

Seven Days

The short story reinvented

Legend  Press
Independent Book Publisher

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All characters, other than those clearly in the public domain, and place names, other than those well-established such as towns and cities, are fictitious and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

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Foreword

The aim behind this publication was relatively simple: to provide something for everyone. In the modern world where people want everything to be quicker and more accessible, and with so much reading taking place commuting or in the few minutes before going to bed, we wanted to produce a collection tailored for the modern reader.

It fast became apparent that the perfect vehicle for this challenge was the short story, so often neglected by publishers and, as a result, not picked up by the reader. At long last efforts are being made to revive short fiction and ensure that the genre receives the recognition it deserves – not as a side-part but as reading that perfectly complements the novel whilst offering its own unique qualities.

With several initiatives and major prizes being recently announced, the profile of the short story is on the up. However, as it is, it will be quite some time before the reader shakes off its negative associations and the format takes its place alongside the novel in the mainstream fiction market. Therefore, to help achieve this feat, we wanted to almost reintroduce the public to short fiction by offering an original format, specifically designed for today's reader.

Seven Days consists of seven stories by different authors, each longer than the traditional short story and, although very different individually, held together by the overarching theme of depicting a character for a single day. Firstly, the length of story means that the reader is allowed access to a developed narrative, offering the beginning, middle and end of the novel, whilst also containing the unique qualities of the short story – snappy, tight and compact. Perfect for the busy reader.

Secondly, the overarching theme of the book enables the

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diversity of the short story to be in full evidence. Each story has been carefully selected to provide something very different individually, yet together they complement each other and offer a great deal as a whole. Again, this incorporates one of the most important qualities of the novel but maintains the best features of shorter fiction. In addition, the publication is neatly broken up for the reader to read sections at a time, whether commuting or at home.

Seven Days is also a follow-up to Legend Press's initial acclaimed short story collection, *The Remarkable Everyday*. The idea for that book struck whilst buying a carton of milk on a busy street corner and wondering what it would be like to get into the mind of each passer-by, discovering all the complexities of their everyday life and thoughts. The aim was to uncover a few of the million different stories going on all around us – fleetingly intersecting with each other, though often unknowingly.

This is another aspect of the modern world – interest has never been as open or as great in observing and looking into other people's lives. A symptom of this is the general public's love of reality TV shows, celebrities, fly-on-the-wall documentaries, chat-shows, blogs etc. We love understanding ourselves or getting entertainment and/or catharsis from watching others, and the short story collection can offer this better than any other format.

Seven Days has taken *The Remarkable Everyday* one step further, thus emphasising and challenging the qualities described above. We specifically looked for stories from a particular cultural angle – not necessarily from a religious perspective but simply from a certain aspect of life. It could have been anything from a Nepalese monk to a football fan.

We received stories from all over the world – from award-winning authors to talented new writers. We also ran a second

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successful international short story competition through FanStory.com. This international touch is evident in a couple of the stories and adds to the effect of looking into people's everyday lives whilst maintaining relevance to the UK reader.

It was difficult to choose from hundreds of excellent stories, but in the end the decision came back to that initial aim: providing something for everyone. We purposely chose a rich and diverse range, each offering something very different and so, as a result, also adding to the overall picture. One of the most rewarding aspects of publishing such a collection is to listen to readers saying which story they liked best, which was most relevant to them, which they got most out of, and so on.

In many ways I hope *Seven Days* acts as a catalyst; that this collection tailored for the modern reader not only provides great entertainment in its own right but also encourages the reader to go out and try another short story publication along with their next novel. Reading one helps to appreciate the other and of course Legend Press will shortly be bringing out its third short story collection for readers to buy! Enjoy *Seven Days* and, as always, feel free to send us your comments.

Tom Chalmers
Managing Director
Legend Press

Friday

By

Andrew Theophilou

Friday

'Torture' is the first word that comes into my mind as I reluctantly begin to regain consciousness. A hammering, mechanical hum perforates the morning silence. I quickly close my eyes, desperate to prevent myself from slipping out of the cosy confines of sleep. Instead I find myself lingering in a state of limbo. I try to keep my eyelids shut; the worst thing I could do now is let in the morning light. This would destroy any hope of delaying the onslaught of reality. I draw the duvet over my head, only to realise that I am starting to get pins and needles in my leg. My heart beats faster as I come to terms with the irreversible truth of the moment: I am awake.

Tossing the duvet away from my body, I open my eyes. Mum's sewing machine continues to hum intermittently. Once again, I focus on the word 'torture'. This time it is on the poster depicting an imprisoned and screaming primate with electrodes attached to its head. Next to that is a photo of a white rabbit having a syringe needle pushed into its pink eyeball by a rubber-gloved hand. The caption below reads: 'Every six seconds an animal dies in a British laboratory'.

Turning onto my side, I catch a glimpse of the clock radio: 6:58 am. In twenty-dead-animals' time, the alarm will go off and I will have to get ready to go to school. It's Friday morning. This afternoon I have my interview at Woodhouse Sixth Form College. I bury my head in the pillow and fantasise about waking up in a year's time, my final term at school having mercifully zoomed past. It's nineteen-eighty-eight and, now approaching seventeen, I am well established at Woodhouse with my new set of friends. I am writing for the college magazine, starring in the spring-term play, getting involved in extra-curricular activities at one of the most prestigious state schools in North London...if I manage to pass my A-levels there, who knows where I'll end

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up...Oxford? Cambridge?

A blast of noise makes me jump. Once I have recovered from the shock, I recognise the sound as Cindy Lauper singing *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*. Frantically, I fumble for the off button. I must have accidentally turned the volume up full blast while setting the alarm. But it's too late; Mum has already started on her inexorable Greek screamathon:

“Hambis! Turn that music off *right* now and get down here! Do you have *any* intention of going to school today?”

I get up and pull on my jeans. I manage to fasten my belt at the third hole for the first time and rush towards the mirror in excitement. Patting my belly with both hands, the flab wobbles beneath my white T-shirt. Still a long way to go, but I'm certainly losing weight...

I contemplate my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. With my thick, greasy black hair in a side parting, I look like a Cypriot peasant boy. And as if that's not enough, I seem to be turning into some sort of pubic freak of nature with the premature, unstoppable growth of my moustache. Although quite a normal phenomenon among Greek boys my age, I can't bring myself to share in their sense of macho pride. My fervent attempts to shave off the offending hairs, however, have not only led to a scabby upper lip but a renewed, thicker growth which makes me stand out all the more.

Glaring into my eyes, I recall the self-portrait project in art a few weeks ago. We all had to take photos of each other and I wound up working with Joshua. I had never really bothered much about him before that. But as I focused on his face, I started to admire him through the camera lens. His pale freckled face, his big blue eyes and floppy blond hair aroused in me a strange mixture of longing and jealousy. Joshua wants to go to Woodhouse too. He should have no problem getting in...

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“Hambis!” shrieks Mum.

“All right, all right, I’m coming!” I say, quickly putting on a plain black V-neck sweater.

Three-hundred-dead-animals later, I walk slowly down the stairs. Mum’s rage is getting louder by the step.

“*Panayia-a-a-mou!*” she wails, evoking the spirit of the Virgin Mary. “Save me from the madness of my husband!”

She pauses to gulp down some air.

“We’re all gonna end up being eaten alive at this rate! How many times have I told you to keep those disgusting snails in the shed? *Panayiamou!* What sort of a man did I marry? Eating snails on a Good Friday!”

Hunched forward, she sits between the fridge and the cooker; her fingers force-feeding her industrial-sized sewing machine with patches of cloth. Another cheap garment for Lady Royale Clothing Ltd. She peddles away frantically in pink slippers while staring closely at the needle shooting up and down, punctuating her ranting voice.

“If you don’t finish them off by tonight,” she continues, “I’ll feed them to the chickens! And where’s that *vachtal-abumba*? If he doesn’t come down soon I’ll grab him by the ear and drag him to school kicking and screaming!”

Vachtalabumba, indeed! I’ll show you who’s the fatso round here; give me another year and I’ll be as thin as a rake.

Aware of my presence, she stops sewing and stands up. Walking past me without a word, she picks up a broom and starts sweeping unnecessarily.

I notice the fugitive snails sliding slowly in various directions on the kitchen tiles, leaving a glistening pattern of lines in their wake. Dad puts on his glasses and gets up. A smouldering cigarette hangs between his lips as he plucks the snails off the wall, one by one, carefully placing them back into the small wicker basket they think they’ve escaped from.

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He puts the basket on the sideboard, covering it with a folded copy of *The Sun*.

“There,” he says. His Greek is easier on the ear than Mum’s. “That should keep the buggers in.”

He sits down again, legs wide apart. He places one hand on each thigh as his bulging belly surges forward to fill his white shirt. One of the buttons of his shirt pops open to reveal the tight white tank-top vest beneath.

“Do you want me to fry you some eggs?” asks Mum in hopeful expectation.

“I thought it was the Greek Easter,” I reply sarcastically, pouring soya milk over my Sugar Puffs. “I’m supposed to be fasting.”

“How dare you use the Lord as an excuse! You’ll see; you’ll be sorry when you collapse in the street due to malnutrition. Vegan, indeed! Who would have thought that my own son would turn out like this? You need to see a psychiatrist, you do; get your head checked out!”

Dad’s feeble attempt at convincing me to stop being daft also fails. He pulls a boiled snail out of its shell with a toothpick and holds it out to me. I decline the offer politely.

“*Háde!*” he says. “Come on! Can’t you see how much you’re upsetting your mother? *Háde*, I’ll give you ten pounds if you eat this now...”

He dips it into a small bowl of vinaigrette then quickly pokes it into his mouth; sauce dribbles down his chin.

“Delicious!” he says, smirking. “Mmmm...”

He stops chewing and looks at me wide-eyed, suddenly possessed by a thought.

“I wonder what snails taste like in batter,” he says, causing Mum to tut and sigh.

“Maybe I should take some into the chippy; we’re running a bit low on scampi – the customers won’t tell the difference!”

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He chuckles with himself while we try our best to ignore him.

“Ach!” he exclaims. “If we were in Cyprus now you’d be eating meat. The meat back home was not like the frozen rubbish you get here; it tasted like honey. Honey, I tell you! At this time of year we would be fattening up the pigs for the village fete on Easter Sunday. We’d choose the best one for the slaughter and cook it fresh the same afternoon.”

Mum sits down silently, clutching onto the broom-handle as if the memory has drained her entire body of energy. Dad’s eyes glaze over before he continues.

“By the early evening all the villagers would be gathered outside the church and we’d have a feast in the fresh open air. There’d be singing and laughter later, as your great-grandfather’s home-brewed wine got to our heads!”

“Ach!” Mum agrees, shaking her head slowly from side to side. “How we’d lick our fingers and thank God from the bottom of our hearts for blessing us with such a life...”

She stares blankly at the floor, captivated in a moment of thought.

“But then the bloody Turks...” she continues, spitting on the floor. “The bloody Turks came and took everything away from us and now I’m stuck in this bloody country bringing up a vegan!”

She gets up, casting me a quick look of accusation.

“I can’t believe that boss of mine wouldn’t let me take the day off,” she continues, solemnly. “He knows how important Easter is to us. Thirty dresses he wants from me today!”

“Well, I don’t see why the Greeks don’t just celebrate Easter at the same time as the English,” I say. “Seems a bit impractical having it weeks later.”

Mum shakes her head wearily and walks towards the garden door.

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“I’m going to feed the chickens,” she says, a note of sadness in her voice. “You’d better hurry up; you’ll be late for school. And don’t forget we’ve got that interview this afternoon, since you *will* insist on changing schools... Hopefully, it won’t take too long – we don’t want to be late for the evening church service.”

I put on my jacket and leave the house, already trying to think of an excuse for not going to church. Before I reach the end of the street, I hear a cock crowing and wonder if the neighbours know that this displaced sound is coming from our back garden. I walk past the Victorian terraced houses and notice someone’s net curtains twitching. A few houses further down, an old woman sticks her head out of the window, looking bemused. The cock continues crowing and I imagine the entire neighbourhood is observing; laughing at me as I walk past in embarrassment.

I reach Bounds Green Road and sit at the bus stop. Anxious about my interview, I take the letter out of my rucksack and read it for the umpteenth time. ‘*We are pleased to invite you to attend an interview for entry to Woodhouse Sixth Form College...*’ The words fill me with excitement, with a sense of possibility. This is my chance for a new start. Perhaps in a different environment I can do better, make something of my life, be myself. It is only when I reach the end of the letter that I recall the full horror of what is involved: ‘*All candidates must be accompanied by their parents.*’

Halfway through English, the teacher is reading from a book. I notice Joshua sitting at the front of the class, near the door. He wears a green cotton lumberjack shirt, blue jeans and red Converse shoes. Like a lot of the pupils at Fortismere School, Joshua comes from Muswell Hill. This is an area

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where parents buy their children books, give them musical instruments and send them to the Boy Scouts or Brownies. It's just a coincidence that I ended up here. According to the laws of geography I should have gone to Alexandra Park School, just a stone's throw away from where we live. But the laws of economics interfered and our school joined up with one in Muswell Hill. For them, this meant the brand new name of Fortismere; for Alexandra Park, it meant closure, forcing the immigrant and working class families in Wood Green to look further afield for schooling.

From the very beginning I have admired the pupils from Muswell Hill. During English lessons in particular they speak with a confidence I can't help but envy. At first I tried to be like them, practising at home so I could sound intelligent whenever I had to read aloud. But this only caught the attention of the Greek boys, who were far from impressed. For them, being brainy was very uncool. I knew I would have to take a different approach. On one occasion I caused a scandalous outburst of laughter by reading my part in *Macbeth* with an exaggerated cockney accent. It went down a treat with everyone, bar the teacher...but I know how to keep her sweet; I just have to swot away with the essays at home. At the end of the day, I'll still get the grades I need.

"Hambis!" comes a cry from the front, tearing me out of a reverie.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

All eyes turn towards me; the blood rushes to my cheeks.

"What did I just say about Siegfried Sassoon?"

Siegfried Sassoon? I wasn't listening...what am I supposed to know about the British War Poets, anyway? I wonder if any Greek soldiers wrote poems about *their* heroism during the Turkish invasion. My parents don't talk much about the war. They were in England at the time, trying to get away for a while until the troubles died down back

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home. But things only got worse and they've been stuck here ever since. Maybe things would have been different if they'd stayed put. Perhaps Dad would have fought for the motherland then, instead of frying fish for England...

"Hambis!" she cries. "Have you been listening at all? Do you even know who Sassoon was?"

Everyone turns to me in anticipation; I struggle to control my breathing until I manage to respond: "Famous French hairdresser – wasn't he, Miss?"

The class bursts into laughter; the teacher's face turns red. I catch a glimpse of Joshua smiling my way.

"Very funny indeed. Now look here, young man; if you stop staring into thin air for a moment and pay attention to what's going on around you, then you may actually learn something. You won't get anywhere in life by studying the dirt on the windows. Now stop being silly and act your age."

"But Miss!" I protest. "When I grow up I want to be a window cleaner..."

The lunchtime bell rings and we all storm out of the building. Outside, I find myself hanging around as various groups begin to form. There is no official uniform at Fortismere, but most pupils follow a strict dress code of their own. The black girls gather outside in their baggy tracksuits and Fila trainers. They link arms and march off together, laughing loudly. Joshua immediately joins the Trendies in their torn 501s, denim jackets and Doc Martens. They're all vegetarian, wear CND badges and smoke dope. At lunch times they often hang around on the Broadway with sixth-formers or, even more impressive, with those who have left Fortismere and gone to Woodhouse. I know this because I've been with them a couple of times. For a moment I consider tagging along again, but instead I hesitate, hoping that Joshua will ask me to join them. Before I can catch his eye, though,

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they disappear across the playground and out of the gates.

Spiros, Johnny and Chris walk past in their stonewashed jeans, black PVC jackets and thick gold chains hanging over white T-shirts. The Greeks at school are generally referred to as 'Bubbles'. At first I thought this was because of their bulging size and loudness. It was only recently that I heard the cockney rhyme: 'bubble and squeak, Greek'. In any case, this small group has managed to earn an added title all of its own: 'The Wham! Gang'. Spiros is in the sixth-form; Johnny and Chris are his fifth-year disciples. I begin to rummage around in my rucksack in an attempt to avoid making eye contact with them; the thought of spending lunch with the Greeks is not particularly appealing.

"Have you started eating meat again yet, you big fat sissy?"

My heart sinks as Spiros walks up to me.

"You better stop hanging around with them English bloody teabags," he says. "You'll turn into a right weirdo if you're not careful! You're shaming us up, you know."

I ignore him and start to walk off, but he grabs me by the shoulder.

"Where you going?" he says. "You're coming with us."

"All right, all right," I say, brushing him off and resigning myself to a tedious hour; with Joshua already gone, the only other option now would be to hang around like a nobby-no-mates.

Spiros recently passed his driving test and already has a Ford Capri. We jump in and speed back to his house in Wood Green. After scoffing our sandwiches in the kitchen, we go up to his bedroom to listen to his records.

"Here, I ain't heard this one in ages..." Spiros says, gently placing the needle onto a record.

It's Wham! with *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go*. I sit down

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on a cushion in the corner of the room, quietly observing the photo of Samantha Fox amid the numerous Arsenal posters, banners and scarves pinned up on the wall. I pick up a Rubik's cube from the floor and start twisting it as they talk.

“Do you still go to the Ritzy?” asks Johnny.

“Nah, man, tha’s history,” responds Spiros. “Ain’t been there for ages. It’s full of fucking Asians now, innit? It’s turned into a right fucking curry house that place!”

The others listen attentively as Spiros continues: “I only go down the West End these days; the Hippodrome’s the best place. You can meet some really classy birds down there sometimes – top pussy, man! And no fucking Asians or fat Greek girls with moustaches either!”

They all laugh out loud as I shake my head disapprovingly.

“Don’t they ever make you show any ID?” asks Johnny.

“Nah, the bouncer’s my cousin, innit? You’ve got to dress up really smart though – no jeans or trainers.”

“Nah?”

“What do you wear then?” asks Chris.

Spiros jumps off the end of his bed and opens the door to his wardrobe. He takes out a black suit and a red shirt, holding both items up to be viewed – one in each out-stretched hand.

“Giorgio Armani,” he declares, as if introducing a very close friend.

“Fuckin’ell! How much did that cost you?”

“Well, let’s put it this way: the shirt alone cost fifty quid in the sales.”

“Kin ’ell!”

The record comes to an end; Spiros carefully tucks Giorgio back into the wardrobe and moves towards the stereo.

“So, what sort of music do you like, Fatty?” He says,

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turning to me.

“All sorts, really,” I reply, evasively.

“Yeah, but what’s your favourite group?”

I try to think of something in my feeble music collection that would appeal to my present company.

“U2,” I answer, resolving not to mention the Eurythmics under any circumstances whatsoever.

“What! U2? Ain’t they a bunch of fucking English poofs?”

“No, they’re Irish!” I respond, as if this is enough evidence to throw his other insinuation into question.

“Nah, man. It ain’t funny you know.” says Spiros, shaking his head.

“Yeah,” agrees Johnny. “What’s happening to you man?” he adds, switching to Greek as if to lend his words greater authority. “Ever since you came to Fortismere you’ve gone downhill, man; hanging out with all them weirdoes – you should stick with us, bro, before it’s too late.”

“I hope you’re not going round to Tim’s place tonight,” says Spiros, “He’s having another one of his parties.”

Tim is in the sixth-form and his parents are often away. Although he mainly hangs out with the Trendies, he is popular with everyone at school. He is so self-confident that he doesn’t feel the need to remain within the comfortable parameters of any particular clique. As a result, anyone can turn up to his parties.

“No, I’m not.” I reply, “I didn’t even know he was having a party tonight.”

“Yeah, right. Pull the other one, it’s got bells on,” says Johnny, “I bet you’re gonna be there with all your English bum chums.”

“I think we might have to turn up as well in that case, boys,” says Spiros, patting me on the shoulder. “Make sure our little bro here doesn’t get into any trouble.”

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“Yeah,” agrees Chris. “Anyway, Tim’s quite a popular geezer, innit? Should be quite a lot of birds there from other schools...”

“Suit yourselves,” I say, “But I won’t be there.”
Unless, that is, Joshua plans to go...

“Hambis!”

The teacher’s shrill voice startles me. We’re in German, the last lesson of the day.

“Stop staring out of the window and answer!”

I look at her blankly, waiting for the question to be repeated.

“*Wie alt bist Du?*”

“*Fünfzehn,*” I respond without interest as her attention moves on to someone else.

Lucy, who is sitting in the seat directly in front, turns around. Lanky and flat-chested, she wears a tight brown polo-neck sweatshirt. She tucks her long mousy hair behind her ears.

“Dozy git,” she mumbles. “Where’s Joshua?” she adds, noticing the empty seat beside me. “He was here for English; where’s he gone?”

“How should I know?”

“How should I know! How should I know!” she repeats childishly. “Well, you sit next to him, don’t you? Isn’t he your friend?”

“Well, I don’t keep track of everything he does, do I?”

Lucy pulls a face at me then turns around. I ponder on the fact that I’m still not as close to Joshua as I’d like to be. Apart from the walk back to the bus stop together after German, we rarely spend any time together outside of school.

“Who do you fancy?” asks Lucy, turning around again.

“Nobody,” I answer, hoping the response is enough to nip

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her curiosity in the bud.

“Don’t lie! Everyone fancies at least three people at the same time. So who do you fancy?”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Why won’t you tell me who you fancy? Is it me?”

“Don’t be so stupid! You’re the last person I would want to go out with!”

Annoyed, she snatches my pencil case and turns around to face the front of the classroom.

At the very beginning of the German course, Joshua would mess around with my things too. He would take stuff from my pencil case and hide it from me. He eventually started to get quite tactile – tickling me or throwing things down the back of my jumper; then he would stick his hand down there to fish them out again. The contact made me feel embarrassed and I shied away from it, pushing or hitting him playfully. I started to wonder if this was normal, if it was natural. The idea entered my mind that Joshua might be gay. What horror! I could be sitting next to a poof – he could have AIDS! This initial feeling of disgust soon disappeared as I started to get to know him. Besides, he has so many friends and all the girls fancy him; someone so good-looking and popular couldn’t possibly be gay.

My thoughts are interrupted suddenly by the slamming of the classroom door. Everybody turns around to see the late-comer standing sheepishly at the front of the class: Joshua.

The teacher looks at him and frowns.

“*Weißt Du, wie spät es ist?*” she asks smugly.

“Sorry Miss,” he says, catching his breath. “I couldn’t come earlier; we had drama rehearsal...”

“That may very well be the case, Joshua, but I hardly think it’s worth interrupting the last lesson of the day so *dramatically*, just five minutes before the end...”

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She smiles at her own feeble joke as Joshua fills the empty seat beside me. Although pleased to see him, I decide against starting a conversation and instead silently anticipate the walk back to the bus stop.

“So, how was drama rehearsal?” I ask, smiling broadly.

I time every step carefully, calculating how long it will take to get to the end of Queen’s Avenue. Normally the journey takes about seven to nine minutes after school. In the mornings I can usually drag it out to ten or twelve. Now there’s a chance of being seen with someone popular enough to significantly boost my street-cred, I am set on breaking the record... Fifteen? Twenty? If I manage to slow Joshua down to my pace without him realising, then who knows – maybe even twenty-five!

“Oh, it was all right,” he answers, taking a Walkman out of his rucksack. “A bit stressful though; we got away early today but we’ve had to rehearse every night this week.”

“Oh, no!” I reply, a little too enthusiastically.

“Still,” he says, “It means I got out of having to go to my interview at Woodhouse last night; my dad went to speak to them without me and I’ve already got a place.”

“Lucky sod!” I say. “I have mine tonight. But they probably won’t let me in and I’ll have to spend another two years at Fortismere...”

He puts a tape into his Walkman; I place one foot carefully in front of the other.

“What are you going to listen to?”

“Have you heard of *Tubular Bells*?”

For a moment I pause, wondering whether to lie, to tell him that I have, to say “Yes! Of course I have, everyone’s heard of *Tubular*...” *Tubular* what? I take another step.

“No, what sort of music do they play?”

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“Actually, that’s the name of the album. The guy that did it is called Mike Oldfield; really big in the seventies, all instrumental. Starts off really slow then gradually gets faster as more instruments are introduced; then he plays the tubular bells at the end. It’s really good; my dad taped it for me. Do you want to listen?”

“Yes,” I answer, looking down at his tight jeans as I take another step.

He moves closer towards me until our shoulders are almost touching. He places a small black earplug into his right ear, handing me the other.

“So, tell me what you think...” he says, as I place the earplug into my left ear and one foot in front of the other.

The music begins to sound in my ear and I do, of course, like it. We both walk slowly together in tune as a thin black wire connects us. The melodies cause us to quicken our pace, our shoulders sporadically rubbing. Bumping against him clumsily, I start to get an erection. We glide together – more swiftly now – in joyful synchronisation. The tempo picks up. He looks at me; the blood rushes through my veins. I hasten ahead – I blush at a thought – the ringing of tubular bells...

“Watch out!”

The earplug is torn away from me.

“Shit!” I exclaim.

And that’s exactly what I have stepped in.

Joshua laughs benignly and my face starts to burn. I try to pretend this hasn’t happened and focus on reaching the bus stop without spontaneously combusting. We continue in silence until we reach the end of Queen’s Avenue and cross over.

“Here...” he says, holding out the tape. “You can borrow it if you want to listen to the whole thing. I can get another copy.”

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I take the tape and force a smile.

“Are you coming to Tim’s tonight?” he asks. “He’s having another party.”

“I can’t,” I respond. “I have my interview.”

“That’s a shame – everyone’s going to be there...”

“Well, maybe I’ll pop in after...”

“Cool!” he says, as his bus arrives. He jumps on.

“Thanks for the tape!” I shout. “See you later...”

I am left standing alone, trying to wipe the shit off my shoes with some leaves on the ground. My own bus arrives and I get on. I quickly take up a seat next to an old lady downstairs, keen to avoid the other school kids wreaking havoc on the upper deck. I take out my personal stereo and listen to Joshua’s tape from the beginning. Sorting through the books in my rucksack, I try to work out how much homework I have to do over the weekend.

I used to love doing homework when I first started going to school. Maths was my favourite subject. Even when the teacher hadn’t set us any exercises, I would ask for some extra work to take home. With Biology, I knew everything on the syllabus long before starting to do the GCSE course. My interest in the subject began when I was about eleven-years-old, after Spiros started to mock my wild ambitions. Spiros and I had just become friends at the time; we lived on the same street and walked to school together. One morning he came up with the question: “So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“A doctor,” I replied instinctively.

According to Dad it was the best job anyone could have. Doctors were clever, respected by everyone, and earned lots of money.

“You? A doctor! Don’t be so stupid! You have to be really clever to be a doctor; you have to study for years and go

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to university.”

“University? Where’s that?”

“See! You’ve got no chance if you don’t even know what university is! You have to go there if you want to be a doctor. Apparently it’s really hard to get in. My sister says that for every person in university there’s two thousand people what doesn’t get in.”

“Well, I want to be a doctor, so I don’t see why I shouldn’t get in.”

“What do you know about medicine and biology?”

“More than you do, at least. And anyway, what are you gonna do, clever clogs?”

“I’m gonna be a bank manager, innit? My sister works at the Natwest down Crouch End and she said she can easily get me a job there when I leave school. A bank manager earns loads of money; it’s a wicked job, man!”

The following Saturday morning I went to Wood Green Library and borrowed a book called *The Human Body*. I was fascinated to discover how things worked. The long words formed part of a magical language that I learned very quickly. I would ask Spiros questions on the way to school to check my progress against his ignorance.

“I bet you don’t know where the alimentary canal is...”

“In Scotland, innit?”

“No, stupid!”

“Where is it then, fatso?”

“Not telling you.”

I would love shutting myself up in my room and reading, or just gazing at the pictures. I felt slightly disturbed, though, when I got to the chapter called *Human Reproduction*. In fact, I was so upset at the thought of one day having to take off my pants in front of a woman and commit unspeakable acts that I decided to take a break from human biology and spent a

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few months concentrating on the plant kingdom instead. Soon after, I lost all interest in the medical profession. Now I want to be a journalist. That's what Joshua's going to be. Maybe we'll end up working for the same paper one day; his dad writes for the *Guardian*... But first I have to get into Woodhouse.

“So...why exactly have you chosen this combination of A-levels? Why German in particular? Why not French or Spanish...or Greek?”

The man sits up in his chair and opens a notebook; the interview is clearly coming to an end – I must make an effort to impress him while there's still hope...

“Well, I'm quite fluent in Greek, so I don't need to study it as a foreign language...”

I pray that my parents don't butt in. Luckily they have kept quiet so far; I'm still in with a chance...

“I think German is becoming increasingly important as an international language,” I add.

“Yes, that's true,” he responds, while scribbling something on the file in front of him. “And what exactly do you hope to do after finishing your A-levels? What is your ultimate professional goal?”

“I want to be a journalist,” I reply, thinking that things aren't going too badly after all.

“I see...”

He pauses to note something down again before continuing.

“And how do you feel about your son's ambitions?”

Dad sits up, baffled; I hold my breath. His village Greek is embarrassing enough, but when he tries to speak English he invariably sounds like a fool.

“What would you like your son to do when he grows up?” the interviewer repeats, raising his voice slightly.

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“Well, he don’t listening to me; I say him he should to be doctor, or to make business, he should to do good clean worrk...”

Oh God, please be quiet, please don’t say anything else...

“...With journalist, I dunno,” he adds, shrugging his shoulders. “Is a good worrk?”

The interviewer starts to fidget in his chair.

“Well, er – if I understand you correctly – then yes, journalism is a highly-respected profession indeed. The only thing that one ought to be aware of is the fact that it’s a very competitive profession too,” he adds, turning to me. “There are a lot of frustrated, unemployed journalists in this world.”

“Yes, too much unemploy, too much unemploy in this country...”

My face turns red. What next? What now?

“...I worrky in the fishen-ships, you know? Is verri hard worrk, I telly you! Twenty-year in the fishen-ships! But for the young pipol, no worrk – oll unemploy...”

“Yes, unemployment is a problem. But maybe we should turn back to the subject of–”

“You telly me is problem? Is verri big problem! You know why? I telly you why...The Grik pipol is like the English pipol – we worrky verri harrd, ollways worrky verri harrd...”

He places his right arm on the desk, leans forward and lowers his voice: “But the Pakistanis, you see – and the Chinezzi – they come here, they take oll the jobs, and as well they getty unemploy benifi! The counrry going bankarrotti!”

He starts to chuckle as he leans back, winking at me to express his certainty that he has boosted my chances by enlightening the interviewer on the contemporary socio-economic state of the nation.

I wish I was dead.

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What have I done to deserve this? Surely there is no hope left now. Maybe I should say something – tell the interviewer that I don't agree with my father on anything at all...

“Er, anyway...” he shuffles through his papers, “...Hambis, tell me about your extra-curricular activities. What do you do after school?”

“Well, I like reading a lot...” I pause, wondering what to say next. I have to invent something – but what's the point? It's no use; what can I possibly say to impress this man now?

“I mean...do you play any musical instruments? Do any sports?”

“Well, I've always wanted to learn to play the saxophone...”

“I see...”

No, you don't see! I have always wanted to play a musical instrument. When I first went to Fortismere, I felt jealous whenever people would wait around for music practice after school, carrying funny black cases of varying shapes and sizes. My parents just laughed when I asked them to buy me a saxophone, and my argument that all the English kids at school had a musical instrument did nothing to support my claim. I was advised to spend more time with the Greeks if the only thing the English kids did was put stupid ideas into my head. Asking the music teacher if I could take lessons after school was also a waste of time; she just told me that it would be pointless if I didn't have my own instrument to practise with at home. Eventually, I saved up some pocket money and bought myself a recorder in defiance. But by the time I had mastered *Three Blind Mice*, my father had had enough of the racket I was causing every night and smashed it to pieces.

The interviewer clears his throat.

“Are there any activities that you do actually practise?” he

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asks, looking at me patronisingly.

I try to imagine Joshua sitting here with his parents; what would he be saying now? He would have no problem impressing the interviewer by telling him about his participation in the drama group and his role as editor of the school magazine. I have never done anything out of the ordinary; I have to invent something; pretend my parents aren't here and bluff my way through this interview – there's no hope otherwise.

"I write for the school magazine," I venture, trying to sound confident.

"Oh?" he says. "That's interesting... How long have you been doing that for?"

Ok, so there is still a chance, but I must sound convincing – don't let the mask slip...

"Since the beginning of the fourth year," I say, feeling encouraged by the interviewer's positive reaction and trying to remember all that Joshua has told me about his involvement with the magazine.

"I'm one of the editors actually," I continue boldly. "I started the magazine with three other friends because our school didn't have one and we thought it was important to give the pupils a voice."

I pause, my pulse races. What have I done? Have I gone too far? What if he doesn't believe me?

"So, how did you manage to get the whole thing off the ground? I imagine it was all quite a huge enterprise... And how was the project financed?"

"Yes, it took quite a lot of organising actually. They – I mean we, had to meet after school once a week, sometimes twice and, well, one of the English teachers helped us at the beginning and then we asked the other pupils to make contributions and organised a poetry competition and when

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we had the first copy ready we asked the school to supply the paper and got some of the shops from Muswell Hill to advertise and the money we got from selling it was reinvested in the next issue and since then it's been coming out every term and I can bring you a copy if you want...."

I stop suddenly to catch my breath and concentrate very hard on maintaining eye contact with the interviewer. I mustn't look at my parents; this would give the game away.

"Well that's really quite impressive! Especially for someone from a background like—" he stops in mid-sentence, casting a quick glance at my parents before continuing. "Erm...I mean, you must be quite committed to your professional aspirations... And, of course, Woodhouse also has quite a good student magazine that you could get involved with if you were to come here after your GCSEs..."

I smile at him silently, too scared to open my mouth in case I ruin everything. If I don't overdo it, and if my parents keep quiet for the rest of the interview, I may still be in with a chance.

"And why exactly do you want to come to Woodhouse? Why don't you want to stay on at Fortismere to do your A-levels?"

"Well, Woodhouse has a very good reputation and I feel it would be a nice change, a new challenge for me..."

He notes down something before turning to my parents; I hold my breath.

"So you live in Wood Green at the moment, don't you?"

"Yes," responds Dad, thankfully restraining himself to the harmless confines of monosyllabic expression.

"And would it be a problem for your son to travel all the way to Barnet every day? I mean, it's quite a distance..."

"Is orright," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "If he wanna be journalist, he wanna be journalist. What canna do?"

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“Well,” says the interviewer as he stands up. “I think that’s probably enough questions for today.”

He ushers us slowly to the door and pats me on the shoulder.

“I’ll send you a letter of confirmation in the next couple of days,” he says, “But we’ll certainly be offering you a place, young man.”

“You mean I’m in?” I ask, a little taken aback.

“Well, that all depends on you now,” he explains, smiling. “You will have to get excellent grades in your GCSEs, so you will have to work hard in your last term. We’re pretty strict about grades here, you know.”

“Yes,” I respond enthusiastically, and start shaking his hand instinctively. “Thank you, sir! I will get the grades, I promise...”

We are shown out of the building and walk towards the car. I hurry ahead, brimming with excitement.

“Well, that went pretty well!” says Dad, slightly more coherently now that he has switched back to Greek.

Yes, I think, but no thanks to you...

I can’t wait until I tell Joshua!

Dad starts the engine, grinning smugly.

“And he didn’t take up too much of our time,” he adds

“Yes,” says Mum. “He seemed like a very nice man. I quite like the area too. But I still think you should stay at Fortismere,” she adds, clearly unable to fathom the significance of what has just occurred. “This place is so far away; you’ll have to take two buses every morning...”

Ignoring them, I stare out of the open window, allowing the wind to blow against my face. I feel an exhilarating sense of liberation as I think ahead to the future. Of course I will get the grades; I will work harder, nothing can stop me now. I will get through Woodhouse with flying colours and go to

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university – then I’ll really be free...

We approach the High Road near Tim’s house and I remember the party. I wasn’t sure about going before, but now I have some news to tell, there’s no way I’m going to church with my parents.

“Drop me off here,” I say eventually. “I just need to pop over to a friend’s and pick up a book...”

“What book?” says Mum rhetorically. “Who do you know around here, anyway? No, we’re going to church tonight, remember? Can’t it wait till Monday?”

“No,” I lie, “There’s a really big test on Monday and I need the book – I lent it to a friend. I won’t be able to revise otherwise...”

Mum looks at me doubtfully.

“Please! I’m serious. I’ll get the bus back straight away, I promise...”

Dad slows down and pulls the car over to the curb.

“I’m warning you, Hambis,” says Mum sternly. “I don’t want you out gallivanting until the early hours. If you’re not back in time for the Good Friday service, you’ve had it.”

“OK,” I say, slamming the door in relief. “Can you lend me some money...just in case?”

Dad hands me the money without any resistance before they drive off. I pick up a quarter bottle of whisky and a litre of coke from the off-licence before turning into Tim’s street. I ring the bell nervously, hoping that Joshua is already there, and I’m greeted by Tim.

“Hi Hambis! Good of you to come...”

“Here,” I say, handing him the drinks.

He takes the bottles and walks through the hallway and into the kitchen. I follow him until I reach the living room entrance, where I pause to assess the scene. The party is already in full swing with the usual eclectic crowd. The Goths

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stand in the corner, dressed in black and wearing dark mascara. The Casuals hang about with their tracksuit tops, ripped jeans and Adidas trainers. They chat to a group of busty girls from another school who offer them lipsticked smiles and giggles. A commotion is caused when The Cure's *Lullaby* begins to play. The Goths spring into life, moving to the centre of the room. They shake the silver bangles on their outstretched arms as they move their hips slowly, rolling their heads with closed eyes.

"Fucking weirdoes," I hear a familiar voice muttering.

I take a step into the room and realise it is Spiros. The Wham! Gang are sitting in a row on the sofa adjacent to the door. They all turn their heads simultaneously, but I rush back out of the room before we can make eye contact. In the kitchen, Tim pours me a whisky and coke.

"Here," he says, "Come up and join us for a spliff if you want."

He takes the bottles with him.

"OK," I say, following him out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

In his room, Joshua and the Trendies sit around on the floor smoking dope.

"Hey," says Joshua.

I sit down beside him, buzzing with excitement over the outcome of my interview. For the first time I feel confident with these people, as if I have finally earned my place in their circle.

"How did it go at Woodhouse?" he asks.

"OK," I respond coolly. "They've offered me a place."

"Wicked!" he replies. "Here. Have some of this."

He passes me a joint. I take a deep drag and hold my breath before exhaling. Tim starts blowing cigarette smoke into detergent bubbles. Soon the room is filled with white,

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smoky spheres floating around in the air. I take a gulp from my glass. The smell of whisky, the fizz of coke – my nostrils itch. I stare at the brown effervescent liquid in my glass; bubbles rise as the people around me laugh. I chuckle along with them, despite not having caught the joke. I feel high...

The door opens suddenly and the Greeks come in, followed by Lucy.

“So this is where all the action is,” says Spiros, as he makes himself comfortable next to Johnny and Chris.

Annoyed by this intrusion, I down my drink. Taking a bottle from the floor, I pour myself another.

Lucy sits beside Tim and takes the detergent bottle. She blows a huge bubble, catching everyone’s attention.

“Hey,” says Spiros, “I didn’t know you were so good at blowing!”

Johnny and Chris snigger. Lucy stops blowing bubbles.

“She’s probably had a lot of practice,” adds Johnny.

“Very funny,” she responds. “Actually, I don’t give blowjobs.”

They continue to laugh. I lean over and take the small plastic bottle that Lucy has left on the floor. I pull the ring out of the diluted washing detergent and gently blow at the delicate film. A bubble forms and is released through the other side. It hangs in the air in front of me. I try to look inside it but only manage to see the washy rainbow colours on the flimsy film – blurred images of the room. Funny how bubbles are invisible; you can’t actually see them, but rather their surroundings, the images reflected on them, on the surface. I touch the bubble, causing it to pop and disappear...

“I would never go out with a girl who’s not into oral sex,” says Chris.

I blow another bubble and gaze at the opaque images running into each other. I fall into a trance, hypnotised by the

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gently floating sphere... On the watery surface I see my face looking back at me blankly. But I'm on the inside now; my face reflected – inflected – on the concave inner surface. Encapsulated by the bubble, I try to look out.

“You really don't need to worry about us ever going out with each other, darling... And anyway, I never said I wasn't into oral sex; I just don't give blowjobs, that's all...”

I float about the room in slow motion, looking down at Spiros and his friends. I feel myself drifting away from them; they can't hold me back now. In a year's time, they will no longer be a part of my life.

“What about you, Hambis?” says Spiros. “You look as if you could do with a blowjob yourself.”

The bubble pops.

“Fuck off,” I say, as Joshua passes me another joint.

“Hey, turn off the light,” says Tim, thankfully changing the subject. “I want to show you my new lava lamp.”

“Oh wow,” says Lucy, “When did you get that?”

The lights go off and I am suddenly aware of Joshua's presence; I wonder if he has moved closer... I take another drag from a joint and pass it to Joshua. Somebody lights a candle and the lava lamp is switched on. I try to tune in with my surroundings, but am too stoned. Snippets of conversation crackle across the room; different voices come and go, conflicting frequencies struggle for dominance on the airwaves.

A hand gently squeezes my leg – just above my knee...

I freeze.

The hand caresses my inner thigh, moving timidly towards my groin.

It must be Joshua.

My body tenses up; my muscles lock.

I cast a furtive look around the room; has anybody else noticed? Spiros stares at me. I avoid his glance, turning back

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to Joshua, seeking confirmation of what has just occurred. Before I manage to make out his head in the dim light, he gets to his feet and heads towards the door.

“Where you going?” asks Tim

“Bog,” he replies, closing the door behind him.

“Don’t puke up all over the bathroom!” shouts Tim.

I stare at the lava lamp in astonishment. Surely that didn’t just happen? Surely it was all in my mind? It was all so brief; perhaps I just imagined the whole thing. It all happened so quickly and subtly. But no, no, it didn’t happen. Why would he do such a thing? If he had touched me like that and the others had seen it, we would become the laughing stock of the entire school... He must have accidentally put his hand on me as he was trying to get up... Yes, yes, that’s it, that must be it...

“That was quick,” says Lucy, as Joshua sits back down beside me. “I hope you washed your hands!”

I stare at the lava lamp and remember getting an erection on the way to the bus stop after school. What was that about? How can listening to music give you an erection? Or was it being close to Joshua? No, it can’t be that. That would imply that I was-

NO!

I gulp down the rest of my drink.

“Hey,” says Joshua, “That light looks really cool now that it’s got going.”

Of course I’m not. What a pathetic idea! Just because I had an erection while walking down the street with another boy; that doesn’t mean a thing. People are supposed to have erections at bizarre and random moments. Everyone knows that.

“It looks even better if you’re tripping,” continues Tim.

OK. I like Joshua *as a friend*. Of course I do. But there’s

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nothing wrong with one boy loving...liking another; what's wrong with that? Attraction? I mean, just because I think he's good-looking, it doesn't mean I'm attracted to him – physically attracted to him! There's a fine line between attraction and admiration; the two things should never be confused... But what if Joshua was gay! What would Spiros, Johnny and Chris say if they found out I was knocking about with a poof?

Suddenly, I feel it again, his hand on my thigh.

For a moment I consider hitting Joshua or pushing him away in case Spiros has noticed. I mustn't let them think I'm gay... Instead, I stand up instinctively and head towards the door.

“What's up with you?” says Spiros.

Thankfully, he hasn't seen what's happened.

“Nothing,” I say. “Just feeling a bit queasy...”

“Don't puke up all over the bathroom!” cries Tim.

I rush down the stairs, my head buzzing; I have to get away. I push past the people in the hallway until I am finally out of the house. Slamming the door, I make my way to the end of the street. It is only when I reach the High Road that I realise it's raining. I see my bus and scramble towards it. I take deep breaths as I find a seat on the upper deck, trying to calm myself and make sense of everything. My mind is filled with a whirr of incoherent thoughts. A drowsiness takes hold of me and I focus my attention on staying awake until I get home...

The bus comes to a sudden halt, jolting me back to consciousness. I must have fallen asleep.

“Aw woss goin' on now, man?” cries the girl in front of me. “The last fmg we want is traffic jam,” she adds, sucking at her teeth as she turns to her companion.

I lean over to look past the two girls and out of the front

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window. The bus has just turned onto Bounds Green Road. My curiosity is aroused by the tailback on what is a relatively quiet, residential lane.

“Muss be a bloody accident,” she continues. “Just our bloody luck.”

The bus edges forward before coming to another premature stop. I sit back in resignation and wait.

“Fuckin ’ell, man; we're gonna be well late at this rate,” says one of the girls. “Sha’ we get off ‘ere and walk it?”

“You mad? Look at all the rain!”

The bus grinds on; more passengers tut and sigh as they fidget nervously in their seats. I wipe the window in a circular motion with a sodden sleeve and look out at the clusters of people gathered along the pavement. Dressed smartly, they shield lighted candles under their black umbrellas. It is only after I catch sight of the Greek-Orthodox church that I realise what the commotion is about.

The window frosts over once again. This is the first time I have missed out on the Easter ceremony. Although I no longer go to the boring services that usually take place on Sundays, Easter has always been something special. We turn up in our best clothes, arriving early in the evening to make sure we can sit in the front row of the upper gallery. The priests chant away in their shiny purple robes, occasionally swinging pots of incense attached to a jingling silver chain. The bearded archbishop preaches from the centre of the pulpit – glittering in his ornate golden robe and jewel-studded silver crown.

Invariably mesmerised, I sit waiting for the culmination of the service when all lights and candles are suddenly put out; the priests stop chanting so that nothing can be heard but the muffled sound of traffic coming from Bounds Green Road – the shuffling of feet, mothers hushing their children, until,

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shhh...silence. Only then, in absolute darkness, does the archbishop's quavering voice ring out with the only words in Ancient Greek I understand – those potent, magic words charged with electricity, “Jesus has risen from the dead!”

A thunderous clap follows as everyone stamps their feet violently on the floorboards. Children jump; frail old ladies bang the wooden benches with tightly clenched fists or walking sticks – the church erupts with rejoicing. Humbled by the power of this communal outpouring of emotion, I always shed a tear in the darkness as I focus my attention on the obscure pulpit; looking out for that single, tiny flame – the holy light that the archbishop brings out and offers to the congregation. We light our own candles before passing the flame on to others, and gradually – spot by spot – the church is inundated by a shimmering wave of light...

The bus comes to another halt – just a few metres short of the stop. One passenger rings the bell impatiently as the driver refuses to open the doors. I look down at the dispersing crowd and try to spot my parents. They’ll kill me...

“Look! It ain't no accident, iss a funeral!” says one of the girls.

“Nah...” replies the other after a moment of contemplation. “Muss be some church fing. I reckon iss Italians; they're cafflicks, innit?”

“Well, who dey tink dey are blocking up me road at dis time of the night?”

I observe the people down below, desperately protecting their flames against the elements in an attempt to bring home the holy light. Finally, the bus reaches the stop and I make my way down. Before I exit, I notice two middle-aged Greek women getting on at the front with candles.

“Sorry ladies, you ain't gettin on wiv them!” says the driver angrily. “I ain't having no fires burnin on my bus!”

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“Is the holi light...” replies one of the women optimistically.

“I don't care what sort o' light it is, madam; rules is rules. You eiver put 'em out now or get off,” he says stubbornly, before shaking his head in disbelief. “Holy flippin' light, my arse...”

One of the women crosses herself with her hand as they blow out the candles.

“*Kírieleison, kírieleison,*” she repeats under her breath, before slapping a coin on the counter.

As I rush through the rain towards our street, I wonder if they are home. I recall once noticing my mother's glaring eyes concentrating on the flame as she gripped her candle in one hand while shielding it with the other, transfixed, as if clinging onto a precarious, drifting memory of a far-away place I could never know or understand. The thought fills me with a sense of guilt, as if I have betrayed my parents by staying out, drinking and smoking dope.

I reach the house and notice that the lights are off; they're not home yet. I open the front door and hurry up the stairs; I must get to bed before they return – I can't face an argument with them now. I enter the bathroom and turn on the light, locking the door behind me. I look into the mirrored doors of the bathroom cabinet on the wall. A line is formed where the two doors meet, splitting my face in half. I move my head from side to side, trying to make my whole reflection fit into one of the doors, but fail; the cabinet is too small. Focusing on my divided features, I think of Joshua once again and am filled with a sense of shame. Who am I trying to fool? Of course I want to be with him. But what was he thinking? What could possibly happen between us with everybody else around? We would become the laughing stock of the entire school. No. Nothing can happen. Not while we're at

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Fortismere. But soon we'll go to Woodhouse; maybe things will be different then. Maybe...

Suddenly, the door-handle moves, interrupting my stream of thought. They're back. For a moment I feel as if I have been caught doing something dirty. I flush the empty toilet and take a deep breath, preparing myself mentally for whatever awaits me outside. I once again think of Joshua as I stand still, watching the water disappear down the hole, and wishing I could somehow flush away my murky thoughts and emotions.