedence over social policies (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013, 275).
Neoliberalism is also a cultural force. The beliefs identified by Kalleberg and Hewison about economic systems, policy and governance exert a profound pressure on how people see society and their role within it; how they assign worth to themselves and others; and how norms and values are shaped. For example, neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism lends itself to a conceptualisation in which each person is the agent of their success or failure (Giroux 2006, 156; Bauman 2001, 72). The belief that the market is the most logical and efficient means of organising the economy sees the citizen reconceptualised as the sovereign consumer, whose freedom of choice positions them as “an agent who is capable of dictating economic production and driving political activity” (Zamora 2019). This emphasis on private individuals over public or communal identities undermines feelings of solidarity and social cohesion, creates political apathy and fuels atomisation. Henry Giroux suggests that neoliberalism’s emphasis on economic rationalism, individualism and anti-statism is essentially undemocratic, as it “embraces commercial rather than civic values, private rather than public interests, and financial incentives rather than ethical concerns” (Giroux 2008, 65). By extension, Bauman and Vecchi see it as emptying ‘citizenship’ of its content (Bauman and Vecchi 2004, 45). The focus on economics as the indicator of social capital and value also leads to stigmatisation of those who are economically marginalised, which we can see in Thatcher’s idea of the undeserving poor and the concept of the underclass in 1990s Britain.

Importantly, Giroux also suggests that neoliberalism affects the nature and use of language, with the focus on evaluating all public decisions in terms of economics and the belief in ‘the market’ as the most efficient (and thus effective) mode of decision-making. He writes:

As public space is privatised, power is disconnected from social obligations and it becomes more difficult for isolated individuals living in consumption-oriented spaces to construct an ethically engaged and power-sensitive
language capable of accommodating the principles of ethics and racial justice as a common good rather than as a private affair (Giroux 2008, 67).

In other words, agents of neoliberalism frame issues and dilemmas within society through language in a way that advances the logic of their ideological system. In this way, people’s capacity to conceive of the world around them in alternative ways is constrained. George Monbiot offers an example of this in the ways in which government agencies in the UK have approached debates about the natural environment. He notes that parks and rivers and forests have become “green infrastructure”, with elements such as air, water and soil becoming “asset classes” within this framework (Monbiot 2014). The intention of this adapted economic language is the commoditisation of the environment in order to assign it a monetary value. The natural world’s value is thus expressed in economically rational terms. In this way, a cost-benefit analysis can be used to determine whether destroying a site such as Smithy Wood, an ancient forest outside Sheffield, to build a service station on the land is a good investment (Monbiot 2014).

The gap in this logic is that these two systems of value – the environmental, heritage and social benefits of the woodland versus a monetary sum – are incompatible. Something as unique as Smithy Wood cannot be commoditised because it cannot technically be sold; it can only be destroyed and lost forever. However, the manipulation of language allows for a conceptual reframing based on the assumption that all elements of life can be reduced and contained within a monetary system of value. While Monbiot’s focus here is the environment, the point can be extended to the commoditisation of love, community, history, sense of place and security. The value of emotions themselves becomes debased. While pricing felt experience seems absurd, the dominance of neoliberal thinking in the west has seen this mode of conceiving of society and communities as normalised, in political and social discourses.
As with all ideologies, neoliberalism as a cultural force sees individual engage with its ideas and narratives and accept or resist them, often unconsciously. Dominant culture is an active process, “an organisation of often quite disparate meanings” which the agents of dominant culture must continuously and actively work to unite (Milner 2002, 80). Given human diversity, any wholesale uptake of ideology is impossible. As such, an appreciation of structures of feeling in the reading and writing of fiction can renew a sense of potential of human agency, diminish the power of the dominant ideology, and, perhaps, re-imagine the individual as democratic citizen. This aspect of Williams’ idea of structures of feeling also disrupts groupings and categories such as ‘the right’, ‘the left’, ‘consumers’, ‘elites’ and ‘the underclass’, since its focus on the social as a collection of individuals with diverse views restores complexity to the human and social world. As Filmer suggests, structures of feeling draw attention to “the significance of literature for the articulation of alternatives to dominant world views, and thus to the politics of social change” (Filmer 2003, 199).

Conclusion

The concept of structures of feeling informs both my critical analysis of texts by Drabble, Hornby and Lott in this dissertation component and the creative component of this thesis, ‘All in This Together’. My analysis demonstrates how literature can help capture the subjective experience of lived reality, including individuals’ modes of thinking as well as their feelings. The concept of structures of feeling draws attention to tensions, contradictions and uncertainties created by gaps between what individual characters experience (practical consciousness) and what the dominant culture or official consciousness of the times suggest they should be experiencing. In this way, readers can gain a better understanding of the age, as generalised social character is augmented with a multitude of individual experiences that may offer instances of characters’ resistance, marginalisation, partial acceptances of norms
and values, and so on. As such, structures of feeling re-infuse complexity into fictional representations of the historical moment.

In terms of the creative component of this thesis, I also suggest that an awareness of structures of feeling in contemporary culture can help attune the writer to social tensions and their deeper causes. It can encourage writers to strive for a capturing of the mood of the times, as well as to focus readers’ attention in such a way as to disrupt dominant (in the present case) neoliberal narratives that attempt to reduce feelings to a rational, measurable or static form. In this way, the author can restore possibility and hope, as culture is shown to be not a top-down hegemonic process, but a constant work in progress in which all individuals participate.
Chapter 3. The Ice Age

Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age* (1977) is a realist novel set in Britain in the mid-1970s, in the wake of Prime Minister Heath’s ‘dash for growth’ (1971-73), an economic policy characterised by tax cuts and deregulation which led to a property bubble followed by rapid devaluation and recession (Beckett 2009, 127). Adopting a third-person omniscient narrator, the narrative moves between the perspectives of: Anthony Keating, a BBC producer turned property investor; Alison Murray, his partner; and imprisoned real estate developer Len Wincobank and his former girlfriend, Maureen.

All four main characters are preoccupied with their own problems as well as the state of Britain more generally, which is viewed as having lost its way economically, socially and spiritually. They each reflect upon and attempt to determine the root of the crisis, interrogating their feelings in terms of the viability of the welfare state, the impact of the loss of Empire, and cultural changes, including immigration and youth culture. Britain’s problems are both concrete – economic recession – but also, in the context of characters’ lives, experienced as sensations of unease and trepidation that cannot be alleviated through the rational explanations and understandings on offer. Characters articulate their feelings of turmoil through language and metaphors that often evoke paralysis and impending disaster, as they attempt to find expression for what is felt. These articulations are informed by middle-class assumptions about class that betray deep-seated doubts about egalitarianism and the welfare state. In this way, structures of feeling in *The Ice Age* show the complexity of the historical moment, dispelling the notion of Thatcherism’s inevitability while, at the same time, showing the unconscious impulses that helped support Britain’s radical turn away from the welfare state.

The novel is infused with sensations of paralysis. Characters and the nation are trapped in a metaphorical ice age, unable to resolve their issues. Multiple characters are in
prison, Anthony is immobilised by financial limbo and the economy is stuck in recession. And yet, *The Ice Age* is also characterised by a sense of pent-up, ever-growing destructive energy, which takes the form of a devastating storm, threatening crowds, the destruction of public space, and, finally, an overseas coup. This atmosphere of stasis and rising pressure offers a distinct sense of Britain during this historical period, as it reflects a pervasive mood of the times. Hall would later conceptualise it as “an unlocated surge of social anxiety” with origins in “the unresolved ambiguities and contradictions of affluence, of the postwar ‘settlement’” (Hall 1988, 34).

Characters in *The Ice Age* feel that something is ‘not quite right’ with Britain, but are unable to define the precise shape or cause of their disquiet. They grope around, poke, explore, hypothesis and test ideas, but there is little in the existing culture to encapsulate or help them articulate what they are feeling. As a result, there is “tension between the received interpretation and [their] practical experience” which takes the form of “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” (Williams 1977, 130). The characters cannot fully make sense of their feelings of immobility and looming danger, yet it is intensely real and exerts profound pressure on them.

*The Ice Age* might be regarded as a ‘Condition of England’ novel, a category of fiction named after its association with Victorian Britain, notably works such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) and Benjamin Disraeli’s *Coningsby* (1844). J Russell Perkin defines Condition of England novels as “a type of fiction that has been a recurring feature of the English literary landscape since the late 1830s, and that seeks to represent the state of the whole nation, diagnosing its ills and at least implicitly prescribing a remedy” (Perkin 2017, 100). These sorts of works have traditionally considered the political and social climate of their time, taking into account the effects of industrialisation, class and politics on the individual and the community. Drabble’s novel is
similar in that it engages directly with the upheavals of the 1970s in Britain, a decade which saw developments such as the three-day week, the oil crisis, extreme cycles of inflation, labour unrest and increased strikes.

In this chapter, I explore how Drabble places her characters in unfamiliar or discomfiting situations in order to explore the social tensions and unease they variously and individually feel. This technique disrupts their habitual ways of seeing the world, as confrontations lead characters to interrogate their beliefs and work through the cogency of prevailing ideologies and ideas. In this way, Drabble’s characters’ practical consciousness reveals the inadequacy of existing systems of understanding to resolve their anxieties. While they attempt to rationalise Britain’s crisis through their narrative perspectives, none of the arguments available to them is sufficient. In this way, the text represents not just how individuals were thinking about the nation’s issues at the time, but also how they were feeling them, and what effect this had on their perceptions and lives.

I also consider how metaphors are used to give shape to, and interrogate, tension in the narrative’s unfolding. Property metaphors give form to ambivalence about the loosening of class and egalitarianism, the loss of empire and modernisation. Property also allows for interrogation of anxiety about the organisation of the economy in relation to the welfare state and free-market capitalism. The character of Anthony, imagined as a metaphor for the nation, opens up space for a deeper consideration of spirit and spirituality as material conditions. And Drabble’s use of nature provides a visceral sense of disharmony and disorder and encourage readers to consider intangible but irpressible human and social commitments, such as purpose, ethics and spirit.
Plot summary

The novel opens with Anthony recovering from a heart attack at his country estate, High Rook House, in Yorkshire. He ruminates on his situation, both in terms of his health and his financial situation, which is dire, as he and his business partners are unable to sell a property in London due to the recession. He considers how he came to his current life, recounting his upbringing, time at the BBC and friendship with mentor and imprisoned property developer, Len Wincobank.

The narrative perspective switches between Alison, who ruminates on her relationship with Anthony; and, Len, in prison, who reflects on his situation and England’s resistance to development. It then shifts to Maureen’s perspective, who considers her conflicted feelings about Len’s downfall, acknowledging both his criminal actions and the excitement of his risky, high-reward lifestyle. The novel then utilises a third-person omniscient narrator to canvass ideas about the nation’s crisis, listing the myriad rational causes citizens assign to Britain’s malaise. This includes those on the political left, who advocate for the end of the free-market capitalist system, and those on the political right, who argue for its expansion.

The novel’s narrative perspective continues to shift between characters. Maureen visits her aunt Evie, who is being evicted from her council house. This prompts her to consider the meaning of a home and to question Len’s unrelenting drive for redevelopment. Alison is in the (fictitious) Eastern European country of Walachia, where her daughter Jane is imprisoned for killing two men while driving. She considers Jane’s situation, England’s predicament, her sister Rosemary’s cancer and her developmentally disabled daughter, Molly. She wonders if their various conditions are fate or the result of choice.

Anthony hosts his business partner Giles overnight and suspects that he is possibly being deceptive in his dealings. With Alison in Walachia, Molly comes to stay with Anthony. Alison decides to return to England, further straining her already difficult relationship with
Jane. A violent storm sweeps across Britain, downing power lines and causing damage. Alison returns to London and is unsettled by the city, as its pollution, sense of menace and urban decay contradict the somewhat romanticised idea of England she had envisioned on her plane trip back. She stays with Kitty Friedmann, whose husband has recently been killed by an IRA bomb in Mayfair. Kitty’s home offers a sanctuary. Alison’s rail trip to Yorkshire unsettles her once again, as she is confronted by a South African man critical of Britain, prompting her to deliberate on what has caused the national crisis. She alludes to this crisis as one not just of economics, but of spirit. On her way, she finds herself trapped in the chaotic urban city centre at Northam, unable to find a way to navigate the built environment. She sees an Alsatian dog, which has apparently been maimed by a car while crossing the street.

Alison and Anthony spend time with Molly at High Rook House, but Alison feels hesitant about their relationship. Jane, meanwhile, is sentenced to two years in prison. Anthony returns to London for business and finds a pregnant squatter in his home, whom he takes to the hospital. Anthony’s financial fortunes improve, as his business partners manage to sell the London property and resolve his debts. This does not alleviate Anthony’s sense of personal crisis, however, as he begins to drink to excess, despite his heart condition. His disenchantment grows when he goes to see an old friend, Mike Morgan, performing stand-up comedy and feels irritated with his Marxist views. Anthony quits his partnership and gets out of the property market. Through diplomatic contacts, he travels to Walachia and helps free Jane, but ends up imprisoned after becoming embroiled in the political violence that erupts there. The novel ends with him in jail, working on a treatise that helps explain God’s treatment of humanity.
Critical responses

In her analysis of *The Ice Age*, Joanne V Creighton emphases Drabble’s focus on “the integral connection between people and their houses and environments” and implies that the commoditisation of housing in 1970s Britain has disrupted the natural balance (Creighton 1985, 97). She considers the meaning of space within the novel, with urban Britain depicted as dehumanising and houses acting as refuges and “islands of selfhood” (Creighton 1985, 91).

Valerie Grosvenor Myer considers Drabble’s symbolic use of houses (Myer 1974, 132) and prisons (Myer 1991, 113). The state of a house can reflect the character’s inner turmoil, while prisons can be both literal and spiritual. She sees *The Ice Age* as ultimately being about the struggles between the material world and God, ending with the hope of spiritual renewal (Myer 1991, 108). Perhaps most interestingly, Myer highlights how Drabble’s characters make direct assertions about their lives and society, but are often wrong (Myer 1974, 155). This makes the author’s use of imagery important, as images often stand in contrast to what characters perceive, potentially creating ambiguity and tension and opening up space for readers to engage in their own meaning-making. Myer posits that “Images are used to create atmosphere, to make thematic statements, to express character, to direct our responses and to imply moral judgements” (Myer 1974, 155-6).

Mary Hurley Moran suggests the novel revolves around the question of fate and free will, reflecting Drabble’s belief that human beings have limited agency (Moran 1983, 15). She sees the author using a “medieval wheel-of-fortune concept”, with characters rising and falling in fortune (Moran 1983, 26). Moran also emphasises the symbolic role of nature in the novel, which relates to spiritual wellbeing, a feature she locates in Romanticism:

Like the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, [Drabble] wants to re-establish human beings’ intimate connection with the rest of nature – animal, vegetative, and geological. And like them, she intuits the presence of a
supreme force, be it God or something more abstract, animating and giving significance to the natural world (Moran 1983, 37).

Russell Perkin considers Drabble’s use of Wordsworth, too, though suggests she ultimately resists a Wordsworthian rural idealism:

Drabble began *The Ice Age* with epigraphs [including lines from Wordsworth’s “London, 1802”] appealing to an idea of national destiny and ends with two individuals who represent other Wordsworthian themes: resignation and endurance, resolution and independence (Perkin 2015, 199).

Jane Duran considers *The Ice Age* as a contemporary postmodern historical novel, which captures some sense of the times yet resists historical hierarchies and standard Eurocentric worldviews (Duran 2006, 37-38). Instead, she notes how Drabble shifts the narration from class to class through her diverse characters and omniscient narration (Duran 2006, 38).

*The Ice Age* is remarkable for Drabble's refusal to acknowledge any one view of any class of Britons as paramount. Rather, she moves from class to class and individual to individual to give us an account of how history is created by its participants (Duran 2006, 39).

**How character dislocation reveals structures of feeling**

Drabble often moves her characters out of their familiar locales, disrupting their habitual or ‘fixed’ ways of seeing the world. These unsettling encounters typically prompt feelings of stress and panic as the characters attempt to understand what is threatening them, its nature and its origins. In doing so, they engage with the social world through “practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (Williams 1977, 132). Tension is experienced first as feeling and is then consciously reflected upon, as characters attempt to resolve their turmoil through existing systems of belief and knowledge. Drabble’s technique draws attention to points of social tension and allows her characters to interrogate their feelings in a naturalistic way. This, coupled with the nature of their discourse, offers insight into the structures of feeling of the decade.
Alison’s return to Britain from Walachia is an example of this dislocation. On her flight back, she conceives of England as a “promise of civilisation”, with modern amenities, such as Tampax and reliable phones (Drabble 1977, 159). This imagined community is shaped by tradition and civility, which she thinks of in terms of gallantry and dedication to service (Drabble 1977, 159). This is Alison’s stable idea of the nation, a supposedly known entity, what Williams might refer to as culture in the past tense, fixed and finite (Williams 1977, 128). However, upon her return, Alison finds herself in a dirty, crowded and threatening Victoria Station. Her surroundings paralyse her, as she stands “on the platform, amidst the garbage and the pigeons”, feeling too frightened even to use the public phone box (Drabble 1977, 161). The next day, at St Pancras station, is even worse.

She looked up, at the crazy Gothic façade, at the impressive iron arches. Victorian England had produced them. She had so loved England. A fear and sadness in tune with her own breathed out of the station’s shifting population: old ladies with bags, a black man with a brush and bin, pallid girls in jeans, an Indian with a tea trolley, a big fat man with a carrier bag, they all looked around themselves shiftily, uneasily, eyeing abandoned packages, kicking dirty blowing plastic bags from their ankles, expecting explosions (Drabble 1977, 172).

Her previous imagining of the nation as a stable promise of civilisation is disrupted, as, in Alison’s lived experience, it is sprawling, chaotic and beyond her grasp. Her country is no longer recognisable and is reflected upon in the past tense, as if gone. Alison’s reaction expresses a mix of nostalgia, loss, fear and dread, but she cannot articulate precisely why. Instead, she looks for a causative agent, wondering “who has undermined, so terrified, so threatened and subdued us?” (Drabble 1977, 172).

Alison’s use of language, image and detail reveals the mood of the times and insight into ways of thinking, including assumptions and underpinning beliefs. The way in which she attempts to articulate her bewilderment offers evidence of the structures of feeling, as she makes telling choices in language and offers “qualifications, reservations, indications” (Williams 1977, 130), which speak to the gap between recognisable formations, institutions
and traditions and her subjective reality. In a sense, England is not what it should be, and Alison must work to understand why. Tellingly, the nation that she “loved” is associated with the Victorian age, as symbolised by the Gothic façade and impressive iron arches, which offers evidence of Imperial nostalgia. However, this majestic nation, which she refers to as “us” has been terrified, threatened and subdued by an unspoken other, the unknown “who” (Drabble 1977, 172). This suggests that England’s crisis has been caused by an unidentified enemy, and is not due to circumstance or an act of its citizens.\(^\text{17}\) Both this nostalgia and paranoia are notable feelings that help readers understand the mood of the times.

Alison’s reflections illuminate the potential approaches individuals took to rationalise these feelings of conspiracy. In her description of the station, the Victorian structure is personified as an ailing being, with fear and sadness breathing out of the population within it (Drabble 1977, 172). Whether conscious or not, this implies that the ‘other’ has infiltrated and infected the nation like a virus. In a sense, the noble, true England appears to have been afflicted by the elderly, pale, fat and foreign. Unlike the imagined service workers of England steeped in gallantry that Alison had imagined on her plane journey, she is confronted by a black man with and a brush and bin and an Indian man with a tea trolley – two of the populaces within the station’s metaphorical lungs. From this perspective, she is attempting to understand her anxiety in terms of apprehension about post-colonial immigration into Britain, thus working to reconcile her paranoia about the other and her nostalgia for a bygone empire.

Alison had imagined escaping the chaos of the world outside England, upon her return, she finds that the world has infiltrated and infected her homeland. This interpretation

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\(^{17}\) Hall would later suggest that this feeling was a prevailing characteristic of the times. He writes: “Between 1972 and 1974, the ‘crisis’ came finally to be appropriated – by governments in office, the repressive apparatuses of the state, the media and some articulate sectors of public opinion – as an interlocking set of planned or organised conspiracies. British society became little short of fixated by the idea of a conspiracy against ‘the British way of life’” (Hall 1988, 23).
is supported by Alison’s subsequent terse exchange on the train with a South African man who complains about the poor state of council housing in Britain and pornography in Soho (Drabble 1977, 172-3). Alison concedes that the man’s views are fair, but she thinks that “it was for her, an Englishwoman, to voice them, she felt, not for him, a foreigner” (Drabble 1977, 173). She assumes a privileged place in the colonial hierarchy here, one in which the English citizen is deemed superior and empowered to speak.

While these reflections and encounters reveal feelings, assumptions and biases, they also suggest a deeper feature of the structures of feeling in the mid-1970s, namely, a profound concern about British identity itself. While the colonial period is ended and the nation has become increasingly multicultural and racially diverse, the myths and assumptions of the Victorian Age continue to assert an influence on how individuals see themselves and attempt to make sense of their feelings. Alison’s encounters with society are fraught with insecurity, both in her interactions but also in the ways she conceives of her surroundings. She is bewildered by the city, which she does not recognise. She fears both London (Drabble 1977, 161) and the north of England (Drabble 1977, 173). Alison’s sense that the South African on the train does not have the right to complain about the nation could be regarded as evidence of a latent desire on the part of white, native-born Britons to reassert British authority and solidify colonial identity. This self-doubt about national identity and its manifestation as paranoia and nostalgia might also be seen as evidence of an emergent cultural formation, one that Thatcher would draw on with her evocation of Victorian Values, the Blitz spirit and an enduring British national character.\(^{18}\)

However, as is characteristic of the novel, Alison cannot resolve her feelings with a definitive explanation for the nation’s crisis. As such, she draws upon other possible

\(^{18}\) Hall sees the Thatcher project as rooting itself “inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of ‘national identity’ ... [and characterised by] constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation” (Hall 1988, 8).
explanations from the culture, including youth culture and the permissive society. Earlier in the novel, she considers Jane, imprisoned in Walachia for reckless driving and the death of two men, and thinks:

who could blame the new nations of the world for wishing to take their revenge? Alison herself did not approve of the dirty, idle parasitic British teenagers, who thought they could smoke and strum their way round the world on their grass and their appalling guitars, preaching freedom and idleness to those who believed in work (Drabble 1977, 97).

Alison attempts to resolve her feelings of irritation and unsettlement by adopting the position of moral crusaders such as Mary Whitehouse.19 In this formulation, the national crisis is conceived of as an outcome of social movements that took shape in the 1960s, such as feminism and shifting gender roles, increased sexual freedoms, secularisation and drug use. Hall suggests these became part of a series of moral panics (Hall 1988, 36), which included a focus on the hedonistic and anti-social nature of the youth movement (Hall 1988, 34).

Alison also considers Imperialism itself. As the train moves north, she observes environmental damage in mining areas and wonders if the nation’s current problems are hubris. She reflects: “was it true that the English had ransacked their riches for two centuries, had spent like lords, and were now bankrupt, living in the ruins of their own past grandiose excesses?” (Drabble 1977, 173). Like St Pancras Station, the landscape is personified here too. As the train makes its way through a cutting in the topography, “the sheer stone slices on either side of her wept black, dank, perpetual tears” (Drabble 1977, 174).

Throughout the scene, Alison attempts to articulate and rationalise her feelings, groping around for an explanation to resolve her distress. But there is no resolution, only new impulses and partial justifications. Her feelings remain as an emergent formation. In this way,

19 Mary Whitehouse was a former teacher and Christian revivalist who gained public notoriety by campaigning against what she regarded as filth and corruption. Largely, she campaigned against sexually explicit material in television in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (McSmith 2011, 138).
Alison offers experience of a “present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships” (Williams 1977, 133). Therefore, then, the novel offers an active experience of subjective, lived reality in the historical moment, revealing a character’s disposition in complexity, contradiction and uncertainty.

Importantly, in this scene, and throughout the novel, Alison never finds certainty about the root of Britain’s malaise. She ultimately admits to having “no picture of the future” for either herself or the nation, and believes “we have fragmented and dissolved into uncertainty” (Drabble 1977, 234). Drabble’s character thus captures the feeling that something is not right, that the nation is failing, but it is left for the reader to ultimately consider why and draw their own conclusions.

**Clashing discourses**

The sense of dislocation experienced by Drabble’s characters helps to show how individuals in the 1970s may have responded to, interrogated and tested evolving ideological ideas against lived experience. In this way, the novel is valuable in offering readers an understanding of the times, as it shows the individual as an active agent in cultural production. It disrupts any misperception that people in the past acted en masse, by restoring detail to the historical moment, thus allowing readers a glimpse into confusion, uncertainty and ways of thinking and feeling. In *The Ice Age*, this includes ambivalence about the welfare state as well as about the Heath government’s move towards a more competitive capitalism. This larger argument as to how the nation’s economy should be structured, and what that might mean for the shape of society, is explored at the individual level of character within the novel. This subjectivity shifts the debate from one of logic and reason to one in which feeling and emotion have tangible value.
Drabble shows that characters do not live homogeneous, ideologically consistent lives, but that individuals’ experiences are unique, and often contradictory or changeable. An example of this is when Maureen visits her aunt Evie, whose council house is being forcibly acquired by the council for demolition. While Maureen has previously shared Len’s rigid capitalist and free-market view of property development, within this scene she considers the council flat’s value from both Len’s perspective and from that of the older woman. This shifting of point-of-view strips back existing ideological assumptions and allows for the evaluation of ideas such as tradition, progress and community. In this scene, in one sense, Drabble ‘stages’ an ideological clash, a technique in fiction that literary theorist Terry Eagleton suggests can highlight “limits, absences and contradictions in the ideology which are not visible to us in everyday life, where ideology is, so to speak, too close to the eyeball to be objectified” (Eagleton in Macherey 2006, ix).

Maureen’s visit to her aunt’s council house involves two ways of seeing the place. On the one hand, Maureen imagines Len’s perspective. As a devotee of free-market capitalism, he sees the problem with England in terms of its people being “shabby, lazy, unambitious, complacently high-minded” (Drabble 1977, 55). Maureen doubts that Len would have any sympathy for Evie. She assesses her surroundings:

She tried to look at it through Len’s eyes. A rundown, seedy, neglected area, an eyesore, a disgrace. A monument to lousy housing policy, bad planning, council ineptitude (Drabble 1977, 94).

Maureen accepts that Len’s perspective has some validity, noting the poor state of the house and the decline of the surrounding neighbourhood. However, she finds that “when I think of Aunt Evie, it’s as though I was thinking about a different place. Seeing it through her eyes” (Drabble 1977, 94). Whereas Maureen initially notes the sloped roof, crumbling steps and buckled floors, she becomes aware of the unique “bits and bobs” that her aunt has collected over decades, which could never look right anywhere else (Drabble 1977, 93).
recognises that Evie regards her house not as a property, but as a home, the place where she has lived all of her married life and where she has spent thirty years “making herself one of the most respectable women in the neighbourhood” (Drabble 1977, 93). Maureen’s ambivalence allows her to see her surroundings through two opposing systems of value. Len’s ideological vision is shaped by economics and the profit motive, whereas her aunt’s is informed by values such as security, sense of self and community cohesion. Drabble’s placing of Maureen in this context re-humanises the debate about urban development, as well as about public versus private housing. On this view, Len’s ideological position is exposed as limited, but so too are Britain’s council housing policies. This speaks to deeper tensions about the shape of the economy more broadly, showing how feelings of uncertainty about both the welfare state and moves towards free-market policies in the decade.

The scene also suggests a Britain divided between past and present, between a desire for progress and for maintaining tradition. Again, this speaks to anxiety about the nation’s identity, expressed not just through economic policy but also culture, custom and community. Maureen’s ability to see the council house through her aunt’s eyes helps re-infuse economic and social policy with a sense of the personal, destabilising the privileging of economic progress and reframing the nation as a collective and not simply as an economic and legal entity.

Structures of feeling are also revealed in the scene through Maureen’s conscious engagement with Len’s discourse, as she works to understand why she feels hesitant about his worldview. She recognises the patterns in his language use – which might be regarded as belonging to developers and free-market business people more broadly – as being underpinned by aggression and mendacity. Notably, she locates Len’s words and figurative language that connect to feelings and behavioural attitudes. Maureen reflects that

in principle, [Len] was always in favour of rebuilding, and nothing annoyed him more than stories about pathetic old ladies fighting lone battles to preserve
their cherished crumbling homes. He was all for more ruthless powers of eviction’’ (Drabble 1977, 92).

Len’s perspective frames the world in individualistic terms – ‘lone battles’ – with no consideration of how people fit within a larger community. The language is also violent, with ‘ruthless,’ ‘fighting’ and ‘battles’ conjuring up a threat to the national or collective interest. In this way, the language excludes and alienates those in council housing, such as Evie.

Maureen thinks:

Len had been fond of a phrase that had always puzzled her: ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs,’ he used to say. But that was nonsense. She tried to work it out. Of course an omelette is broken eggs. That was the point about an omelette. There’s nothing accidental about breaking eggs for omelettes. Whereas nobody could pretend that an office block was angry evicted old ladies” (Drabble 1977, 94; italics in the original).

Maureen sees that the metaphor provides a poor rationale for justifying redevelopment, particularly as depictions of the agents of violence shifts from residents to developers breaking eggs – that is, old ladies. While Maureen can accept that Len’s instrumentalist arguments about redeveloping and modernising are logical, they are checked by a hesitation that she feels. The scene offers a sense that emotional and personal connections have value that help support community and social cohesion. And yet Maureen concedes she would never want to live in Evie’s dilapidated council house (Drabble 1977, 94), which paradoxically shows Maureen’s desire for development and modernisation. As such, the scene reveals unresolved tension between ‘progress’ and maintaining tradition, without either shown to be ideal.20 This in turn might suggest anxiety about the speed of change in post-war Britain and how it has destabilised feelings of security and belonging.

20 Hall suggests Thatcherism succeeded in part through the way it addressed a similar underlying tension, writing that “Thatcherite populism is a particularly rich mix. It combines the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neoliberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism” (Hall 1988, 48).
Property metaphors

Highmore suggests that physical objects can act as sites for understanding structures of feeling. He states that feeling “is related to the world of touch, to a sensual world that is fabricated out of wood, steel, denim, crushed-velvet and tarmac” and not to words alone (Highmore 2016, 145). Historically-specific feelings can be embedded in an object itself (Highmore 2016, 158) or in its treatment, such as the attitude with which a particular item of clothing is worn (Highmore 2016, 153). The key is to consider the phenomenology of the world of things, accompanied by an attention to historically specific moods and atmospheres (Highmore 2016, 145). Drawing on Highmore’s ideas, the symbolic meaning of property and attitudes towards it in the novel act as a conduit to better understand the mood of the times and how individuals attempted to understand their feelings.

Highmore proposes that feelings are embedded in the accoutrements of everyday life, offering “one way of explaining how formations of feeling are disseminated, how they suture us to the social world” (Highmore 2016, 145). The Ice Age shows how the neglect of public spaces in 1970s Britain provoked strong feelings of trepidation and concern in individuals, offering first a “sensory amalgam”, which Highmore views as an amalgamation between felt emotion and an object, preceding rational associations of meaning (Highmore 2016, 145). In the novel, this sensory amalgam becomes a site for a metaphorical connection between the perceived failure of council housing in particular and the welfare state in general. In short, the feelings created by the perceived neglect of tower blocks become linked to council housing more generally, the character of its occupants and the government policies that underpin their existence. This insight is useful for making sense of the structure of feelings within the

21 Apprehension about council housing is a recurring theme in a number of novels of the 1970s, including Bradbury’s The History Man (1972), Pym’s Quartet in Autumn (1977), Read’s A Married Man (1979), Arthur Wise’s Who Killed Enoch Powell? (1970), Wilson’s Who was Oswald Fish? (1981), JG Ballard’s High-Rise (1975) and Anthony Burgess’s 1985 (1978). The poor state of tower blocks often elicits feeling of disgust and disillusionment in characters in these novels. Because council housing is a key feature of the welfare state, characters equate the two, with tower blocks coming to symbolise the welfare state’s failings. For example,
decade, but is also useful in understanding how objects become potential sources of metaphor and meaning-making.

This fusion of object, sensation and metaphorical meaning is perhaps best seen in Anthony’s reflections on collecting his children from a 20-storey council tower block. He recalls that

the lift had been broken, the walls covered with graffiti, there was dog shit on the stairs (was it dog shit?) and broken bottles dumped in corners, the trees uprooted in the communal stripe of garden, the communal flowerbeds trampled (Drabble 1977, 69).

In contrast, the flat in which the party takes place is “cosy, neat, compact, bright” (Drabble 1977, 69). While the public space provokes disgust and insecurity, the private is homely and safe. Anthony recalls discussing this with his wife, a liberal, who blamed the “oppressive architecture rather than the people”, as well as with a friend, who opined that “we must recognise that what belongs to everybody, belongs to nobody. And nobody will care for it” (Drabble 1977, 69). Both positions suggest that the poor state of the buildings align with their occupants’ diminished values and behaviours. Those living in council housing are cast as part of the larger social and economic problems.

Anthony interrogates his feelings and the views of his former wife and friend through a metaphor in which council housing acts as a proxy for Britain’s move towards socialism more generally. The contrast of public exterior that is damaged and neglected is contrasted with the private interior, which is well-maintained. However, the style of Anthony’s

*High-Rise* traces the responses of Dr Robert Laing as the 40-storey tower block in which he lives descends into anarchy and tribal violence. In Burgess’s 1985, future-Britain is a nation in ruin, paralysed by roving gangs of lawless youths who roam council high rises to callously attack the weak. The welfare state has bankrupted Britain through rampant inflation and inefficiency, leaving it to be bailed out by Middle Eastern despots. In Burgess’s novel, the tower block is a symbol of socialism’s corrosive effects on norms of individual and social responsibility. In this formulation, it is not the building themselves that are harmful, but the political policies that brought about their construction. Ironically, post-Thatcher, in 1990s fiction such as Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995), Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993) and Richards’ *Throwing the House Out of the Window* (1995), tower blocks symbolise the failure of Thatcherism and the creation of an atomised underclass.

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reflections offers a deeper insight into the structures of feeling, as they suggest a bias related to housing and class specific to the time. Anthony considers why so many homeless and jobless people have moved to London, many “to inhabit decaying terraces, and to squat in derelict slums” (Drabble 1977, 70). In contrast, his middle-class contemporaries are relocating to the countryside. He wonders if they are “simply seeking every Englishman’s dream: his own plot, his own castle, his own estate?” (Drabble 1977, 70). In this formulation, the implied ‘real’ English everyman does not desire a council flat, but wants to own land. This situates those living in council housing as inherently deficient. There is a clear difference not simply in terms of abode, but in nature. The English middle class is respectable and aspirant, while the poor and working classes are base and happy to literally ‘slum it’.

Like Alison’s pining for Victorian England and her apparent apprehension about immigrants from former colonies, Anthony’s view of the housing situation reveals underlying nostalgia for a bygone England, led by a quasi-landed ruling class, and distrust of an encroaching other. Beyond this, his reflections demarcate and reinforce ideas about what it means to be British, again showing underlying uncertainty about national identity and an impulse to stabilise class hierarchies. Those who live in decaying terrace houses (the poor or working class) and who squat (the poor) are, in Anthony’s view, leading to the degradation of the nation. Not only do they destroy public space, but they are bestial, smearing their own shit onto the walls. Anthony illuminates a felt anxiety about British identity, although in this case, the problem is the encroachment of working-class citizens on spaces hitherto owned by the middle and upper-classes. This feeling, and its symbolic expression through the tower block, could be regarded as providing grounds for middle-class acceptance of Thatcherite policies aimed at the reduction of council housing and organised labour (working-class)

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22 This paranoia of the lower classes rising up is most evident in *The Assassination of Enoch Powell* (1970), which sees the Conservative politician killed, sparking a revolution.
power. Policies such as the Housing Act (‘right to buy’)\(^{23}\) addressed the deep-seated worry felt by some that Britain had drifted too far to the left and given over too much influence to groups of people who could not be trusted to defend the public interest.\(^{24}\)

**Anthony as metaphor of the nation**

Drabble also captures and explores the era’s sense of uncertainty and through her use of Anthony as a metaphor for Britain itself. This personification offers insight into how national problems were felt as a crisis of the spirit, and not just a matter of economics or social norms. Filmer sees structures of feeling “hovering between the privacy of subjective feeling and the publicity of linguistic utterance, they are expressed as pre-formulations for intersubjective, shareable meanings … elaborated through the structures of expressive and communicable form” (Filmer 2003, 209). From this point of view, the metaphor occupies this in-between space, offering an alternative way of grasping the deep sense of paralysis, indecision and foreboding that affects both Anthony and the nation.

At moments within the narrative, Anthony’s individual situation closely parallels the experiences of Britain as a nation. Like the country, the housing downturn has left him over-extended financially and lingering on the edge of bankruptcy. He has had a heart attack and is recuperating at his home, which reinforces the sense that the nation, too, is sick. The connection between Anthony and England is immediate, palpable and personal. Anthony’s estate is called High Rook House for the birds that surround it, but also evokes the tower in chess, which is known as the ‘rook’. This potentially calls to mind the Tower of London and

\(^{23}\) According to Sarah Monk and Mark Kleinman: “The ‘right to buy’ introduced by the Tories in the 1980 Housing Act gave tenants a discount on the market value of their property of between 33 and 50% (later raised to a maximum of 60% for houses and 75% for flats” (Monk and Kleinman 1988, 124). The policy was part of the Thatcher government’s dismantling of the welfare state and is consistent with its rhetoric on individual freedom as opposed to the state control of council-owned housing.

\(^{24}\) Philip Tew suggests that Anthony voices the middle-class presumption that “only the energies of a revitalised middle class can rescue the nation” (Tew 2004, 68).
its ravens – birds, which, like the rook, belong to the family Corvidae. Legend holds that if the ravens ever leave its grounds, the kingdom and Tower, and thus England, will fall. As such, Anthony’s situation is infused with foreboding and gravitas, both for himself and the country.

Reading Anthony as a metaphor also opens up space to consider the nation as irrational, impulsive and reactionary and not as a coherent entity. In this way, Britain, like the individual, might be seen as active, alive and evolving. Prior to the 1970s Anthony had shared the nation’s broad commitment to egalitarianism, reflecting that in university, he had “deplored the fact that so much was owned by so few, would have liked to see public schools abolished, denounced the property-owning role of the Church, and could not see why everybody did not agree that a radical redistribution of wealth was logical, desirable and necessary” (Drabble 1977, 22). This changed in the 1970s, when, readers learn, Anthony became enchanted by Len Wincobank’s property ambitions, embracing the atmosphere of speculation, risk and potentially easy money created by the Heath government’s enthusiasm for deregulation and tax cuts (Drabble 1977, 28-29). Anthony concedes that “he had rarely done the sensible thing in his life: his whole career had consisted of careless gambles and apostasies” (Drabble 1977, 20). He seems to have no clear sense of purpose or foundation. By the 1970s, readers learn, he is empty:

> He was underemployed, bored, and not at all happy in his relation to his work, his country, or the society he lived in: ripe for conversion, to some creed. A political creed, but there wasn’t one: a religious creed, but he had had God, along with his father and life in the cathedral close. So what would happen to the vacant space, in Anthony Keating? What would occupy it? The vacant space was occupied by Len Wincobank (Drabble 1977, 27).

Anthony’s emptiness provides a visceral sense of a nation searching for identity and meaning. His feelings are simultaneously personal and communal. The recent turn to free-market policies for both Prime Minister Heath and Anthony have resulted in debt and disaster.
Through the character of Anthony, Drabble also develops her overarching theme that Britain’s current problems are linked to a crisis of spirit, the effect of its loss of religious faith. Anthony manages to sell a property and avert financial disaster, which he compares to Britain’s discovery of North Sea Oil in the North Sea, “the black miracle, the Deus Ex Machina” that will save the nation economically (Drabble 1977, 209). However, this economic good fortune sends him into a spiral of drinking and despair, which re-emphasises the sense that his (and the nation’s) malaise has a deeper cause. He finds himself in a diplomat’s bedroom, waiting to travel to Walachia to help Jane and finds images of Victorian England all around the office.

Anthony stirred, restlessly. Surely, even as a boy, he and his clever friends had mocked the notion of Empire? Surely they had all known the past was dead, that it was time for a New Age? But nothing had arisen to fill the gap ... where were the new tricks? They had produced no new images, no new style, merely a cheap stained exhausted imitation of the old one (Drabble 1977, 261).

The reflection is both nostalgic, and a rejection of an idealised past. The Victorian era is another dogma to fill vacant space, but ultimately an ‘old trick’. The present and the past can offer no purpose or meaning. Like Alison, he cannot resolve his feelings or find an adequate way to understand them based on what is available in the culture. At this point, Anthony leaves the nation – physically and metaphorically – and ends up imprisoned in Walachia, where he no longer cares about England’s problems. Instead, he has turned to a more meaningful purpose, to explain God’s ways to man, like Boethius. The omniscient narrator insinuates that this saves Anthony, as he embraces his fate, as ordained by God. This ending leaves the metaphor of Anthony as nation unresolved, and offers little in the way of practical remedies for England’s problems. This, in itself, is evidence of the sense of paralysis of the times.
The natural world as metaphor

Drabble also uses metaphors and images drawn from the natural world to suggest that the nation and its citizens are suffering from a crisis of the spirit. Often, these have to do with death and disease, as the living world signifies the disorder of the metaphysical world. This approach supports Drabble’s theme of Britain needing to transcend its social, political and economic problems and find a higher spiritual purpose, but also expresses a sense of discord and feeling that society is in disharmony. The narrative carries echoes of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and the Christian Bible to signal this idea.

One of the most striking scenes within the novel is Alison’s attempts to navigate the city of Northam, which has recently been redeveloped. She wants to visit a chemist before her next train, but finds herself trapped by the urban environment, “confronted by an enormous roundabout, the beginning of a fly-over, a road leading to a multi-storey car park, and an underpass” (Drabble 1977, 174-5). While the chemist is accessible by car, pedestrians have to traverse a concrete tunnel beneath the road filled with carbon monoxide and rubbish, which she views as “monstrous, inhuman, ludicrous” (Drabble 1977, 175). The urban environment isolates her, constricts her and overwhelms her with its industrial, impersonal and unnatural atmosphere.

As she contemplates hopping over a railing onto the road, she is stopped by the sight of an Alsatian dog, which appears on the four-lane motorway. She observes:

Its fur had been scooped and flayed backwards: a wad of it hung rumpled. It must, she thought, be dying … But where would it go? There was nothing but concrete, as far as the eye could see. There was no cave, no hole, no retreat, no lair. But it walked as though it had some purpose. It was going somewhere, if only to death (Drabble 1977, 177).

There is a sense that the dog is a vision, perhaps created by the “stink of carbon monoxide” around her (Drabble 1977, 175). It stops her from stepping into the road momentarily, but then she climbs over the railing, “as strange a sight in her own way and as
displaced as the dog” (Drabble 1977, 177). In this sense, she becomes the animal, damaged by the urban landscape, walking through her life as if she has purpose, if only to approach death. The natural world and built environment become demarcated. Like the black cut hills and the Alsatian dog, she is alive but wounded, diminished by industrialisation, progress and the mechanisation of modern life. All that is alive is suffering. The power of the imagery and its connection with the character is visceral and traumatic, highlighting the sense of unease that things are not right in England, that the country and people in general are moving in the wrong direction. What ails the country seems to be much more profound than the structure of the economy and politics – it goes to their very being – and might be beyond resolution.

This sense of the metaphysical is further signified by the storm midway through the novel, which destroys houses and unsettles characters and their lives. It calls to mind both *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, which feature storms that indicate a natural world in chaos, resulting from the unnatural acts of their protagonists. Drabble makes the connection to *King Lear* directly when Alison contemplates Jane’s killing of two men while driving in Walachia, as she reflects that “there is no such thing as an accident. We are marked down. We choose what our own ill thoughts choose for us” (Drabble 1977, 158). She then catches herself and thinks, “What, in ill thoughts again?” (Drabble 1977, 159) which she remembers comes from *King Lear*.25 In the play, Lear betrays his daughter Cordelia in an act which contributes to his downfall and ultimately her death. Alison feels that she has wronged her daughter by not giving her proper attention, thus bringing about the car accident. This failing of maternal care is symptomatic of the feeling of disorder.

As the storm rages, threatening to rip off roofs throughout the country, Len approaches a fellow inmate who is shunned by the prison population, Callendar. The older man intones that something has gone wrong with the laws of chance (Drabble 1977, 169),

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25 Act V, Scene II
implying that the cosmic order has been disrupted. Drabble also draws on Christian and pagan symbolism to reinforce the need for repentance. Maureen and her new boss Derek watch the storm from a hotel restaurant in Sheffield, thinking the hills are like Stonehenge. Maureen then muses that “the dark satanic smoke had gone forever, and Sheffield lay purified by the apocalyptic flames of a new Jerusalem” (Drabble 1977, 171). The old city is destroyed and the spiritual rebirth and second coming is foreseen. Drabble’s use of metaphors work in support of her theme of turning to God throughout the novel, but they also add to the pervasive sense of foreboding and deep paralysis that marked this period in Britain.

Conclusion

With *The Ice Age*, Drabble creates a novel that explores many of the problems of Britain in the 1970s. It reveals how this ‘crisis’ was experienced by individuals, such as the characters of Alison and Anthony. These characters help articulate how this stalemate felt through their observations, connections and attempts to understand their feelings. The novel’s use of image, metaphor and symbolism also capture a sense of the crisis, offering a form to figure subjects’ emotional responses and meaning-making processes that are not yet fully understood or that cannot be fully articulated. The uncertainty and confusion felt by characters serves as resistance to the idea of historical inevitability, showing that a number of possible narratives could have characterised the 1980s, not only Thatcher’s anti-statist neoliberalism.

However, at the same time, *The Ice Age* also shows the lingering influence of Imperialism, notably on identity, as characters feel that the nation has lost its authority and sense of pride. Related to this are underlying, and enduring, class assumptions, which reveal deep-seeded middle-class unease with Britain’s egalitarianism and council-housing situation. Despite surface ambivalence towards the welfare state, the narrative, particularly as focalised
through Anthony’s perspective, is grounded on the as-yet inarticulate belief that the middle
classes must regain control and assert themselves. This emergent state can be seen as
evidence of the orientation necessary for Thatcherism to thrive. So, while characters
consciously debate the crisis and offer rational arguments for the welfare state, the novel
provides evidence of a deeper, unconscious shift that helps to explain why radical political
and social change occurred and was tolerated in the 1980s.
Chapter 4. About a Boy

While The Ice Age provides insight into the emergent cultural conditions that would allow Thatcherism to take hold, structures of feeling in Nick Hornby’s About a Boy (1998) show how individuals in the 1990s were attempting to make sense of the radical changes that occurred in the 1980s. The novel also provides evidence of negotiation between dominant neoliberal values (the extension of Thatcherism in the decade) and the lingering influence of welfare-state values – which, while subsumed by the profound political, economic and social changes of the 1980s, are still in existence during the 1990s. Overall, Hornby’s text suggests exhaustion with Thatcherism coupled with an awareness that the nation has moved on from the welfare state. This might be read as evidence of an emerging desire within British society for an ideological compromise, one later addressed politically by Tony Blair’s “Third Way”.

About a Boy is a multilayered novel written in the realist genre that allows for a number of readings. The novel is a family story about Fiona, a single mother, and Marcus, her son, who try to start a new life in London while dealing with economic pressures and social isolation. It is also a coming-of-age story for both a thirty-something-year-old man, Will, and a 12-year-old boy, Marcus. And it is a snapshot of consumer-oriented society and lad culture, a form of masculine identity in popular culture that encouraged men to shun the adult world of responsibility and remain in a state of delayed adolescence. In this regard, the novel captures a range of experiences of diverse characters going about their lives in contemporary London during the 1990s. Hornby manages to create a fictional world that opens up a sense of life as experienced through the subjective realities of individuals, each of whom is struggling in some way to understand their emotional needs and desires and the

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26 The lad identity and lad lit genre are considered more closely in the Critical responses section of this chapter.
pressures they face within society. It is this ability to capture the times that led *Guardian* reviewer Tobias Hill to call Hornby the decade’s “most influential autobiographer”, as an author whose writing “crept up on the Nineties and captured something of them. … Hornby Man is an instantly recognisable social phenomenon” (Hill 1998).

Hill’s evocation of Hornby’s male protagonists as part of a social phenomenon unique to the times bolsters the view that novels such as *About a Boy* capture structures of feeling of the decade. Although Hill highlights the role of male protagonists, and many critics have drawn on Hornby’s works to explore issues of masculinity in the 1990s, *About a Boy* offers insight into the ongoing effects of the radical social, political and economic changes that took hold in the 1980s. Characters in many lad lit novels, such as Will Freeman, do struggle to understand what it means to be a man in Britain in the decade, but, in doing so, their experiences speak to a multitude of social influences, many of which relate to the aftermath of Thatcherism and the neoliberal political agenda it established. Gender norms are inseparable from this larger cultural canvas. Will’s performance of his identity is informed, primarily, by dominant neoliberal norms and values, including individualism and consumer culture.

Will’s story within *About a Boy* can be regarded as “social experiences in solution” (Williams 1977, 133; italics in original), with his emotional responses, evasions and processes of thought offering insight into lived experience in Britain in the 1990s. The character of Will helps the reader understand the times because he believes in, and lives his life as, a self-obsessed consumer, consistent with dominant norms and values that position the subject principally as a market actor. He judges and values himself and others not as citizens or by class, but according to what they own and what they do – how they project their identities via consumption. However, while he claims to be content with this mode of living,
his anxiety is indicative of a gap between the dominant culture of 1990s Britain and his practical consciousness. Williams offers a helpful distinction:

Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived. … It is a kind of feeling and thinking (Williams 1977, 130-131).

The difference between what the dominant culture tells Will he should be feeling – contentment and happiness at being individualised and free – is at odds with his actual lived experience. While this can, in part, be attributed to his expression of masculinity as a lad who resists commitment, it also suggests limitations to the promises of self-fulfilment associated with both consumption and over-arching self-regard. The text captures this resistance, which might be seen as an exhaustion with Thatcher’s promotion of meritocracy and its extension as John Major’s classless society.27

About a Boy sees all of its characters attempt to understand their lives in terms of social pressures and individual needs, testing their own perceptions against dominant culture. Marcus is a young boy who wants – and desperately needs – to fit into a social world obsessed with branded clothing and allegiances to particular sports teams and bands. While he sees his problem as personal and the result of his mother’s rejection of contemporary culture, his anxiety is produced by, and has its roots within, the broader social conditions of the larger society. Marcus has a sense of why he is miserable, but only through his interactions with Will does he come to see how consumer society shapes the behaviours and expectations of those around him, as Will shows him that buying the right clothes and having the right haircut is the key to approaching social acceptance.

27 Turner relates the origin of this idea: “When, in 1990, Major set out his stall in a bid for the leadership of the Conservative Party, he promised to ‘make changes that will produce across the whole of this country a genuinely classless society, in which people can rise to whatever level their abilities and their good fortune may take them from wherever they started’” (Turner 2013, 4).
Will and Marcus both feel pressure created by the norms and values of consumer culture. Though they make no connection between their personal troubles and this larger structural formation, their feelings can be taken as evidence of a social experience. They are encountering a force that affects them, though they don’t really understand why. In this way, the novel reveals structures of feeling, which Williams characterises in terms of a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and denominate characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies (Williams 1977, 132; italics in original).

My focus in this chapter is on the principal characters’ feelings of anxiety in response to experiences of atomisation and precarity burgeoning in neoliberal culture. I view these affects, glimpsed throughout the narrative, as characteristic of the structures of feeling within 1990s Britain. This includes characters displaying unease that can be read as symptomatic of the fluidity of identity construction, the role of consumerism as a marker of social capital, and the lionising of individualism. While not outwardly political, the novel can help readers gain insight into a period of transition in Britain, where belief in a return to pre-Thatcher welfare state values is at its nadir, yet neoliberal ideology has also fallen well short of its promises. The unease felt by characters is not consciously identified with the political and social reverberations from the previous decade, but their effects exert an influence on characters’ perceptions of themselves and others. This includes characters’ ideas of belonging and assessments of their own and others’ value within society.

In this chapter, I consider how characters use metaphors and imagery to articulate their anxiety, which often relates to precarity and isolation. I suggest that the form of these expressions reflect changes within the social structure of Britain arising from neoliberal ideologies and policies more generally.
Moreover, I explore how Hornby’s narrative may be read as creatively interrogating and *challenging* neoliberal norms and values, including the idealisation of individualism and the desirability of consumer-based identities. The narrative exposes the limitations and drawbacks of Will’s lifestyle through the irony and humour of free indirect discourse, in which the impersonal, omniscient third-person narrator repeatedly undermines Will’s claims about his enviable life. The discrepancies between Will’s assertions and detail from the third-person narrator nudge readers to question his claims, and, by extension, his value system.

The chapter also identifies how Hornby ‘triangulates’ the characters of Will and Fiona in relation to Marcus in order to allow tensions around their different values to be explored dynamically. As the two adult characters attempt to guide Marcus and help him understand how best to live, the limitations, inconsistencies and contradictions of their very different orientations to the world emerge. This conflict of views allows the individual characters to reflect upon and interrogate their own values, and creates space for readers to engage in a similar process. It also speaks to the continuing influence of welfare-state values, despite their marginalisation within the dominant culture.

**Plot summary**

*About a Boy* is set in the early 1990s in London and follows Will, a bachelor in his late 30s, and Marcus, a 12-year-old boy. Will is a hedonistic and narcissistic loner who fills his days purchasing consumer goods and partaking in activities such as watching television, getting stoned, having his hair cut and eating in high-end restaurants. Independently wealthy thanks to royalties from his deceased father’s Christmas novelty song “Santa’s Super Sleigh”, he has no ambitions and is committed to keeping the emotional chaos of human relations at bay, living in his ‘bubble’ and being fully free and independent.
However, Will’s carefully controlled life is disrupted by Marcus, who he has met through SPAT (Single Parents Alone Together), part of his scheme to meet and date single mothers. Will believes that single mothers generally opt for short-term relationships, foregoing deeper commitments due to the complexity of their lives. Marcus insists on hanging out at Will’s flat after he discovers that the older man has invented a fake son, Ned, in order to join SPAT. Will reluctantly, at first, takes on a mentoring role to help the awkward young man learn how to avoid being bullied. This brings Will into contact with Marcus’s mother, Fiona, a depressed social worker. Will and Marcus’s narrative threads mirror each other as a form of bildungsroman, as each assists the other in overcoming their respective problems and ‘growing up’ to reach a new level of maturity. Through Will’s friendship and tutelage on what clothes to wear and what music to listen to, Marcus is able to better fit in at school. His friendship with Ellie, a fellow student and avid Nirvana fan, brings her family into contact with Fiona, opening up a social community for them both; similarly, Will is able to overcome his aversion to commitment and form both communal and romantic bonds, the latter with Rachel, a single mother.

Critical responses

Hornby is considered to be an iconic figure in the lad lit genre, whose leading writers include Lott, David Baddiel, John O’Farrell, Ben Richards, Tony Parsons and Mike Gayle. Their works loosely focus on male protagonists navigating relationship issues, often caused by a desire to avoid being trapped or an inability to act responsibly. Protagonists in these novels are often underachievers, or have failed at their aspirations, and feel they have not lived up to the examples or expectations of their fathers (Parsons 1999, Hornby 1998). The narratives typically have first-person and highly introspective narrators, and include comical and fast-paced dialogue. As the novels generally follow a coming-of-age or evolving-to-
maturity narrative arc, the novels tend to end with characters attaining increased awareness and resolution, with relationships being patched up against the odds (Hornby 1995, 1998; Baddiel 1999; O’Farrell 2000).

Critical engagement with lad lit has predominantly been through questions of gender, in particular the stereotype of the lad, a form of masculinity that gained prominence in 1990s British culture. This includes in TV (*Men Behaving Badly*), radio (Chris Evans), music (Brit Pop) and media (men’s magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM*). Andrea Ochsner defines the lad as “hedonistic, post-(if not anti-) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football and sex” and notes an outlook on life that could be characterised as anti-aspirational, stuck in prolonged adolescence and with an ironic relationship to the world of serious adult concerns (Ochsner 2009, 23).

Drawing explicitly on Williams, Ochsner argues that the lad lit genre is an expression of the structures of feeling in the 1990s, one revolving around a crisis of masculinity in which new understandings of manhood and fatherhood are being pursued (Ochsner 2009, 19-20). She relates this recalibration of identity norms to larger shifts, including globalisation and insecurity, the decline of the nuclear family, gender scripts produced by media and advertising, and changing roles for women (Ochsner 2009, 20-25). In a similar vein, Nick Bentley argues that authors such as Helen Fielding and Hornby were engaged in “re-mapping discourses of femininity and masculinity in the post-feminist 1990s” (Bentley 2005, 1).

Elaine Showalter traces the origins of lad lit to 1950, arguing how they take in the ‘angry young man’ novels of Kingsley Amis (Showalter 2002). She links the texts through thematic similarities, namely being romantic, comic, popular male confessional literature that confronts men’s fear of accepting marriage and adult responsibilities. These, then, according to Showalter, ape male coming-of-age stories in which first-person narration steeped in bravado betrays underlying anxieties (Showalter 2002). Given this historical tracing,
Showalter does not see male insecurity in the 1990s as a necessarily unique or exceptional phenomenon.

In terms of *About a Boy* specifically, Nikola Stepić (2018), like Ochsner, reads the novel as grappling with a ‘crisis of masculinity’. He considers how the rise of consumerism in the late-twentieth century and its role in identity formation conflict with traditional ideas of masculine behaviour. Stepić argues that obsessions with fashion and the collecting of goods had been long-associated with women, and thus these new behaviours challenge traditional ideas and forms of masculinity for men in the 1990s (Stepić 2018, 153). The fact that contemporary men are pressured to construct their identities through branded clothing, luxury goods and other markers of an individual lifestyle creates tension and uncertainty. Stepić suggests that male “appropriation of traditionally feminine interests speaks to the crisis in masculinity that is at the core of lad lit” (Stepić 2018, 153). This, in turn, according to Stepić, helps to explain extreme aspects of the lad stereotype, including sexism and obsession with traditional male pursuits, such as drinking, gambling and football, which might be seen as compensation for feelings of being feminised. Stepić’s ideas are useful in showing the interplay of pressures created by cultural shifts in the late-twentieth century, including feminism and the flourishing of consumer society. From this perspective, the lad’s behaviours are manifestations of much deeper structural forces.28

Thomas Barfuss (2008) argues that *About a Boy* helps readers to navigate the complexities associated with the new individualism of neoliberal society. He writes that “Hornby’s book in fact advises people, preferably singles between thirty and forty, of how to come to terms with the required cleverness and irony as the base of their lifestyle in a way

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28 Rosalind Gill also sees the lad identity as symptomatic of deeper, more complex structural and cultural developments. She argues that neither the ‘new man’ phenomenon of the 1980s nor the 1990s lad evolved solely from media construction or the backlash against feminism, as often suggested; she instead points to the more complex influences of economics, marketing, political ideologies, demographics and consumerism (Gill 2003, 41).
that will enable them to settle to a somewhat more lasting life-style” (Barfuss 2008, 842). He relates this to what he sees as the deception inherent in neoliberalism, which advocates individualism as the way for people to break out of the Fordist conformity that dominated up until the 1980s. Barfuss asserts that this aspect of the neoliberal narrative offers an illusion of freedom, personal gain and empowerment, but, in reality, leaves the individual atomised and unable to enact meaningful change, with the focus on private profit and the personal life hampering the pursuit of greater social good (Barfuss 2008, 847). In this way, drawing on the ideas of Gramsci, Barfuss frames neoliberalism as a ‘passive revolution’. He sees Will as exemplifying the individual who can only become an insider to the new society by removing himself from that society (Barfuss 2008, 842). While Will might be deemed a success in a neoliberal society defined by consumerism and hyper-individualism, this state of separation denies him opportunities for forging social connections and the solidarity that might come from cooperation with others.

**Evocations of insecurity: Marcus**

One way that Hornby captures structures of feeling is through the imagery, metaphors and analogies that his characters draw on to express their emotional states. These various attempts to give form to as-yet inarticulable responses can be taken as evidence of a shift in the style of language in the decade, in that they are underpinned with evocations of precarity, isolation and danger. This suggests a “particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period” (Williams 1977, 131). I suggest that this quality of social experience and relationship is underpinned by tension related to the evolving neoliberal norms and values of the dominant society depicted in this novel.
The plot of *About a Boy* is largely driven by Marcus, who is intensely unhappy because of two problems: his mother is suicidal; and he is bullied at school. While these are obvious reasons for his despondency, how he describes his situation and the ways in which he conceives of solutions is striking. First, he comprehends his and his mother’s failings as the result of their own personal shortcomings, and, as such, he believes that they alone are responsible for remedying the situation. Secondly, Marcus’s attempts to articulate his feelings find expression in language and metaphors filled with risk and uncertainty. Both of these elements speak to unconscious adaptation to neoliberal values of individualism and self-determination.

Marcus sees his problems as his own fault. The reader is informed that “Marcus knew he was weird, and he knew that part of the reason he was weird was because his mum was weird” (Hornby 1998, 21). Following her suicide attempt, Marcus becomes aware that this weirdness leaves them both vulnerable, as they lack friends and family in London. He reflects that

two wasn’t enough, that was the trouble. He’d always thought that two was a good number, and that he’d hate to live in a family of three or four or five. But he could see the point of that now: if someone dropped off the edge, you weren’t left on your own (Hornby 1998, 74-5).

This calls to mind a life lived on a cliff edge, perpetually in danger. The idea that wider social forces and a broader, collective vulnerability are a cause of Fiona’s depression is absent; so too is any notion that help will come from an external agency. Instead, Marcus conceives of security through a neoliberal framework, as a private task. He later imagines his mother marrying Will, not out of love, but for safety’s sake, and thinks it would be good if they had a baby too. His reasoning is then “it wouldn’t matter quite so much if one of them died” (Hornby 1998, 86).
Later in the novel, Marcus adds people to his life, with Will and Ellie and her mum forming a friendship with him and Fiona. He feels safer, and expresses this to his father through a metaphor, explaining:

‘You can find people. It’s like those acrobatic displays. … Those ones when you stand on top of loads of people in a pyramid. It doesn’t really matter who they are, does it, as long as they’re there and you don’t let them go away without finding someone else’ (Hornby 1998, 278).

While Marcus intends this to elucidate his feelings of increased security, rather tellingly the analogy remains loaded with connotations of precarity and danger. Security is contingent. Here it is shown to rely on the personal strength and resolve of individuals, some of whom are likely to go away. Even more, maintaining this pyramid is the responsibility of the individual, as ‘you’ cannot let others go without finding a replacement. The fact that Marcus believes “it doesn’t really matter who they are” sees others valued primarily for their utility.

On the one hand, Marcus finds resolution to his problems within the novel. He needed more people in his family’s life and he found them. However, his reflection on his situation may also be viewed as evidence of resistance to the dominant neoliberal culture, as the style of his articulations suggests a strong underlying anxiety about individualism, personal responsibility and security. His conception of his problems as entirely personal might be seen as evidence of what Bauman calls the consumer mentality, which came into prominence in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Bauman 2001, 130). He writes that insecurity affects us all, immersed as we all are in a fluid and unpredictable world of deregulation, flexibility, competitiveness and endemic uncertainty, but each one of us suffers anxiety on our own, as a private problem (Bauman 2001, 144).

These deeper structural forces impinge on Marcus in a way he doesn’t fully understand, except to know that he and his mother are isolated and need more people around them. He feels fretful and insecure, but doesn’t relate this to dominant norms and values.
within the culture or the political and economic organisation of society. Whereas individuals living in the pre-Thatcher welfare state may have considered their insecurity in terms of class, community, or as citizens who could expect support from the state, Marcus grapples with his situation alone. This difference suggests that the ways in which individuals think about themselves and their place within society has shifted significantly. The 1990s is thus distinct and novel. This locates characters within the text in a social space in which formations and institutions within the culture are new and not yet fully understood, but are already proving insufficient to resolve feelings of tension. This quality of social experience might be regarded as belonging to the individual within a society still adjusting to an evolving neoliberalism and beginning to feel apprehension about its effects.

Marcus’s second problem is that he is bullied at school. He attributes the bullying to his style of dress and describes the social pressure to conform in terms of danger and isolation. He muses that his fellow students

patrolled up and down school corridors like sharks, except that what they were on the lookout for wasn’t flesh but the wrong trousers, or the wrong haircut, or the wrong shoes, any or all of which sent them wild with excitement (Hornby 1998, 21).

While humorous, the simile also is vicious and primal and hints at tensions around consumer culture and its role in defining social inclusion and exclusion. Ochsner suggests that the crux of the novel lies in Will helping Marcus learn how to become an adolescent, act his age and ‘fit in’. She interprets Marcus’s situation as such:

His mother tries to teach him to like things because he likes them and not because everyone else does, but she basically fails to let him lead a kid’s life. Will realises the problem Marcus is faced with and helps him to become a ‘proper kid’ (Ochsner 2009, 281).

However, Fiona’s ‘failure’ and Marcus’s inability to be a ‘proper kid’ need to be understood in relation to what those terms mean in the context of the novel and the society it reflects. Fiona’s failure within the novel is that she is not able to provide Marcus with
information on cultural trends and consumer goods; this is an error in her judgement only if readers agree that the evaluation of people according to their discernment as consumers is valid and that her desire that Marcus be sceptical and think for himself is flawed. From this perspective, Marcus’s shortcomings and Fiona’s failings are not personal deficiencies, but, rather, offer evidence of how neoliberal and consumer culture exert pressures on those who do not conform to their values. While Marcus comes to realise that he must conform, the characters do not, and quite possibly, cannot reflect consciously on the forces that are shaping their behaviours. His attempts to articulate the materiality of his lived experience are felt and thought, “but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (Williams 1977, 131).

**Evocations of insecurity: Will**

Like Marcus, Will thinks of himself primarily as an individual. While he claims that he is satisfied with his personal freedom and self-serving life, his use of images and metaphors, like those used by the younger boy, evoke precarity, danger, drowning and exclusion. As such, the novel reveals structures of feeling through the gap between the way Will lives his life – according to dominant cultural norms and official consciousness – and what he is actually experiencing in his life. In this way, *About a Boy* provides evidence of a disquiet with, and scepticism about, neoliberal values and consumer-based identities, even for those, like Will, who conform to them and are apparently successful when judged against prevailing cultural norms.

Early in the novel, Will reflects upon his solitary lifestyle, with the reader being told that he “was proud of his ability to stay afloat in the enormous ocean of time he had at his disposal; a less resourceful man, he felt, might have gone under and drowned” (Hornby 1998, 79). In this case, staying afloat equates to filling his days with lunches out, crossword puzzles
and getting expensive haircuts – floating above boredom. His lifestyle is frothy, light and lacking in the weight of conflict or toil. He appears to rise above the fray.

However, when faced with a recurrence of Fiona’s depression later in the novel, Will returns to the metaphor and reflects that “it wasn’t easy, floating on the surface of everything: it took skill and nerve, and when people told you that they were thinking of taking their own life, you could feel yourself being dragged under with them. Keeping your head above water was what it was all about, Will reckoned” (Hornby 1998, 229). Instead of lightness, this image of floating evokes fear and dread. His floating is not easy and trivial, but a struggle, one which he must maintain in order to avoid drowning in despair. Will’s alienation is, thus, not so much an act of pleasure as it is terror of being emotionally involved with other people who might need him. This gap between official consciousness and his practical consciousness disrupts the neoliberal ideal of individualism, suggesting that while personal freedom is liberating and removes obligation to others, it is also imbued with vulnerability and peril. Will realises it is only Rachel who is “buoyant” and can “keep him afloat” (Hornby 1998, 230). In this last metaphorical reference, floating is a communal act, not above, but in the water. The implication is that life involves struggle, but that it is best endured together. These images and metaphors show resistance to neoliberal narratives that promote individualism as an ideal pursuit, suggesting, perhaps, a need for compromise between the social obligations and restrictions that characterise the welfare state and the independence and insecurity borne of neoliberalism.

Evocations of emptiness and being incomplete

Images and metaphors also capture a sense of emptiness in Will, as they are often formulated in terms of an absence. For instance, in order to disguise his lack of experience when applying for a job that he claims he doesn’t really want, Will sends a two-page CV
numbered one and three, “implying that page two, the page containing the details of his brilliant career, had got lost somewhere” (Hornby 1998, 80). His worth to single mothers is articulated in terms of absence, as Will reflects that his relationship with Angie and her child was due to his not being her ex-husband: “he was loved for not being Simon more than he had ever been loved simply for being himself” (Hornby 1998, 30). He also lacks Ned, the son he uses as a pretext for joining SPAT to meet single mothers. Ned is symbolic of the substance that Will is missing, an idea made clearer when he meets Rachel at a dinner party. He wants to keep their conversation going, but becomes aware of his inadequacy, with the narrator informing us that “He missed Ned. Ned had given him an extra something, a little *il ne sait quoi*” (Hornby 1998, 181). To fill this empty space, Will pretends that Marcus is his child, which succeeds in drawing Rachel back into conversation. Later, Rachel offers her own reflection on Will being incomplete. She tells him that her first impression of him was that he was “a sort of blank” (Hornby 1998, 218). However, unlike Ned, Marcus does offer Will substance, as Rachel explains that “there is something there. You didn’t make it all up about Marcus. You’re involved, and you care, and you understand him, and you worry about him” (Hornby 1998, 218).

These recurring images and metaphors capture a sense of emptiness about Will and encourage readers to consider what specifically he lacks and what is needed to make him more complete. Early on in the novel, Will reflects bluntly that someone like him could not have existed in previous generations, as a lifestyle funded by novelty song royalties and filled with a range of leisure activities was not available then (Hornby 1998, 14). However, he also suggests that his life is viable because “You didn’t have to have a life of your own any more; you could just peek over the fence at other people’s lives, as lived in newspapers and *EastEnders* and films and exquisitely sad jazz or tough rap songs” (Hornby 1998, 14-15). The implication is that British society in the 1990s does not require social obligation or
participation, which has resulted from the loss of traditional communities grounded upon neighbourhood, class, religious affiliation and jobs for life. In general, these solid lynchpins of identity have disappeared, freeing the individual to build their own identity. As such, Will uses his possessions to show his self-worth and substance. He has all the ‘right’ consumer goods, and, while they give him social caché, they are, paradoxically, not enough. This reveals tension around consumerism and its relation to identity formation and social value. There is a gap between what the dominant culture tells him will fulfil him and his practical consciousness. Again, in terms of structures of feeling, this provides a sense of resistance to consumerism’s role in determining social value and suggests that individualism has limitations. Logically, this resistance offers ‘resources of hope’ (Highmore 2016, 160), as it reasserts the value of individualism’s opposite condition, community.

Viewing Will’s feelings as evidence of resistance or opposition to dominant culture might be read as the emergence of a cultural turn. Turner alludes to this sort of pushing back against neoliberal’s privileging of individualism and promotion of market-based identities in his analysis of 1990s Britain. He sees it as characteristic of a process of coming to terms with changes that began in the 1980s:

Many felt that something valuable had been lost over the course of the Thatcher decade, as private profit took precedence over public service; that Britain was in danger of throwing away an intangible but powerful cohesion, something that might well be termed ‘society’ (Turner 2014, 5).

Through Will’s narrative arc, we can see how this impulse may have been grappled with by individuals at a lived, practical and emotional level in the 1990s.

**The ironic treatment of Will Freeman**

While the language and metaphors within the novel give shape to felt experience in the 1990s, the narrative style also interrogates dominant consumer and neoliberal culture more directly. The ironic effect of free-indirect discourse through a third-person omniscient
narrator exposes Will’s fears, rationalisations and contradictions with wit and humour. In this way, his claims of having an ideal life are undermined, encouraging readers to question the basis of his values and that of wider society. This, too, works by making visible the gap between what is actually being lived, and what is thought is being lived (Williams 1977, 131).

When Will first appears in the novel, he is completing a quiz from a men’s magazine with the intention of finding out “How cool was Will Freeman?” (Hornby 1998, 13). He answers questions about products and experiences that earn him points for being in the know, such as having taken ecstasy, owning hip-hop albums and having eaten polenta and shaved parmesan in a restaurant. He discovers that he is “sub-zero” (a good thing), and is elated, so much so that he decides to hold onto the magazine instead of throwing it away (Hornby 1998, 14). While the scene is comedic, it is notable for its tinge of pathos. As Will celebrates, the reader is informed that he didn’t know how seriously you were supposed to take these questionnaire things, but he couldn’t afford to think about it; being men’s-magazine cool was as close as he had ever come to an achievement, and moments like this were to be treasured (Hornby 1998, 14).

It is not immediately clear whose narrative voice this is: Will’s or the omniscient narrator’s. This use of free-indirect discourse creates ambiguity, as the reader is encouraged to decide if the quiz has affirmed Will’s self-esteem or diminished it. On the one hand, Will is cool, because he has scored well on experiences and purchases that the magazine deems important and of value; and yet he is exposed as pathetic, because his self-worth comes from a men’s magazine quiz.

Similarly, when Marcus insinuates that kids at his school listen to Joni Mitchell, Will is so surprised and distracted by the revelation that he can’t engage in a serious discussion about Fiona’s depression.
Will knew about hip-hop and acid house and grunge and Madchester and indie; he read *Time Out* and *iD* and the *Face* and *Arena* and the *NME*, still. But nobody had ever mentioned anything about a Joni Mitchell revival. He felt dispirited (Hornby 1998, 58).

The threat to Will’s self-esteem and his anxiety are absurd, as he is more concerned about high school music tastes than Fiona’s very serious mental health crisis. His panic offers insight into the precarious nature of status and how social capital and standing are assessed in a consumer-driven society. It is evidence of what Anne Rippin would later identify as characteristic of wealthy consumers in Western societies, particularly those whose identities are heavily reliant on the purchase of luxury goods. She suggests that rather than offering security and a sense of self, identity construction based on the consumption of trendy, cutting-edge products creates an awareness of one’s limitations, as it “increases anxiety by hinting that there is so much more out there that the reader will never be able to feel cool, hip or on top of things” (Rippin 2007, 125).

Bauman and Vecchi frame it in similar terms:

> The task of putting one’s self-identity together, of making it coherent and presenting it for public approval, requires lifelong attention, continuous vigilance, a huge and growing volume of resources and incessant effort with no hope of respite. Acute anxiety results (Bauman and Vecchi 2004, 82).

Will demonstrates this inherent anxiety, which might be seen as indicative of individuals learning to adapt to the growing influence of consumer culture and individualism in the 1990s. However, neither the narrative nor the character ever address or work through these feelings directly. This perhaps suggests that in the historical moment of the novel’s setting, the pressure of maintaining a market-based identity is felt, but not consciously understood – consistent with the idea that structures of feeling capture “forming and formative processes” (Williams 1977, 128).
Will’s flat as metaphor of the man

Hornby’s ironic use of Will’s flat as a metaphor for the man also exposes tensions around, and the limitations inherent to, consumer-based identities. When Marcus first visits Will, he is awed by his stereo, CDs, posters and appliances. These include a number of modern gadgets in the kitchen, such as an espresso maker, ice cream maker and a liquidiser – all the trappings of an urbane and fashionable life. However, Marcus reflects that they “looked as though they had never been used” (Hornby 1998, 105). Marcus questions Will about them:

‘What’s this?’ [Marcus asks]
‘Espresso machine.’
‘And this?’
‘Ice-cream maker. What do you want?’
‘I’ll have some ice-cream, if you’re making it.’
‘I’m not. It takes hours.’
‘ Might as well buy it from the shop, then’ (Hornby 1998, 105).

The scene sets up an implied comparison between Will and the products he owns. Both are superficially impressive, modern and cool. According to the norms of a consumer society, they denote value and elite standing. Yet, on another level, they don’t do anything. Will doesn’t work, and neither do his fancy appliances. This scene thus provokes the reader to question the dominant system of value, in which objects symbolise success.

Will’s cultural tastes are also on display in the flat, with thousands of records and film posters for Double Indemnity and The Big Sleep (Hornby 1998, 104). When Marcus asks why he has black-and-white photos of Charlie Parker and Chet Baker on his walls, Will explains that they’re cool because “‘they took drugs and died, probably’” (Hornby 1998, 105). While these musicians suggest rebelliousness, non-conformism and artistic passion, by contrast, Will spends most afternoons on his sofa watching Countdown, which even Marcus regards as boring (Hornby 1998, 103). Again, the irony exposes a gap between what is projected as
lived and was is actually being lived, evoking the tension derived from consumer-based identities.

**Staging a clash of worldviews**

As I showed in the previous chapter, in *The Ice Age*, Drabble puts her characters in discomfiting social situations in order to disrupt their habitual ways of seeing the world. Hornby does something similar by triangulating Will and Fiona in relation to Marcus. Will and Fiona hold very different views of the world, which come into conflict as they attempt to mentor the young boy. Marcus’s negotiation of their different, often opposing ideas acts to interrogate their beliefs and the ideologies that inform them. This might be read as a clash between Will’s neoliberal values and Fiona’s values, which are informed, in part, by the residual culture of the welfare state. Through Marcus’s narrative perspective, the reader can see how he attempts to understand the world in terms of the values of the two adults, which are informed in part by ideological assumptions and formations available in the culture. However, he also responds to their ideas in a reflexive manner, assessing, evaluating and ultimately deciding which aspects of their advice to accept, ignore or resist. In this way, the reader is offered a glimpse of the contradictions and uncertainties of the historical moment as well as evidence of Williams’ idea of how culture is made and re-made at the individual as well as the social level. He writes, “a culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested” (Williams 2001 [1958], 11). Through Marcus, Hornby makes this process of meaning-making visible, as Marcus tests both Will’s prevailing neoliberal ideas and Fiona’s communal notions of how life should be lived and society organised. In doing so, the novel shows that neoliberalism is not hegemonic, but is one way of seeing and understanding
the world, with its uptake negotiated by the individual. This, in turn, offers resources of hope, as the text reveals options for resistance and the possibility of change.

*About a Boy* can be read as capturing uncertainty about both new neoliberal norms and older collective values associated with the welfare state. Whereas Will appears to be neoliberal in his outlook, Fiona can be read as adhering more closely to the left-wing values that prevailed prior to Thatcherism. Their interactions, as they vie to educate Marcus on how best to live, reveal ongoing tension between the two systems of value and suggests that neither is perfect.

Will is guided by new neoliberal values, as he is self-interested and appears to feel no obligation to society. For example, following Fiona’s suicide attempt, he looks around at the people in the emergency room and feels threatened by their chaotic lives. In his view, everyone is responsible for their own security and safety and need to look out for themselves. He sums up his philosophy:

> You had to live in your own bubble. You couldn’t force your way into someone else’s, because then it wouldn’t be a bubble any more. Will bought his clothes and his CDs and his cars and his Heal’s furniture and his drugs for himself, and himself alone; if Fiona couldn’t afford these things, and didn’t have an equivalent bubble of her own, then that was her lookout (Hornby 1998, 70).

Will might be seen as the embodiment of the sentiment contained within Thatcher’s oft-quoted remark to *Woman’s Own* that

> There is no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first (Thatcher 1987).

Fiona, on the other hand, is a character whose values offer evidence of the continuing influence of the residual culture of the welfare state. She is socially conscious, working as a music therapist for people with disabilities (Hornby 1998, 34), and is a vegetarian and environmentalist – two things Will, “didn’t give much of a shit about, really” (Hornby 1998, 95). Unlike Will, she disdains popular culture and consumerism and has no sense of fashion.
Will’s reaction, when meeting her at a restaurant, is horror at this indifference to public regard, as he wonders: “Why didn’t she have a decent haircut, instead of all that frizz, and why didn’t she wear clothes that looked like they mattered to her?” (Hornby 1998, 95). Her taste in music, like her fashion sense, evokes the 1970s, as she plays James Taylor and Joni Mitchell (Hornby 1998, 97). Ochsner describes Fiona as someone who “seems to have stuck in the 1970s. She cannot cope with the demands of contemporary society” (Ochsner 2009, 285).

The presence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ values does two things: first, it shows a diversity of ideas and positions in 1990s Britain; and, secondly, through a plot which sees Will and Fiona both attempt to advise Marcus, it also shows these values coming into focus through lived experience.

This testing of ideological positions can be seen in the different approaches Will and Fiona take to stop Marcus being bullied. From Will’s perspective, Marcus’s bullying can be explained and remedied by shopping – in this case, choosing the right, trendy trainers to replace his functional black slip-ons, a kind of shoe, the narrator informs us, Will doesn’t think are made anymore (Hornby 1998, 118). Will takes Marcus to buy Adidas trainers, explaining that their branding will allow Marcus to fit in (Hornby 1998, 120). This rationale is consistent with the idea that consumption is a mechanism for social inclusion or exclusion in contemporary society. As Bauman explains, “labels, logos and brands are the terms of the language of recognition” (Bauman 2008, 12). Will is in-step with the times and cognisant that social capital and identity come largely from what you buy, not from class, political allegiances or religious affiliations as in earlier periods.

Fiona holds a very different view of Marcus’s bullying. She rejects the idea that buying shoes – consumption – will remedy the situation. Fiona is scathing of Will:
‘You mean that he thinks he’s trendy, and that even though he’s God knows how old he knows which trainers are fashionable, even though he doesn’t know the first thing about anything else’ (Hornby 1998, 126).

Fiona ultimately argues her position in terms of social consciousness, morality and the need to think for oneself. When Marcus asserts that he would like to go to McDonald’s and eat meat, she says he can, though remarks that she would be disappointed, explaining that she thought he was a vegetarian because he “believed in it” (Hornby 1998, 128). She argues that in life, “You have to work out what you believe in, and then you have to stick to it” (Hornby 1998, 128). She refuses to or cannot see the nature of Marcus’s dilemma, dismissing his argument that his bullying comes from the clothes he wears (Hornby 1998, 126).

However, Marcus reflects that his mother’s approach to life is not consistent with the lives of kids around him. Adhering to her values leaves him vulnerable in a society that more often than not operates and judges according to Will’s worldview. He feels “lucky to have found [Will]” (Hornby 1998, 126), and the implication is that Fiona’s advice is not simply outdated, but dangerous. Will makes a similar point, reflecting on her depression and suicidal feelings. He thinks:

You had to be engaged to be a vegetarian; you had to be engaged to sing ‘Both Sides Now’ with your eyes closed; when it came down to it, you had to be engaged to be a mother. ... Fiona did good works and they had driven her mad: she was vulnerable, messed-up, inadequate (Hornby 1998, 98).

From Will’s perspective, doing good works – being socially conscious – is destructive. Will and Fiona’s advice to Marcus captures some sense of the confusion and contradictions of the historical moment. For one thing, it exposes confusion about the meaning of individualism. Will sees himself as an individual who signifies his place in society through what he consumes. Yet, paradoxically, he informs Marcus that brands will help him fit in and not be seen – to be included and accepted socially through conformity. He reassures the boy that the point of buying the shoes is to follow the crowd and be a “sheep”, arguing that “You don’t want anyone to notice you” (Hornby 1998, 120). In this sense,
individuality is conformity. Equally paradoxical, Fiona’s advice that Marcus should think for himself and not simply purchase products that are popular – the very definition of individualism – is destructive. Marcus can only be ‘in’ and safe by giving up his personal freedom and agency and subsuming his uniqueness in a value system that assesses his worth based on markers of consumption.

The collision of Fiona and Will’s divergent values shows how both are alienated from their society, though in different ways. While Will has social status, he is insecure and largely shuns social interaction or commitment. Fiona is demoralised by the prevailing system of determining worth and is herself socially marginalised. Bauman explains such a predicament in terms of ghettos. He posits two forms of ghetto in contemporary society: the wealthy elite who choose to live apart; and those with more limited means, who are forced into an underclass. The result is a fracturing of the social and political realms:

No ‘collective buffer’ can be forged in the contemporary ghettos for the single reason that ghetto experience dissolves solidarity and destroys mutual trust ... [A ghetto is] a laboratory of social disintegration, atomisation and anomie. ... To sum up: ghetto means the impossibility of community (Bauman 2001, 122; italics in original).

This reading of Will and Fiona in terms of a collision of opposing values and worldviews offers evidence of an exhaustion with Thatcherism and the neoliberal world it ushered in. About a Boy captures a moment of social transition, where a return to the values of the pre-Thatcher welfare state no longer seem feasible, but some compromise is desired. These structures of feeling offer insight into Britain on the cusp of New Labour’s election victory in 1997, which was guided by Tony Blair’s political philosophy of the Third Way. This idea was, itself, a compromise between old Labour and Thatcherism, promising “to blend free-market economics with a leftist social policy of ‘fairness’” (Turner 2014, 258). About a Boy offers some evidence of why Britons in the mid-1990s were receptive to this political re-imagining.
Conclusion

While *About a Boy* does not see its characters directly discussing or reflecting on the politics and dominant ideological norms and values of 1990s Britain, it is an important text for understanding how shifts that began in the 1980s affected perceptions of society and the self and relationships between them. Characters’ recurrent use of metaphors and imagery that evoke precarity and fear capture a sense of the mood of the times. To some degree, all the characters in *About a Boy* suffer feelings of atomisation and alienation, which relates to larger structural pressures informed by the political and ideological context of neoliberalism.

Through Will, the idea that individualism promises freedom and happiness is tested, as his lifestyle is treated ironically through his developing relationship and interactions with Marcus, and through the use of free-indirect discourse. His narrative arc suggests that individualism and an over-reliance on consumerism as a badge of self-worth do not guarantee contentment. Instead, his experience indicates that human connection, love and belonging have fundamental value. The triangulation of Fiona and Will, with their very different worldviews, offers a way for Hornby to test neoliberal values against residual values of the welfare state, which suggests a desire for some compromise between the two.

Ultimately, the novel offers readers a glimpse of the complexity of human lives, disrupting stable ideological precepts in ways that enable readers to view characters as unique individuals caught up in the conflict between dominant social norms and lived experience. Moreover, this focus offers ‘resources of hope’, demonstrating how fiction can potentially reawaken the awareness that alternatives to the atomising and apathy-inducing effects of neoliberalism are possible.
Chapter 5. *White City Blue*

There is a distinct working-class way of life, which I for one value – not only because I was bred in it, for I now, in certain respects, live differently

(Williams 2001 [1958], 15).

As in *The Ice Age* and *About a Boy*, structures of feeling in Tim Lott’s *White City Blue* (1999) show how working-class values and identities and norms from the past may continue to exert an influence on the present-day culture. *White City Blue* makes this marginalised culture visible again and captures the complexity of the lives of those who moved from the working class to the middle class in the 1980s and 1990s.

*White City Blue*, winner of the 1999 Whitbread Award, is a novel in the realist genre that follows 30-year-old Frankie Blue, a successful and aspirant estate agent in West London from a working-class background. The plot revolves around Frankie’s pending wedding to Veronica, which has created tension with his long-time friends Nodge, Colin and Tony. When Veronica suggests none of the friends actually like one another, Frankie goes through a process of evaluating her claim, trying to determine the reasons for his friendships based on his present-day interactions with these men and his memories of their shared past.

The novel is narrated in the third person by Frankie, who draws upon his reflections, memories and experiences to ponder the meaning of friendship and the instability and complexity of personal identity. Yet, beyond this, *White City Blue* reveals deeper anxieties about class in the 1990s, particularly for those, like Frankie, who have moved from their working-class origins to the middle class. The tension around Frankie and Veronica’s wedding is encoded with anxiety around questions of social mobility and class insecurity, as she signifies a rejection not just of his friends, but of his background and class. While this
issue is not directly interrogated, it is bound up in Frankie’s uncertainty about identity and his strong desire to be seen as wealthy and sophisticated.

What *White City Blue* captures and helps to articulate, then, is the *in-between* state of the aspirant working class, who attained the trappings of middle-class identity in the 1980s and 1990s, but who feel they do not quite belong. This is made manifest within the novel in Frankie’s oscillations, as his emotions shift from a desire to keep his friends close, to wishing them out of his life. He wants to marry middle-class Veronica, but then sacrifices her birthday, and as a result, their engagement, for a golf game. He wants to trade up and leave White City, the site of his working-class upbringing, yet keeps an entire wall of photos of old friends and family so that he won’t “float away” (Lott 1999, 36).

Lott reflected on his own feeling of being in-between in 2014:

> The curse and blessing of class mobility penetrates my life. In leaving the working class, I have always been living somewhat on the outside of the middle – no longer of the milieu in which I grew up, yet never quite fitting in to the social level to which I was “rising”.

> I even now find myself from time to time assailed by self-doubt, trying to work out if I am really nothing more than an averagely slick con-man who is somehow fooling everyone by possessing a shallow facility with words – a chancer with a gift for the literary equivalent of three-card monte. Such is the nature of class insecurity (Lott 2014).

In this chapter, I provide a brief summary of *White City Blue*, critical engagement with the text and an overview of its social context. I consider how feelings of being caught in-between are represented in the narrative, including through the use of metaphors and temporal shifts between Frankie’s working-class past and the middle-class present of the novel’s setting. I also consider how characters regulate their use of language, adopting different accents or middle-class vocabulary to distance themselves from their working-class roots. However, characters also draw attention to these habits in others in an attempt to compel them to conform to the expectations of their class of origin. Again, the effect is one of characters pushing and being pulled, of finding themselves in-between. Finally, I consider
how the novel frames new modes of identity formation based on consumption as dubious, and even unethical, reflecting conventional working-class attitudes towards solidarity and rising above one’s station.

In terms of structures of feeling, Frankie’s narration captures deep anxieties unique to the aspirant working class of the 1980s and 1990s; it is a story infused with the character’s conflicting feelings of betrayal, nostalgia, liberation and loss. This anxiety is informed by tension between dominant political narratives that simplify social mobility and conceive of class in purely monetary terms. *White City Blue* problematises Major’s idea of a “classless society”, as it shows that people’s lives are multifaceted, with class-based identities deeply intertwined with personal identity. For individuals such as Frankie, being working class is intrinsic to his sense of self, even if he feels an ambivalence about his background that can never be overcome.

**Plot summary**

*White City Blue* starts with Frankie recounting how he met his fiancé, Veronica, while trying to sell her a house. He suggests that her wealth and refinement fit his ambitions to further reinvent himself as a successful, middle-class businessperson.

Frankie meets his long-time friends Nodge (cab driver), Tony (owner of several hair salons) and Colin (IT worker) in the pub to watch their football team, Queens Park Rangers (QPR), which is one of their regular pursuits. They then go to an Indian restaurant and compete to determine who has given a woman the most orgasms in one ‘session’. Frankie’s narration suggests that the night is indicative of a pattern of behaviour, based on friendship that has become a habit. His attitude to the group and their familiar repartee is one of loyalty but also weariness.
These feelings are articulated by Veronica, who questions why Frankie is friends with the group, and whether they even all like each other. This occurs as Frankie and Veronica make plans for a guest list for their wedding. Veronica encourages Frankie to organise his entire social network into categories by sticking colour-coded pins into a large wall of photos from his past, designating each person in terms such as ‘untouchable’, ‘trophy friends’ and ‘friends from work’. In this way, they can together measure the relative worth of the friends and eliminate those who aren’t valued. Frankie resists, but then discovers that he enjoys the liberation of removing people from his life. While he feels an urge to cut out Colin, Tony and Nodge, he resists, yet is unsettled by his conflicting feelings.

Veronica’s prompting leads Frankie to revisit his past, with chapters recounting how he came to meet Colin, Tony and Nodge. Colin is his oldest friend, from primary school, while Tony became his friend in secondary school after Frankie lied to the principal for him. The incident saw Tony goad a black teacher into striking him. Nodge became a friend through his association with Tony. These recollections chronicle his younger insecurities and the innumerable ways in which his friends came to be so important in his life.

In the run-up to the wedding, Frankie, Tony and Veronica go to a presentation by a new-age speaker Veronica admires. After the speaker burns Tony’s five-pound note, a drunken Tony attacks the man and has to flee. Veronica again voices her doubts about Frankie’s loyalty to his friends, which culminates in her calling off the wedding when Frankie opts to play golf with them instead of going out for her birthday. The reason is that August 14 marks a golf-day tradition that the group has maintained since the end of secondary school. The date commemorates their ‘best day’, when they snorted cocaine for the first time, played football, went to the pub and escaped a retinue of London black cabs who pursued them after Tony clipped a car in a hit and run.
The narrative’s commemoration of August 14 sees tensions within the group come to
the surface. Nodge admits that he is gay, which alienates hyper-masculine Tony, and Frankie
expresses his loathing for Colin when the latter confronts him about cheating to win the day’s
golf competition.

Frankie throws himself into work, but eventually attempts, unsuccessfully, to repair
the group relationship. Colin is indifferent to a reconciliation, as he has become a born-again
Christian, finally finding someone (Jesus) to love him for who he is. Frankie decides against
a reunion with Tony, finally conceding that his friend’s behaviour is toxic, after secretly
witnessing Tony berate one of his workers with a vitriolic sexist and racist tirade. Frankie
repairs his relationship with Nodge and they talk honestly about the sexual encounter they
had with one another as teenagers. The novel ends with Frankie marrying Veronica.

**Context: changes to working-class life**

*White City Blue* is set in London in the 1990s, in the wake of Thatcherism. The
previous decade saw profound changes to Britain’s economic, political and social landscapes,
many of which targeted the working class. The Thatcher government’s abandonment of the
post-war consensus led to a massive program of deindustrialisation, an increase in
unemployment and a decline in union power.29 These changes hit the working class in
particular, most especially in industrial areas such as in parts of Wales and Northern England.
At the same time, Thatcher’s discourse included narratives such as the deserving and
undeserving poor, which divided the working class (and others) between ‘scroungers’ – those
out of work and on social benefits – and those in employment. Unions were identified in
terms of ‘the enemy within’.

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29 Between 1979-1981 alone manufacturing production capacity fell by approximately 25 per cent (Evans 2004,
21); Union membership went from 13.2m in 1979 to 9.8m in 1990 (Ball 2013) and
unemployment rose from 5.3 per cent in 1979 to 11.9 per cent in 1984 and 6.9 per cent in 1990 (Ball 2013).
David Monaghan suggests that Thatcher created two incompatible subject positions for the working class: ‘patriots’, who reject participation in organised labour in favour of the national good; and ‘consumers’ adapting to privatised enterprise culture (Monaghan 2001, 3). While the patriot was expected to make sacrifices for the benefit of society, the consumer was instructed to pursue self-interest. This appeal to the working-class individual to be a consumer responsible for their own personal success or failure was intensified and enabled by policies such as the 1980 Housing Act (‘right to buy’), which offered council housing to tenants at reduced prices. This policy, and others, such as the ability to buy shares in privatised industries, was aimed primarily at skilled members of the working class, who were encouraged to aspire to middle class lifestyles (Evans 2004, 27). The skilled working class was essential to Thatcher’s subsequent election wins (Evans 2004, 27). While Thatcher never achieved more than 43 per cent of the popular vote, she managed to maintain power by attracting a segment of traditionally Labour-voting working-class people.

In 1987, for example, Thatcher’s appeal to their self-interest and their aspirations to self-improvement gave her an 18 per cent lead over Labour among manual workers in the booming south-east of England. Those working-class council house tenants who had recently bought their homes under Conservative policy also proved grateful, and loyal. In the 1987 election, 40 per cent of council house owners voted Conservative, virtually the same as the Tories’ global share of the vote; only 25 per cent of council house tenants did. Labour’s traditional constituency, the working class, was in any case eroding both in numbers and in loyalty (Evans 2004, 27; italics in original).

During the 1980s, the construction of new council housing was reduced. The effect was a new polarisation between those who owned their homes and were able to use ownership as a source of wealth and an underclass who remained in substandard housing with little hope of improvement (Monk and Kleinman 1989, 129).

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30 Lott’s *Rumours of a Hurricane* shows how this pressure to conform and take advantage of the policy affected working-class people through his character, Charlie, who purchases his council flat due to social pressure.
These changes in the 1980s resulted in a fragmentation of the working class between those aspiring to move into the middle class and those unwilling or unable to participate in the new neoliberal enterprise culture. Economic hardship coupled with the political and social stigmatisation of those on welfare benefits, the unemployed and those involved with organised labour contributed to the demoralisation of working-class communities. At the same time, Britain’s transition away from the welfare state to a more consumer-based society led to a further weakening of traditional markers of identity. This shift contributed to a sense of lost identity, diminished status and insecurity for the working class. Lott himself suggests it also led to a sense of shame at being working class (Lott 2008).

In the 1990s, Major put forward the concept of the “classless society”, an idea intended to erase traditional distinctions between groups. While this was an extension of Thatcher’s notions of meritocracy and individual agency as the prime factors in social mobility (Turner 2014, 5), from another perspective, it could be viewed as a further act of erasure of the working class. As the underlying aim of the classless society was to enable social mobility, the logical implication is that those who do not, or cannot, aspire become marginalised. This consigned many to the underclass and the invisible, designated by their lack of wealth and power. In this framework, the value of the working class is determined in overwhelmingly economic terms, with ideas of shared traditions, history, values and kinship significantly diminished or erased.

It is within this context that *White City Blue* is set, with Frankie, Nodge and Tony aspiring to the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle; and Colin, left behind with his senile mother in the family council flat, stigmatised and resented.
Critical responses

Despite its distinctiveness as a 1990s working-class British novel, and its Whitbread win, *White City Blue* has received limited critical attention. Richard Bradford (2007) and Rosalind Gill (2013) draw on the novel in their overviews of 1990s writing and lad lit, but only in passing. Philip Tew also mentions it briefly, noting the hybridisation of working-class identities in the novel and characterising it more generally as charting the “effacement and constantly renewed inferiority faced by the newly educated class of people like estate agent Frankie Blue” (Tew 2004, 88).

Ochsner considers *White City Blue* as a study of masculinity in lad lit. She suggests that the novel is concerned with the tension between the fluidity of identity and the desire to stabilise. She argues that “Frankie is stuck in the past and cannot imagine retaining his identity if he were to lose his friends” (Ochsner 2011, 260). She also suggests that lad lit’s motif of men unwilling or unable to commit to adult romantic relationships is a manifestation of a more complex, more general “(post)modern insecurity” (Ochsner 2011, 249).

Matthew Adams uses *White City Blue* in his exploration of what he sees as the highly rationalistic nature of reflexivity – the self-monitoring and evaluation of the self that is characteristic of late-twentieth century Western life. He suggests that fictional accounts can … be used to problematise the notion of reflexivity, and suggest a more ambiguous selfhood [as they show how self-identity is not simply constructed consciously, but involves the influence of] many areas of experience relevant to the contemporary self – tradition, culture and concepts of fate, the unconscious and emotions (Adams 2002).

Adams’ work is useful in that it highlights, if only inadvertently, the structures of feeling evident in this text and the continuing influence of tradition on the construction of self-identity. As the novel is told from Frankie’s narrative perspective, his reflections on himself and his life need to be considered as partial truths, as he has a limited ability to know
himself. In terms of tradition, Adams’ ideas prompt consideration of how Frankie’s working-class origins influence his perceptions and reactions.

**Pushing and pulling: aspirations and constraints**

Williams advocates a holistic approach to culture, paying particular attention to how literary works relate to the wider society. He suggests that this involves a consideration of patterns:

> It is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind (Williams 2014 [1961], 33).

A recurring motif within *White City Blue* is of Frankie being caught in-between, often conflicted, or pushed and pulled. This is signified by the home he owns on the fringes of White City. He has moved away from the neighbourhood where he grew up, and is nearer to more salubrious areas where he wants to live, but has not quite escaped. The fringes of White City are, themselves, divided.

> It’s still a bit of a mixed area – one or two flat-cappers, one or two roll-up puffers, bitter drinkers, war moaners, leftover from the 1950s and 1960s – but mainly it’s young couples with Volvos, Beemers and Peugeot 205s. I like it unmixed. It makes me feel more secure in my achieved place in the world (Lott 1999, 34).

Superficially, the neighbourhood is decidedly varied in terms of age, culture and conspicuous wealth. However, Frankie’s identification of objects and practices traditionally associated with the working class suggest that his anxiety is grounded in his inability to escape his roots. For Frankie, place is bound up with class, and so his marriage to Veronica represents a chance to “trade up” (Lott 1999, 36), helping him reach his goal of moving from W6 to W11 and finally to W8 (Lott 1999, 4). At the moment, he is in the middle, but his ultimate aspiration is the district that includes Kensington, Chelsea and Holland Park –
traditionally areas inhabited by the wealthy. His ambitions are expressed not in terms of the quality or size of a future home but, indirectly, in terms of class.

Repeatedly, feelings and ideas related to being in-between in White City Blue are permeated with class insecurity, as Frankie straddles his working-class roots and his middle-class aspirations. From this perspective, Frankie’s inconsistent attitude towards his friends can be read as the manifestation of ambivalence about his class origins. Despite Tony and Nodge’s outward social mobility, together with Colin they are strongly associated with Frankie’s past, with their shared experiences grounded in working-class White City. Frankie equates his love of his friends to his love of his parents, reflecting that “they exist as part of my history, and you need your history, don’t you? Otherwise what are you? Who are you?” (Lott 1999, 77).

However, Frankie also detests his friends. When Veronica encourages him to categorise the friends and acquaintances on his wall of photos to eliminate those he no longer needs, he finds his eye drifting to their images. “I thought to myself, Do it now. Finish them off. Kill them all, but instead I diverted it to the bloke from the office” (Lott 1999, 49; italics in original). Yet, moments later, when Veronica suggests the friends don’t like one another, Frankie’s response is visceral and vicious. He tells her “Well, they’re my mates. And I’ll tell you something else. Tony’s going to be my best man, so stick that in your trocar and inject it, you fucking graverobber” (Lott 1999, 51; italics in original). While Frankie reassures himself that he loves his mates, he is unnerved by his contradictory impulses and wonders how he really feels. The exaggerated response to Veronica’s judgment speaks to this confusion and his inability to understand the meaning of what he feels.

This scene is important as its visceral nature draws attention to the novel’s core tension and its intensity as experienced as feeling. Frankie’s outburst is evidence of a deeper fissure, with the violence of his language framing the anxiety as existential – a matter of life
and death. His emotive outburst speaks to deeper motivations that he cannot grasp, but which affect him. In his discussion of Victorian literature, Williams sees a similar dynamic at work, writing that

we find some art expressing feeling which the society, in its general character, could not express. These may be the creative responses which bring new feelings to light. They may be also the simple record of omissions: the nourishment or attempted nourishment of human needs unsatisfied (Williams 2014 [1961], 53).

Williams suggests that gaining deeper understanding of a historical period often involves identifying the “false consciousness” that prevents recognition of the nature of core tension and the desire to move beyond that tension (Williams 2014 [1961], 52-3). In this scene, Frankie cannot satisfactorily rationalise his desire to dissociate himself from his friends, because he does not seem fully aware of how his conflicting feeling about class affect him. In a classless society, tensions around class cannot logically exist, so he is left to find other explanations for his feelings, namely that his friends have become a habit and bore him. The problem is not grasped as social but personal in its origins. Yet this is clearly not enough for Frankie to justify jettisoning his friends, as his reasoning about his situation does not resolve his feelings.

Like his home on the fringes of White City, Frankie is metaphorically caught between his friends and Veronica, believing that his marriage involves a choice between her and them. This becomes a literal choice when he chooses to play golf with Nodge, Tony and Colin instead of celebrating Veronica’s birthday with her. Again, he is unsure about his choice and his motives. He wonders if he is happy, wonders if Veronica really intends to call off the wedding, and wonders if he wants her to do it (Lott 1999, 208). His inability to know himself or the reasons for his actions, again, suggest that his feelings are grounded in something still not fully formed. While his dilemmas can be read in terms of masculinity – the lad unwilling to give up personal freedom for the responsibilities of a mature heterosexual relationship –
Frankie shows an aversion to single life and its routines. Quite early in the novel he concedes that he is not just weary of his friends, but weary of himself when he’s around them (Lott 1999, 18).

This dissatisfaction with the single lad lifestyle suggests that Frankie’s perceived need to choose between Veronica and his old friends is also class insecurity. Nodge, Tony and Colin represent his working-class roots, while Veronica is posh and “maybe two rungs above” Frankie (Lott 1999, 5). Despite being engaged, he has kept them apart, because Frankie is “ashamed” of his friends (Lott 1999, 79). But, really, he is ashamed of his working-class origins, which are a source of embarrassment. However, they are also a fundamental part of his self-identity, and his rejection of his class creates further feelings of guilt and self-loathing.

While Frankie wants to push away his past, he is simultaneously drawn to it. His house features bare white walls, all except one, which he has filled with hundreds of photos of friends and family. He tells the reader that “I made it in a frenzy one night about a week after my father died. That was last year. It reassured me that I was still connected, that I would not float away” (Lott 1999, 36). He wants to escape and yet his upbringing is intrinsic to who he is and his sense of security. The result is a mix of intense and contradictory emotions that he cannot rationalise, reflecting the ambivalent feelings of the aspirant working-class in the 1990s.

**Residual culture**

Frankie appears pulled between wanting to embrace the dominant culture of middle-class meritocracy and his working-class origins, which still asserts considerable influence over how he sees himself. This lingering affect might be considered in terms of Williams’ idea of residual culture, referred to in previous chapters.
By ‘residual’ I mean that some experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation (Williams 2014 [1973], 129).

The stigmatisation of working-class culture in the 1980s, and its subsequent related construction as the underclass, might be seen as impeding its expression within British society in the 1990s. Yet, patterns within White City Blue speak to the ongoing influence of working-class values and beliefs on Frankie and his friends’ perception of themselves and others. Because the residual culture is marked by shame, its expression is often irrational, emotive and frenzied – witness Frankie’s reaction to Veronica questioning his affection for his friends, or his frenzied creation of an entire wall of photos to ground himself. Shame might also be seen as the basis for his desire to escape White City, his friends and his past, as well as his aversion to the symbolic reminders of the working-class, such as men in flat caps.

**Structures of feeling in lived environments**

While Frankie tolerates Tony’s cruel behaviour and repeatedly excuses his sexism, and while he also accepts Nodge despite their differences, he displays an irrational hostility towards Colin. He regards him as “an honest loser and authentic Sad Bloke” (Lott 1999, 60), bemoans having to protect him (Lott 1999, 76), and is generally disdainful of his clothing and lifestyle. Tellingly, however, Colin is the only one in the group who does not aspire to middle-class status. As such, he is a direct and obvious reminder of working-class culture, both of the past and in its contemporary demoralised, marginalised and fragmented form. This makes him a source of shame, which provokes surges of aggravation and cruelty in Frankie.

This can be best seen when Frankie visits Colin to get his laptop fixed. Colin lives with his sick, elderly mother, Olive, in the council flat he grew up in. Frankie resents Olive because she is weak and has “performed weakness” in order to keep Colin with her (Lott
1999, 90; italics in original). Frankie links her to his own working-class family, seeing her as “a wicked, stubborn old woman, with a hatred of life as deeply ingrained as the coal dust on my dad’s thumbs” (Lott 1999, 90). He dislikes her because she has kept Colin in his old life – “there was no escape, not until she died” (Lott 1999, 90) – which, through their friendship, also ties Frankie to his past. Colin regards her fondly and doesn’t show any indication of resenting his mother, but Frankie muses on euthanasia (Lott 1999, 91).

To understand Frankie’s state of mind, it is important to consider his feelings as separate from, and not always consistent with, his thoughts and claims. While he insists that he dislikes Colin’s mother because of the restrictions her neediness places on her son, he is also aware that Colin shows no desire to escape her and his life. As such, Frankie’s claims are not consistent with what he knows, and are a form of denial. Williams is useful in understanding Frankie’s complicated reaction in terms of class-related anxiety, as he advocates separating forms of knowing from one another. He suggests that presences and processes are “often asserted as forms themselves, in contention with other known forms: the subjective as distinct from the objective; experience from belief; feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social” (Williams 1977, 129). Frankie’s emotional responses are at odds with the reality that he encounters, which suggests he is either evading the real source of his anxiety or is not aware of it. What he experiences is a strong reaction that he projects onto Colin and his mother, in part because the dominant culture encourages their stigmatisation.

In this scene Frankie works through his disgust, anger, shame and guilt. In part, this is done through Highmore’s idea of ‘structures of things’, which involves a belief that “the felt world is often experienced in something like a synaesthetic mode where feelings of social flourishing and struggling take on particular flavours, sounds, colour-schemes and smells” (Highmore 2016, 145). Frankie describes Colin’s home as follows:
The flat has the exact same smell I remember from childhood, the straight-out-of-the-cellophane meat pie smell, then something milky, then, underneath, embrocation, floral air freshener, cigarette butt (Lott 1999, 91).

Frankie’s suggestive, sensory-laden depiction conjures a distinctive working-class world of the past, which is unsophisticated but functional. It is decidedly ‘old-fashioned’, featuring staple food items, pies and milk, and the simple domestic pride of air-freshener. There is nothing fancy or aspirational about these surroundings. The smells of smoke and liniment call to mind a larger working-class way of life, decidedly male, with the muscle rub in particular reminiscent of manual labour. These touchstones are repellent to the aspirant Frankie, who spends much of the scene distracted by the fear that someone will damage his BMW parked outside.

Even more than the past, the state of the contemporary White City Estate repulses Frankie, who doesn’t feel safe and bemoans the location. This is how he sees it:

The wind brings tidings, dismal trailers from the rest of the White City Estate: the smell of chips and junk-fed babies, small cascades of ripped and discarded lottery tickets, rattling beer cans sucked dry by collapsing scumbags (Lott 1999, 89).

The degradation of working-class life is evident in the objects of the present, particularly in contrast to those that evoke the past in Colin’s flat. Maternal care and domesticity have been replaced by “junk-filled babies”, alluding to both bad food and heroin. Reverberations of ‘honest work’, pride and manual labour have given way to drunken scumbags and the desire for the quick payoff of lottery tickets. These details can be read to explain Frankie’s irrational hatred of Colin and his mother, as they hint at the complexity of working-class identity in 1990s Britain. The fact that Frankie doesn’t self-consciously perceive his surroundings through the lens of class consciousness also suggests how de rigueur this mode of identity conceptualisation had become in the 1990s, as exemplified by the idea of a classless society. In the scene, Frankie does not admit that class exists, yet his reactions show that it still exudes a material effect. In a way, this is similar to Fiona’s
relationship to the welfare state in About a Boy, as ideas of egalitarianism, community and social responsibility continue to influence her system of value, yet the link to the past is never explicitly made. In both cases, past cultural formations continue to exert a material effect, yet they are not consciously acknowledged or understood.

While Frankie shows an aversion to his working-class origins, they also assert a pull on him, reinforcing the sensation of being caught in-between. When he sees photos of Colin at four or five years of age, he feels an ache in his chest and thinks “His skin is gloweringly, heartbreakingly, pink, fresh and pure. His eyes are not sludge-coloured, but quite a vivid blue. … Something aches slightly at the walls of my chest” (Lott 1999, 92). This is his friend before he has been “reduced” (Lott 1999, 92), in better, or simpler, times. Frankie’s nostalgia can be read as yearning for the past, both personal and cultural.

Colin and his flat act as a convergence point for Frankie’s aversion to his working-class roots, yet also help to reveal his nostalgia and longing for its security and knowability. Colin’s unwillingness, and inability, to change sees him remain in a physical and social location that reminds Frankie of his own past, while the White City Estate confronts Frankie with a lived reality that exemplifies the contemporary degradation of working-class life. This location and the structures of feeling captured by its physical objects speak to the class insecurity of the period for those who moved from the working class to the middle class.

How chronology evokes structures of feeling

The organisation of the novel, with its alternating pattern of chapters set in the present and the past, also captures the sense of Frankie being caught in-between. This disrupted chronology sees Frankie pulled back and forth, not just through time, but from his middle-class aspirant self to his working-class upbringing, which contextualises his memories. While these retrospective chapters work to help Frankie understand why he has remained friends
with Nodge, Tony and Colin, they also allow him to engage with very intense competing feelings, including affection, nostalgia, fear, vulnerability and aversion. This complexity, and his view of himself as a “misfit” (Lott 1999, 104), once more heightens the sense of Frankie not truly belonging anywhere – in large part because of his social climbing.

The novel’s structure also reinforces Frankie’s deep ambivalence. He does not fit in particularly well in the past, which helps to demonstrate why he wants to reinvent himself, and yet he also doesn’t fit in with the present either, as a middle-class subject. In articulating his feelings about being an estate agent, spending considerable time in other people’s houses, he suggests “you’re an intruder all the time, never in your own place. You’re always the misfit, although you have to come across as the opposite – confident, unflinching, positive” (Lott 1999, 3). On a metaphorical level, this suggest that he views his assured projection of middle-class status as a feint: the identity that he performs via his accent, possessions and fashion is a mask that allows him to be in a place where he feels that he does not belong.

Yet, even in chapters that deal with his past, where he is immersed in working-class life, Frankie is torn. His memories evoke an earlier existence that is both desired and repellent. In terms of the latter, his description of entering secondary school is striking and visceral:

Many of my friends – the lesser-ranked ones, and they all fell short of Colin – had been cauterised, cut off. Condemned to the surly pit of Goldhawk High, what would nowadays be called a sink school: kids with dirty chops, vitamin deficiencies, calloused fists who said fucking in front of the teachers. Three-quarters of my friends went there, or to one of the other holding cells in the district – Clem Attlee Comp or, worst of all, St Bart’s, where they wore second-hand clothes and the bad boys fought to the blood every day (Lott 1999, 135; italics in original).

There is no idealisation of working-class life here. The imagery is brutal and bloody, filled with severed limbs, scabs and grime, and the sensation is one of brutality, neglect and chaos. He and Colin manage to escape to a local grammar school, because they are cleverer than others, but even this is a brutal place. Tony is the class bully who humiliates Colin by
pulling off his pants and underwear in front of his schoolmates. Frankie reveals that he befriended Tony, in part, for his own protection, but also because Tony’s status and propensity for cruelty helped him feel stronger: he “began to get bigger inside, less frightened of the outside world” (Lott 1999, 149). His home life also resists any hint of working-class bonhomie, as he remembers his father’s painful death from lung cancer, caused by his years as a coal delivery man. His mother’s life is marked with loneliness, and neither parent has any social life or community, which disrupts stereotypes about the solidarity of traditional working-class life. His memories are highly sensory, saturated with violence, despair and isolation. Yet, Frankie also fondly remembers days with Colin, which offer nostalgia and friendship:

You just played games. Honest games, that had names and rules and horizons and borders. You knew where you were with that sort of game. You won, you lost, sometimes you drew. They were exciting, fun. Innocent, I suppose (Lott 1999, 98).

The feelings triggered by this tumble of memories interconnect, pushing and pulling along a spectrum between love and revulsion. They also serve to offer a dynamic, complex and, often times, contradictory or paradoxical view of working-class life. Their incorporation into his current life demonstrates fiction’s ability to articulate culture in “the undeniable experience of the present … [which] discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products” (Williams 1977, 128). There is nothing certain about Frankie’s sense of himself and the world.

In this novel, the working-class cannot be reduced to the ideologically defined groupings of enemies within, scroungers, strivers or the like; the portrayal is more complex and nuanced than that. Through Frankie, the simple becomes intricate, and the defined become less certain. Beyond this, the narrative works against the idea of a classless society and reinstates working-class consciousness, showing it to be a felt, if not always fully
realised, material force in 1990s British society. The working class are not gone, but rather continue to exist in many forms.

**Class and ways of speaking**

Williams suggests that the way in which generations speak are never the same and argues that change is general “rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects” (Williams 1977, 131). Language, and its associations with class, has multiple functions within *White City Blue*. On the one hand, choice of expressions and accent can signify belonging in the middle class, while, conversely and ironically, the regulation of language serves as a way to re-establish working-class identity. In this way, how one speaks indicates class attitudes and provokes emotional responses in listeners related to class insecurities. Language offers insight into structures of feeling for the aspiring working class.

Like his BMW and expensive clothing, Frankie uses language as a signifier of his status. While his possessions are not necessarily class-specific, his language use is. Frankie repeatedly self-regulates, such as correcting his reference to settee instead of sofa (Lott 1999, 36), and admitting that he often forgets to say loo instead of toilet (Lott 1999, 19). The effect is one of cultural erasure, which might be seen as contributing to his general feelings of guilt and repression. While he doesn’t directly link his language use to an expunging of his background and working-class identity, he does note something similar in a memory of Tony in secondary school. He recalls how Tony pretended that he had forgotten how to speak Italian and, instead, “spoke a carefully enunciated, almost wilfully urban London guttural, exactly like that of any Shepherd’s Bush housing trust glue snorter” (Lott 1999, 138). Tony’s intention was to “establish himself as English through and through” (Lott 1999, 138). Through this memory, choosing a new language is equated with a rejection of origins.
But the regulation of language use is also a way for characters to pull others back to their ‘real’ identities. Frankie recalls Tony’s humiliation when their teacher, Mr Koinage, exposed his guttural London way of talking by speaking to him in a pastiche-Italian ‘Joe Dolce’ voice. In effect, the teacher forced Tony to assume his Italian identity again. Frankie and his friends subconsciously utilise a similar method. Frankie’s attempts to sound middle-class are effectively neutralised by the others, particularly Tony. When Frankie uses sophisticated or middle-class language, Tony repeatedly mocks him for his “syllabobbles” (Lott 1999, 64-74); similarly, Nodge hates when he uses “vocabulary” (Lott 1999, 70). The policing of language acts as a form of constraint on Frankie, disrupting his identification as a middle-class subject.

The group also regulate one another when they engage in behaviours that are deemed above their station. Frankie is dismissive of Nodge, “the only taxi driver in London who reads the *New Statesman*” (Lott 1999, 60), questioning the veracity of Nodge’s admiration for French cinema, dance, contemporary art and opera, of which, he suggests, Nodge “professes to be fond” (Lott 1999, 70). The implication is that a working-class person cannot, or perhaps should not, have cultural interests that traditionally belong to higher classes. These exchanges suggest a desire to re-assert working-class identity. However, this intention is not acknowledged, and may not even be grasped. The self-regulating habit of the group suggests ambivalence about the loss of traditional identities and markers of solidarity, as the characters feel conflicted about abandoning their roots and embracing new consumer-based identities. At the same time, they clearly want to explore new aspects of culture and experience traditionally outside of their class.

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Ironically, Frankie identifies and ridicules restrictive working-class attitudes in others, particularly towards education. Upon graduating from the University of West Middlesex, previously named Staines Technical College, he finds himself in between, partly because he has moved beyond what is deemed socially acceptable for his class.

A degree from Staines Tech – especially at 2:2 – doesn’t exactly buy you a ticket into any of the professions, and what’s more it directly excludes you from many of the skilled and semi-skilled manual trades. Bricklayers, plumbers, electricians and so forth can smell education like so much gone-off aftershave. And they hate it. (Unless it’s for the children. It’s great for children, essenshul. They just hate it in adults) (Lott 1999, 2; italics in original).

In this formulation, Frankie sees himself as separated from the working-class, and mocks their attitudes. And yet, Frankie exposes similar prejudices related to education and class. As such, the novel, captures a social experience informed by deep, often contradictory impulses that are not well understood, but that, nevertheless, inform what is being lived.

The desire to re-assert working-class identity is violently actualised when a drunken Tony agrees to attend a new-age talk with Frankie and Veronica. The speaker, Christopher Crowley, comes from, and has the appearance and accent of, someone from the American West Coast, though he is originally from Birmingham (Lott 1999, 127). Crowley quotes Zen philosophy and, to demonstrate the de-mystification of money’s symbolic value, burns a pile of five-pound notes collected from the audience. While the crowd appreciates that “the symbol has been stripped of its power” (Lott 1999, 131; italics in original), Tony quite pragmatically demands his money back. When this appeal fails, he head-butts Crowley and repeatedly kicks him on the ground.

Suddenly, [Crowley’s] shouting, but his mid-American accent has disappeared completely. Instead, thick, gasping Brummie vowels fill the hall.

Yow fooker. I’ll fooking ‘ave yow, mate (Lott 1999, 132; italics in original).

The attack forces Crowley back to his working-class English roots and symbolically punishes him for middle-class affectation. This might be regarded as an act of class warfare –
or a defence of traditional class divisions. The scene is followed up by Tony begging Frankie not to marry Veronica. Tony suggests that Frankie should reject his fiancée to maintain his male friendships and preserve his personal freedom – that is, to retain his ability to live as a lad. However, the strong sense of antagonism and class warfare in the lead-up to this plea suggests Tony feels that Veronica’s middle-class status is threatening, a force pulling Frankie away from his friends.

These acts of regulation by characters might also be viewed as an indirect form of opposition to the dominant culture and the classless society, expressed as passive or overt forms of aggression that suggest the eruption of suppressed anger, frustration and fear. From this point of view, the novel might be seen to draw attention to deep anxieties around the erasure of the working class, enabled not only by the dominant culture whose policies led to the dismantling of the welfare state and de-industrialisation, but also by the working class themselves.

**Scepticism about appearances**

Like *About a Boy*, *White City Blue* sees characters ambivalent about modes of identity construction based on consumption. In the latter, Will derives his sense of self-worth from his expensive possessions and fashionable hobbies, yet is anxious about the precarious nature of status dependent on being in-the-know about new trends. Similarly, in *White City Blue*, Frankie is proud of what he owns and what his possessions suggest about him. He describes himself on the day he met Veronica:

> I was all Prada’d up on my last month’s commission, plus a full-on tan that I’d got from two weeks in Koh Samui, and I had the Beemer outside. I could actually feel the money on me like the touch of some strange, fragrant oil. I felt like I could get exactly what I wanted, what money demanded (Lott 1999, 4).
In this reflection, he derives his confidence from the consumable markers of his wealth and status. He has constructed a worthy self to project to the world. And yet, Frankie is also highly sceptical about this mode of identity formation. When he finds himself in a relationship with Veronica, he discovers:

[Veronica’s] red hair moved not at all, so short, so severely gelled. It turned out that it was dyed. The roots pushing through. It’s all illusions nowadays, isn’t it? Estate agency, self, appearance, relationships, friendship. No, not friendship. I couldn’t let myself believe that (Lott 1999, 43).

Unlike Will in About a Boy, Frankie sees the construction and performance of identity based on appearances as a form of deception. This is apparent in how Frankie describes his job as an estate agent. He sells houses and flats to buyers who mostly only survey the facades. This presents a metaphor for market-based identity construction, since, like houses, a person’s outward appearance can mask who they are. In terms of language and framing, Frankie’s attitude to potential customers evokes that of a street hawker, selling fake goods to dupes. When he first meets Veronica, he thinks of her as a “punter”, to whom he shows a grubby and overpriced flat to soften her up (Lott 1999, 4). He knows the flat is a “fleece job” (Lott 1999, 1), but he and his company “cut corners in order to get commissions” (Lott 1999, 2). He doesn’t simply sell flats, he “unloads” them (Lott 1999, 1) to “mark[s]” (Lott 1999, 4;8); and he revels in the act, thinking, “God, the power and beauty of scamming, of scammery, of the big scamola” (Lott 1999, 10). His company also regularly does business with a corrupt freeholder named Dirty Bob. When Frankie mentions this man to dissuade Veronica from buying the flat, he reflects that “Dirty Bob was one of our very best customers and … if my boss knew that I was disrespecting him, I would get the tin-tack there and then” (Lott 1999, 7). Tin-tack, Cockney rhyming slang for ‘the sack’, meaning to be fired, heightens the evocation of a working-class tout running a scam, which, in fact, he literally is, given the properties he sells. But, of course, Frankie doesn’t look like a tout, with his BMW, Rolex and expensive clothes, and he doesn’t sound like one, with his middle-class
vocabulary. Similarly, the flats he sells represent a form of disguise, as their defects are painted over or hidden away under carpeting.

Once again, the novel presents Frankie as straddling classes, never fully in one or the other. However, the ideas that appearances are a sham suggests that Frankie’s middle-class status itself is a lie, that he is dressing up, but that underneath his foundation – his core self – is less impressive. The mould in the roof, and the subsidence and cracks in the walls of the houses he sells act as metaphors for Frankie’s sense of self. He is outwardly impressive, but feels inwardly uncertain and lacking in substance, suggesting his anxiety and shame about being working class.

**Conclusion**

In *White City Blue*, Frankie adapts and responds to the dominant ideology of the time, living, on the face of it, in a classless society whose hierarchy is apparently determined by the individual’s capacity to accumulate wealth rather than the social class one is born into. Through his financial success as an estate agent, Frankie sees himself as moving up the social ladder, as well as the property ladder. However, his personal experiences and relationships disrupt his sense of security within this hierarchy and undermine his sense of identity, as the nature of his upbringing and long-term friendships are shown to be part of an inescapable ‘whole self’. Through Frankie’s experiences, musings and reflections in the course of the narrative, the reader is able to see how the present is informed by the past, and how an individual’s view of society and their place within it is informed not just by rational processes of reflexivity, but by emotion, memory and sensation. As such, the notion that the economic and social changes of the 1980s and 1990s could suddenly give birth to a classless society and a new type of classless individual become absurd. Williams rejects the idea that culture can simply be prescribed or unproblematically adopted, insisting instead that it is lived in all
its contradiction and complexity. He writes that “a culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man’s whole committed personal and social experience” (Williams 2014 [1958], 15). This whole self necessitates an appreciation for the materiality of the past, tradition and class upbringing.

The novel captures and engages with tensions that exist between the dominant social narrative of social mobility and Frankie’s personal experience, as he finds himself neither middle class, nor working class, but rather something in-between. The feelings of guilt, constraint and class insecurity within the novel can be regarded as a distinct form of the structures of feeling in Britain in the 1990s, specific to many of those who moved from the disintegrating working class to the middle class during this period.

Lott gives voice to the feelings of those who find themselves in an increasingly marginalised culture, whose emergence within the novel is informed by contradictory and a not yet well understood confusion of emotions and meanings. Frankie feels nostalgia for his working-class roots, yet is repulsed by them. He is ambitious to further establish himself as middle class, yet is suspicious and dismissive of aspects of it. Added to this is profound guilt at rejecting his origins and shame at what the working class has become – a fragmented and stigmatised underclass. Within the novel readers may identify a pattern of thought and feeling that evokes a sense of characters being in-between, straddling social positions and not quite fitting. Often, this is expressed as confusion and irrationality, and the novel offers a form through which such experiences can be of captured, explored, and gradually understood. In doing so, the novel offers evidence of resistance to idea of a seamless and painless move to a classless society, which is predicated on the idea that class is about money and not about values, a way of life, a way of being and seeing the world. Lott’s novel testifies to that hurt and muted anger, as well as to the internalisation of stigma and shame. When Veronica asks Frankie why he keeps her separate from his friends, she wonders if he is ashamed of them or
of her. His reaction is “I can’t say the answer, which is, paradoxically, both” (Lott 1999, 178; italics in original). Even more, and yet unspoken, is that Frankie is ashamed of himself too.

Lott has referred to *White City Blue* as a novel “set among the southern working class” (Lott 2015), which is an apt description, as this is not a working-class, nor a middle-class, novel. Instead, it is somewhere in-between. Frankie’s perspective is unique to his time and place, infused with conflict and doubt. The novel’s ending – his marriage to Veronica and continuing friendship with Nodge – is ambiguous, as it is possible to read this denouement as a compromise between the classes he inhabits or, perhaps, as offering no resolution at all. Nonetheless, it is the documenting of the tension throughout the text that sheds light on the structures of feeling that characters such as Frankie experience, swept up as they are in the changes of the 1980s and 1990s, yet never disconnected from deeper personal and social legacies. As such, *White City Blue* dispels the idea of a classless society and, instead, makes the materiality of the working-class visible again.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to explore how structures of feeling offer, through the reading of select realist literary texts, a vital and dynamic way of understanding and reflecting on the lived cultures of the past and the near-present. This is predicated on the concept’s ability to draw attention to feelings and points of tension within a given society at a particular time. Structures of feeling can illuminate individuals’ emergent desires for change and opposition to officially sanctioned and dominant ways of thinking, and give voice to marginalised or stigmatised social groups. In this way, structures of feeling restore a sense of agency to the individual that may have been previously unavailable, as the concept reveals cultural production to be a process defined not just by dominant social formations and institutions but also personal responses. As Filmer asserts:

Structures of feeling are generated through the imaginative interactional social and cultural practices of initiation and response – quintessentially social practices of reflexive communication of experience which are at the root of the stability of and changes in human societies (Filmer 2003, 201).

This duality, of stability and change, can help readers understand the complexity of the historical moment, which differs from the generalised social character of the times. In this sense, structures of feeling as discovered through fiction resists the reduction of individuals into known formations and, instead, provides insight into individual and sub-communities’ acceptance or rejection of, or compromise with, social orders. Literature’s capacity to encourage readers to see this process of evaluation through the experiences and narrative perspectives of character and characters’ relationships, when structures of feeling are indirectly represented or obliquely articulated in fiction, opens up a space to consider the nature of culture itself as a dynamic and ever-evolving production. This perspective, in turn, enlivens the possibility of social change and new ways of thinking about how we live.
As I have shown in this dissertation, novels do many things. Using the conceptual framework of structures of feeling, realist fiction can show the complexity of the historical moment and provide an understanding of what it might have felt like to experience life “in solution” (Williams 1977, 133; italics in original), as it was happening. The concept can also help illuminate resistance to dominant culture, dispelling the sense of historical inevitability, while also offering evidence of emergent cultural formations. The narrative possibilities of working with structures of feeling also inform the creation of new works, offering a way for authors to locate points of tension in society, including the fissures and struggles against prevailing ideological and cultural assumptions.

In the creative component of this thesis, I have focused on capturing the structures of feeling of contemporary Britain, including expressions of precariousness, insecurity and injustice evident in the social discourse and lived reality of the novel’s characters. As a central element in this process, my manuscript imaginatively interrogates what I see as the source of these feelings, including the atomising and alienating effects of neoliberalism and economic rationalism, globalisation and technological change, shifting gender and identity roles, and the residual influence of class. In doing so, I grapple with the contradictions of modern Britain and show how individuals attempt to make sense of their feelings by drawing on their personal experiences and the existing formations and institutions within the culture. My hope is that readers now, and in the future, might read the work and gain some insight into the contemporary moment and see that culture is never settled and fixed, but always in flux and filled with possibilities for positive change.

Working with the concept of structures of feeling in the reading of novels from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s enables us to reflect on the ways individuals grappled with shifting ideological precepts and evolving hegemonic forces. The critical analysis of selected texts has informed the writing of the creative component of this thesis by drawing attention to
recurring, evolving and novel feelings and sensations in British culture. By gaining an understanding of the past and how it works to help actualise the present, I have been able to draw imaginative attention to the ways in which dominant neoliberal culture affects discourse, ways of knowing and norms and values. My hope is that ‘All in This Together’ may prompt readers to see their lives and a British and western society too often judged in terms of economic rationalism from new perspectives, ones in which emotion, sense and feelings are regarded as valid and valuable.
Bibliography


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